Episode 471.

It's nighttime.

I thought about watching Charlotte until she fell asleep, but decided it was better not to.

The more I cared, the more guilty I felt, because I knew it would be better for Charlotte if I didn't watch.

And I couldn't just talk to Charlotte forever.

I took Sarkegar and Lucinil to the highest spire of the castle.

I couldn't think of a better place to take in the views of Rajak.

Sarkegar, as he used to be, when he came to see me.

She speaks in the form of a dainty female maid.

You think I'm burdened by the appearance of the devil.

"This is....... degraded....... No, this is the....... your Majesty rebuilt. new Darklands?"

"So to speak."

The city of Razak, not quite as deserted as the ecliptic, with lanterns lighting the streets, and the refugee neighborhoods, not quite as deserted, with guards roaming the streets with torches.

It is also the highest point of the royal castle, which was built on high ground in the first place.

I could see the ocean, the land behind me, and the horizon as far as the eye could see.

I could see sprawling urban areas and open farmland.

It was a bleak landscape.

What Sarkegar wanted was a land of demons, inhabited only by demons.

But I chose to blend in with the humans, and I was still rescuing humans and the demons of the continent.

Not entirely in the way Sarkegar would have wanted, but I have succeeded in establishing a nation of my own in the land of the dead.

Sure, it's a kingdom built on theft.

"God told me I'd see something like this before I died....... The truth is....... I didn't think so."

Sarkegar looks out over the city of Razak with its harbor and the vast expanse of refugee camps and farmland on the other side.

Sarkegar spins in place on the rooftop of the spire, pierced in all directions.

I look around, and then I look around, and then I look around, and then I look around, like I've been doing forever.

It was like a child seeing a new landscape for the first time.

"Your Majesty....... God, you can die now. Even if you die....... Even if you die blessing your sire's new world....... You are welcome....... Anytime......."

Sarkegar is smiling and crying like a child.

"Why think about dying, when there's so much to be done that you'll wish you hadn't."

"Whatever you want me to do, whatever you want me to do, even if it means dying of exhaustion, I will die laughing."

Sarkegar tugs at the hem of her skirt with both hands and bows her head in front of me.

"The great, the only, the sublime."

"Absolute Lord of the Darklands and all demons. And lord of men."

"Hail, hail, hail to the eternal king."

"This faithful dog, Sarkeghar."

"I'll take your orders anytime."

Sarkegar looks at me and smiles.

Sarkegarda, always smiling wickedly, conspiratorially.

But Sarkozy, with tears in her eyes and smiling as happily as ever, had taken on the appearance of a false human woman, not her own.

If I could visualize happiness right now, in this moment, it would look like this.

He looked happy enough to make me think so.

At first, I was honestly terrified.

I thought I might have to remove Sarkegar at some point.

And at some point, I felt guilty for not being able to fulfill Sarkegar's wish.

But when my wish failed, I was forced to do something I didn't want to do.

Eventually, I became Lord of the Darklands.

Because.

"Welcome back."

I hugged Sarkegar.

"My best friend."

I said what I've been thinking all along, my honest thoughts.

\* \* \*

Sarkhegar descended the spire, wanting to see my Darklands more closely.

Is it really that good?

I knew Sarkegar would be pleased, but I didn't expect it to be that bad, so I was a little embarrassed.

"That's a lot of money for two years."

I smiled bitterly at Lucinil's words. While Sarkegar was thrilled with the rebuilding of Darklands, Rusinil seemed purely amazed that it had been possible in the short span of two years.

Sarkegar, Effinghauser, Loyard, and Roussinil.

These four were the ones who personally stopped Xavier Tana and the knights of Shanapelle as I was leaving the temple.

Loyard and Dr. Effinghauser were dead, and it was not until some time later that I was able to retrieve the other two.

"I know it's been....... It must have been hard for you."

"No, it was really good."

My warning that killing Lucinil and Sarkegar would make them permanent enemies.

Did the Empire really treat Sarkegar and Lucinil with such disrespect?

"Archdemon, even if it's two years at most and I've been through the wringer, how much of a part of my life is that going to be?"

Rusinil says he's lived so many years that even if it had been painful, it wouldn't have meant much.

That doesn't change the fact that Lucinil took the risk because of me.

Lucinil stares out at the city lights.

"You know what, Bali, I'm more excited about this."

"......What is it?"

"This neighborhood, you and me."

"Right."

I had come to the Edina Archipelago with Lucinil to meet Airi.

Lucinil would have known that the Edina Archipelago in that winter was very different from what it is today.

"What has changed so much in just two years?"

The city itself has never been so sprawling, not to mention the gigantic Great Hall, which didn't exist two years ago.

"Why does mortal time pass so quickly?"

In just two years, the landscape had changed. Lucinil thought it was amazing.

"It's so cozy and cute."

Rusinil covered his mouth and laughed as he said that.

"So more, sadly."

Mortal life has an end called death. Lucinil, therefore, seemed to be experiencing sadness in the midst of splendor.

"Why did you help me?"

"......?"

At my question, Rusinil shook his head.

Lucinil helped me.

It's safe to say I'm next in line for the council. She risked death for me.

I don't know if Lucinil had a reason to do this to me. All I knew was that she had helped me in some way and that she wanted to repay the debt.

Lucinil looks at me.

"When I was at the end of my rope, it was Elise who helped me become a vampire."

"ah......."

I thought that might be the case, but it was Elise who helped Lucinil when the homunculus reached the end of its physical life.

"So I was originally part of the Hwayo clan, and of course, you made a deal: you wouldn't take on a clan. You'd make me a vampire, but you wouldn't be responsible for me, so the lord of Demand, who was close to Eleris, took me in."

"And then it became a house of demand?"

"There was no clan to sublease to. I was the only one to receive it."

Lucinil turns on the stretch.

"But honestly, I helped you because I thought I owed you my life....... I don't know, I'm actually pretty good at anything."

I found that statement strangely funny.

"Being immortal inevitably leads to sloth. And with that sloth comes boredom, and with boredom comes giving up on life. I told you before, road vampires, for the most part, give up on life."

"I did."

"So I rarely have to do anything, but when I do, I do it well, and helping you was one of those things."

They risked their lives to help me.

That sounded a little, well, weird.

"What's the big deal, I'm a lot of things, just like Antony was a lot of things, and you can think of it that way."

"That weirdness is too convenient for me."

"Is that so?"

Of course, Antony's weirdness is just as convenient for me as it is unpleasant.

"Of course, if you work hard at something, you don't work hard for someone who's ugly or insignificant."

Once again, Lucinil turns on the stretch and takes a few deep breaths.

"You're pretty, cute, and quirky, and I guess immortals like me will inevitably find things like you cute when we get too old."

"We're too old, we know too well what works and what doesn't."

"Even if we didn't do it ourselves, we were living history in real time, not just in books."

"Those who dream too big."

"I know it's fleeting, I know it's impossible, I know it's too hard."

"So do we laugh at those who dream too big, who think it will never happen?"

"Actually, no."

"We've seen a lot of failures, but we've also seen very few successes."

"We have seen one man succeed where a hundred, or a thousand, have failed. We've seen rocks breaking eggs time and time again, but the number of broken eggs is immeasurable, and the number of eggs breaking rocks is immeasurable, even after all these years, only a handful."

"I've seen so many people fail and die trying to do things that were never supposed to be possible, and then someone succeeds."

"So I don't laugh at those impossible attempts."

"I pity those who fail."

"I thought those who succeeded were great."

"Immortals like me pity, pity, pity beings like you."

"So you want to do something about it."

"Do you understand, Archdemon?"

"So I don't want your story to be remembered as a sorry tale. I don't want to be on the sidelines of history like I've always been, I want to be a part of it."

"So the help she gave me, it doesn't really matter now."

Let's not make this a sad story.

Antirrhinus said that whether I die miserably or succeed, both are good.

I can't say the same for Lucinil, but she seemed to care about me.

Let's make sure my story doesn't end in tragedy.

It's not that I'd do anything for you, but there was something about those specific words that touched my heart.

Lucinyl turns on stretching.

"It was a short time, though....... It was a little frustrating not to be able to smell the night air outside once in two years."

I may have been comfortable, but I would never have been free.

"It's Reinhardt."

"Yes."

Archdemon, then Bali, then Reinhardt.

Lucinil calls me anything.

Then Lucinil looked at me and smiled.

"Thank you for giving me the night air again."

They think it's a gift.

I'm not resenting the fact that I didn't pay attention for two years, I'm grateful.

If only there were immortals like Lucinil in the world, it would be a pretty good thing.

In exchange for saving my life, I spent two years in prison.

You finally say thank you for a breath of cold night air.

I'm not supposed to be happy.

It's not a moment to be thankful for something yet.

"I'm more grateful."

I'm grateful to be able to see Sarkegar, Lucinil, and Charlotte again, albeit briefly.

Again, I was happy.

\* \* \*

After Rusinil and Sarkegar left, I sat alone on the minaret's parapet, gazing out over the streets of Razak.

We did what we wanted to do.

The damage was inevitable, but it was literally inevitable.

The remnants of the Black Order fled at the death of their leader.

But.

I stare at the blackness beneath my feet.

It was a vague feeling.

There have been good things, and there have been terrible things.

I've been harsh on Ellen.

I thought it was the best thing to do in that situation, and I think I would do the same thing if I were in that situation again.

Ellen is in distress.

It was not a situation where we could talk to each other in a normal way.

I can't forget the look in Ellen's eyes as she looked up at me, horrified, frightened, and sad.

That look.

The tip of the trembling sword.

A mouth full of things I wanted to say, but couldn't bring myself to open.

They're all stuck in my head until it hurts.

"......."

As much as it bothered me, maybe even more, it bothered Ellen.

We've created something even more painful.

It hurt.

And the experience of physically hurting me must have traumatized Ellen even more.

I did it because I had to, but I'm sure Ellen is suffering.

I wanted to say sorry.

But will that day ever come?

I don't think that day will ever come.

I hold still and stare at the street lights.

Me and Ellen have different worlds to live in.

Here, I created a society of demons and humans.

Ellen must unite humanity by being the only ray of hope in a world filled with hatred, fear, and anger.

Ellen is more important than the emperor right now.

So Ellen and I have different worlds to live in.

For me and Ellen, the best we can do for each other is to live like this, not knowing where the other is.

If you encounter it, you have to fight it, even if it's forced, like you just did. You have to put that fight on display for people to see.

We are the enemy.

A warrior is stronger than a demon, or so people should believe.

People must believe that the devil cannot attack the empire and humanity because they are afraid of the hero, and that one day the hero will defeat the devil.

So I intentionally gave Ellen a critical hit.

But what if.

You say the fight was necessary and that I purposely played the sore loser.

Really soberly.

Take the emotion out of it.

I knew today what the outcome would be if I really fought with Ellen.

"......."

If you really want to fight Ellen Artorius.

If that day ever comes.

If it's a hundred, it's a hundred, and I lose.

Such an objective truth, I realized after today's unintentional fight.

Episode 472.

Like a projection of the universe at night, the laments have absolute cutting power.

That won't change if I become a master class in using Auror armor.

Relics can defend against it, but that's about it.

Part of the problem is that Ramen is too good at attacking, but that's not the real issue.

The biggest problem is that my sword came from Ellen.

I learned swordsmanship at the Temple, and later with Savior Tana, but my roots are with Ellen.

I learned everything from her, from swordsmanship to hand-to-hand combat and submission.

I learned the sword from Ellen, whose five voices are incomparable to mine, so she is my overwhelmingly superior compatibility in terms of swordsmanship.

Swords have clashed and clashed for an immeasurable amount of time.

So Ellen knows all about how I understand and use my swordsmanship, what my habits are, and which sword I usually use.

So technically, Ellen knows me better than I know myself.

So, in today's skit, Ellen read all of my swords, which is probably why we didn't hurt each other too badly in staging such an extreme battle.

Of course, at the end, I stabbed myself in the back and made a near-suicidal move, but of course that's not something she could have anticipated.

Because.

Aside from the fact that my fight with Ellen today left me feeling personally devastated, it also confirmed what I've suspected for some time.

I am still weaker than Ellen.

Even without the absolute offense of lambent, I'm not going to beat Ellen.

Ellen specializes in swordplay that assumes an opponent stronger than her. So even if you're physically stronger than her, a sword that's reached Master Class and only requires you to slash and press with force won't work against her.

The demon was weaker than the warrior, so he fled.

You've created a situation that leads people to believe that.

But in reality, it's not that different. Even without the two holy relics, Ellen can still beat me.

But when Ellen, with her laments and lapels, really tries to kill me, I really die.

Ellen knows me too well.

As the saying goes, I, the apprentice, may be able to surpass Ellen, the teacher, but only in that world.

My master's voice leaps over me.

There's no way I, a lesser student, could ever surpass Ellen.

He's been watching my every move.

So I can't beat Ellen.

"......."

I look at the darkness of the streets and the torches that are chasing it away.

Someday.

There may come a moment when Ellen and I have to have a real fight.

My defeat is almost certain.

I don't know how or under what circumstances the two of us would try to kill each other.

If it comes to a situation where Ellen is genuinely trying to kill me, I will lose and it will be a death sentence.

I don't want to kill Ellen.

I don't even want to die.

If yes.

I must be the one who can win against Ellen.

You also don't want to use Alsbringer in the fight to break the last gate.

I don't want to use Alsbringer to sacrifice my life.

I also don't want to die in a fight with Ellen that might happen someday.

To do that, you need to be stronger.

How to do it.

We need to figure out how to do that.

\* \* \*

Ellen sat dazedly on her bed in Temple's dorm room.

'Take a few days off, I've got work today and....... There's nothing pressing right now.'

Despite Bertus' unspoken instructions, Ellen was not in a position to do anything right now.

A demon appeared in the ecliptic and was attacked and defeated by a group believed to be the secretive Black Order, which Ellen defeated.

As always, stories will beget stories, and rumors will beget rumors.

The story of the warrior's initial hesitation will fade away, and the story of the great warrior's rescue of the people from the devil's attack will spread.

For Ellen, that was probably a good thing.

Ellen realized some truths today.

There's only one truth that hurts the most.

The truth that there is no such thing as a forever Reinhardt.

It's not about forgiveness.

Just as Reinhard has a job to do, Ellen has a job to do.

Out of necessity, not emotion, Ellen must live as the Devil's enemy.

She realized that there was no way this relationship could ever be repaired.

Most of all, that cold stare.

Reinhardt doesn't hesitate to attack him.

The cold eyes and expression, devoid of any emotion, filled Ellen with sadness, despair, and fear.

Unlike herself, who was trembling with uncontrollable emotions, Reinhardt's stoic expression and hesitant behavior frightened her.

I don't deny that it was something that needed to be done.

I fully understand that Reinhardt should have done so.

But.

It hurt too much.

Ruthless violence in his hands, unafraid to hurt himself, as much as the pain in his body.

He was even ruthless in the violence he inflicted on himself.

After hesitantly choosing to stab him through the heart, he feigned defeat and fled.

Just as he wasn't afraid of hurting Ellen, he wasn't afraid of hurting himself.

Ellen looks at her right hand.

I can't count the number of times I've slashed something.

Today, however, the eerie sensation was enough to send Ellen into a panic.

Too easy.

The sensation of the ramen that had so simply pierced Reinhardt's heart struck terror into Ellen.

I almost killed Reinhardt.

The creepy sensation caused Ellen's right hand to shake violently, as if she were suffering from hydrocephalus.

Even if Reinhardt had intentionally allowed the attack, it would have killed him.

Ellen buried her face between her knees and shuddered silently.

"ugh....... ugh......."

Will this happen in the future?

Like today when I was forced to fight Reinhardt because I was pushed around by people.

I wonder if one day I'll really have to fight so hard, so much so that I'll have to risk my life to kill Reinhardt, just because people want me to.

Ellen wasn't ready or willing to make that commitment.

I'm afraid of dying at Reinhardt's hands.

Killing Reinhardt was even worse.

But today, even though she didn't want to fight, Ellen was pushed by the people and forced to stand before the demon.

And Reinhardt urged Ellen to fight back.

Reinhardt seemed to have already accepted that fate.

Reinhardt became stronger.

If nothing else.

That cold look.

In that cold look, Ellen realized.

Reinhardt's mind had become too strong.

Ellen is so sad about that.

I was afraid.

Someday.

Early in the gate crisis.

"Ellen.

"......Mom?

I once had a surprise visit from my mother.

The day I collapsed from exhaustion and thought I was going to die.

My mother, who came to visit, said.

"Should I go back home?

'Going back to......?

"If you want to forget about the world and go back home, let's do that.

My mother's words were hard to take.

Ellen doesn't know what her hometown is like or who her family and the people in her village really are.

"My daughter, there are only hard things ahead.

"It's going to be unbearably painful, and there's going to be nothing but sadness.

"It's going to bother you, it's going to make you sick, and it might even kill you.

"So.

'Think of it as your last chance. Our daughter.'

"If all this is too much to bear.

'It's hard now, but it's only going to get harder, harder, before it swallows you whole.'

"I can leave all the pain and sadness behind.

"Let what hasn't happened be what hasn't happened.

"Without having to know what hasn't happened yet.

"Then you'll be far away from all the sadness and pain, and you'll finally be able to forget and find peace.

"I can forget all responsibility, all guilt, all sorrow.

"So, do you want to go back home now, with your mom?

Ellen didn't know what her mother was talking about.

The sight of her mother saying those words was so foreign and mysterious that Ellen felt like she was seeing her mother for the first time, like some kind of absolute being.

If you want to walk away from all of this, go for it.

Ellen didn't tell her mother much.

Is she going to turn her back on this?

Why are you acting like you're the first person in the world to do this?

Who the hell are we.

Ellen didn't ask anything.

However, I shook my head.

"No, you can't.

'.......'

"I can't do that because it's my responsibility.

My mother's expression was still gentle.

"You're not supposed to do that.

"This all happened because of me, and I made it happen.

"You can't just throw people under the bus and forget about them, you know?

"I can't go, I can't do that, I can't do that.

"I think so.

"There are things I have to do, things I have to be responsible for.

"I don't know what to do, but there's someone I need to see again.

'I don't know what we're going to do when we meet again, but there's someone I need to see....... There's someone I need to see.'

"I'm sorry, Mom.

'I can't go.

I couldn't just turn a blind eye to all of this and walk away.

I have to get at least one more person.

I know it's impossible to fully pay for this responsibility, this punishment, but I can't end it all by running away, I thought.

My mother didn't say much.

"Yes.

Just like we did the other day.

Just like the time I threw the sun god's cloak over my shoulder.

I kissed Ellen lightly on the forehead, smiling as I did then.

'Hello, my dear daughter.

"Upon you, the moon and the sun.

With those same words, he disappeared into the moonlight.

There will be times when it hurts more than you can bear.

That's what my mother used to say.

And I was sensing that it was coming.

It was a vague idea, but it happened.

I could see it in his eyes, in his body, in his expression, that he and Reinhardt had become a kill-or-be-killed relationship.

I've always felt like I had to be responsible for something.

But if that responsibility means fighting for your life with Reinhardt, and accepting the fact that you're going to have to die and kill each other.

I couldn't accept dying, and I couldn't accept being killed.

I wonder if I should have run away.

I thought I shouldn't have to make that choice, but now it's getting closer and closer to being unacceptable.

Ellen was scared.

People, himself, and Reinhardt.

I was so scared.

Ellen stays still and watches the moonlight stream into the dorm.

The pale moonlight streaming in gave Ellen no answers.

\* \* \*

The next day.

Everyone has to get used to it, me and the Senate.

That.......

Four Thousand Kings.

Airi, Riana, Harriet, and Olivia.

I gathered my core group of people for breakfast.

The Senate was missing Lucinil, and he was the last piece.

He also added Sarkegar to the Senate.

Sarkegar helped me when I had nothing, so to speak.

I also thought it would be fitting to be included in the Senate, which is technically a national honor.

The real king is the Four Heavenly Kings.

The public figures feel like the Senate.

It's practically a rebuilt Edina Archipelago version of Darklands, with all the real players.

Breakfast, of course, vampires don't eat.

The Senate, the Four Heavenly Kings, and the Devil.

The new guy there, and who will be another key player.

Charlotte.

Charlotte still couldn't hold her head up.

Everyone in this room is either my friend, or they're not, but they trusted me to get them here.

So, he felt like he couldn't even hold his head up in front of people who had done what he couldn't.

Charlotte was arguably the most demonic-looking human in the room.

Or, technically, a half-man-half-horse.

With the Archdemon's soul mixed in, Charlotte was neither fully human nor fully demon.

The darkness radiating from his body seems to have stopped now, but it's not just black, it's reddish eyes with jet-black hair that reflects no light at all.

It looked like the devil himself.

Still, there was something about the original Charlotte that gave her an uncanny charisma, an uncanny charm.

If only I could figure out what to do with that dead grass.

"Charlotte will inherit all of my powers as Demon Queen and will be responsible for all of Edina's internal affairs."

"......?"

It was Charlotte herself who was most taken aback by the comment.

I say, looking at Charlotte, who can't hide her embarrassment, her red eyes rolling back and forth.

"Ma, what did you think I was going to do by bringing the Imperial Empress all the way out here, besides be a king?"

"......."

You can't allow yourself to live a life of guilt forever.

The throat is grape juice and the place is full of things a wise ruler should do.

If you don't feel confident and your self-esteem is low, you have to force it up.

I have a lot of work to do.

It's not about playing politics, it's about actually doing the work that needs to be done to close the gate once and for all.

We don't have much time left.

We can't take care of Charlotte's mental health forever, so she has to get up on her own.

Too much thinking doesn't create anything more than too much thinking.

Only by being hit by something does a person move forward.

Usually, there's no time for heartbreak when reality catches up with you.

Just as I have been, so will Charlotte.

\* \* \*

I can't do that, I don't deserve that, how can I do that.

I didn't give Charlotte any time for that. Once I'd delivered the most important facts, I went to breakfast.

Charlotte ate it, but when I glared at her, she forced it into her mouth.

I felt like I knew what to do with Charlotte, whose self-esteem had been destroyed.

I didn't try to comfort him, I just told him what to do and he did it.

If you ask him to eat, he hesitates, but if you ask him to eat, he eats.

If you had tried to convince her to take over the Edina Archipelago, Charlotte would have flatly refused, saying she didn't deserve it.

So, when I told him to just do what he said, he just nodded.

In two years, the once arrogant and domineering Empress has become someone who thinks that if I say something, she should do it.

If only it wasn't a guilt trip.

Charlotte, who should be used to commanding things, has become someone who is used to being commanded, even if only by me.

Charlotte wasn't immediately thrust into government service.

Charlotte seemed to already know that Sarkeghar was responsible for the kidnapping of the Queen and Empress. After all, Sarkegar and Lucinil had spent time in the palace.

But Charlotte didn't seem to be able to care about any of that, her guilt over me outweighing her fear and anger at Sarkeghar.

As if the guilt is so great that you don't even have the heart to hate your mother's enemies.

Add to that the fact that the Senate doesn't tend to intervene much in state affairs, and it's unlikely that Sarkeghar and Charlotte will ever come into contact.

Charlotte began to receive updates from Herriot, her scribe, on the state of the Edina Archipelago and what she needed to know.

Still, Harriet didn't seem to feel much for Charlotte.

Airi was a different story.

The demonic soul that entered Charlotte.

If she could feel it, Airi seemed to feel an odd sense of fear as she looked at Charlotte.

Charlotte is a demon proxy, but she's not really a proxy.

Charlotte is already a demon in her own right.

A man and a demon at the same time.

Part human, part demon, perhaps even more so than me, he was fit to be the ruler of this new Darklands.

It's clear that Charlotte also possesses some, if not all, of the demonic powers.

Of course, not everyone was happy about this situation.

"What's the point of being so powerless?"

Riana, who hopes for the Empire's demise in the long run, asked me with concern in her voice as we prepared to return to Port Mokna.

"They're not going to be able to compare to me in the long run."

"@....... I don't like it."

Riana couldn't help but be unhappy that the Imperial Empress had become the acting leader of the Darklands.

Bertus was actually responsible for the murder of Duke Granz and the destruction of the revolutionary organization, but Charlotte only found out about it after the fact.

"I'm going anyway."

"Good luck with the base move, I'll be making my own arrangements."

"Okay."

Riana made her way to Port Mokna.

And the person who is most likely to hate this situation.

"He'll take care of himself, right?"

Olivia didn't seem upset or unable to accept the situation at all.

"That's all we need to know."

Olivia looks at me with a wry smile.

"Next time he gets in trouble, don't try to defend him."

Olivia looks at me with a hard expression.

"Because then, even if you try to protect them, they'll kill you anyway."

Olivia gave me a blunt warning about what to expect when someone I've already betrayed comes back to haunt me.

Episode 473.

Since coming to the Edina Archipelago, Charlotte has spent the most time with Herriot, not the demon.

"She gets restless when you're with her. Just let her be alone with me."

"Uh....... Really?"

"Yeah, so you're just going to let me do it?"

"......Okay."

I told her it would be best if she didn't see him for a while, as being around someone she felt guilty and sorry for would distract her.

It was a country, albeit a small one compared to an empire, and it had a lot on its plate.

Although Charlotte had been forced to take charge of a country on short notice, she felt she had to do it because Reinhardt had asked her to.

Meh.

I was thinking about it, but I couldn't do it if I had to.

Reinhardt was willing to take on a job because he believed in himself.

So Charlotte spent the day listening to Harriet tell her all about it.

Population size of the Edina Archipelago.

Distribution of islands.

The status of each island.

Refugee ships that periodically arrive at the main port of Razak.

What you have in storage and where it's coming from.

Fort Mokna as a forward base, and that it is now scheduled to move.

The Demons of the Streets.

Charlotte stared blankly at the landscape of Razak, where orcs and trolls roamed the streets.

For the first few days, I walked around with my robe on, but now I take it off.

In a landscape where demons of all stripes roam, Charlotte's appearance wasn't all that bizarre.

In fact, rather than taking notice of Charlotte's form, people were more likely to pay homage to her companion, the scribe Herriot.

"Interesting, huh? If you ask me if I've gotten used to it, honestly, no."

Herriot watches in disbelief as people and demons mingle in the streets.

"Still, just knowing that this is possible has changed my thinking a lot."

Herriot said he had something to show her and led Charlotte's hand up a hill in Rajak.

"Hey, you see that?"

"Is this an agricultural area......?"

"Yes."

At a distance that should have been no bigger than a human finger, something enormous was clearing a field.

A single ogre was clearing a path at lightning speed that would have taken dozens of people to accomplish.

"Normally it's vampire wizards, but once the groundwork is done, ogres tend to do the heavy lifting. It's helpful, but....... Hmm....... I mean, to be honest, it's a lot of work for dozens of people, and you have to eat as much as those dozens of people....... Actually, I wonder if it's kind of the same thing, but it's kind of interesting, isn't it?"

"......Yes."

"The only thing that keeps it going is a faction of vampire mages who have mastered botanical alchemy and magic. If it weren't for them, the refugees would have starved to death long ago."

Even worse, it was an old farmer with a bent back from age directing the ogre's clearing.

Whether this is efficient or not, we don't know from Herriot's words.

But I'm living it.

Trying to blend in.

The sight burned into Charlotte's eyes.

"Honestly, Edina's biggest problem is food. She's gotten so big since the Gate, she's somehow managed to feed herself with the help of demonic wizards and other demons, but it's all demonic....... So Reinhardt's power must have done something."

"......I see."

"So in Edina, the existence of the demon is absolute: the humans on the island are afraid of it, and the demons absolutely follow it, so there's no conflict. If it's gone, the demons won't understand why they have to live with the humans, and the humans will be even worse."

Archdemons extract absolute obedience from demons.

And the humans on the island are afraid of the devil.

This coexistence, while seemingly perfect, is not possible without the existence of the Devil.

"In the Darklands, demons are more like gods than kings. From what I've heard, demons used to be different races, fighting and splitting. Until a race called the Archdemons came along and ruled them all."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that."

More of a god than a king.

Archdemon.

Charlotte stares at the unearthly landscape created by its absolute presence.

Charlotte had heard many stories from Harriet.

How many refugees have made it to the island so far.

How the demons made contact and came to the island.

What it was like to use magic to build the buildings they would live in, to clear the land.

How the Unified Holy Order came to be.

While you're locked away in the Palace of Spring, blaming yourself for everything.

I heard about how the demon was not self-pitying and self-deprecating, but how he was trying to do something and managed to do it.

"You really....... you've done so much......."

He has saved countless lives and created landscapes that seem out of this world.

What happened to someone who didn't sit back when everything else failed, but kept pushing forward.

Charlotte was looking at it from a loser's perspective.

Am I responsible for this?

Why should I, a loser and a traitor, take credit for someone else's brilliant work?

"Charlotte, this is not considerate."

Harriet looks at Charlotte, her eyes serious.

"Reinhardt has a lot of work to do."

"......."

"It's just too much, too much."

"......Yes."

"Reinhardt brought you here because he needed you. He didn't bring you here because he felt sorry for you."

Herriot wasn't angry.

"If you want to be a sinner and a traitor, go ahead and live that way."

"......."

"But if you want to be what Reinhardt needs, a regent for Edina, that's what you get."

Charlotte looks up and sees Harriet.

"Do you want to be the person Reinhardt needs, or do you want to be the person Reinhardt, who is incredibly busy, has to keep attending to?"

Charlotte's lip trembled.

"I am....... Of course......."

Everyone here is someone Reinhardt needs.

I know because I've heard so many stories from Herriot.

Not Riana, not Olivia, not Irie, not Harriet.

They all had important jobs to do.

Charlotte is also brought in by Reinhardt for a very important mission.

If you want to live as a loser, you can live in defeat.

However, you will be a constant nuisance that Reinhardt will have to deal with.

Harriet pats Charlotte on the shoulder.

"If you know it, you do it. Don't overthink it."

"It was like that when we first got here."

"If I think about it too much, I feel like I'm just going to get stuck in my thoughts and feel guilty."

"I thought, 'Let's just take one step at a time.'"

"Rather than thinking about how many people are going to die on the continent."

"Building homes for people who have nowhere to stay."

"Rather than thinking about who was responsible for this situation."

"I'm going to launch a boat right now, rescue the people fleeing the monster, and bring them to this island."

"Rather than grieving over who died and how many, and thinking about what we lost."

"I have to feed the people who don't have anything to eat right now, so I've increased my cropland."

"If you think about things that are too far in the future or too abstract, you're going to get stuck wondering what to do and not be able to do anything."

"Let's do it one by one."

"Let's just take it one step at a time."

"After that time......."

"Look."

Herriot points to his surroundings.

Points to the world.

"Before you know it, it's like this."

"......."

"I don't feel like I've done something completely right, and I'm very anxious and it's unfinished, but I can't say I haven't done something."

Charlotte looks at Harriet, wide-eyed.

Those who stood still, and those who took at least one step every day.

Look at the landscape that the difference has created.

Do I deserve it. Is this okay. Whether I deserve to be forgiven.

I wonder if I should give myself the power to gawk at this beauty.

If you're stuck, you're just stuck.

Before you think about entitlements and rights.

Eat, exercise, and build strength for your weakened body as Reinhardt instructed.

Learn one more thing about Edina.

That one step where you sit on your throne and start ticking things off your agenda.

Why shouldn't you take that one step?

Herriot's comforting, yet persuasive, voice telling you that there is work to be done.

I finally got Charlotte to give up on the whole idea.

There will be no rights and no obligations.

But Reinhardt had a job for him.

Then it's just a matter of doing it.

Then take a step.

It is a sin to pause to consider whether I deserve to take this step.

Charlotte gritted her teeth as she saw Herriot's warm smile.

The thought of people doing this to themselves brought tears to my eyes.

But.

Over the course of two years, Charlotte cried a lot.

All I could do was cry.

Other than crying, I didn't do anything.

So instead of wiping away the tears that were bubbling up inside her, Charlotte gritted her teeth and wiped them up her sleeve.

Eyes as red as the devil's, their irises burning.

"Okay, whatever it is....... I'll try it."

Even though he didn't change his mind that he was wrong.

A sense of obligation to do something.

I was able to regain a sense of responsibility that I had to get it done somehow.

\* \* \*

Herriot's persuasion was successful.

Rather than sinking into thoughts and self-doubt, I had to put one foot in front of the other and take it one step at a time.

Reinhardt didn't bring you here to forgive you, he brought you here because he needed you, so if you're guilty of that, you need to fulfill that need.

So Charlotte has talked to Harriet a lot since then, and she's been visiting Edina and trying to get a sense of what's really going on.

After getting to know the Edina Archipelago a bit, Charlotte came to one conclusion.

"That....... Um....... Can I be honest?"

"Uh, you should be honest, then."

At Reinhardt's words, Charlotte shook her head emphatically.

"This is not a country."

"......?"

Charlotte's assessment was harsh.

"This is a national soup kitchen....... if you call it that. I wouldn't say national....... It's more like......."

The Edina Archipelago was in need of a major overhaul, Charlotte decided.

"The biggest problem is that without the demons, everyone in Edina would starve to death. Bringing in refugees from the continent is great, and giving them free land and houses to live in is great, but basically, food self-sufficiency is a problem that can't be solved without magic and demons."

"I've heard that they keep increasing the amount of land they cultivate, but they're using mages to do it. There's a limit to the amount of manpower they can use, and right now the most labor intensive part of the island is probably the food resource business, but if they start growing more and more, at some point they'll cross the critical mass of people they can support."

"So this isn't a country where the surplus of what people produce is stored in the treasury in the form of taxes to be distributed when it's needed or used for public purposes. This is a country where the state produces food. It's reversed. It's not really a government or a state, it's a charity. The only purpose of the state is to feed the population, and it's struggling to do that."

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with doing that, but we don't have a plan for when the dependent population grows too large for us to support. Farming with magic is ridiculous in the first place, and neither is having mermaids feeding us from the ocean. We need to have a long-term plan for food self-sufficiency, a long-term policy that will allow us to be self-sufficient even without this bizarre thing with the mages farming."

"There's also the issue of security. The size of the evacuation zones has already surpassed the size of the old Razak city center by several times, and the only way they're trying to keep them safe is by having guards patrol them at night, but there's a limit to the number of troops they can keep, which is why the crime rate in the evacuation zones is so high."

Food. Policing. Institutions. Policy. Management of areas outside the capital, etc.

When Charlotte's tale of the Edina Archipelago's many problems was over, Reinhardt's mouth hung open in disbelief.

Looks like a country, but is actually a charity.

It's not called a treasury for the sake of taxes, but a bizarre structure where the treasury and all the power the king has works for the people and the people alone.

That was the reality of Edina, which he spent two years building.

When she's finished, Charlotte stares at Reinhardt.

"The only reason you've gotten this far is because the demons below you are overpowered, and even under the best of circumstances, people of your caliber don't do this kind of work."

Edina is kept alive by overly talented people doing jobs they wouldn't normally do, and the people of Edina are, for the time being, a bunch of military types.

The reality of Edina is that the country itself cannot survive without a demon.

Episode 474.

In Charlotte's opinion, Edina, the rebuilt Darklands, is overly dependent on the Demon.

That was qualitatively different from saying that Darklands couldn't exist without Archdemons.

"So....... How do I do that?"

"......Food issues will inevitably become a long-term policy, but right now we need to address systemic issues. There are many petty crimes, but too often what could have been a simple case of violence turns into a murder."

"I don't think we'll be able to increase the size of the guard, and to be honest, we're already overwhelmed."

"This is not a guard problem."

Charlotte shook her head.

"The punishment for criminals is too uniform, and it's too simplistic: death or hard labor, and more people are sent to hard labor than to death, and you seem to be inclined not to give them the death penalty, right?"

"That's right....... I was just wondering if it might be better to use them as labor somehow rather than kill them......."

At that, Charlotte shook her head.

"Let's say someone gets into a fight with someone they have a grudge against. Let's say there's a violent incident, and the other person gets hurt too badly, then it's a certainty that the perpetrator will be sent to the labor camp. If you kill them, they're going to go to jail, if you beat them up, they're going to go to jail. Some people actually just kill them, because the outcome is the same."

"......?"

"Of course, this is an extreme example, and not the only one, but there are plenty of people who would rather make that choice, so the punishment for each offense must necessarily be specific."

Charlotte discusses the problems of not dealing with sins that deserve death in the extreme.

"Reinhardt, extreme punishment doesn't exist to punish criminals, it exists to show the majority of the general public the horrors of felonies. Basically, extreme punishment, including the death penalty, exists to consume felons and put them on display for society."

As a leader, Reinhardt has avoided capital punishment because he believes it is more efficient to use criminals as labor than to kill them, because he believes it is inefficient.

But Charlotte was raising the possibility that she may have helped turn a simple incident of violence into a murder.

If the crime is different but the punishment is the same, you might want to choose the felony.

"There are no laws in place in Edina right now, but there is no system of punishment, and that needs to be established. The situation in Edina is not at all like the situation in countries in general. With the inevitable influx of so many outsiders, the problems between people are only going to get worse, not better, so the punishment should be harsher than it needs to be. The ecliptic is extremely short on resources right now, so it's impossible to reduce the crime rate with extreme measures, but Edina is not in that situation, so it's still possible to deal with criminals with punishment."

"I guess so......."

"And it's also true that the number of guards is absolutely insufficient, and it would be difficult to increase the size of the guard at this point."

Charlotte quickly concluded, as if she had an answer for that, too.

"Let the refugees organize themselves into vigilantes."

"Vigilantes? This is the capital city, and we can't even manage the water, so you're making us organize vigilantes....... Am I right?"

"It's not the time to cover that up."

"Hmmm......."

Reinhard rolls his eyes in disagreement at Charlotte's words.

"But the vigilante thing, it's kind of like a volunteer thing, because who's going to do that for free, and if they're not going to do it for free, you're going to pay them, but if you do that, you're organizing a vigilante group and then you're paying them, and that's no different than a guard, so why would you organize a vigilante group and then incorporate them into the guard, I don't know?"

Charlotte shook her head at Reinhardt's words.

"Don't give me money, give me some privileges."

"Permissions?"

"Yeah, power by another name."

Charlotte stares at Reinhardt with a calm expression.

"There are a lot of people who would love to have that little bit of power. Money? You don't have to give it to them. There are some people who want power for its own sake."

"ah......."

"Give me the power to elect vigilante leaders and recruit vigilantes. And give them the power to arrest and interrogate people. As a result, the vigilantes won't get paid a dime and they'll be patrolling the streets at night thinking they're something. As a result, the vigilantes won't get paid a dime and they'll be patrolling the streets at night thinking they're something, and that's it, right?"

Charlotte understands that power alone can sway people, as she understands the futility of the human desire for power.

The seemingly sinister policy sent chills down Reinhardt's spine.

"No, that....... I get what you're saying, but....... After all, it seems to me that giving vigilantes any degree of power over a refugee zone would inevitably lead to them doing some bullshit....... Autonomy is relatively free from control, so it's bound to be corrupt, right?"

"Yeah. It's inevitably going to be corrupt, it's going to be an interest group, it's going to be a corrupt power that commits crimes with impunity, and no, they're not going to be able to make money doing vigilante work, so they're going to want to fill their pockets in other ways, and they're going to have to do that, because they're going to be busy doing vigilante work, but it's not going to be money, so they're going to have to do that."

"I mean, that's how it's supposed to be."

"Why bother with that?"

Charlotte mimics slitting her own throat.

"Kill it. Pull it out again."

"ah......."

"Vigilante corruption isn't our responsibility because they're not directly under the government, right? So the state steps in and executes the corrupt vigilante leader. It looks like justice, and it's good, but in reality the government has created an environment where policing is handed over to the vigilantes, and they can't make a living, so they inevitably become a corrupt force, and who cares if the public knows that? The more secular the vigilante leader, the more vicious the vigilante, the more support for the government will come back to benefit from hanging them."

Charlotte was saying it with a nonchalant expression that didn't make her smile, but didn't make her look sinister either.

Use and discard people as you see fit. It creates and exploits groups that are inevitably corrupt. You don't even give them a dime.

What the devil couldn't do, Charlotte could.

Corruption is bad.

So it was Reinhardt's idea to rule out the possibility of corruption.

But Charlotte is different.

It creates and exploits power, which inevitably corrupts.

And when that corruption crosses a threshold, it is replaced, and the replacement process is used to benefit the government.

It blames the government for putting them in power, which is bound to be corrupt, and blames corrupt individuals for being corrupt.

The mindset is inherently different.

"Reinhard, you don't know something very important."

"What is that?"

"The purpose of the state is not the fulfillment of justice or goodness, but the maintenance of the state itself. In a defunct state there is no justice, no relief of the poor, no charity. If there is one absolute good that the state must uphold, it is the maintenance of the state itself."

Government is not supposed to be good and just.

Governments are maintained to be maintained.

No other business or policy can exist without that basic condition being met.

Reinhardt wasn't thinking in those terms at all.

Even in the face of injustice, the country must be maintained, and policies and projects must be implemented to do so.

The Edina Archipelago did not have it, and Reinhardt did not consider it.

They're getting bigger, but their systems are broken.

That's why it's now Charlotte's decision to create a system.

We've gotten so big that we can't keep up, so we need a stopgap.

Reinhardt couldn't deny that Charlotte's way was better than his when it came to keeping the country together.

"I never realized you were royalty....... It's starting to sink in now......."

Reinhard nodded dumbfoundedly. Charlotte looked at Reinhardt and lowered her eyes.

"I can't help it if I'm disappointed....... If this is the only way I can help you....... I'll do it anyway, because it has to be good."

"......."

"So, this is what I, the would-be regent, do, and you, the would-be monarch, remain a kind and gentle monarch who cares about the people. The more people fear my regency, the more they will support you."

So, Charlotte has decided that she will bear all the stigma of the evil reign she is about to undertake.

The more people hate the regent. The more they hate the regent.

The support for the devil is even stronger.

Just as she used vigilantes, Charlotte would use herself to solidify Reinhardt's control.

\* \* \*

I don't know if Charlotte is done with her preparations.

Just as I didn't become king until I was ready, Charlotte didn't come to the throne fully prepared to be king.

I was unprepared and haphazardly organizing the country, and that's why it's a mistake.

We can keep it for now, but we don't know how long this will be possible.

That's why we brought in Charlotte to solidify the boudoir.

I tried to make it as plausible as possible, but to Charlotte, Edina looked like a misshapen structure.

I don't know if Charlotte will be able to cope with all of them.

But Charlotte could think of things I couldn't.

Sometimes you'll have to use people to throw things away.

It's brutal, but I couldn't deny its necessity.

Charlotte approaches cases and problems differently than I do.

I don't think Charlotte taking over the Edina Archipelago would have made things better, but at least it would have been better than me staying on the throne.

I was getting tired of dealing with the politics of Edina.

Someone to replace it.

Someone who is clearly better at it than I am.

And.

Somehow, he's more frightening than I am, and he's the one most worthy of the Devil.

"Let me introduce you."

In the realm of the vassals, I carefully placed Charlotte on the throne, standing beside me in a black dress, looking down at the people.

"I am Charlotte de Gradias, regent of Edina from this day forward."

At my words, the vassals, who had been nervous about the mysterious presence, gulped.

Charlotte De Gradias.

With that name attached, it's no surprise where Charlotte is from.

"Remember, she is my substitute, but she is also my equal."

I get up, and Charlotte, who sits on the throne instead, looks down at the still vassals.

"I'll keep it short."

Charlotte didn't say hello or any other greeting.

In Empress of the First Empire, Charlotte, now Queen of the Darklands, looks down on her people.

"All things......."

It wasn't a strong voice, and it wasn't a confident voice.

"It's going to be a lot different than it has been."

However, everyone was overwhelmed by the charisma of Charlotte's presence.

\* \* \*

Charlotte tackled the most urgent task first.

Systematization of punishment.

And vigilante organizations.

It was a system that made evacuees responsible for the security of their own neighborhoods.

The next day, I saw the molds being built in the central square of the city of Razak.

Someone will be beaten there according to their crime, and the most heinous will be beheaded or hanged.

The residents of Edina will see someone's death on display and fear sin.

We don't know how much of an impact a public execution would have, but we couldn't deny Charlotte's opinion that the situation in the Edina Archipelago called for it.

It's not that I didn't see the need, but I may have been avoiding making that decision in the name of efficiency.

After all, from a modern perspective, we haven't yet shaken off such a trivial notion that such things are barbaric and bad.

Now virtually everything I did in the Edina Archipelago would be done by Charlotte.

I will now, for a moment, step down from my throne and do what I must.

\* \* \*

Charlotte began her reign as regent.

The rate at which the warp gate is destroyed gets slower and slower.

While we have destroyed a significant number of warp gates in two years, we will not be able to destroy all of them in the near future.

So there's still time until the final fight is close.

I had some work to do to prepare for future events.

Now that I had Charlotte, I could finally get rid of the clothes that didn't even fit me.

None of them still had business outside, but I gathered them together and started talking.

"I'm going to be gone for quite a while."

"You're leaving?"

Everyone scratched their heads at my words.

"I don't know how long he'll be gone, but he'll be back when he can, so don't worry about it too much."

Charlotte is also an Archdemon, which means she has power over demons. And Charlotte will run the country more wisely than I will.

So there's no reason for me to be physically present in Edina.

So, I thought I'd do something I hadn't done before.

"Are you going to do something dangerous again?"

I shook my head at Olivia's question.

"Well, technically, it's to prepare for something dangerous....... I can't tell you anything for sure yet, but I'll be bringing plenty of teleportation scrolls, so don't worry too much."

"I still don't think it's a good idea to go alone....... It's going to be dangerous wherever we go......."

Herriot said.

Everyone knows I'll do whatever it takes.

I know I'm not the kind of person who would be killed by a horde of monsters roaming the continent, but I can't help but worry.

"I'd love to take someone, but this isn't the place to do it."

I don't want to insist on traveling alone.

However, where I need to go now is somewhere I don't know if I can find on my own or not.

Not Olivia, not Harriet, not Charlotte, not Airi.

They didn't approve of my decision, but they were concerned.

"It won't be too late."

Before the gate debacle is finalized, I need to be much stronger than I am now.

That is why I must bring Charlotte to rule, and I must do what I can to make myself stronger than I am now.

And the dragon at the last gate.

Even in a fight with Ellen.

If you don't want to die, you have to be strong.

Airi asks, concerned.

"Can't you at least tell me where you're going?"

"......I'm sorry, I can't tell you."

I'm not even sure if you can find it.

And even if you can find it, you may not be able to get what you want.

I can't tell you because if you know where I'm going, you won't let me go.

Rizaira, Ellen's hometown.

I'm going to go there.

Episode 475.

I've only stuck around because I couldn't leave Edina, and as long as there was someone to replace me, I was going to leave Edina as soon as possible.

I had planned to leave the very next day after I finished packing.

The night before you leave.

Charlotte came to visit.

Charlotte seemed incredibly confused at first when she saw me sharing a bedroom with Harriet, but she didn't ask any questions.

It's that feeling of not asking for anything and then getting stuck.

As if that's what you'd think if you made that decision.

Charlotte asks as we leave the bedroom and meet on the terrace.

"Reinhard, I have a question for you."

Charlotte asks me.

"What is it?"

"I need you to clarify where my permissions start and end."

I wonder if it means that they want to know where the line is between what they can and can't do.

After all, Charlotte is a rolling stone.

After two years of just getting by, you're suddenly crowned king, no matter how confident you are that you can do better.

Charlotte looks out the window with a calm expression.

"I can certainly control the demons and vassals, but as you know. The Senate and other public figures are your friends and allies, so my command and control will not work."

"......Yes."

"I'm glad you trust me, and I'll try to live up to that expectation, but your long absence from Edina at this time of year....... will inevitably lead to discord between me and the others."

Charlotte was speaking reality.

The Senate is not really the people you control.

Riana, Olivia, Harriet, and Airi are my friends.

While they may control those below them, they are no less a public figure than the founding fathers, and may ignore the regent's instructions.

In some cases, like Riana and Olivia, they don't even like Charlotte.

They were both very likely to push back if Charlotte came out of nowhere and started telling them what to do.

That's why my decision to leave Edina before the Regent's rule has stabilized is so dangerous.

Charlotte is saying that there might be infighting.

Charlotte has only one power in Edina.

A declaration of support from me, the devil.

It hasn't been proven that it alone can dominate the entirety of Edina.

"If you tell me that I have no command or control above the Four Heavenly Kings, I'm not going to say anything about their business."

That's why we're not asking for permissions, we're asking for clarity.

I would like Charlotte's regency to be in the form of a full transfer of my authority.

However, I also agree that Olivia and Riana, who have been building Edina up to this point, might be offended by the sudden appearance of Charlotte telling them what to do.

Even if you know rationally that it's the right thing to do, it's hard to accept emotionally.

In fact, the reason I never had a problem with them was because I never had to argue with them. They generally agreed with me, and if they thought I was wrong, we talked about it until we were both convinced.

In Harriet's case, she still wanted to help Charlotte.

In Airi's case, she seems to be feeling the Archdemon's influence on Charlotte, so she should be fine.

But Riana hates the Empire, and Olivia hates Charlotte for not trusting me.

I was concerned about the potential for friction between the two.

What to do.

Above the Four Heavenly Kings.

In other words, if you tell her not to try to control the Four Horsemen and the Senate, Charlotte is only half the story.

I don't need a half-assed replacement, I need someone who can replace me completely.

So, technically, I don't need a regent, I need a demon queen to replace me completely.

"I know my subjects, so I know I don't have the authority to tell them what to do or interfere with them......."

"Enough."

However, Charlotte's words cut me off mid-sentence.

"You are my replacement, whole."

I look into Charlotte's eyes and say.

"You're not a regent, you're just another demon, and that's the way it should be."

Charlotte needs commands, not requests and persuasion.

I hope it is.

I want you to be a complete replacement for me.

Riana and Olivia.

There could be emotional friction with them, and there could be political issues.

Olivia and Riana's crushes on Charlotte may go beyond crushes to feelings of resentment toward me.

If they feel bad for me, I'll feel bad. And I might have to apologize.

But this isn't backyard politics, this is running a country.

Just because Olivia has done so much for me, just because Riana has sacrificed so much for me, doesn't give them the right to override the regency I've established.

If they intentionally try to ignore and exclude Charlotte, I will inevitably be disappointed in them for intentionally interfering with the running of the country over nothing more than their feelings.

In the first place, I don't even think they're the only ones.

They'll recognize the need for Charlotte.

And Charlotte will get the recognition she needs.

You need to prove that you have the ability to do so.

"So, bend it somehow."

"......."

At my words, Charlotte stares up at me.

As soon as you become regent, the king who should be supporting you is gone.

Just as I started out the hard way, Charlotte must lead the country among public figures who hate her.

I didn't put you there to do the easy stuff, I put you there to be a complete substitute for me, even when it's hard.

No, to the command.

"Yeah, okay."

Charlotte nodded.

It's kind of weird to think about this.

I found Charlotte's overly obedient behavior a bit, well, cute.

\* \* \*

The next day.

Reinhardt has gone off somewhere.

"What the hell....... Why won't they tell me where they're going......."

Herriot sighed heavily as he looked at the spot where Reinhardt had just stood, having teleported away.

The king left behind a regent, and in his place were Harriet, Charlotte, and Olivia.

Once the handover is complete, Herriot assigns a new scribe and returns to his original duties of magical research.

The Demon King set up the regency partly to free himself, but also to free Herriot, the brain trust.

Charlotte stares at the spot where Reinhardt has gone.

And, naturally, she couldn't help but feel Olivia's eyes on her.

Charlotte glances over at Olivia.

"Do you have anything to say? Bishop Olivia."

"......."

At Charlotte's question, Olivia looks at Charlotte wordlessly. As if trying to gauge something.

Charlotte could read no malice in his gaze.

Obviously, not yet.

"Reinhardt is too nice."

"......."

"Maybe he's too nice to be an asshole, maybe he trusts people he shouldn't. That's what I was thinking."

At the bluntness of the words, Charlotte stares at Olivia.

"If I were to betray Reinhardt, what could I do?"

"......."

"If I were to intentionally screw up Edina, where would I go from there?"

At that, Olivia was speechless.

"I was almost executed by the Empire, and Reinhardt saved me, so there's no way I'm going back to the Empire."

Herriot had been listening to the conversation.

"So there's no reason for me to intentionally screw this up, and there's no reason why I should."

"There are some people who will ruin someone else as long as they ruin themselves. There are quite a few of them these days."

Charlotte nodded at Olivia's words.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Olivia has seen many who would kill a demon, even if it meant giving up their own lives.

A hatred so deep that it will go so far as to destroy itself.

"You won't believe me, and you're right to think that, because I'm guilty."

"......."

"Still, I'll do my best."

Charlotte lowers her tail.

I wasn't even going to fight it in the first place.

It doesn't compare.

The people here because they believed in Reinhardt.

She didn't trust Reinhardt, but he saved her in the end.

It's a different story.

"It's greedy of me to want your support, but please don't think I'm doing something to ruin something."

Charlotte bowed deeply to Olivia.

"In the meantime, good luck."

"......."

A former princess, guilty as charged, bows her head to the one who made a decision greater than her own.

At that unassuming bow, Olivia narrows her brow.

"......Why are you more asshole?"

It would have been better to be annoying, Olivia thought, kicking a rock that rolled unnecessarily.

-Ass! Sucks!

Clapping also requires hands and feet to be in sync.

Once she's angry and the other person hasn't given her an excuse to be angry, Olivia is grumpy and exclaims.

Charlotte looks at Harriet.

"Thanks for everything, Harriet. Keep up the good work."

"Oh, no, why don't you keep your head down......."

Herriot threw up his hands in dismay.

\* \* \*

I don't know much about Ellen's home town.

A border town on the southwestern edge of Cernstadt. I'm told by Ellen that it's in the mountains and that many people don't even know it exists. She points out its location on a map, so I have a general idea, but it's too broad.

The name of the town is Liza.

Not surprisingly, the map didn't show any place names.

Originally, there might have been people in nearby villages who knew where Rizaira was. But after the Gate, all such small towns were wiped out.

So you shouldn't expect to find someone who knows the exact location of Lizaira.

We don't know if Lizaira is still alive and well after this incident.

However, we don't know for sure, but Ellen's mother was supposedly a stronger figure than Savior Tana.

I don't know anything specific about Liza and Ellen's mother.

Ellen's mother's name is Luna Artorius.

And he called himself the Lord of the Month.

As such, it is speculated that it may be related to the Lord Vampire clan, of which Sunday and Monday are long gone.

He said it was his policy to stay out of the world's business.

We don't know why this is the case, but if it's true, we can assume that even now, after the Gate scandal, there's been no movement from Ilwondang.

Whether Lizaira escaped the aftermath of Gate.

Is Luna Artorius really staying out of this?

See if I can find Lizaira.

We don't know anything yet.

You can't ask Ellen directly for Lizaira's location. It's best if you don't see Ellen, and you're not in a position to do so.

The reason you want to meet Luna Artorius is simple.

I don't know how to convince her, but I'm going to ask her to teach me. She has a transcendent power that even I can't understand.

I don't know how, and I don't see the slightest reason why she should teach me.

At this rate, I'll have to use Alsbringer in the final fight.

I don't want to die that way.

You may be able to resolve the situation without using Alsbringer, but if for some reason you need to fight Ellen in the future, you will never be able to defeat her in her current state.

It doesn't change the truth that I would have to be at least as good as or better than Ellen for me to have a choice.

You should at least reach the master class before the final fight. If you can, you should have more power than that.

There are some great wizards around me, but none of them have reached the master class.

The strongest, as far as I know, is Saviolin Tanada.

But at this point, it's impossible to ask her to teach us anything that isn't ridiculous.

Therefore, we should look for Luna Artorius, who is presumably stronger than her.

It's a really, really vague thing.

I have to find Ellen's mother and tell her to be strong.

In this situation.

At this point.

It's a ridiculous thing to do when everything is so broken.

There are monsters out there somewhere on the continent, but as I stood in the mountains of southwestern Cernstadt, I had only a vague sense of dread.

"Is this....... What is......?"

You said it was a mountain town.

In front of me was a mountain range that looked like a natural fortress, full of bizarre rock formations.

When Ellen told me about it, it felt like a small backwoods village, but it was a huge alpine landscape.

Geographically, the area was known as the Sren Mountains.

Ellen.......

Espionage You can't call it a mountain village when it's hidden in the middle of nowhere.......

Looking back, I realize that Ellen has always been a little different than the average person.

I didn't think it would be easy to find Lizaira.

As you can see from the map, this mountain range is incredibly vast.

And there's no way in hell there's a road to Rizaira in this rugged terrain.

-Woah, woah, woah, woah

I hear the cries of nameless monsters in the mountains.

Even within those mountains, there are already monsters roaming the continent.

I'd be lost for days, weeks, or months.

If I'm Lizaira Nabal, can I find her in the mountains, where you never know when a monster might try to kill me?

Where will I sleep, where will I get food?

They say it's to prepare for the final fight.

Suddenly, you're playing a survival game in a monster-infested alpine environment.

"a......."

Well, when has anything ever been easy?

I think what I'm trying to find is that somehow I've found it, and I've gotten it.

There's a powerful force at work here.

I'm trying to find Lizaira, and I'm trying to meet Ellen's mother.

So you'll find it, and you'll meet it.

I step into a huge, rugged mountain range.

To avoid sacrificing my life in the final fight.

It has to be stronger.

Must.

Episode 476.

"Destroying a warp gate with only a shortstop has become impossible....... This is it."

"I'm afraid so, Your Majesty."

Bertus nodded solemnly at the stern-faced Saviolin Tana's words.

We already knew that as the number of warp gates dwindled, gate-busting operations were becoming increasingly unwieldy.

In the most recent operation, a mission that required the destruction of three warp gates, Savior Tana was forced to withdraw her forces after destroying only one warp gate.

There were too many monsters, and they were too strong.

Two Swordmasters of Shanapelle and four Imperial mages were killed in the operation.

A force that strong is not easily recruited, so this was a devastating loss.

This is master class power that can't be easily replenished, so it's a permanent power loss.

The gate becomes more dangerous, and the shortstop's power continues to decrease.

But the longer we put off closing the gate, the more monsters are released into the world.

"What do you think of combining Ellen's forces with Lord Tana's?"

The rebuilding of the city continues, but the environment has made it very difficult to rescue survivors.

You now change the mission of Ellen's unit to destroy the remaining warp gates and organize a new, very powerful unit.

At the Emperor's words, Tana shook her head in disbelief.

"Doing so would allow us to continue our warp gate destruction operations temporarily, but....... In the long run, we believe that we will suffer another loss like this. Also, the risk of Ellen Artorius being killed....... cannot be considered nil."

Ellen Artorius is killed during a warp gate destruction mission.

That's worse than any catastrophe for humanity.

People have placed a great deal of expectation and hope in Ellen. If Ellen were to die in the fight to control the warp gate instead of the demon, humanity would be plunged into despair and heartbreak.

Ellen was already doing dangerous work, but to push her into something even more dangerous was unacceptable. Continuing to send her on missions with a very high risk of death was something Bertus could not accept.

But we couldn't leave it all up to Savior Tana, either.

The situation is very bad.

It's not like there's no way around it.

"After all....... It looks like we're getting close to the point where we need to organize a large army."

"......Yes, Your Majesty."

You'll have a large army for all-out warfare.

Magical mass migration is not possible.

The assembled army must then travel across the continent, supplied by magic, on an expedition to destroy the warp gates.

In order to preserve the power of the Master Class and the Archmages, they sacrifice those of a lesser level.

We don't even know how many people will die.

If you organize and send out an army of that size, they won't be able to return easily. They would have to travel extremely long distances to the warp gate and fight countless monsters roaming the continent.

You must organize a rallying cry that will not return until all the warp gates are destroyed.

Now that the spearhead can no longer fulfill its mission, it's time to go to war for real.

The organization of a large army leaving for the complete end of the Gate Crisis.

There's no telling how many years it will take for those troops to leave and return, as they'll have to travel huge distances on foot.

Will it ever come back.

However, if the Gate Crisis does not end, humanity will perish.

So it's something that needs to be done.

"We need to have a meeting with the Imperium and the Order."

Bertus decided to scrape together everything he had left and assemble a massive army, the sum total of humanity.

"Your Majesty, the Empress has sent a message to......."

"Reinhardt took him."

Tana knew about the plan.

"......Yes."

Saviolin Tana nodded in disbelief at the Emperor's words.

The empire could not protect the empress.

So we had to play it safe.

"There were some unforeseen circumstances, but....... Let's leave it at that."

In any case, things turned out the way Bertus wanted them to.

A mysterious secret society called the Black Order appeared and tried to kill him.

An unintended consequence was that Ellen, who was present, was forced to fight Reinhardt, but the result was that Reinhardt was defeated by Ellen and faked his escape.

So, while there was a significant amount of unexpected civilian casualties, the mood in the ecliptic was very good.

You failed to execute the Empress, and the demon's minions fled.

But they saw Ellen Artorius overpower the demon.

As if that was all there was to it.

The zodiac was in a state of high spirits, with the belief that, despite the demon's appearance, they had seen a warrior who now had the upper hand over the demon.

\* \* \*

It's been a week since Reinhardt left Edina.

As regent, Charlotte was running her own affairs.

With Reinhard entrusted with full power, Charlotte could conduct state affairs, but she was still more concerned with staying on top of things.

I could have easily organized a vigilante group, codified punishments, and set a standard for the worker bees, but I needed to see a lot of things with my own eyes first.

The Edina Archipelago was always a small country, but as it grew, it became like an overgrown child.

So you can't expect empire-like laws and institutions.

For now, Charlotte focused on Reinhardt's biggest problem: numbers.

The number of people, the amount of food stockpiled, the number of crimes, the number of prisoners in camps.

What you need and what you don't.

With the numbers she needed to know more or less cemented in her head, Charlotte did the following.

In a way, it's even more important than memorizing numbers.

Whether the number you remembered was correct.

There are cases where there is a reported abundance, but in reality there is not enough.

This is often higher than the actual number recorded.

Usually those numbers are tweaked a bit in the middle.

And it was Charlotte's job to figure out why the numbers were different.

Charlotte sits on her throne and stares at the man on his knees, surrounded by guards.

"Explain the difference between the amount of fish received and the amount shipped for the production of fish paste."

Charlotte never thought she'd be interrogating the manager of a dried fish plant in her lifetime.

But Edina's most important business and issue is food.

Food is a matter of life and death.

The fish and shellfish that the mermaids collect are a very important and vital food resource, and the process of making fish into canned food is one of Edina's most important food initiatives because it creates long-term preservation for the winter.

There is a difference between the amount of fish received and the amount of fish paste produced.

In front of Charlotte's eyes was the person in charge of the production process for the apo.

"I, Your Highness......."

"Let them be called regents."

The terrified rep looked into Charlotte's red eyes and slammed his head into the ground in fear.

"Sir, Your Excellency the Regent....... Basically, not all of the fish that are brought into the fishery for production are finished in the fishery manufacturing process. A significant amount is lost in the interim due to mistakes or errors made by field workers, so the yield is not actually very high......."

"Does this mean the yield is low?"

"Yes, for example......."

"What is the loss rate?"

"That, that......."

"If you're the person in charge of the production of apos, you should know something about the average value of yield. Don't you know?"

I don't know what I need to know.

Even if they didn't actually steal it, not knowing what you need to know is already a sin.

"The actual yield is around 8, so......."

"That can't be right. If we calculate the incoming and outgoing, the average actual yield is less than 6%. That means we're losing about 4% of the fish."

At the false report, Charlotte stares calmly at her handler.

"If there was a mistake about the actual numbers, that's a sin in itself. The issue of preserved food is a very important state project in terms of food for the winter. If the person in charge does not know the actual situation, it is a serious dereliction of duty. Also, if 4% of the business has to disappear, there must be a technical problem. But there hasn't been a single report on the need to improve or raise technical issues. Are you just doing what you're told and don't understand the purpose of this?"

"There you go, Mr. President....... But....... Things happen in the field, so....... inevitably....... that......."

"Inevitable what?"

Charlotte tilts her head slightly.

"We've already seen your stolen Apo circulating on the Razak black market. Let's see what other excuses you have."

"Go, Your Excellency, go, Lord, Lord...... is guilty of death!"

Charlotte smiled as she watched the pale-faced representative slam his head into the floor of the realm.

"False."

"......Yes?"

"I don't have to do anything to find out if you're a marketplace apo distributor or not, I'm just saying."

Charlotte smiles at the frozen rep.

"I poke him once, and he comes clean."

Charlotte glares at the guards.

"Investigate this man's crimes and execute him publicly. If there are other crimes, find them as well, and if they are discovered after you have been executed, I will execute your wife and children. So, if you want to save the rest of your family's lives, tell the truth."

"Go, Your Excellency! Go, forgive me!"

"Drag him away."

Charlotte watched as the Apo production line manager was dragged away by the guards.

Sin happens everywhere.

Charlotte doesn't wonder why the author sinned.

It could be for a good reason, or it could just be selfishness.

But once you start making extenuating circumstances, the list is endless.

So Charlotte didn't even know about it.

"Sir....... Regent......."

One of the vassals who had remained silent at Charlotte's decision spoke up cautiously.

"Speak."

One of the vassals squirms, as if unable to meet Charlotte's gaze.

"His Majesty the Demon King is inherently....... When dealing with sin, he did not discuss the idea of a sit-in......."

"Oh....... Is that what you mean?"

Reinhard's Rise to Power.

Charlotte has some idea of what that was like.

Rather than kill them, they used them for labor, and punished them for the most heinous crimes.

Even the punishment for those who attempted to assassinate the king was death, not punishment for their clan.

Leaving aside the question of mere right and wrong, Reinhardt's idea of punishment is punishment of the individual.

But Charlotte's idea of punishment is different.

To be a worker bee is to be a hundred.

Punishment is a tool of governance, not a matter of ethics.

"Didn't I tell you?"

Charlotte says in a frosty voice.

"It's going to be different, a lot different."

Sin and its punishment are meant to serve as a warning to society.

"I was delegated full authority over Edina's internal affairs. And I've been given maximum autonomy in that regard."

"So, if I'm going to punish, I'm going to punish."

"If I say I'm going to sit down, I'm going to do it."

"Food, in particular, is a business that touches the lives of everyone in Edina."

"For the people in charge of that business to pocket the profits in the middle is a felony that shakes the foundations of Edina."

"Edina has a lot of mouths to feed."

"Too many."

"Therefore, I intend to reduce as much as possible the number of unscrupulous mouths that suck the lifeblood of the nation."

"Going forward, anyone caught pursuing this kind of self-interest in Edina's food business, regardless of affiliation, will be publicly executed, no exceptions, and his clan will be disposed of as well, no exceptions."

Charlotte watches the vassals flinch.

There are demons among the vassals. But the demons are unabashed in their absolute trust in the King.

The terrified were all human.

"If it's clean, there's nothing to be afraid of, so there must be some people whose fears are well-founded."

Charlotte sits on her throne, chin on her arm, surveying the faces of her vassals.

"Pray to the gods that your uncleanness may not be found in my sight."

You're not the only one who dies, you can take things you care about with you.

The reign of the Bitten Demon is over. The Regent will see plenty of blood to keep Edina disciplined.

Those who have been lining their own pockets with complacency are going to have to make a pretty big commitment to do so in the future.

\* \* \*

"About the sit-in, see....... Reinhardt might not like that."

Charlotte nodded at Harriet's words.

"Perhaps, but your reign has been overly benevolent."

"......."

Charlotte's reign as regent was different, but too different.

She was afraid of what Reinhardt would think when he returned, not knowing where he was headed.

I wonder if Reinhard knew this would happen and gave Charlotte the regency.

Herriot couldn't tell.

"Even the lowest level officials are looking down their noses at the royal family and siphoning off supplies. Those who know know. that the Demon King is actually quite merciful. And a benevolent monarch is more likely to be perceived as a joke. It's time to get rid of that, pull out the rotten roots that aren't doing the country any favors. No, burn them in front of a crowd."

In fact, Charlotte once tried to keep the empire together by burning herself in front of a crowd.

Charlotte had a point, so Harriet didn't chime in.

"Anyway, the sit-in is for show, it's not something I'd actually do that often. I'll show you a few times and you'll get the hang of it, but you need to know that if you get caught, you'll be pulled down to the studs of the house."

Killing people for show.

Even though Harriet is a princess, it's hard to watch Charlotte make such a cavalier decision.

\* \* \*

It's been three days since Reinhardt left.

There were several public executions in the squares of Razak.

The accuser recited the crimes of the sinners, and the executioners struck their heads off.

The people knew that the way they were governed had changed and that the Regent had made the decision.

Rather than being afraid, people were cheering.

They are usually those who have misappropriated the treasury or committed unforgivable felonies. Therefore, the crowd thought they deserved to die.

Of course, there were also those who felt panicked and paid their taxes voluntarily.

Charlotte did not punish them with extreme punishment. She forgave them with whipping or scourging, and even tended to their wounds.

And we didn't retroactively punish those who had already been punished.

So Charlotte was reorganizing the country and establishing new principles and rules.

At the same time, we also kept an eye on Edina's overall health.

"......."

Charlotte stared at the list of numbers in front of her.

A forward base responsible for capturing survivors from the continent and sending them to Edina.

Port Mokna.

In a way, it was Reinhard's most important place. Liana de Granz, known to the people as the Brainiac, was in command.

The main force is Paladins of the Order, with a number of Mages as well.

It can never be overrun by a horde of monsters, and even Riana, a powerful psychic, can't bring it down.

[Fort Mokna Requested Supply List].

"Is there a problem with......?"

Sitting in her office, Charlotte narrowed her eyes at Harriet's question.

"Can you give me a list of all the supplies you've sent to Port Mokna so far?"

"Huh? Oh, okay, I'll look it up."

Harriet scrambled around in her office for a while, but soon returned with the documents Charlotte needed.

"And if you have any paperwork on the number of survivors who have made it from Fort Mokna to Edina so far, can you find it for me?"

"Yeah, okay."

Charlotte's words were like the most important document she'd ever seen, so Harriet was able to get it ready in no time.

Charlotte lists her stash requests by date.

Similarly, there were papers lined up next to him, organized by when and how many refugee ships arrived each day.

Charlotte stares at the papers.

Charlotte, who seems to be thinking about something, and Harriet, who looks on.

"You said Fort Mokna had a resident force of about two thousand?"

"Uh-huh. That's right, there's about fifteen hundred combat troops, plus a hundred and fifty men for this and that, and that's about two thousand, and that number hasn't fluctuated much."

"Hmmm."

Charlotte stares at the papers for a long time.

Herriot broke out in a cold sweat.

We don't know what Charlotte is thinking, but if there's a problem in Port Mokna, it's Riana's problem.

Despite this, Riana doesn't have any good feelings for Charlotte.

If Charlotte found any irregularities at Fort Mokna and tried to correct them, she would inevitably run afoul of Riana.

There was a very real possibility that this could be a bad thing.

"Is there a problem with......?"

"Yes, I have."

Charlotte nodded at Harriet's question.

"Port Mokna is asking for too many supplies. Not just this time, but all the time, especially food."

By Charlotte's calculations, Port Mokna is overly eager for food supplies, and in fact, Edina has been supplying Port Mokna with just as much.

Charlotte noticed that there was something odd about the numbers.

Episode 477.

Charlotte discovered that Port Mokna had been suspiciously overcharging for food for quite some time.

"That's because of the survivors....... or something?"

At Harriet's question, Charlotte shook her head.

"I understand the need to have a stockpile of food for the evacuees, not just for the resident population, but even with that in mind, it's too much. We need to feed the survivors until they get to Edina." ....... Based on the data so far, Fort Mokhna is requesting more food supplies than they actually need by my calculations. This isn't just a matter of feeding combatants, it's a matter of estimating how many refugees have been in Fort Mokhna at any given time, and then estimating the amount of food resources needed, and it's always been far more than needed and consumed."

At Charlotte's words, Harriet swallowed hard.

I felt like I was seeing conflicts that shouldn't be there.

"So you're saying that Port Mokna is....... are siphoning off food supplies from......?"

"Well, I don't know what else you can do with food in the middle of a battlefield, but....... We were getting charged for supplies more than we needed to."

"Did the field manager doing the demand forecast intentionally inflate the numbers?"

"That's a possibility, but even then, what's the point of going there? Even if you accumulate private wealth at Fort Mokna in the first place, you'd have to bring it back to Edina, and how would you get food back, and how many ships would you be able to put to private use, and even if you could, they'd probably all be rotten."

Why would I want to use stash as food, when I have to bring it to Port Mokna anyway?

It's true that some irregularities have occurred in Port Mokna.

From a self-interested perspective, it doesn't make much sense.

However, food is a very precious resource in Edina, as it is everywhere on the continent right now. That's why officials are dealt with harshly when they are caught cheating on food.

Charlotte stares at the papers and numbers in front of her.

"Hmmm......."

Something is wrong.

To be precise, there is something that has been a problem for a very long time.

But neither Reinhardt nor Herriot realized this was a problem. They didn't realize they were being charged more than they needed to be.

Even if you do, it doesn't make a difference.

Because it's a battlefield, and there might be a contingency, and you're trying to stockpile a lot of food.

Trust Riana, that's what you've been doing all this time.

Because there's no such thing as doubt.

Charlotte isn't the only one who suspects Riana of foul play.

But the numbers are weird.

The numbers, on paper, are showing strange values on average.

If you're seeing strange numbers on average for a long time, it's a pretty good indication that something strange has been going on for a long time.

Reading negativity and suspicion between the lines.

What was impossible for Reinhardt and Herriot was possible for Charlotte.

But problem.

It's about investigating corruption that may have involved one of Reinhardt's most important people, Liana de Granz.

Even if there is nothing wrong with Lyanna, investigating Port Mokna is investigating her faction.

If necessary, there should be punishment.

Are you authorized to do so.

"......."

That's why Charlotte asked Reinhardt before she left.

Be clear about your authority and its scope.

Reinhardt didn't ask Charlotte to do it, he ordered her to.

Bend it somehow.

As Regent of Edina, Charlotte must do what Reinhardt tells her to do.

If there is fraud, it should be investigated, and if punishment is necessary, it should be carried out.

If Riana refuses to listen to Charlotte's instructions and commands, she must be made to listen.

"I need to go to Port Mokna."

I wouldn't have made this decision if Reinhardt had told me not to touch you.

But Reinhardt told him to do it, so he has to do it right.

Charlotte thought so.

\* \* \*

Fort Mokna is garrisoned by the Paladins of the Holy Order, whose leader is Rianada.

Their main task is to defend Fort Mokna, first, and secondly, Riana herself will set out on expeditions to nearby areas to rescue refugees fleeing or hiding from the monsters.

The number of people Riana has saved so far is hard to fathom.

However, Riana now believes that Fort Mokna has lost much of its strategic value. She wants to build another base and use it as a staging post.

In fact, while they had initially been able to rescue a fairly large number of evacuees, it was now becoming very difficult to find survivors in the neighborhood.

That's why, unlike in the early days, no matter how much you explore and go on expeditions, no more than a thousand people are rescued.

It's a cruel thing to say, but it would have meant that the people who were still alive were almost all dead.

The number of people you can save has already been stretched to the limit, and even if you move your base, you won't be able to find as many survivors as before.

Fort Mokna, the obsolete forward base.

Charlotte and Herriot arrived in Port Mokna via mass teleportation from Lucinil, the House of Demand resident in the castle.

"This is....... Port Mokna......."

Charlotte felt something different when she saw the place she knew on paper.

There were quite a few people living in this base.

However, it was not a residential area, but rather a place to temporarily house evacuees, as well as a key military presence.

There was a general sense of tension in the city, as battles were a daily occurrence.

"Refugee camps are....... almost empty."

"Yeah....... It's getting harder and harder to find survivors now."

At Charlotte's words, Harriet nodded.

There were a few evacuees who had somehow been rescued, but the numbers were in the two hundred range at best.

The base wasn't that big because the larger the base, the more it had to defend.

It was a place where only necessary buildings existed, including barracks for troops, shrines for paladins to pray in, smoke-filled dining halls, and massive warehouses.

The harbor was also quite large, with large ships coming and going.

"This is a place where negative accumulation can't exist."

"Yeah, I mean......."

Only when she saw it with her own eyes did Charlotte realize that there was no room for selfishness in this place.

Lucinil, the Gaju of Demand who had come along for the transfer, also stared out over the landscape of Port Mokna.

"Get back to work. I'm going to hang around here a bit."

"Yes, my lord."

Lucinil said he was going for a walk and started walking somewhere in the Samangsaban.

At Temple, I thought he was just a junior who had gotten along with Reinhardt strangely quickly, but it turns out he's an older Lord Vampire.

Charlotte and Harriet both stare at the back of Lucinil's head, now a member of the Senate.

Despite the situation.

Looks like a child, but is actually a road vampire.

Sometimes I stop to think about what I'm doing, sometimes I stare at something.

After idly following Lucinil's dazzling silver hair, Charlotte looks straight ahead, as if remembering what she's come to do.

"We don't need to hide the fact that we're here. Let's go to the command center."

"Yes."

Herriot clenched his fist slightly.

I didn't know what the conversation would be, but I knew that Riana's personality wouldn't allow her to say anything nice.

That's why Charlotte's response is so important.

\* \* \*

"Your Excellency, the King is currently on an operational deployment. He is expected to return sometime today, but we do not have a specific time."

"Then we'll wait until you return."

Upon arrival at the command center, Charlotte was informed that Riana was out of town. Harriet and Charlotte sat in the command center parlor and waited for Riana to return.

Atop the thick walls surrounding Fort Mokna, paladins stood guard at regular intervals. They were on constant alert, never knowing when or where the monsters would strike.

Since this is basically where most of the fighting happens, you could feel the tension in the room.

Not only does he command them, but he is also tasked with periodically patrolling the neighborhood to exterminate monsters, as well as traveling farther afield to rescue survivors.

Charlotte is a numbers person, but she also doesn't think numbers are everything.

There are some things you just have to see to believe.

Or the overall tension at Fort Mokna, or the way all the troops are tucked in.

Some things can't be expressed in numbers, they have to be seen to be believed.

That's what Charlotte concluded after checking out Port Mokna to some extent.

"I think Riana has too much on her plate."

Liana de Granz has a lot on her plate.

"Yes. That's why sometimes Riana's missions are....... Olivia takes over for a few days."

"Ah....... That could work."

Olivia Ranze, Prelate of the Holy Order.

She also has a lot of power, so if Riana's fatigue seems to be too much, Olivia can take over.

"You've been working so hard, and you're only taking a few days off?"

"Yeah, Riana wanted that....... She says she's a little sore from resting......."

With no one else available to replace her, Riana has become a permanent fixture at Fort Mokna. Charlotte crosses her arms and stares out at the view of Fort Mokna.

"Was Reinhardt a frequent visitor to Fort Mokna?"

"No, you know....... Reinhardt has a lot of work to do, so he doesn't come to Fort Mokna very often, but he did make an inspection last time."

It was a crudely built house, and Reinhardt didn't even have time to sleep while he got some of Edina's systems in place. He even received death threats.

"Hmmm......."

"Why, does something seem off to you?"

"Oh, no."

Charlotte shook her head.

"In effect, Riana has full control of Port Mokhna....... I was just thinking about that."

"Yeah, that's right. Riana tends to make most of the decisions and work things out here, though we do talk about the really important stuff."

"What if it's really important?"

"Primarily, how are we going to transport evacuees. How are we going to set up new operational zones?"

Charlotte nodded at Harriet's words.

"What is the loyalty of the troops at Fort Mokna to Lyanna?"

"Loyalty?"

"Yes, loyalty."

At Charlotte's question, Harriet ponders.

"It must be very high. I've heard that Riana always fights at the front of the line, and when monsters attack, even in the middle of the night, she tries to be the first to do as little damage as possible. If the commander fights at the front of the line....... can't her loyalty be low?"

"I see."

Charlotte is still looking out the window.

Liana de Granz puts her all into the defense of Fort Mokna.

He fights from the front to avoid taking as many casualties as possible. Trust and loyalty to such a commander cannot be low.

Charlotte was convinced by Herriot's words.

"How does it compare to Olivia Lanchester?"

"Huh?"

The out-of-the-blue question left Herriot a little flustered.

"Is it possible that the paladins here are more loyal to Liana de Granz than to Olivia Ranze, the head of the Holy Order?"

"That's....... That's a dangerous question. Charlotte."

It was a very sensitive question. In essence, they are all under the command of Olivia Ranze, the High Priestess of the Holy Order, with Liana de Granz as their commander.

If they are more loyal to Liana de Granz than Olivia over time, that might be an issue.

Charlotte stares at Harriet, who is reluctant to answer.

"It's a risky question."

"......."

"It's dangerous, you need to know."

Reinhard wants Charlotte to take the place of the Devil entirely.

So, you should know all about Edina.

If something is dangerous, it's dangerous and you need to know about it, no matter how sensitive it is.

"I....... I don't know the specifics of Port Mokna or what the paladins think. But....... Riana has always fought for the people, and she's fiercely protective of her soldiers. I don't know who the paladins will be more loyal to, Olivia or Riana. ....... But... if they're for Riana....... they would lay down their own lives for her... ....... I think so."

The severity is unknown.

But the loyalty of the paladins is such that they will lay down their lives for you.

"King Thunderbolt is a title given to paladins with reverence and respect."

They even give themselves that title in honor of their commander, who is only twenty years younger than they are.

"...... is it?"

Charlotte nodded at Harriet's answer.

Herriot dreaded each of Charlotte's unspoken questions.

When Riana comes back and they start talking and things start to fall apart, there's a big problem, and that kind of problem can turn into a fight if done wrong.

A regent set up by a demon.

And a conflict with Liana, one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

It's very likely to be irreversible in many ways.

In the end, the supreme decision maker in Edina, despite not being there, is the demon king Vali.

Regardless of whether or not there really was a problem, if there was a problem and it wasn't resolved properly, the jury is still out until after the devil returns.

If the devil comes back with a problem, whose hand will he raise?

No matter whose hand you raise, it's a problem.

Raising the Regent's hand is a surefire way to antagonize Riana and her supporters.

If you raise Riana's hand, your fledgling regency will be creaky from the start. If she can't handle the authorized factions, she won't be able to take on the full responsibility of running Edina's affairs.

"Charlotte, this is....... It's too dangerous to touch."

"I know that."

At Harriet's cautious words, Charlotte merely stared out the window and said, "Yes.

\* \* \*

Southwestern borderlands of Cernstadt.

Sren Mountains.

-Woof!

I stood still and watched as the giant tree fell and rolled away, splitting in two.

"@AndreaMcGee....... 허억......."

A cold sweat broke out all over my body.

I had no idea there was a monster disguised as a tree.

I tried to climb up and get some snow, but before I could close my eyes, the tree tried to suck me in and eat me whole.

He had somehow managed to shield and release his energy, blasting away at the behemoths, but there was no telling what would have happened if he had actually fallen asleep.

You've been in the Sren Mountains for about a month now.

I didn't sleep a wink.

We haven't found Lizaira yet.

Episode 478.

It was late at night when Liana de Granz, the Thunderer, returned to Port Mokna.

Charlotte watched from inside the command center as the paladins and priests returned to Fort Mokna.

Somehow there were survivors, and quite a few wagons were returning from the rear of the force.

If they found survivors, they would be placed in wagons and escorted safely to Fort Mokna.

Not all of the carriages are filled with people, but we can see that some of them have people in them.

And the aftmost of the troop.

There, Liana de Grants rides in on a white horse, escorting her troops to the very end.

In battle, the vanguard.

In an escort, you take up the rear.

It's hard not to admire a commander who always fights in the most dangerous positions.

The wagons carrying the survivors are dropped off at the evacuation center, where they are directed by troopers. Fearful people are first calmed down, educated to some extent about Edina, and then loaded onto the transport fleet to be sent to Edina.

That's the alpha and omega of running a Fort Mork or a forward base.

Harriet mumbles to herself as she watches the survivors get out of the wagon.

"Still,....... That's quite a bit."

It was Riana's job to scout out and bring back survivors from time to time.

Some external operations could be completed in a single day, while other expeditions could take several days and cover very long distances.

Survivors have become harder to find, which is why we're considering relocating the base, but there are still survivors in the area. It's just that there are far fewer of them than there used to be.

We don't know if Riana has been out of commission for a few days, but the number of survivors we've captured is over two dozen.

Rescued from a life of destruction.

Charlotte watched as the survivors, now in safety, still looked terrified.

\* \* \*

"What are you doing without telling me?"

Back at the command center, Riana shook her head at the mention of Charlotte and Harriet waiting for her until the middle of the night.

"Whatever it is, hold on, I'm going to wash it."

Charlotte doesn't have all the time in the world.

We don't know what's wrong with Port Mokna yet, and it's probably nothing. But we're here because Riana might have something to do with it.

That's why it's important to get back to work as soon as possible.

But when the regent arrived, Charlotte watched him walk away, as if he had some unexpected business to attend to.

'A chi fight. No, it can't be.'

Scared to think about it, Charlotte shook her head inwardly.

Even at Temple, Charlotte hadn't been close to Riana, but that didn't mean she didn't know her.

Liana De Granz.

Honored by the Duke of Granz, she is an Electrokineticist whose offense is the best of her powers.

After the death of Duke Granz, his powers were enhanced by several dimensions.

As far as Charlotte knows, Riana's personality is on the boisterous side, and she doesn't sweat the small stuff. She knows she'll hate the Empire at this point, and she knows she'll never feel good about herself.

When Riana has something to say, she says it.

I'm not the type of person who tries to stifle opponents with subtle chi fights.

Liana de Granz is a very different kind of person than Olivia Ranze.

If Olivia Lance is sarcastic and makes comments that are subtly dismissive of her opponents, Riana says that if she doesn't like them, she just doesn't like them.

So what you're doing now is probably just something you do without thinking.

If it had been Reinhardt instead of Charlotte, he would have told her to wait while he washed up.

Herriot was nervous, not knowing what to expect.

How much time has passed.

Riana came out into the parlor, having changed out of her armor and into casual clothes.

Riana set the plate of sandwiches the adjutant had brought to the table and began to whine about how she hadn't had a proper meal in a long time.

Taking a bite of her sandwich, Riana glares at Charlotte.

"So, what."

Riana is straightforward by nature. She doesn't like to talk back or fake favors she doesn't have.

It's easy to make enemies when you're too direct.

However, being a person of straightforward demeanor and straightforward actions, Riana has always been at the forefront of the battle.

In this particular environment, Riana's somewhat unorthodox demeanor has earned her the absolute trust of most of Fort Mokna's troops.

"I heard it's hard to find survivors, maybe there are still some left."

Harriet watches as Charlotte rings the bell.

Straightforward Riana.

Charlotte not immediately bringing up the point.

Only Herriot, watching, realized that they were two very different people.

Riana takes a sip of water and sighs.

"It's not completely absent. I hate to say it, but the seed has dried up. Less efficient. That's why we're moving bases, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, I heard they're moving their base to another port."

"What, you think we should keep Fort Mokna open, because there are still survivors around here?"

At Riana's question, Charlotte shook her head.

"No, that's probably best left to you, the field commander, because you've seen and done it."

"It's just a prediction that we'll be able to save more people if we move our base, but I don't know how it's going to turn out, and we'll have to clear out the monsters around it to build a new base. It's a risk, but we can't afford to be complacent."

We need to save more people.

In keeping with Reinhardt's tone, Riana was only trying to voice her opinion and act on it.

People admire and respect her.

Riana is the furthest thing from selfish.

Riana's decision to seek out only the most dangerous places, to abandon Port Mokhna, which she considers safe enough, and to take risks by creating a new base is clearly far from selfish.

"How many people are in the evacuation zone right now?"

"Well, I don't know the exact number, but I'm guessing it's probably around a hundred and fifty, counting the people we saved today."

The next time you load them onto a transport ship and send them to Razak, they become residents of Edina.

"On average, do survivors stay here for a few days before being transported to Razak?"

"Well, it doesn't matter how many days they stay, it matters when the convoys that come every three weeks arrive, so if they get here the next day with survivors, they're here for three weeks, if they get here a week ago, they're here for a week, and so on."

"I see."

Charlotte nodded at Riana's words. Then she was silent for a moment, as if lost in thought.

After some thought, Charlotte asks again.

"How many people did you have on your last transport fleet?"

"I don't know, I think it was about eight or nine hundred."

"And before that?"

"Hey."

Riana narrowed her eyes at Charlotte's question.

Charlotte looks at Riana without changing her expression.

"What are you doing?"

"......what?"

Riana glares at Charlotte, not hiding her displeasure.

"You don't need to hear that from me, it's all in the numbers, it's all in the report, why are you coming all the way over here to ask me that?"

Riana puts down the sandwich she's been eating, crosses her arms, and glares at Charlotte.

"Cut to the chase. What is it? Why are you here?"

Charlotte stares at Riana, unmoved by the frosty gaze of Riana's enemy.

"Hmmm......."

When Charlotte rings the bell, she does so to see how the other person feels about her. Favorable, hostile, or neutral.

But I can't resist a few words of cajoling, so I ask him straight out.

Riana is blunt and doesn't like herself. Charlotte realizes that she was right to a certain extent.

"According to my calculations, I think Port Mokna is charging for more food than they actually need."

"......what?"

"That's been the case for quite some time. I think it's been like that for a little under a year."

Riana's expression hardened at Charlotte's words. Her eyes widen as she looks at Charlotte.

With just a few glances at the documents, Charlotte realized how long Port Mokna had been overcharging for food.

The food requirement for Port Mokna is basically two thousand meals.

The number of survivors living there determines the need for additional stockpiles of food requirements.

For about a year now, Port Mokna has been overcharging for food.

"Food is a big deal, especially when you're about to go into combat, and you need to be as full as you can be and have a good meal, and up until now we've been getting the bare minimum because of Edina's situation, and I'm just trying to make it easier on you. Is this such a big deal that you have to come all the way out here and tell me that those of us who fight on the front lines are a little underfed?"

Charlotte nods in agreement with Riana's bitter words.

"Yeah, that's what I thought you were going to say."

"......what?"

Charlotte's nonchalant comment causes Riana's expression to harden into a grim one.

Riana is straightforward. As such, she drops a lot of clues with her words.

Charlotte had already gotten one clue.

"I take it that you were aware of the issue, and that you acknowledged that this was something you directed me to do."

Riana bit her lip as she realized she'd been talked into it by Charlotte.

Clues tend to slip through the cracks, and Charlotte is good at picking them up.

And Riana wasn't very good at that.

"Yeah. I did that, so what. What's the big deal?"

"You wanted to make sure the troops had better meals than they have now to keep their morale up?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think so."

"......what?"

Charlotte begins to explain, still and calm.

"You said you wanted to provide a lot of food to keep the combatants' morale up, and to do that, you wanted to provide a high quality diet rather than a high quantity diet, so you should have requested more meat and processed goods. But what you charged more than necessary was not meat or processed goods, but very basic items like flour."

"......."

"You wanted quantity of food, not quality of food."

Liana de Granz's expression is hardening.

Charlotte explains with an expressionless face.

As he watched, Herriot felt a heavy weight in his throat, like something had gotten stuck.

Riana said she wanted to improve the quality of her meals.

But according to Charlotte, while the quantity of meals may have increased, the quality has not.

Charlotte doesn't tell us everything she knows from the start.

You wait for your opponent to make a mistake, and then, as if waiting for it, you bring up something else you know to push them over the edge.

Catch your opponent in their words.

"For Edina's sake, I just thought it was important to keep her full for now. Meat is hard to come by, so I'm trying to fill her up with basic foods......."

"The existing food rations were calculated based on the nutritional needs of combat troops and calculated to feed two average people, so there's no point in sending more flour or rice. They wouldn't even be able to eat it all. Even if they binge, the troops at Fort Mokna can't consume the overcharged rations in the first place."

-Bang!

Riana slams her hand down on the table and glares at Charlotte.

-Pagic!

Riana's forehead lights up, and she glares at Charlotte with a murderous glare.

"What are you trying to say?"

Charlotte looks at Riana, her expression still calm.

"It's simple, there were more mouths to feed here than were actually reported in Edina."

"There were a lot of......?"

Herriot asked, sensing an ominous foreboding.

"......."

Riana's silence.

Charlotte continues.

"Days, maybe weeks worth. They needed more food because they had to be fed somehow, but they never made it to Edina for some reason, and a lot of the survivors who were here never made it to Fort Mokna, so they were charged more for food than they actually needed, which was for people who weren't on the paperwork."

Riana is silenced by Charlotte's words.

"You."

Charlotte asks quietly.

"What did they do?"

"......."

"The people who should have come to Edina but didn't, what did you do with them?"

Riana glares at Charlotte and falls silent.

What a long silence.

Charlotte realizes that Riana is far from the kind of person she wants to be.

If so, overcharging for food would have been necessary.

If they're lying about it, they're lying because they need to.

It must be because there is a truth that cannot be told.

Riana's face is set, and she slowly opens her mouth.

"I killed ......."

"Mu, what?!"

Riana's words, which broke the silence, stunned Herriot.

"No more, I couldn't put Edina in danger."

"......."

Charlotte nodded, as if she'd been expecting it.

Episode 479.

Rusinil was walking still in the nighttime neighborhood of Port Mokna.

Archdemon.

A new world created by the demon Valier.

A landscape where humans and demons mix.

Rusinil didn't think it was possible.

The age-old hatred between demons and humans was not seen as something that could be resolved.

However, in the end, survival is an absolute necessity for all beings.

The environmental limitations of being an island.

The reality that the continent is overrun by monsters.

Faced with a choice of death or coexistence, humans mingled with demons, creating a bizarre landscape.

It made Lucinil sad that this was only possible after the world had come close to destruction.

The mere fact that such a landscape had been created in the first place, under such circumstances, sent a strange ripple of emotions through Lucinil.

The reasons and causes are complex, and it's Balie who actually created this environment.

But I didn't let that get me down, I tried to make something happen, and I did.

That's why Lucinil felt sad, but also proud and honored.

It was the outskirts, beyond even the city walls.

The monster didn't walk around to see if it was being periodically swept away.

But if there are monsters that come and go, Lucinil is a road vampire.

There is no monster that can threaten Lucinyl with this change.

That's why Lucinil walks the outskirts of Port Mokhna, looking at a world that has changed.

In fact, it didn't look like much had changed.

It's not like there's a dense population of humans on every continent, or monsters all over the place.

All Lucinil could see was a meadow, lit by moonlight, with a slight breeze blowing through it.

A silver-haired vampire strolls through a landscape where the world is so close to destruction that you wonder what's so different about it.

Reinhard disappeared in search of something.

In her absence, the empress struggles to fulfill her role.

Many of the relationships he had were transformed into bizarre relationships mediated by guilt.

Lucinil thinks back to Valier, who seemed to be the same, but who seemed to have changed so much in the time he hadn't seen her.

It's almost as if there's a compulsion not to show weakness.

It's not as subtly cute as it used to be.

His heart must be broken, knowing that his presence has caused a tragedy.

But on the surface, I didn't feel any of that.

You're not showing your true colors at all.

I could feel myself closing off my mind because I couldn't reveal it, because if I started to reveal it, there would be no end to it.

It's as if he has a premonition of an even more miserable fate in store for him next time.

And yet, they act like they have to do something.

"Poor guy......."

Lucinil mumbles to himself.

The Demon has grown stronger.

You can only pretend to be strong with thick curtains drawn over your shattered heart.

He didn't tell anyone where he was headed, but he must have left to somehow overcome his fate.

You can run like a horse that never tires.

She's seen a lot of them.

I saw them running like untiring horses, accomplishing things.

But I've seen more people die of exhaustion after running like that.

Lucinil doesn't know if his fate is to die of exhaustion or to accomplish something.

However, the demon was gritting his teeth and running, never revealing his brokenness to anyone.

You don't want to fail so badly that you fall apart at the seams.

It's not a strength, it's a compulsion.

What's the devil up to.

The poor guy, wandering around in what part of the world?

Relieved of Edina's task, the demon headed off somewhere, as if waiting.

As Lucinil walked through the meadow that night, he stopped dead in his tracks.

-ssh

Somewhere, a breeze was blowing.

"......?"

Lucinil looks out over the rolling hills in the moonlight.

Lucinyl is a load vampire.

A vampire is inherently undead.

It should be dead, but it is alive.

So even though Lucinil doesn't have a soul, it's easier for me to recognize spiritual beings than other living beings in general.

And Lucinil has done more soul research than any other being in the world.

As such, their ability to sense spiritual beings was much greater than other vampires.

An odd sense of discomfort in the wind.

She could intuit that it was some kind of spiritual response.

Lucinil takes a deep breath and centers herself.

-Uhhhhhh.......

-uuuuu.......

Lucinil could read the strange crying and despair in the wind.

Ghosts.

The Vampire Council is also haunted by ghosts. There were ghosts that could not affect living beings, but haunted the ruins themselves.

Lucinil walks slowly over the rolling hills to the place where the ears howl.

It's not like the monster in the gate.

It's a phenomenon that belongs in this world.

But the breeze, which seemed to chill even the wind, made Lucinil walk to a certain place as if possessed.

"What......?"

Lucinil could feel things that other beings could not.

The ghosts of despair and resentment echoed painfully in my ears.

A rural area quite a distance from Port Mokna.

Somewhere between those rolling hills, under a giant boulder.

Some kind of huge, deep pit that looks artificially created.

It was a cleverly hidden cliff, like something you'd never find from the outside unless you were looking for it.

Lucinil intuitively realized that the tune was coming from inside that artificially constructed cave.

Below that pit.

Rusinil saw that there was something nasty going on there.

It doesn't move.

-hhhblack.......

-으우으으으으…….

But I could feel the ghosts, the ghosts that never left this place, and I couldn't count them.

Lucinil narrows her brow and summons a sphere of light down the pit.

It was a pit of unfathomable depth.

Suddenly, Lucinil could see what lay at the bottom of the pit.

"What is this....... What is this......?"

All.

They were charred human corpses.

\* \* \*

Riana has more survivors than she reported to Edina.

However, many of them were never sent to Edina; they became non-existent, unrecognized on paper.

Killed by Riana.

The words shocked Harriet, and Charlotte could only stare at Riana with a blank stare.

"I figured I'd find out someday, but I didn't realize it would be you and not Reinhardt, and not for long."

So far, Herriot and Reinhardt have been clueless, but Charlotte has been able to deduce what happened from a few papers.

Aside from her personal dislike of Charlotte, Riana couldn't help but feel that there was no room for doubt about her abilities.

"Liana....... What the hell are you talking about? Why....... Why would you send people to......?"

Charlotte didn't say anything, but the impact on Harriet was immense.

So far, no one has reported it, and Riana has been killing survivors with her own hands.

If true, Riana would have saved the most lives in Edina while simultaneously slaughtering innocents.

Liana stares at Harriet, her face pale.

"Reinhard, you've almost died many times."

"......."

Assassination attempts on demons are not uncommon. He's come close to dying many times, which is why he's been sharing a bedroom with Harriet lately.

"We can't have any more impurities in Edina."

In fact, there are many people in Edina who hate the Demon so much that they want to oppose or kill him.

So far, though, we've only been able to snap them with force.

Also, without a demon, there is no way to know how the demons that have been coexisting with humans will turn against them.

Liana stares at Herriot.

"If we educate the evacuees about the situation in Edina, do you know what happens?"

"......."

"When you hear about societies ruled by demons and intermingled with demons, do you think there aren't people who would rather die than live in such a place?"

It's not just an opposing force.

These are people who have lost something.

A country ruled by a demon who is the cause of the situation.

There are those who would rather die than live in a place ruled by such a being.

There are those who hate it so much they want to kill it.

But beyond that, there are those who hate the devil to death.

Herriot's lips quivered in despair.

"Liana....... That doesn't mean you have to kill....... There is......."

"Whatever."

Liana looks at Harriet.

"He won't go to Edina even if he dies, and if we force him to go, Reinhardt will be in danger. He's not the only one. Harriet, you've been close to death many times. I don't like it, but so has Olivia. I don't want to fill Edina with extremists, but I can't just send them there without training them, either, because that could be a problem. There are already more and more of them, and they're already in power, and I can't send more of them who could overthrow Edina? I can't do that. What if I don't send them there? What if I have to feed them here for the rest of their lives? I can't do that, either. Do I just kick them out to live on their own somewhere else?"

At best, you'll banish them back to the monster-infested outskirts of your base.

Drive them back to the land of death.

Death or exile.

"Yeah, actually, that's how we used to do it back in the day: if you want to die so badly, go out and die because I don't want to get my hands dirty, and that's how we chased a lot of the survivors back out into the open."

"I thought that if I survived, that was it, but you know what? I think there are some real survivors, and that's even worse."

"Word is spreading that there's a place like this down south, probably through the people I kicked out."

"What do you think will happen if this reaches the Empire?"

"What would happen if the Empire knew of Port Mokna, and the humans knew of our presence on a distant island to the south?"

"There's going to be a war, I'm sure."

"I have made a mistake, a very great mistake, banishing those who oppose Reinhard, who would rather die than enter the dominion of a demon, who know our land, who know our home, and let them live."

"So I haven't made that mistake since."

"It's just, it's just."

It wasn't that they were dead, it was that they were alive.

Rumors of Port Mokna are starting to spread from somewhere, and while it's not known that it's the land of demons, people are gradually learning that it's a paradise in the south.

A demon, a symbol of hate, and a nation of demons.

Humanity's assault on Edina may one day begin.

If an unspecified number of people learn of Edina, the Empire may be forced to go to war with her.

like a demand to execute the Empress.

The faltering Empire may be forced to go to war with the Darklands in order to right the ship of state and unite humanity.

So Riana began to actually kill people who said they would rather die than be under the demon's control.

If they live, all of Edina might be in danger.

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"It's not that I didn't try to convince him, I tried to convince him with lies, but even if I sent him to Edina, he would eventually learn the truth."

"I don't know what you two think."

"People hate the devil a lot more than we realize."

"It's common to hate someone so much that you want to kill them."

"They hate it so much they want to die."

Harriet knew, and Charlotte knew, that people hated the Devil enough to want to kill him.

But I could have hated it to death.

What I was doing to save someone was killing someone.

Killing someone to save someone.

Killing someone to protect something.

I had to kill those I had somehow saved, with my own hands.

Riana had been hiding this story for a very long time.

About a year ago.

Sending would-be impure individuals to Edina resulted in numerous assassination attempts on the Demon King.

The increasingly extreme opposition to the Demon King could lead to Edina's overthrow in the long run.

Ever since we realized that information about Port Mokna and Edina was spreading.

Riana has actually killed people who would rather die than fall under her control.

In Riana's hard expression, there was a resolve that could not be broken or dented.

No bitterness, no despair.

I know that if I start getting hung up on that, I'm just going to flounder in a bottomless pit of despair.

All I could see was that he was determined not to think about it.

"Whatever you wanted to know, the truth is this."

Riana looks at Charlotte and says.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

Charlotte stares at Riana.

"Why didn't you tell Reinhardt about this?"

At Charlotte's question, Riana crosses her arms.

"Do you know what that Reinhardt bastard was like for two years?"

"I don't know."

At Charlotte's nonchalant response, Riana narrows her eyes and looks out the window.

"I've never done anything like that, not even tough love."

"......."

"The guy who's supposed to be the hardest on us, he's spent two years with no signs of it, just thinking about what he has to do, moving forward, never taking a break."

Riana stares at Charlotte for a moment.

"She thinks you're the reason she's like this, but you don't say anything, so she knows. That she's struggling beyond words."

"......."

When you save people, you kill people.

"If Reinhardt had known about this, he would have told me to just send him to Edina and let him deal with the death threats and internal affairs."

"I don't want Reinhardt to have to deal with that anymore."

"I'm not going to say this is the best option."

"But."

"I don't even think it was the worst choice."

"Can't I see that no matter how we try to solve this problem, we have only shitty options? So I've made a decision, as the Devil's changeling and commander of the front lines, that Reinhardt will never know about this. He must be rotten to the core as it is, and I'm not going to make him bear more burden and anguish by letting him know about this."

Riana didn't want to give the demon another thing to worry about, as she was sure he already had enough on his plate.

Riana didn't want Reinhardt to be in danger, and she didn't want Edina to be in danger.

So, at best, the people we saved who hated the devil enough to want to die, we actually killed.

Rumors of the carnage here did not reach Edina. Riana handled her people in secret, so even the survivors who made it to Edina didn't know who was missing around them.

Just like that.

Riana saved people, and killed them because she saved them.

Rather, they would have lived a little longer if they hadn't been discovered by Riana.

What it felt like to kill them with my own hands, Riana didn't explain in the slightest.

Just as Reinhardt hadn't had a hard time for two years.

Riana says nothing about the inevitability or pain of killing.

We decided to do that, so we did.

Liana de Granz, so hard you'd never get a needle through her.

The Devil's Changeling.

Charlotte stares at the Thunder King.

"You must be a friend of Reinhard's, right?"

Charlotte asks Riana, still looking nonchalant.

"Right."

"But before we get to that, I assume you realize that this is a vassal relationship?"

"......Yes."

You should think of the relationship as a friend first.

When Charlotte says that they started out as friends, but now they have to let go of that mentality to some extent, Riana has no words to argue. Charlotte stares at Riana for a moment.

"The subjects cheat the lord for the sake of the lord. That's your argument, isn't it?"

It's a bit of a stretch to compare Riana's situation to Reinhardt's, but in the end, they're not all that different.

"Yeah. I guess that's how it goes, so to speak."

"So by that logic, neither Harriet here nor I, the Regent, nor Olivia, the Prelate, nor Airi, the Succubus Queen, can cheat the monarch?"

"......."

"To ease the monarch's burden, to ease the monarch's responsibility and guilt, the monarch shouldn't know about the miserable, dirty things going on in the country, so it's okay to deceive the monarch?"

Charlotte stares at Riana.

"If you deceive like that, if you pull the wool over the eyes of a monarch in the name of serving him, if you report only what looks good, only what's pretty, only what's pleasing to the eye, but you hide the dirty stuff and don't show it to him, and he thinks everything is going well and knows nothing, what do you call a monarch like that?"

"Dark Lord, or not?"

Riana looks at Charlotte with a stern expression.

"Liana de Granz."

"Your intentions may be loyal, but your actions are unfaithful."

"The moment a vassal dares to show consideration for his monarch, and tries to hide and blindfold him, you make Reinhardt incompetent, even if unintentionally."

"Inevitably, Reinhardt won't doubt you, so everything you say is true, and he won't wonder what's behind it. Why? Because you're a public figure, a friend."

"Whatever your intentions, you have proceeded unilaterally without discussing important matters with your lord, and for a very long time."

"Reinhardt trusted you, and you suspected he might fall apart."

"As a result, I betrayed Reinhardt's trust."

"I'm not going to get into a debate about whether your handling of this was wrong."

"But you should have talked to Reinhardt about this, you must."

"That's your fault, that's your mistake."

Regardless of your intentions, once you start cheating your lord, there may be a second and third time.

Riana has deceived the monarch herself, so if there are others who are deceiving the monarch for similar reasons, she cannot say anything to them.

Just like that.

If we assume that every follower of Reinhardt has a few things to hide in order to honor Reinhardt.

Reinhard is an incompetent monarch who doesn't know what he's doing. Charlotte stares at Riana, still and speechless.

You may be a friend, but don't approach it from your friend's perspective.

Riana knows that Charlotte's comment wasn't just to confirm that this was up or down.

"The monarch needs your loyalty, not your consideration."

You can be considerate of your friends and keep them from knowing what they need to know.

However, out of respect for the monarch, it would be treasonous to keep him from knowing what he needs to know.

"The issues and responsibilities of good and evil stemming from the state are for the monarch to decide from below, to enforce at will, and not for you to decide for yourself if you want to take them."

"......."

Charlotte's comment that this would make Reinhardt an incompetent monarch.

That intentions never matter, and that the accumulation of these things will only make Reinhardt an enemy.

Riana was at a loss for words.

He had to admit that his choice, for better or worse, was a mistake that would eventually jeopardize the relationship between the gods and Reinhardt's ability as a monarch.

"So, what do you want to say in conclusion, are you trying to get me removed from my position, or are you trying to tell Reinhard that I've cheated and need to be punished?"

Charlotte responds to his words with animosity, but ultimately an acknowledgment of her mistake.

"I didn't know the specifics, but I had a feeling it was something like that. All I'm saying is, there shouldn't be this kind of secrecy in the future, under any pretense."

She didn't say what Riana had been slaughtering survivors up to this point.

Most importantly, he didn't discuss what should have been discussed with the monarch, but went ahead and did it anyway.

I'm just pointing out the problems it will cause.

"I'm going to report this to Reinhardt, but because of his personality, I'm not going to say that he's going to punish you or remove you from your position."

"......."

"And this is my judgment as regent."

Charlotte looks around.

"Until Reinhardt returns and gives me orders, I suggest we suspend the search for survivors at Fort Mokna."

The possibility of getting survivors isn't completely out of the question.

However, securing survivors inevitably leads to the slaughter of some of them.

You may have the option of continuing this search for survivors because you may be able to save some of them.

However, there is also the option of not saving anyone because you might have to kill someone innocent.

No decision is completely right.

It's just a decision.

"So for now, we're going to stop all activity outside of base defense."

Until Reinhardt makes a new determination, Fort Mokna will restrict activity outside of base defense.

That was the new decision of Regent Charlotte de Gradias.

"Are you comfortable with my decision?"

At Charlotte's question, Riana stares at her.

Eventually, Riana was forced to admit her mistake.

"......Yes, let's do that."

Therefore, we had no choice but to accept the regent's judgment.

When she was done, Charlotte stood up, and Harriet stumbled to her feet.

"Hey."

Riana calls out to Charlotte as she turns to leave.

"......?"

"You know I don't like you, right?"

"......."

At Riana's words, Charlotte stares at Riana in silence.

"There's no reason to like me, only reasons to dislike me, and I'm sure they will."

Charlotte could only stare at Riana as if that was all that mattered.

"Doesn't that occur to you?"

"......what?"

Riana bites her lip, her eyes widening.

Before I knew it, Riana's eyes were red and bloodshot.

After a long moment of silence, Riana mumbles something that sounds like vomit.

"I love you. And that you don't deserve to hate the Empire....... That kind of thinking comes from....... don't you?"

"......."

Charlotte looks at Riana, her eyes wide and bloodshot.

Riana is casting her vacant gaze off into the distance.

Hold still.

Riana knows what happened to cause her father's death.

The Empire killed Lyanna's father, Duke Granz, and blamed it on the Devil.

This is because Duke Granz was one of the key figures in the revolutionary forces.

Revolutionary forces could have plunged the entire continent into a vortex of war.

Furthermore, Duke Granz's location was known to be a meeting place for demons.

The revolutionary forces were willing to join hands with the enemies of humanity for the sake of the revolution.

To avoid war.

To avoid countless sacrifices, the Empire killed Duke Granz, even going so far as to disguise it as the work of the Devil.

For this reason, Riana hates the Empire, and she hates all those involved in her father's death.

For that reason, he dislikes Charlotte, an imperial princess.

But now.

Riana does it for Edina's sake.

In the name of avoiding war with the Empire.

In the name of the devil.

Killed innocents.

It was as if Riana had confessed to Charlotte that she hated the empire and was plagued by the idea that she was not worthy of it.

The logic behind the Empire's killing of Duke Granz.

The logic behind Riana's slaughter of the innocents is exactly the same.

The logic is the same: to avoid more sacrifices.

Riana realizes that her hatred is now unjustified.

As if Reinhardt wasn't feeling hopeless enough, Riana was feeling hopeless as well, having done such a terrible thing with her own hands.

"Well......."

A right to hate.

Qualifications to hate.

"I don't know if hate and hatred require qualification."

Hate and dislike happen even when the evidence is weak.

I wonder if it's just a misconception that people actually hate and loathe demons.

"So if you keep hating me, if you keep hating the empire, it's just the way it is, and thinking about whether you deserve it is......."

Charlotte stares at Riana for a moment.

"Worrying about the moral purity of hate and hatred is itself....... something."

Charlotte shakes her head.

"Isn't that too, too arrogant?"

Your previous hatred and dislike may have been morally pure, but now it may be unjustified.

At Charlotte's suggestion that it was arrogant to even think about it, Riana bit her lip.

"You, I don't like you either."

Charlotte smirked at Riana's reaction.

"It would do no good for a regent to be overly friendly with the king's most important people. Not for me, not for you, and not for Reinhardt."

So I'd rather be seen as an asshole and an inconvenience to you, but someone you can't ignore, he added.

"But that doesn't change the fact that you're a much better person than I am."

Those who believed in Reinhardt.

You didn't believe in yourself.

Charlotte knew that she couldn't bridge the gap forever.

With those words, Charlotte left the Fort Mokna command center.

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The power of the regent must be strong.

However, if you get too close to the demon's people, the state will be run without them, and if the regent becomes more trusted, the demon will become less popular.

Charlotte may have control over Edina, but she recognizes the dangers of letting herself get too close to too many important people.

Charlotte believes that she is only the king's substitute, not the king himself.

That's not really what Reinhardt wants.

Of course, Charlotte doesn't think that just because she wants to, she can earn the trust of the Four Heavenly Kings, the Senate, and their leaders any more than Reinhardt can.

The time they've put in is out of Charlotte's hands.

She's wary of such situations, but she doesn't think Olivia or Riana are any more trustworthy than Reinhardt.

However, for them, the regent should be an inconvenience, but one that cannot be ignored.

You can't be too weak and you can't be too strong.

Charlotte was in a position of power.

Just before returning to Razak from Port Mokna.

"Hey guys, I think there's something you should know about......."

"What do I need to know?"

"Yes."

Lucinil also had no choice but to tell Charlotte and Harriet about the grotesque carnage she had seen.

As Charlotte and Harriet listened to the story, they had a vague idea of what Lucinil was talking about.

"Oh, I think that's......."

"Of course......."

"What, do you know what's going on?"

Charlotte thought about it for a moment, and then told Lucinil a short story about what had happened in Razak.

"ah......."

Only then did Rusinil realize what he had seen.

Charlotte's face was emotionless, while Lucyneel and Herriot looked pitiful.

Lucinil thought for a moment, and then let out a long sigh.

"Whatever it is, we're going to have to do something about it."

"We've decided to stop searching for survivors for now."

"No, that's not it."

Lucinil refers to the outskirts of Port Mokna.

"If you're spiritually attuned enough, you can feel it through your skin."

"Listen......?"

At Herriot's question, Rusinil nodded.

"Yeah, ghosts might materialize as the undead, an unexplained curse might fall, or some bizarre kind of recalculation might occur."

Too many deaths have deposited too many spirits in the area, and no one knows how many have died in the meantime.

"I have to do something before it becomes unmanageable."

"If I don't, what happens?"

At Charlotte's question, Rusinil shook her head.

"I don't know."

But the look on his face was serious.

"That's why it's scarier."

Recalculation due to original spirit.

It's a world where wrongful death is everywhere.

No one knew what would happen if they didn't act fast.

\* \* \*

With the teleportation scroll, I can go back to Edina and rest for a few days before returning.

However, the teleportation scroll is not infinite. There's a limit to how far you can travel, so it's not like you can get back to Edina in a single sheet.

A teleportation scroll is something that Herriot can barely create without losing sleep and tinkering for days.

I can't waste it, not even for Heriot's sake. If I run out of scrolls without thinking, he's the one who suffers.

The Sren Mountains were as monstrous as the continent itself.

Furthermore, the mountains are so rugged that the monsters that come through here are nothing like the creatures that roam the wilderness.

The terrain is terrain, and the clumsy can't get in.

I was afraid I might fall asleep and be attacked, so I didn't sleep at all.

Being able to pull an all-nighter.

That in itself made me realize that I had become something transcendent, something different from a normal human being.

I didn't want to be in this situation.

However, a mountain range is a mountain range, no matter how fit I am and no matter how much I can't compare to the average person.

Scrambling over rocky cliffs, up steep ridges, and across mountain ranges that were freezing cold at night, I could only go so fast.

Where the hell is Lizaira?

What's the difference between driving into a mountain range and finding a single village like you're heading into the middle of nowhere and eventually finding a handful of oases in a vast desert?

I wonder if I'm wasting my time.

No, you're right, it's a waste of time.

"Whoa......."

You're standing on a rock on a mountain peak, looking out over an endless range of mountains.

When I saw the mountains, which looked as if the sea had risen and fallen, I knew that the moment I would find Rizaira would never come.

If I had known this, I would have gone with Ellen when she said she was going to her hometown.

I have a warrior's bloodline, I'm Nabal, and I have the bizarre notion that if I spend my childhood running around in these pickling pits, I'll become Erhidorgan Artorius.

I don't think Rizaira would have been destroyed by a monster.

But if Lizaira still exists, how is she dealing with the monster?

It is entirely possible that the people of Rizaira also left in search of a new home.

If that's the case, then I'm literally wandering around the Sren Mountains in vain.

I'm pissed, should I set it on fire? As long as I have a flame of fire, I can burn this entire mountain range to the ground.

Then the monsters that are bothering you will burn up or go somewhere else.

"......."

Of course, if I did that, Ellen's mother would kill me on sight.

I was at a loss for words.

I climb down from the rock, and start walking again.

I'm tired.

I want to sleep.

-Kaahhhhhh!

However, out of nowhere, a flying monster was flying toward me.

"Oh my God."

-Woof!

I grip the summoned Tiamata tightly in my right hand and throw it out.

-shhhhhh! Koo-koo-koo!

Flying toward the flying creature, Tiamata unleashed a torrent of divine power from thin air, blasting it to smithereens.

"Huh."

I make my way down the mountain, leaving the blood of the creature that exploded in the air behind.

Lizaira.

Where the hell is it?

\* \* \*

Three more days passed.

The lack of sleep dulled my sense of time, to the point where I was in a trance-like state where I forgot where I was and what I was doing.

We ran out of all the preserved food we had brought with us, so we hunted animals and ate them.

At least I didn't have to worry about starting a fire thanks to Tuesday's spark.

By the time I got to the point where I couldn't find Lizaira and not know what it was, I had climbed the cliff.

A rocky crevice on a cliff, just big enough for a person to fit through.

I crawled in there and went to sleep.

and so on.

Trusting that my gut will wake me up when I'm near death.

It was irresponsible, but I knew that if I didn't go to sleep, I might die.

I couldn't even tell how much sleep I'd gotten.

I don't know if I slept for hours or days, but the important thing was that I wasn't dead.

I crawled out of the rocks, down the cliff, found a stream, and drank water.

The monster crawled out relentlessly.

None of them were deadly, but they weren't anything to sneeze at either.

Some were small, some were deer, and some were flying.

Those that were too close to the spirit body to be hit by physical strikes were lucky enough to be slashed with a holy weapon.

You don't know how many peaks you've crossed.

I was lost in the middle of the Sren Mountains.

Where the hell is Lizaira, and was Ellen's hometown such a hard place to get into?

Or is it somewhere at the beginning of the Sren Mountains?

But I don't know the direction.

Whether Rizaira is closer to the north, west, south, or east of the Sren Mountains.

So I literally felt like I was looking for Kim Seo in Seoul, and all I could do was look around as I climbed each peak.

I'd fall asleep and have no idea how much time I'd spent on it.

I just wandered through the mountains day and night, slashing, slashing, slashing at monsters.

One such night.

"Ha ha....... Ha ha......."

I tore through the swarming monsters, then slumped on a rock at the top of a mountain, covered in blood.

Isn't it possible that Liza doesn't exist?

So isn't all this bullshit actually a waste of time?

After a few days of slaying monsters, I'm approaching 12,000 achievement points.

I can't reach the master class with achievement points.

-Heyyyyyy!

The gusts of wind from the summit seemed to tear at my face and ears.

His clothes were tattered.

I need to get cleaned up somewhere. I've got laundry to do tomorrow.

I came alone because I thought it would be a waste to bring anyone other than myself, but really, should I have brought anyone else?

Some high peak, unnamed.

I think this is the highest peak I've ever climbed.

I sit down on a rock and stare up at the night sky.

Before I knew it, the full moon was shining brightly.

Ellen's mother.

Luna Artorius.

She made the full moon enlarge as if to move the world, then drew a sword from it.

It was a surreal sight to behold.

I still don't know if it's magic, psychic, or where the hell it comes from.

But.

The name Luna.

I couldn't help but think of the name meaning moon, in front of a full moon.

Where is Lizaira and.

Where is Luna Artorius.

I, really can't find it there?

I'm not Ellen.

How to become a master class in your own right, I don't know.

I'm not Ellen Artorius, so I don't know how to teach myself a master class in enchantment.

So someone needs to tell me.

Grabbing anyone.

Because I don't want to die.

I know it's best to sacrifice my life for the ending, but I don't want to do it.

I need to find it.

Someone who can guide me.

That someone.

I stand still and look up at the moon.

"......Luna."

If you call to the moon, it will come.

If you look at the moon and shout.

If you appeal to the full moon.

"Luna Artorius."

Can I find Liza and Luna Artorius?

I reach for the moon, vaguely.

"Mother."

Frustrated and pissed off.

"Mother!"

Shout.

"Come on out, I'm watching you, I'm watching you, I'm watching you, come on!"

Desperate.

"Mommy, mommy, come out, I know you're watching!"

-MomAhhhhh.......

-Maaaaaaaa.......

Shot.

I'm getting old.

I stood still, listening to the embarrassing echoes of what I had spat echo over the ridge.

What to say.

That moment when you realize you're glad no one heard you.

"......me."

"!"

Suddenly, I heard a voice in the back of my head.

It's a voice you've heard before.

"Why the hell do I have to listen to that?"

Let's look back.

"Mother?"

"So....... Why would I......."

There was a face there, a tired face, a face that was familiar, but not familiar enough.

Luna Artorius.

Again, it was watching me from somewhere.

Episode 482.

Luna answered my call.

No, I don't think I responded, more like I was provoked.

The wind, which had been blowing like crazy, died down when she appeared.

Luna Artorius looked at me, still as calm as ever.

Full Moon Night.

I eventually found her.

No, she came to me.

"Why am I wandering around at this time of year, in this place, for what?"

Luna Artorius asks, running a hand through her long, dark hair.

"I want to find my mother."

At my words, Luna let out a short sigh.

"Why do I need to hear about your mother?" I said, "Okay, let's leave that aside. So, what do you want to do with me?"

"I want to be strong."

"......."

She stares at me in disbelief at my brazen demand.

What the fuck?

He seemed to read my mind.

Naturally.

Ellen's mom is, of course, Ellen.

Ellen made me strong, so I went to her mom because I thought her mom would make me stronger.

I guess I'm just a weirdo with a big head.

"You don't know what the January Party is. But if you're not a fool, you know that I, and the rest of us, are a group whose principle is to stay out of the affairs of the world. You must have heard me clearly."

"I heard."

"So you see there's no reason for me to help you."

"Then why are you here, I'll just ignore you."

At my words, Luna Artorius stares at me.

Uh.

Hey, look at my mouth popping out.

It's just like Ellen, right?

She tries to take a step forward.

No.

This guy did some weird spatial movement stuff.

Are you sure you want to go?

"No, wait, wait, wait, I did it wrong!"

"......."

At my urging, she suddenly took a step and stopped trying to disappear through space.

"I'm only trying to ignore it because I can. Did you not say."

"Mother, you know I have a way with words."

"Okay, I see that being polite didn't work out so well with your home education."

"I lost my parents at a young age, so home education is not cool......."

Uh.

If you think about it, aren't these things we can't say to each other?

Because my father and Luna's son have been destroyed.

I start to say something, but then stop, and Luna just stares at me.

"......."

You're the one who brought up home education, so if I'm wrong, I'm wrong.

"Hmm....... That was rude, I'm sorry."

She covers her mouth and coughs, mumbling incoherently.

"Anyway, I'm here to let you know that no matter how much you wander around here, you're not going to get me anything. Stop wasting your time."

Luna stares at me in the full moonlight.

"Reinhard, don't try to save what can't be saved. This is all I can tell you."

She can't help me.

So do something worthwhile with your time elsewhere is the only thing Luna can say.

Really, that's all there is to it.

"The gate crisis is almost over."

"......."

"But at the last gate, there's going to be a monster that no one can handle."

"I suppose so. You know strange things, so if you say so, then so be it."

"Does my mother know what happens when you unleash the true power of the Alsbringer....... Do you know?"

"......."

She looked at me and was silent.

The silence was the answer.

"I see."

"Yes, it can project the power of a god into the body of its owner."

Luna knew about Alsbringer's true power.

"But those who dare to invoke the power of the gods into their bodies lose their lives. For no temporal being can handle such power."

Luna stares at me.

"You know that too."

"At this rate, I'm going to have to use the Alsbringer to break the last warp gate."

"What the heck, what does it say at the end?"

"Dragon."

"......."

"An otherworldly dragon will appear."

An unearthly being.

The Otherworldly Dragon was the last enemy I had to face, and the final boss from the original game.

\* \* \*

"If you don't use Alsbringer, you won't be able to take on that monster."

Luna listens to my remarks nonchalantly, then shakes her head.

"But just because you're a handful stronger here doesn't mean you're going to be able to take on a dragon."

"I suppose so."

Just because I'm a master class doesn't mean I'll be able to take on the last monster.

Honestly, unless I get strong enough to summon Als the War God into my body, I don't see that happening.

"But we can't just sit back and wait for a future that can only be achieved by death."

"You make it sound like you're going to do it if you have to."

"......."

"Why should I?"

Luna asks quietly.

"What makes you think you have to save the world at the expense of yourself?"

"The world's business is the world's business."

"The world's business is everybody's business."

"It's everybody's business, it's nobody's business."

"But why do you live as if the affairs of the world were your own?"

"If you don't save the world, why do you live as if it's the end of everything?"

"If you turn away from it, it will not be your fault."

"Why, you live under the compulsion that you must take all the blame."

"The otherworldly dragon, I don't know what it is, but as long as it is life and a monster, it will not be able to destroy the whole world."

"I do not know what the creature is, but it can only destroy what it holds in its eyes. Therefore, there must be a world that is safe for it."

"The world is a big place."

"So why not escape the monster and live your own life?"

"Why."

"Do you take it for granted that you must die for the world?"

"Why."

"As if it were a given, something to live by."

"What the hell, why."

"Dead with my son....... the son of the devil....... you."

"Then......."

"With eyes like my son's back then."

"You have to die for something, or something like that."

"This is how you came to me."

A single tear trickles from the corner of her eye.

I saw.

\* \* \*

It was a rainy day, he said.

Ellen said she had been bad-mouthed by her brother and slapped by her father.

I'm told that was the last time Ellen saw her brother.

So Ellen once told me that she came to hate rainy days.

That day must have been a different memory for Ellen's parents.

It must have been the day he heard his son's determination to kill the demon for the sake of humanity.

Lagan Artorius is gone.

Lagan Artorius would have believed that killing demons was a good thing.

In fact, an ancestral demon I know, Balie, had a goal of creating a world through Akasha and going to a world without humans.

Without knowing each other's situation, wars were fought.

The War of the Demon Kingdoms was fought because people were afraid of each other and didn't want to understand each other.

Regardless of who attacked first, Lagan Artorius died in the fight against the demon.

Therefore, rightly or wrongly, I would be the son of an enemy to Luna.

Luna stares at me as I say the exact same words as her son did in the past, when he was going to die.

She shed a single tear, but showed no more.

She stares at me, not bothering to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Her son is dead.

But the devil's son comes and says the same thing.

But it means something different now.

Why you should die for the world.

Accountability?

A sense of duty?

Now I'm not so sure.

"Honestly, now I don't know, I don't know why I have to do this. I don't know."

"Okay, then......."

"There are people you can turn away from, surely."

I cut her off mid-sentence and jump in.

"It's just, I don't think I can do that, that's all."

I'm responsible for it.

There's also a sense of obligation.

But in the end, when the real me asks why I should, there's only one thing I can say.

You can't turn away from the world, the broken world.

I could look the other way, but I can't.

So, as salvation approaches, which must be accomplished by crowding and eventually death.

I didn't want to die, so I came here looking for other possibilities.

Lagan Artorius would have said he would die for humanity.

However, I told him that I would have to die for humanity and the world as it is, and that I wanted to explore other possibilities.

Luna stares at me, still.

"I don't know what the otherworldly dragon is, but I do know that even if you were stronger here, you'd have a hard time dealing with it."

"I suppose so."

"And yet, I've been climbing mountains for days on end to find even the smallest possibility?"

"Yes."

"......."

We don't know what she is, but it's clear that Luna has no part in this.

I wonder if she can help me.

If I decide to help, what kind of help can I get?

"I don't know if I should be doing this."

However, she didn't seem to hold any ill will toward me for being the son of the devil.

"But you won't be banned from setting foot in Rizaira."

She stares at me.

"Reinhardt."

"It's ......."

"Close your eyes."

At her words, I closed my eyes.

I felt her cold hand rest lightly on my shoulder.

"That's it. Now open your eyes."

I just closed my eyes for a second and opened them.

"......?"

I could see a small village spread out at the bottom of the hillside.

\* \* \*

What is the source of Luna's power?

It's not magical, it's not psychic, it's not divine.

Given her classification as a Master Class, she wields mysterious powers beyond her physical abilities.

A small basin in the middle of the rugged Sren Mountains.

There was a very small town in that basin, maybe about fifty houses at most.

The wooden houses weren't that dilapidated, but they weren't incredibly ornate either.

It was the kind of small-town scene that could be anywhere.

It was nighttime, so no one was out and about.

This is Liza.

"This is....... How is it safe?"

"It's complicated to explain, and even if you understood it, it wouldn't mean anything to you. It's just that people can't find Lizaira anymore."

In the past, anyone would have been able to find Rizaira. But now, no one can find Rizaira unless a villager brings her here.

She stays still and looks up at the full moon.

He stretches his outstretched hand toward the sky and carefully stirs it. As if to manipulate something.

I stood still, watching the slow, graceful motion.

"What did you do?"

She shook her head slightly at my question.

"You'll find out later."

She seemed like the kind of person who never said more than was necessary.

"Follow me, I think you need to get some rest."

She walks quietly ahead.

We finally see what she's wearing.

She was dressed in a dress that could be found anywhere, the kind of dress a country woman would wear; it would be her normal attire.

She said she was the Lord of the Month, so she must be the leader of Rizaira. But otherwise, she seemed no different than any other member of the village.

She took me to a two-story wooden house.

If you think about it.

This is the house that Ellen has lived in since she was a little girl.

You were born and raised in this house.

That thought stirred something in me, a strange stirring.

By the way.

Now me and Ellen are no longer friends, and here I am at her house with no friends.

"What are you doing, not coming in."

"Oh, yeah."

At Luna's urging, who was waiting at the door, I entered Ellen's house.

"Honey, we have a visitor, please come out."

Hearing Luna's voice sent goosebumps all over my body.

What is.

Suddenly, a much different, more relaxed tone.

What is it?

I was almost in cognitive dissonance as I listened to the warmth and affection in his voice, as if his cold, distant tone was gone.

So does this mean that when Ellen gets married, she's going to be equipped with this tone of voice?

Uh.......

Well.

As Luna said that, a man soon appeared.

"......You're Reinhardt."

It's as if he knew I would come to Rizaira.

A handsome man who looks a lot like Ellen, but a little softer and jovial to be exact.

One day, I remember seeing a portrait of Lagan Artorius.

Not surprisingly, it was a man who looked a lot like him.

He approached me slowly, and Luna took a step to the side, away from me.

Luna didn't seem to feel any hatred for me, the son of a demon.

But Ellen's father might have a different opinion.

However, he offered me his hand with a thin smile.

"This is Ronan Artorius."

Unlike Ellen's mother, his grip is large, thick, and firm. He smirks at me.

Episode 483.

"The beast that slept in the barn probably stinks less than you do, so go wash up.

Following Luna's lead, I walked into the bathroom.

I have to agree, I haven't washed in a long time and have been covered in monster blood on several occasions.

The bathroom was filled with a huge barrel of water, and the sound of burning firewood could be heard outside.

What to say.

It was a strange feeling to see people using surreal powers and living in a deliberately primitive way.

Ellen didn't know anything about her village.

So a monthly salary is for grown-ups, even in this town.

When I think about it, it doesn't seem so strange to live this way.

I wonder if they'll learn the town's secrets when they're older, after they've reached adulthood.

You're just soaking in hot water.

-Is the water okay.

I couldn't help but jump at the sound of a gravelly voice from beyond the wall.

Ellen's father.

It was Ronan's voice.

"Ah....... Yes. Thank you."

What is.

It's like a boyfriend showing up at his girlfriend's house without her, and it's so weird and bizarre.

What is it with this feeling of being taken care of so well that I feel like I don't know what to do with myself?

And even now, I'm not like Ellen and I'm not like Nabal and I'm not like that at all.

But.......

You know your dad.

Actually, I have a flame, so I'm not sure if you've ever seen a fire like this before....... Actually, if I want to do it, I can do it alone.......

If I say this....... Am I gonna get in trouble?

Let's just shut up.

Rub the dried crusts on your face and hair and wash them off.

I wonder if I've had a proper rest in a few days.

"Whoa......."

With the realization that I was in a safe place for the first time in a very long time, I felt a tight cord of tension loosen.

I wandered through the mountains for a long time without a proper break.

Eventually, Ellen's mother, who was even worse, found me and we made it to Rizaira.

It was a long, tedious, and very dangerous day.

We're finally in a safe place.

In the hot water, I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of exhaustion.

Whatever it is, get some rest in a proper bed.

Now that we've accomplished our primary goal, we can think about what comes next.

-Smart

-Reinhardt.

"Oh, that. Yes!"

There was a knock on the door from beyond the bathroom door, and I reflexively answered it in anger.

Just now it was Ronan, and now it's Luna.

-I left my clothes at the door. change clothes.

"Ah....... Yes, thank you."

What to say.

At first, I was like, "Oh, my God," and then I was like, "Oh, my God," and then I was like, "Oh, my God," and then I was like, "Oh, my God.

This is this situation.

This is ridiculously uncomfortable.......

\* \* \*

Just as Luna knew what I was going through, Ronan seemed to know that I was lost.

I washed up, changed into the clothes Ellen's mother had laid out for me, and went out into the living room.

I could hear Luna doing something in the kitchen.

Are you going to give me food or something?

To me, Luna Artorius was stronger than Xavier Tana.

It seemed bizarre to me that such a person would be in such a normal household, cooking for a late guest.

Ellen's father sat across from her, looking on.

"......."

Or, to be more precise, it seemed to be looking at the clothes I was wearing.

Speaking of which.

Ellen's father was quite a large man.

I'm not a short guy either, but he's a lot bigger than me, and a little bit out of shape.

The clothes I was wearing were obviously men's, and not something Ronan would wear.

It can't be Ellen's clothes.

So, you don't have to ask who it belongs to.

I am now wearing the clothes that Lagan Artorius wore.

Which is why Ronan Artorius is standing in front of me, staring at me and my clothes with a look that is hard to describe.

What a bizarre situation.

Technically, I'm in the home of the parents of the warrior who killed my father, being served a meal in the same clothes he wore when he was alive.

They came for me, too.

And this man and woman who took me in.

They'll be the ones who are far from the top.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

"Have you seen Ellen since the gate incident?"

The question took my breath away.

I did.

I even ran into one.

We didn't have a real conversation, but we did talk to each other.

Ronan must have read something in my expression, because he nodded.

"I guess that wasn't such a good reunion."

"......Yes."

My relationship and situation with Ellen.

Ronaldo Luna seemed to know what we were in for.

\* \* \*

Ellen once said.

My mom used to make beef stew at home.

Whether you're good at cooking or not, there's a limit to what you can do in a mountain village like this. You're not going to have as many ingredients as you need.

I wonder where the beef came from, but apparently Ellen's mom made beef stew.

Interestingly, it tasted like nothing Ellen's mother had ever made before.

"......."

I take a bite of stew and pause. Luna stares at me.

Someone who's obviously an Ellen family member, or, more accurately, Ellen's a Lunagua family member, but whatever.

The sneaky pouty attribute, was it here too?

"This is delicious....... It's delicious, really."

Luna's face was still frowning at my words.

"It might not be to your taste, because you've always eaten food made with the best ingredients and spices."

Technically, there's nothing wrong with that.

I was in the Temple Royal class, which has the best environment in the empire, and after that I played king in Edina.

The quality of the food has never been an issue.

No, but it doesn't taste bad.

"Oh, no, not that novelty. No, not the novelty, the first time I've ever tasted it....... I'm not saying it's bad. It's just delicious, yeah."

I was actually a little surprised by the flavor, but it wasn't unpalatable.

I'm not going to put in spices that are popular in this environment, I'm going to put in wild herbs and things that are edible.

So it's a unique flavor, but that doesn't mean it's bad.

But Luna's sarcasm was clearly already spoiled by my pause.

Her eyes narrow, and her gaze drifts to the window.

"Oh, well, your picky eating habits are unavoidable. I'm sorry, but this is the only food I can prepare."

This person.

Entitled in the Strangest Places!

"Uh huh honey, what does a city girl know?"

"Sure, whatever."

Ronan gently pats Luna's sulking shoulder.

Why.

Why.

Is this what my friend's parents look like?

Oh, so I came to you directly?

\* \* \*

After finishing my meal, I headed upstairs.

The second floor had three rooms.

One was a storeroom, and it was immediately obvious what the other two rooms were.

One will be Lagan Artorius' room, and the other will be Ellen's room.

"This is Ellen's room. Rest here."

"It's ......."

I put the futon Luna handed me on Ellen's wooden bed.

"......."

I don't know how Lagan's room has been preserved, but Ellen's room wasn't much better.

Of course, the room has been empty ever since Ellen went to the Temple, and ever since the Gate incident.

Unsurprisingly, there were no traces of Ellen or her body odor.

But it's been Ellen's room for a long time.

This is where he would have spent his childhood, before coming to the Temple.

There were no fancy trinkets or accessories in the room. Of course, she could have cleaned it out, but it wouldn't have been in her character.

Desks, dressers, and beds.

A few worn wooden swords hung on the wall.

The room was overly decorative, which was typical of Ellen's personality. It probably didn't look much different than it did when she actually lived there.

My dorm room was pretty bare except for the bare minimum.

And it was the same for me.

When I think about it, Ellen and I have a lot in common.

Or that you have no interest in decorating your room.

Like if you play today, you're going to get in trouble, or you're going to spend all day practicing.

Other than that, I don't really have any personal hobbies.

"......."

It makes me feel weird.

Because you can't feel any trace of Ellen in her room.

I naturally think about what Ellen was like.

How will Ellen react when she finds out that I've dropped in on Lizaira unannounced?

I've been wondering about that, too.

Of course, I know best that I'm not in a position to do that.

I want everything I lost back to the way it was.

Even though I know it's a long shot.

So, first of all, you have to not die to do that.

To avoid dying in the final fight, when you might one day be fighting Ellen.

I'm doing the bizarre thing of seeking out the parents of the person I may one day have to fight.

I don't know what the heck I'm going to get out of this.

Once there, I succeeded in getting to Rizaira.

\* \* \*

The next day, morning.

When I opened the window, I was greeted by the morning sun and a view of Rizaira.

No, it wasn't morning, it was almost noon, judging by the sun.

It was a cozy scene.

A peaceful landscape so untouched, it could go on like this for hundreds of years.

I could see villagers coming and going, and the occasional child.

Despite the small number of households, the inhabitants were living in peace.

"He slept through the night."

"Yes?"

"He must have been tired, so that could be it."

Luna's words made me realize that my accumulated fatigue was not normal.

"I've told the villagers that you're here, so they won't be surprised to see you."

"Oh....... Yeah."

"To explore the town, but also to get to know the people."

Somehow.

He seemed to assume I'd been here for quite some time.

\* \* \*

Rizaira is a closed village, and that's the way it should be.

Such a town would inevitably be wary of strangers.

But the people of Rizaira were having none of it.

"You say you're a friend of Ellen's? Her name is Line......."

"This is Reinhardt."

"Yes, Reinhard. Make yourself at home."

Ellen's friends.

Luna Artorius had apparently told the townspeople that a visitor with such a name would be staying in Lizaira for a while.

Naturally, I was the only stranger in town, so passersby, young and old, came up to me and said a few words.

"A friend of Ellen's? Hehe....... I wonder how Ellen is doing."

"How's your sister Ellen?"

"Is that Ellen's boyfriend?"

"Gee, this one looks like a real one."

"A....... Ellen must be having a hard time out there......."

"Why didn't you come with Ellen?"

No one was a jerk, and everyone was friendly.

Through the reactions of the children and the adults, I could see the truth of Rizaira.

They don't realize that the world outside is a mess.

On the other hand, I've seen adults who know what's going on darken a bit when Ellen's story comes up.

There was no need for them to know that the world outside was in shambles and people were dying in droves, so they were taking it easy.

My age.

That is, people who appear to be friends of Ellen's.

"Hi, you said you were Ellen's friend. I'm Lena."

"Uh....... Hi."

"You have to tell me your name, right?"

"Reinhardt."

"Yes, Reinhard. Nice to meet you."

She had short brown hair and a cheerful demeanor. She studied my face for a while, curious to see a stranger in this rural town.

"It's called Arta."

In contrast, a slightly blunt-looking man walked up to me and held out his hand.

"It's not making sense out there."

"What....... That's right."

Ellen's friends were probably in their twenties, so they had some idea of what was going on in the world, even if they didn't know it.

As I walked around Rizaira, talking to people one by one, I had only one thought.

I don't have time for this.

I didn't come to Lizaira to play.

She's not here to greet each and every member of the village, she's here to be taught by Ellen's mother or father.

I shouldn't be wasting my time like this.

For now, I'm doing what Luna Artorius told me to do, exploring the town and meeting people.

However, even at this hour, people are dying.

Charlotte has taken over Edina's job, but she doesn't know if it's really working.

I don't have time to waste like this.

In the peace of Rizaira, I fretted at the thought of the outside world without this peace.

In the distance, I could see a group of people descending from the foothills of the basin.

Someone was carrying something over their shoulder, and in the foreground was Ronan Artorius, descending with a sizable boar slung over his shoulder.

You've been on a group hunt.

Somehow.

This place that has nothing to do with the affairs of the world.

In the midst of people going about their normal lives.

I felt a certain cruelty.

Episode 484.

The night we greeted the people of Rizaira, there was a feast.

It was a feast to welcome me as Ellen's friend and guest.

The game was trimmed, roasted whole, and the villagers gathered to eat and drink.

The people of Rizaira were self-sufficient, and there seemed to be nothing wrong with that.

They welcomed me because I was a friend of Ellen's.

Adults realize that the world is in a big mess right now, but they don't talk about it.

And it seemed like most people didn't know about per diems.

Everyone is worried about Ellen, but I can tell they don't think anything bad will happen to her.

Are the people of Rizaira born here, and do they live here until they die?

Do outsiders ever trickle into town?

"You say it's all out there, but what's it really like? We're so deep in the mountains, nothing's happening, and the adults don't say anything. They just tell us not to stray too far from the village."

Lena.

The guy who introduced himself as Ellen's childhood friend asked.

Sitting on the other side of the table, I could see that Arta was also focused on me.

They don't know the full story.

Lizaira didn't seem to realize that it was very strange that nothing was happening right now.

"Dangerous, a lot."

"Chet, you're not going to tell me the truth either, are you?"

There was no reason to tell them that it was hell outside if they didn't know the details.

I stare at the adults in the village laughing and talking, and at Ellen's parents.

You don't have to die for someone. Just because you have the power and ability doesn't mean you have to do it.

However, it was never comfortable for me to see them living like this, hidden from the world.

We don't know what specific powers they have.

However, with their combined power, things could be resolved more quickly.

I couldn't get rid of those regrets and questions.

-.......

As if she could read my thoughts, Ellen's mother, Luna Artorius, who was sitting in the far seat, looked at me for a moment.

She quickly looked away, but I could feel that she had just seen exactly what I had.

\* \* \*

"Follow me, Reinhard."

After the feast, she cleaned up and took me aside.

She led the way wordlessly, crossing the foothills of Rizaira.

Soon, we came to a vacant lot with a small warehouse.

Luna didn't bother to explain what this place was.

It's self-explanatory.

It was where Ragan and Ellen had practiced their swordsmanship.

We don't know how the two warriors practiced swordsmanship at this location. Perhaps Ragan taught Ellen to sword. I do not know if Ragan learned the sword from Luna or Ronan.

However, I knew that I was in one of those historical places.

Is it trying to teach me something.

What can I learn from Luna?

"You cannot have the power I use."

Not can't teach, but can't have.

I felt my breath catch in my throat at that conclusive statement.

"Maybe I can't even teach you something properly."

I don't know what her limitations are or what her situation is. But it's clear that trying to teach me something is a big adventure for her.

Just like I can't turn away from the world.

Maybe that's the story, that she just couldn't turn away from me.

"But promise me one thing."

"What....... ?"

"Trust me."

"......."

"Can you do that?"

Trust me.

I don't know what that means.

Why do you say this before you teach me something?

Perhaps, she's saying, there will continue to be situations where you won't be able to trust her.

Why is she talking as if she has a premonition that something is going to happen that she can't trust?

However, she took me in on a whim.

It even tries to teach you something.

"Of course you do."

"......."

She stares at me.

You have to trust her.

If only so that you can take something with you and be prepared for what happens later.

You have to believe it.

There's nothing to be gained by coming all this way and doubting Luna.

What does she think of the word believe.

She didn't express any patriarchal opinions.

Just, you know, nod.

"Try disenchantment."

"Yes."

-curl!

Enchanting itself is now as easy as breathing.

Explosive bursts of magic coursing through your body, and strengthening.

Could she lead me to the next step.

It's been about 3 seconds since I used the Enchantment.

"That's enough."

At her instruction, I stopped the magical emission of the enchantment.

I wonder if she can find my problem just by looking at me. Luna turned away.

"Your mana flow is too emotional."

And that's all he says.

"Let's go back."

Trust me.

I thought I knew what he meant.

\* \* \*

How much time is left.

I think we have quite a bit of time before the final fight.

However, the situation was different from the original, so anything could happen at any time.

In Edina, Antirrhinus was able to get some idea of what was happening on the continent and in the empire through the information he was able to gather.

But Rizara is so isolated from the rest of the world that the happenings of the world don't reach my ears.

I arrived in Rizaira hoping to make a breakthrough, but I didn't learn anything.

The only thing I heard was that my mana flow was too emotional.

And a few days after that.

Luna cooked me a meal, and Ronan and I went about the business of the village.

I could tell at a glance that life was busy, and I had to be self-sufficient.

I couldn't help but get antsy as I looked at the scene.

I don't have time for this.

I have no time to waste.

People are dying right now, we don't know what's going on in Edina, we don't know what's going on in the Empire, and we don't know what's going on in the continent.

You've been swinging your sword around and around, barely able to breathe.

I can't imagine having to sit back and watch people in mountain villages live their lives.

She said she wasn't even worried about Ellen.

I felt like screaming that dozens of times a day.

But.

She hasn't even asked me to do it again since she saw my enchantment that night.

Isolated from the rest of the world, Lizara was so far removed from it that she couldn't even hear what was going on in the world.

I felt like I was going to go crazy with frustration, and while Luna and Ronan took good care of me, they didn't really do anything I wanted.

It was so crazy, I swung my sword all day in a vacant lot.

Maybe she wants me to make a breakthrough on my own.

He drew and drew and drew until he was exhausted, and when he was close to exhaustion, he leaned back against a tree in a daze.

Once he recovered, he focused his attention on finding the next step in his enchantment.

Nothing came of it.

\* \* \*

A week after arriving in Rizaira.

Although I had gained some familiarity with the people of Rizaira, Luna and Ronan still hadn't taught me anything.

Eventually, I had to make a decision.

Breakfast time.

"Wait....... Do you mind if I go back and come back?"

"Going back, where do you mean?"

I sighed at Luna's words.

"I've got things and people I need to take care of, and I'll have to come back and see how things go."

I say, and she stares at me.

"You may go back. But if you do, I will not let you back into Rizaira."

"......."

Because.

It's not that big of a deal to leave and come back, right?

The words rose to the top of my throat, but I couldn't bring myself to spit them out.

Luna told me to trust myself.

However, a week.

I felt like I was going to lose my mind when she didn't care.

I'd rather do something, but I don't know if you're giving me an assignment I can't handle.

It was just sitting there, doing nothing.

No amount of grunting on my own could give me a clue, and you don't have to be Lizaira to do that.

I felt like I was going to go crazy without Edina, without me, without knowing how things were happening and rolling that I didn't know about.

I had planned to be gone for a long time, but once I was gone, I realized that Edina didn't need me, I needed the world's information.

I didn't know how the world was going to work, and I felt like I was going to go crazy with anxiety.

So wait.

I could teleport there in a few hours, not a day.

If I leave, I'll never come back here again.

I couldn't figure out what the hell Luna was thinking.

"What would you do?"

Luna stares at me, as if it's your choice.

Time is passing.

Something irreversible is happening.

Am I really, really going to get anything out of Lizaira?

"...... will remain."

Luna merely nodded, as if to say that would be the way to go.

\* \* \*

You've been in Rizaira for three days.

It's been well over a month since I've been away from Edina.

As the end of the gate crisis nears, the rate at which gates are being destroyed slows down, and you need to approach each one carefully as you prepare for the big fight.

I was having these thoughts hundreds of times a day, paroxysmally.

Isolation. And anxiety.

I was going crazy with things I didn't know happening in places I wasn't.

Charlotte is doing a good job of taking over Edina's job.

Maybe Riana and Olivia have gotten into trouble.

That would be awkward for Herriot, who's stuck in the middle.

Is Ellen okay, or is she being sent on a mission that's too risky?

Not knowing what was going on in the world, I was stressed to the point of nausea.

On the plus side, yesterday, Luna gave me another enchantment.

She didn't say anything this time. As soon as she saw me use my powers, she said enough and turned and walked away.

If it sucks, it sucks.

If it's rough, it's rough.

If it's not good enough, it's not good enough.

If you have a problem, at least tell me what it is.

I wanted to scream, but I couldn't find the words.

Something is missing.

Wondering if I'd have to figure it out on my own, I tossed around a bunch of enchantments in an empty lot.

"Huh....... 헉......."

Even great horsepower has its limits.

After draining all my energy, I slumped back against the tree trunk, sweating profusely.

Through the process of draining and rebuilding my hp, my hp was rising.

But I have to move on to the next step.

This is no longer relevant.

Talent.

The talent is there.

No one is better equipped than Ellen to teach a master class than me.

I don't know what's wrong or what's missing.

I think we're just one step away.

I can't figure out how to take that one step.

"Would you like some water?"

"......?"

A voice came out of nowhere and I turned around to see a girl with short hair holding out a water bottle to me.

"Uh....... Thanks."

I had no reason to refuse, so I opened the canteen Lena handed me and took a gulp of water.

The water was so cold that it seemed to chill my brain. Maybe it wasn't just that the water was cold, but that my head was overheating.

I've been here for a couple of months now and have gotten to know the villagers a bit.

However, since I spent most of the day in this empty lot, I rarely ran into people.

Even with Ellen's childhood friend, Lena, this was only the third time they had spoken.

Lena looks at me and shakes her head.

"You're always here, aren't you?"

"......."

"Actually, I've been watching you from afar for a while now, and you're pretty damn good."

"...... is it?"

I was able to dominate the master class with power alone, at a level that only horsepower enhancements can. It doesn't change the fact that my physique is off spec.

It's just that it's not my favorite.

I stare at Lena.

Rizaira is no ordinary village.

So, does Lena know how to use a sword and other weapons?

"Weapons, do you know how to use them?"

"Me?"

Lena pointed a finger at herself and shook her head.

"No, not really, I've learned from Lagan before with Ellen and Arta, but I'm not good at it."

A town where the names of two heroes of humanity are casually mentioned.

That's right, Lizara is a really weird town.

"Come to think of it, I think you're better with a sword than either Ragan or Ellen."

"No way......."

"Is that because it's been a long time since you've seen Ragan or Ellen use a sword? Is Ellen a big deal now, too?"

Lena didn't really seem to have a knack for handling weapons.

My preconceived notions of Rizaira were based on the fact that, with a few exceptions, the people there are pretty normal.

In any case, Lena was wrong.

I don't know what Lagan Artorius's accomplishments against the Demon were, but Ellen is stronger than I am simply in terms of sword, and when she gives it everything she's got, I'm no match.

Lena takes the canteen from me and gulps down the water with a grunt. After drinking the water, Lena looks at me and crosses her arms.

"I'm not sure why you're here."

"......."

"Something about you makes me feel very uneasy."

"......Anxious?"

When I heard that, I felt like there was something in the air.

"I don't know what's going on outside, and I don't know why you, Ellen's friend, are here without her....... You're making me nervous. I don't even know what you're doing, Angie, or why you're here."

Anxiety.

Nervousness.

I mean, I could see it.

"What's the rush?"

It's entirely possible for Lena, who has no idea what's going on, to say something like this.

I know there's something going on with me, but I don't know what, and I don't know what's going on out there.

What's the rush?

I'm in no position to relax.

But I didn't feel like explaining that to Lena.

"If you rush, you don't do what you can do."

"......?"

Lena looks at me with that offhanded comment.

"I'm coming, don't push yourself too hard."

With that, Lena stood up and stormed out of the room, as if it were just a comment.

I stare at the back of Lena's head as she disappears.

What to say.

It seems that Lena wasn't the only one who was weird in Rizaira.

"......."

I sit still, in a clearing, and think.

Enchantment.

A master class that goes beyond that.

And the anxiety and nervousness that has taken over my entire body.

I remain still, drawing on the magic in my body to activate my entire being.

I could see the torrent of mana rushing through my body.

Rough.

"......."

Luna said something along those lines.

"Your mana flow is too emotional.

Maybe my disenchantment is fundamentally wrong.

Episode 485.

Luna had told me that she might not be able to teach me something properly.

True to her word, Luna never taught me anything after that.

A quote from Ellen's childhood friend, Lena.

A passing remark resonated with me that if you rush too much, you don't get to do the things you can do.

Luna's comment about being overly emotional was somewhat in line with Lena's.

But being calm wasn't going to make that happen.

I had too many other things on my mind.

No matter how much I told myself I'd put it off for later, it only made me more anxious that it was all out of my hands.

Luna still hadn't taught me anything, and I continued to practice my enchantments in the clearing, feeling nervous and anxious.

"I packed you a lunch, eat it."

"Uh....... That, uh....... Thanks."

Lena would come by occasionally to give me water or bring me lunch.

I felt a little embarrassed, and Lena seemed to pick up on it.

"Auntie Luna took care of it for you, do you think I would have done it myself?"

"......Ah, yeah."

No.

I need teaching, not lunchboxes.

It's clear that Luna had a thought, I just didn't understand it.

Luna Artorius was unknowingly looking out for me without giving me the help I really needed.

At a crude wooden table in a vacant lot, I ate a sandwich with hard bread, ham, and vegetables.

Auntie Luna, by the way.

My first impression of Luna Artorius was that of a transcendent absolute.

In Rizaira, she's no more than a neighborhood lady.

Auntie (world's best, packs lunches).

"By the way, you look a lot like Auntie Luna and Ellen, don't you?"

"Sure."

The resemblance was almost too good to be true. Of course, if you look closely, Ellen was a little bit older.

Still, Ellen is now 20 years old and an adult. But that doesn't mean she looks exactly like Luna anymore.

"Ronan looks a lot like Ragan, and no, that's weird because Ragan looks a lot like Ronan."

Lena chuckled, as if she hadn't realized how funny she sounded.

Lena says, and stares off toward the village.

"You feel it too, right?"

"......what?"

"My town, it's a little weird."

I hadn't expected Lena to say this, so I was taken aback.

Seriously, does Lena have no more idea what kind of town Lizaira is than I do?

"It's weird, because when you look at Aunt Luna, she doesn't look like she's aging at all."

"ah......."

Her uncannily long face was free of blemishes and showed no signs of age.

On the other hand, Ronan Artorius doesn't show a lot of signs of age, but it's definitely there.

I was pretty excited to find out that my neighbor Lena thought it was weird too.

"From the time I was very young to now, Aunt Luna hasn't changed."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Lena leaned her face close to mine and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"And, you know, sometimes there are old ladies and gentlemen in the neighborhood, and you call them Auntie Luna?"

"...... is it?"

"Yeah. He doesn't do that when the kids are around, but when we're not around, he calls me that, like he's on a pedestal."

Per Month.

I had a vague idea that Luna Artorius was something special, even in Lizaira.

So maybe it's only natural that the elderly should be treated with respect.

"I thought you'd tell me what's what when I got older, but I don't know if it's because I'm not old enough yet, or if you just don't want to tell us at all. You don't tell us anything?"

Lena pouted, as if she was secretly disappointed by that.

-Busy

"Lena, don't talk nonsense to a stranger."

With a low voice from Lizaira's side, someone appeared.

"Huh? Arta. What are you doing here?"

One of Ellen's two childhood friends. His name was Arta.

A blunt, sharp-looking man.

If Lena is on the sassy side, this guy is like a personality flip.

Arta hasn't seemed to pay much attention to me so far.

"Hey, outsider."

"Uh. Why."

The bluntness of the call did not produce a polished response.

"It's kind of sad to see you doing this alone, let's practice together."

He rummaged around in the vacant warehouse and brought out two wooden swords.

-Whoosh!

I lightly catch the wooden sword he throws at me.

"Do you know how to use a weapon?"

Arta narrowed her brow slightly at my question.

"No, I don't write well."

He then points a wooden sword at me.

"Compared to the lagan type."

I said no.

In the end, it was just a matter of being good at it.

Lena looked at us in the middle of our confrontation to see if we were going to argue.

Arta stood still, staring at me, her wooden sword pointed at me.

I don't see any particular momentum.

I don't know where the line is drawn between what's special about Lizaira and what's not, but Lena is definitely normal, and Arta doesn't seem special either.

Enchantment is not an ability that can be learned by just anyone.

It is a power that only a select few can realize. Even in temples that have scoured the continents for talent, only a few succeed in enhancing their powers, and even then only belatedly.

Ellen and I were a very special case, having awakened to magical enhancement at seventeen.

Ellen, who became a master class at the age of eighteen, is almost certainly a unique case.

Also, it's safe to say that I'm pretty much the only one who can take on a master class with just a power boost.

So no matter how special Rizaira is, Arta is no match for me.

If Arta is around twenty years old, it's not a very special case that she hasn't yet realized the power of enchantment. In fact, it's quite common.

Because.

I didn't want to go in with a bunch of enchantments just because my opponent couldn't enchant, even though he was a bit of an overpowered guy.

For technology, see Technology.

Me, I'm losing to Ellen, not so much anymore.

Arta takes a step, a forward step.

-Tak!

Moment.

Missed a move.

-Bam!

Almost instinctively, I defended my flank, and there was a cheerful clang of a wooden sword.

"What."

Arta pulls back, this time pointing her wooden sword in front of her.

"Isn't that too shallow?"

-Whoosh!

The wooden sword that grazed my right cheek made a menacing crackling sound.

The speed and destructive power was palpable.

"You."

This asshole.

"What is it?"

I'm not even enchanted, so how can I make this move?

-Whoosh!

I brought my knee up to strike at his head for getting too close to me, but he twisted and dodged to the side.

"Well."

Arta shakes her head.

"What do you think?"

He spins the wooden sword in the air a few times, then points it at me again.

Lena is normal, but.

This guy was no ordinary guy.

I don't know what it is, but he's not to be trifled with.

I have an ability average of over A-rank without using any enchantments.

The guy who doesn't use enchantments moves similarly to me.

-curl!

Arta smiles at me, blue flames all over her body.

I threw down the wooden sword in my right hand.

I don't need a weapon that can't withstand my power.

"Oh."

Arta laughs.

"Actually, I like it better."

He threw down his wooden sword.

\* \* \*

I don't specialize in hand-to-hand combat, but it's not like I can't do it.

Because swordsmanship isn't the only thing I learned from Ellen.

-Bang!

But that's weird.

-Woof!

This is, obviously, weird.

He and I bumped fists, and a menacing ripple swept through the clearing.

He crossed his arms to block the fist I threw at him and bounced back.

If you have enhanced your flesh with Enchantment, your flesh will be harder than iron, depending on your Enchantment output.

I manage to block it by crossing my arms, shake it off, and it leaps right back at me.

-Bam!

I felt a dull thud as I blocked his top kick with the top of my left arm.

Arta's destructive power is beyond the reach of the naked body.

This doesn't make sense.

No matter how strong your body is, there is no such thing as a level of physical strength that enhances the strength of your body. That can only be accomplished through the release of energized magic.

-Thump!

-Bam!

-Puck!

-Bam!

I even watched in disbelief as his back kick missed me and kicked a tree behind me, snapping it in half.

Does this make sense?

It's a feat only possible for me, who has enhanced my physical abilities in a way that borders on cheating, but Arta is doing it with his bare body.

It wasn't as if he had blue magic wrapped around him.

How is this possible.

How does it make sense that there's a guy with more bare-bones power than me using a cheat that literally doesn't exist in the world?

Is there such a thing as a fair play that is greater than foul play?

Unconcerned with how my head was spinning, Arta went on the offensive.

-Bang! Quack! Chirp!

The clash of bare and enchanted flesh swept across the clearing, stirring up dust with every step, and digging deep into the dry earth with every step.

The technology was there, the power was there.

But the overall output will never be able to match mine.

He lunges at me and I catch him trying to pivot his left foot back on its axis for a kick.

I quickly lower my stance, kicking out my left foot, which is its axis.

"!"

-Bang!

In the blink of an eye, you've lost your balance and are about to deliver a decisive blow to the fallen guy.

-pot!

Arta backed away, one hand on the ground, bouncing backward, almost acrobatically, to keep her distance.

"Not bad. I lose."

Arta threw up her hands in defeat and shook her head.

It's not a done deal, but it's like they've come to terms with the fact that they're going to have to keep trying.

However, I couldn't figure it out.

"You, what?"

"Hmm?"

I don't understand it at all.

"How can he move like that when he can't even enhance his magic? How can he hold on?"

"......Ah. I said something."

Arta shrugs.

"I've been using that all along?"

"......what?"

His body was still, but a stream of blue energy could be seen in his flesh.

If you don't do this, you won't see it, so I'm showing it to you on purpose.

"Do you have to see it to know it?"

Sophisticated mana enhancements that don't even require mana to flow outward.

I felt like everything I knew about common sense had been denied.

Does Rizaira teach enchantment as well?

Are Lena and Arta something, something different?

Ellen wasn't this good.

Does Arta have anything to do with Rizaira's secret?

"Well, in the end, you're stronger than me, but let me tell you something, hmm....... Your magic enhancement is....... I guess you could say......."

Arta looks at me and shakes her head.

"It's ridiculously inefficient."

Luna says.

Lena's words, followed by Arta's.

I finally realized what my problem was.

\* \* \*

Two years after Gate.

With the ability to boost my status points with achievement points, my physical abilities have improved by leaps and bounds.

I'd say it's more of an anomaly than a leap.

He had cheated his way to an accomplishment that no one else could have achieved through hard work.

As such, I have increased his horsepower rank to SS due to his unusual growth.

so I felt like I was getting a master class on a topic that could only be enchanted.

But the only thing that went up was the output itself, not my skills.

No, it's not a level that hasn't risen.

If anything, it's regressed.

"Your enchantment is a projection of your mind, and your enchantment is very wild and unruly."

At Arta's words, I could only nod dumbly.

"I don't know what's going on with your body, but an enchantment like yours should break it down. It's strange that it's not broken."

It's just that my body can handle my rough ways because I have strong underlying physical abilities.

I strengthen my flesh as I forcefully release powerful magic.

It's a wonder I'm able to tolerate it at all, but the enchantments I do in the first place are like gnawing at myself.

It wasn't always that way, but somehow it became that way.

So, while I was able to beat Arta in power, I couldn't keep up with him in the technical department.

Sophisticated disenchantment that doesn't even show signs of disenchantment.

If Arta can convert nearly 9% of her hp into power, I can't even convert half of my hp into power.

It's not overly efficient, but the high absolute value of the output makes up for it.

I won the practice match, but I was feeling defeated.

Power is important in horsepower, but since I can't add more power, what I can do is increase efficiency.

When my power enhancement took the form of a giant blue flame, it meant that the power was burning incomplete.

This method is just a force stamp.

This needs to be fixed.

"......Thanks."

What Luna didn't teach me, Arta, oddly enough, did.

No, she knew this was going to happen.

"What's in it for me?"

Arta shrugged, but said nothing.

Episode 486.

The fact that Riza is a place with normal people, aside from Luna, was overturned when I saw Arta.

It couldn't have been an ordinary village with a kid my age who was that skilled at enchantment.

That night.

"Arta told me what my problem was today."

At dinner with Ellen's parents, I brought it up.

"What did you hear?"

Ronan, Ellen's father, asked, and I dipped my bread in the stew and took a bite.

"They said my enchantments were too inefficient."

"I see."

Ronan nodded, and Luna ate her dinner in silence.

Overly emotional.

I wonder if he could have said it more bluntly, like Arta did. It would have been better to be more precise than to delay.

Are they expecting me to figure it all out on my own?

That way, it takes too much time.

I knew my anxiety was eating me alive, but I couldn't let it go.

"Reinhardt."

Ronan calls out to me.

"Yes."

He sets the bread down on the plate and holds up his index finger.

"The magic in your body is the fire in your heart."

"It's ......."

I kind of understood the analogy.

From Ronan's index finger, blue energy begins to smolder.

Just as Luna was no ordinary person, Ronan was no ordinary person.

"Do you think the spark of the mind is stamped on the heart or on the flame?"

"It would be mind......."

"Oh, yeah, you know."

The blue energy at the tip of Ronan's index finger soon began to flare into a tiny candle-like flame.

"If your heart is still, the flame of your heart will also be still."

The flame from his fingers suddenly grows huge and begins to roil.

"If your mind is confused, so will be the flame of your heart."

The fiery sparks of magic, which seemed to be tearing through the air, were actually making the air in the living room shake.

"If your heart is dark."

First.

The azure mana begins to flicker with a distant dark glow, as if its nature has been fundamentally altered.

"The flame of your heart reacts to your dark side, and this is what you may become."

-currr

"However."

The black flames on Ronan's fingertips dissipate, and he is once again filled with blue, pure magic.

"And your mind is not confused."

"Not even dark."

"Without being swayed by any of the emotions that cloud your mind."

"Beyond the stillness."

"Beyond Serenity."

"If you advance to the stage of what is called lucidity or immobility."

"If, above all else, you have a firm and strong heart, peace of mind, tranquility, and assurance without a shred of doubt."

"What shall become of the flame of the heart?"

The flame rising from his index finger was no longer smoke or flame.

"If the flame of your heart no longer flickers, what will it be?"

The magic at his fingertips didn't waver, didn't flicker.

A straight line of magic power.

Extending from the tip of your index finger, it grows longer and longer, and soon takes on a single shape rather than a series of jagged lines.

A flame with a shape.

A flame that no longer wavers.

In other words, it takes on a shape similar to matter.

Intangible Sword.

A sword forged from the heart.

Ronan Artorius summons an aura sword, and cuts the bread with the blade that extends from his fingertips.

"The moment when the flame in your heart can no longer be a flame."

"......."

"You, you will get what you want."

-Tak!

After Ronan finished speaking, he tried to cut the bread with his Auror Sword, but it cut through to the plate.

"......."

"...... Hello?"

Luna glares at Ronan.

Ronan swallowed hard and turned to look at Luna.

"That, that....... you know......."

"I need to talk to you for a minute."

"Oh, no. Honey......."

"Follow me."

"Yes......."

Luna grabbed Ronan's arm and dragged him away, leaving him blue in the face.

Luna is Luna, by the way.

This is probably a no-brainer.

Ronan Artorius was no ordinary man.

\* \* \*

The magic in your body is the flame of your heart.

As the mind is fluid, so is the energy that flows from it.

But if the mind is no longer shaken, then the magic that is the spark of the mind is no longer shaken.

It didn't change the fact that it was the first thing I needed to do now.

After Ronan staggered into the master bedroom, looking like he'd heard a lot of noise outside, Luna turned to me and said, "I'm sorry.

"Let's go for a walk."

"Oh, yeah."

In fact, it's been some time since I've been in Rizaira, and I haven't talked much to either Luna or Ronan.

Rizaira is not a place where people go out at night. Night in the mountains comes early, and life here tends to start at dawn and end sometime after noon.

Whatever the reality of Rizaira, the village's way of life was not much different from that of the countryside.

Luna walks still beside me.

"Do you remember the last time you cried?"

I felt a little hot under the collar at her out-of-the-blue question.

Why am I even asking this?

"I don't know......."

Have I ever cried?

I honestly don't remember. I probably didn't cry.

"I don't know, I don't think I've ever cried....... before."

Luna asks as they walk through town.

"So, when do you feel like you should cry?"

"......."

Have you ever cried, but felt like you should?

As I thought about it, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

I have failed at many things, and I am failing. I was trying to find some success in the midst of my failures.

Did you have a moment where you felt like you had to cry?

Luna stops walking and looks at me.

"Every day is one of those days."

"......."

"Right?"

For the first time in my life, someone's words felt like a punch to the heart.

She puts her hand still on my cheek.

"If you can't cry when you need to cry, those tears will sit in your heart and rot."

"Reinhardt."

"I can't cry when I need to cry. Every day is a day to cry."

"So."

"You don't realize that you've lived through all those days and ended up with a broken heart."

To put up with something.

To hold back the tears.

It's only making me sick, I say, looking at Luna.

"Nothing can be solved by crying."

Why didn't I ever feel like crying.

If I could have solved and resolved something by crying, I would have done so.

Tears are just tears.

There's a limit to the amount of grief that can be poured out and relieved with it.

It's just a reminder of how miserable and painful you are.

It's just to see how sick I am.

So I didn't cry.

I didn't think tears would solve anything.

Moving forward was the only thing I thought I had to do, and that's how I got this far.

"If having an unshakable heart is what it takes for me to take the next step, then maybe I don't need to cry more or spill what I'm thinking."

If what Ronan Artorius said is what I need, then I don't need tears anymore.

At my words, Luna shook her head.

"You misunderstood what Ronan said."

"......."

"The absence of a mind is not the same as an unshakable heart."

Mindlessness isn't immobility, it's indifference.

"......."

"I'm not suggesting you throw those feelings away."

Luna stares into my eyes.

"I can read despair, fear, abyss, and guilt in you."

"Something that should nevertheless be unshakable."

"A clear mind in the face of those emotions."

"Isn't that the mindset you should have?"

"I told you a dreaded battle was ahead."

"It will, inevitably, cause greater fear and dread than the anxiety and nervousness of the present."

"If you can't defeat nervousness and anxiety in the here and now and have an immovable mind, you won't be able to do the same later in the fight."

I wonder if she kept leaving me alone to stir up my nerves and anxiety.

If you can't use your strength in the face of anxiety now, you won't be able to use it in the face of a bigger crisis later.

It's like you're being pre-trained.

Maybe that's why they left me alone.

"You're anxious. You'll be nervous. Your mind will be racing."

"Nevertheless, it must be unwavering."

The nervousness and anxiety I'm feeling right now is irrelevant.

In later battles, I have to face even greater horrors and fears.

What you can't do now because of anxiety and nervousness, you can't do later.

So now, in Rizaira, I'm not looking to castrate fear, but to find a mind that overcomes fear.

"And also."

Luna drops her hand from my cheek and smiles.

"Tears won't solve anything, but I want you to know that's why they're necessary."

Tears don't solve anything. That's why it's important.

I think I used to know what that meant.

The person I am now and the person I used to be are so different, I couldn't understand what Luna was talking about.

"I believe that the things that people don't need the most are actually the things that people need the most, and that's what makes them human."

"I'm not sure what you mean....... I'm not sure."

"Oh no, you forgot."

Luna smiles.

"That we've been talking about the mind."

Humans don't necessarily have to have minds.

But a person without a heart can't be a person.

I didn't understand what she was saying, but I couldn't deny it.

\* \* \*

In the end, I have to overcome my nerves, anxiety, and fear.

If you're stuck with a problem you don't have the answers to, you're only going to feel more anxious.

Rather, I realized that sitting on my ass with an unanswered question was only going to make it worse.

So, I felt the need to move away from it a bit.

I need to distance myself from all the problems in my head.

The more urgent you are, the more urgent I am.

You need to clear your head.

I talked to Luna and Ronan quite a bit, but nothing really changed.

Still, Luna and Lorna neglected me. They hinted, but didn't look.

But once I got to know Luna and Ronan a little better, I realized that it was asking too much for them to see me.

Life was busy in Sanchon.

Life in a mountain village begins before the sun rises.

Ronan had been out hunting since dawn, leading the villagers, and there was no telling when he would return. Luna woke up even earlier than Ronan because she had to get him up and somehow get him fed and out the door.

Those who remained in the village were up at dawn to work the fields, and that included Luna.

After noon, it wasn't just those who remained in the village who were busy, doing laundry or chopping wood.

When they returned from their hunt, they would gather together to skin and dry the animals they had killed, smoke the meat for preservation, or make sausage.

It was calm, but everyone was having a jam-packed day.

I'm nervous and anxious, but I'm human, so I had to say it.

"I....... mom."

"Huh?"

"I should probably do something, is there anything I can do......."

Be a guest for a day or two.

After almost twenty days of not helping, my conscience was pricked like a bean and I couldn't stand it.

I'd love to be a king in Edina, thinking I'm the destiny of the world, and then do some crazy shit like helping out in a mountain village.

I just wanted to get out of that painful feeling of people not noticing me and then noticing me even more.

"You're asking too soon."

Luna smirked and handed her a water jellyfish.

"Fill it with water. Full."

I thought, what the heck am I doing here?

Episode 487.

Even when I tried to help out, I didn't know how to do things like trim or tan leather, so I just did things that required manual labor.

So even if I did help out, I couldn't do it all day.

Helping out at work didn't mean I let go of my personal training altogether.

I don't know what immobility is, but unlike the previous enchantments, I tried to do it with the feeling that I was trying to control the flow of energy instead of letting it out.

But it wasn't necessarily personal training.

Lena and Arta always came to watch me do it.

"Are you an adolescent?"

"......."

I've mostly forgotten about it nowadays, but hearing Arta say that stirred up some emotions in me that I hadn't realized were there.

Do you have any idea how old I actually am, asshole?

I was going to say something like that, but then it slipped out.

Still, it's puberty.

I'm way past puberty as it is!

Arta giggled at my expression.

"No, why are you so angry, because it's not going to happen."

"Doesn't it look like a lot or now?"

Man, at first I thought it was a dumbass property, but it's not.

You're constantly throwing out one-liners to piss people off.

Of course, if you really stick around, I can stomp on you, but it's not like this is Temple time.

It's not like they're actually watching me and telling me what to do, so it's not like they're pissing me off.

In fact, I've been called an adolescent for not realizing that the wild flames of my enchantments were responding to my emotions.

"Don't try to control it by unleashing all your magic. You're not capable of that yet. You need to start with small, moderate power boosts to get used to having full control over it, and then increase the total amount."

"Shit, I know that."

"If they know, why aren't they doing it?"

"That's how I ended up at......!"

I was about to shout nervously, but shut my mouth.

I know that taking small steps is the best we can do for now.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to be able to take full control of all my mighty powers at any given time.

In the end, you can't let go of your nerves.

Arta nudges Lena as I try to pull away, and she says, "I'm sorry.

"Isn't that right, he's got a lot of anger?"

"You stop scratching Reinhardt!"

-Bang!

"Billion!"

Eventually, Lena got angry.

\* \* \*

"I am calm."

"I get peace of mind."

"I am calm."

"I get peace of mind......."

"I am still."

Arta's complexion turned white as I sat still in the clearing, muttering those words in a daze.

"......Look, I'm sorry. That was too harsh."

Arta apologized profusely, apparently thinking I had lost my mind and was talking nonsense.

No.

I'm just trying to see if I can force myself to have peace of mind through a combination of self-suggestion and verbalization. I'm not crazy.

"Don't you think you should take a break......?"

Lena must have thought my behavior was a display of madness, too, because she turned blue in the face.

Yes.

I couldn't deny that telling myself to stay calm was driving me insane.

\* \* \*

Lena and Arta took me to the outskirts of Rizaira to get some rest.

-shoot

I couldn't help but stare in disbelief at the size of the waterfall, as I hadn't expected to find one of this magnitude in a place like this.

At the bottom of the valley, villagers were washing clothes and children were swimming in a deep ravine with a cascading waterfall.

Come to think of it, it's summer.

It's not that I didn't know, but I realized that I was barely aware of the seasons.

"Why don't you go inside?"

"No, not really."

I declined Arta's invitation.

"You don't like swimming?"

"I hate kids."

"ah......."

At my answer, Lena nodded, slightly exasperated.

-Die!

-Ah, stop it!

I figured it wouldn't be as annoying to have them clinging to me while swimming in the ravine, mixed in with the other kids.

I remember following Olivia to daycare.

I remember how the kids clung to me even then, and how Olivia laughed at me like it was funny.

Those kids.

What would have happened.

"......."

Everything that had happened in the ecliptic only made me feel more hopeless the more I thought about it.

Arta clicked her tongue at my comment about not liking kids.

"She seems to be the polar opposite of Ellen, but there are similarities, don't you think?"

"Hmm....... Maybe?"

"Did Ellen hate kids too?"

At my question, Lena brings her hand to her lips and shakes her head.

"Difficult rather than disliked?"

I hadn't expected her to be so bubbly in her home town, but I wondered if she'd adopted the same ditzy attitude here.

Arta stares at the children as they scurry away.

"He didn't used to be like that, he'd play with the kids, he wouldn't say much, but he'd hang out with us, he'd play with the kids, he'd hang out with the kids, but since Ragan left, he's been like that."

"Is that......."

After Lagan Artorius left, Ellen changed.

I tried to think about what Ellen's past self might have been like, but I wasn't sure what it would be like.

I don't think that's the Ellen I know, the one who's always giggling and running around.

In hindsight, that wouldn't be a bad look.

As a child, Ellen would have played in this ravine with her children, splashing around like that.

The water looked pretty deep, too.

As it turns out, Ellen was a really good swimmer.

When you play in a place like this from a young age, swimming skills come naturally.

Suddenly, I realized where Ellen's swimming skills came from.

"I don't know about you, but you think too much."

Arta said.

"Do you see that?"

"Uh."

"Yes."

In response to my question, both Lena and Arta nodded at the same time.

"Because I don't know what you want or what you're actually doing?"

"......Yes."

"If something doesn't work, just pretend you're here to relax."

"Rest?"

Arta stares at me.

"Yeah, well, if you can't do it and I can't do it, you should take a break. If you can't take a break, you're an asshole."

"Yes, Reinhard, I think you should take a break, you don't look like you can afford it."

Neither of them knows that I am a demon, or that I am the ruler of a country called Edina.

But I was still feeling my anxiety and nervousness, which meant that my behavior was not relaxed at all.

Rest.

Just resting without thinking.

I wonder if that's possible for me.

I feel like I'm spending my days here getting nothing out of it, and I feel guilty about it because it's not giving me anything.

But I couldn't deny Arta's point about not being able to rest.

I've been running non-stop for two years, I've seen more cruelty than necessary, I've made cruel decisions, and I've been forced to make hard choices.

What's the difference when you take a break?

How long must I rest before peace comes to this chaotic mind?

I don't know.

-Crack!

-Dwell!

-Ah, stop it! Stop it!

I look at the kids playing in the water without a care in the world.

-shootaaaaa

And then I look at the giant waterfall.

Rest.

I don't know about resting.

It made me want to do something crazy.

Do something you would never normally do.

What you can do in this place, in this moment.

"Swimming?"

"No."

I began to duck under the waterfall.

Naked, without any enchantments.

Lena and Arta start looking at me like I'm crazy when I suddenly stand at the base of the waterfall.

-Shoot!

-What are you doing?

-Brother! What are you doing?

The kids started looking at me like I was some kind of freak.

I did it because it reminded me of the cliché of the Taoists having some kind of epiphany while doing this.

Of course, there was no epiphany, just an excruciating pain in the scalp.

It hurt like my body was going to shatter from being hit by a waterfall without any enchantments.

Oddly enough, the physical pain somewhat distracted me from my mind-bending anguish.

Since then, I've been sitting under waterfalls and practicing zazen when I have time.

\* \* \*

I know enough to know that zazen under a rushing waterfall won't make me fresh.

On the contrary, it's a big deal if I become a god. I'm hoping there's something I can do in this life, so it's a big deal if I have a flash of enlightenment and I'm off to ascension.

I don't know anything about austerities, nor do I know what they mean.

However, I did get that feeling that the physical pain diluted the mental anguish to some extent.

It's not a religious or belief-based practice, it's just a physical practice.

I'm facing a huge waterfall, bare-chested, with no enchantments, and I'm doing it all day long, and afterwards my whole body is sore and I can't even move properly.

If I went back and collapsed in that state, I could pass out without even thinking about it.

"......What are you doing soaking wet these days?"

"I'm polishing the tao."

"......?"

It was pretty funny to watch Luna get flustered by my words.

It was quite painful to take that kind of pain without protecting my body with magic.

But the funny thing is, my physical abilities had already surpassed his.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how many times I fell asleep in agony, my body would wake up the next day as it always did, except for a little soreness.

It's impossible for me to not think about anything in my current state.

So we treat our bodies harshly, making them incapable of caring about anything outside of themselves.

It's a simple trick, but it works.

It wasn't like I couldn't think about it, but with the water hitting my body, I had some idea of what it was like to be in a state of no-mind.

Honestly, we don't need all those fancy words.

It just hurts and hurts and hurts, and I can't think of anything else.

There was also a funny one.

"I made fun of you for being a teenager, what kind of ascetic are you?"

The same Arta who was making fun of me at first, is now sitting next to me and we've been through a waterfall together.

"Hmmm....... Should I try that?"

Even Lena sneaked into the waterfall when Arta asked if she could try it.

"Boom!"

"Hey, you, why are you here!"

Lena screamed as she ran, sick as she was, but also half naked in the rushing water.

Blushing, Lena pulled up her clothes and headed back to the village.

Arta was beside me, her lips quivering.

I don't know if it's obvious, but I can't help but notice that Arta has a crush on Lena.

I was sitting under a waterfall with Arta.

"I was born and raised here, and you're the first outsider to do this!"

"Who would do such a bizarre thing?"

"I do realize that's bizarre!"

Arta giggles and gets hit with a waterfall.

Since it was summer, the kids were always in the valley, and their older siblings were doing the waterfall trick, so the kids were intrigued and would sneak up on them to try it.

Most of the time, when a waterfall falls on their heads, they scramble out, but there are some who grit their teeth and hold on.

"Dude, you think this is funny?!"

An unnamed village boy looked at me and exclaimed.

"Wouldn't that be fun!"

"Then why do it?"

"I don't know!"

Why do something that's not fun and hurts?

They asked me, and I couldn't figure out why.

However.

Every time the waterfall pounded my head and body.

I could clearly feel the grime peeling off my mind with the impact.

-Shoot!

The sound of the raging waterfall rattled my eardrums.

My mind was getting quieter and quieter.

I was definitely aware of that loud silence, the sound of water rushing through the world.

Enchantment is power for combat.

I awakened my enchantment during my fight with Oscar de Gradias.

The superpower of self-suggestion.

Power of Enchantment.

The power of words.

All of my awakenings have been in the fight.

If you think about it, that's a pretty far cry from universal.

I can't deny that I've been given that power because of the inevitability of my actions.

Under normal circumstances, I should have been seriously injured or dead, but I moved on to the next step.

It was, after all, a foul or something.

A yoga master teacher who is no longer with us.

The teacher must have been pretty good, too, because he was doing his part to combat Gate.

My yoga master teacher's classes were basically hypnotic.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

And before you know it, we're all asleep.

And when you wake up, you wake up with an unexplained exhilaration.

Since then, after realizing the power of enchantment, Ellen and I have been taking special classes.

A yoga master didn't teach mana enhancement as a way to fight; he taught how to control the mind, the flow of mana.

Enchantment is a combat-specific power that greatly increases your physical output.

But is it really just for combat?

My yoga master teacher seemed to approach things like energizing and circulating chi as if it were a way of cultivating the mind.

Luna and Ronan do the same, and so does Arta.

They didn't discuss the power or sophistication of disenchantment, but seemed to think it was a matter of the heart.

Emphasize meaning over power.

It's not a power that enhances combat power, it's a kind of psychology that manifests itself in the way that strength of mind is strength of heart, and sophistication of mind is strength of body.

I didn't have a strong heart.

I just had to put up with it, and put up with it, and put up with it.

A broken mind actually affects the physical body.

A breakdown of the mind can lead to a loss of control over the body: tears, hyperventilation, tingling in the hands and feet.

Of course, the reverse is also possible.

The mind and body are reciprocal.

Just as I forget the anguish of the mind to some extent through the pain of the body is an example of this.

If yes.

Can there be a vice versa.

Just as a person who is sick in mind is actually sick in body.

Of those whose minds are steadfast, if the steadfastness of their minds affects their bodies.

Can a strong mind be translated into actual strength?

-curl

The sound of the rushing waterfall hits my entire body with the intensity of an almost thunderstorm.

So far, I've been fighting my way through everything.

So, I've been thinking that if I use the enchantment furiously, emptying, filling, emptying, filling, and so on, it might work.

However, I was technically on an apostolic path.

Awakening to power in the midst of battle is not something that happens naturally.

It's happened so often that I've come to think of it as a natural progression, a way of awakening to power.

Because so did Ellen, who is my goal and direction.

I was also stuck in the mindset that enchantment was a tool, a way of fighting.

Enchantment.

A method of enhancing physical abilities by channeling magical energy into the body.

But this wasn't the way to approach the problem.

You can approach disenchantment instrumentally, but you don't have to.

As a yoga master teacher would say.

As Luna and Ronan said.

As Arta said.

It is a tao, a law that allows the mind and spirit to influence the body through the medium of magic.

So, it's a matter of heart and mind.

For some time now, I've been suppressing things rather than expressing them, pushing forward, suppressing a lot of worries and anguish.

Think about it after it's all said and done.

After everything is resolved, let's grieve.

Next.

To the next moment.

As I piled on the procrastination, my mind became muddled, and pent-up emotions were left to fester unexpressed.

The chaotic mind becomes a flame of chaotic mana, only to be unleashed with fury.

The only reason my body was able to withstand it was because I was unusually strong.

I was just hitting an overly powerful frame with unrefined brute force, and it was a strange thing to hold on to.

I couldn't quite compose myself.

It was just a flood of powerful magic hitting the body.

Therefore, my body was not being used properly either.

Problems with the mind were boiling down to problems with the management of magic, which in turn were boiling down to problems with the management of the body.

It's time to abandon the apostle.

I am a giant tree with rotten insides.

A giant tree that looks huge at first glance, but can't grow any bigger because it's rotten and dead inside.

That's why it's a monster.

I don't know how to let go of this pain and despair. No, I don't even know if it's okay to let it go.

But I know I was just being patient.

It wasn't putting up with it, it was turning away.

I was blocking everything out by telling myself not to think about it yet.

So it wasn't that I didn't want to think about the unanswered questions, it was that I didn't want to think about them.

I still don't have the confidence to face them head-on, but just knowing what they are gives me hope that things can get better.

The pain is gone.

I don't get a blue glow all over me.

But I didn't feel the pain of the water hitting me, as the magic coursed through my body, strengthening my flesh.

A pure heart.

Chaste Enchantment.

I was able to take that first step.

It's a good first step, but it's not the end of the story.

Next, we need to go to

to the next step.

I.

You can go to

Episode 488.

Extremely refined enchantment powers are actually mana draining.

In the first place, the blue aura that enchanter's bodies were bathed in was merely a form of incomplete combustion, caused by the release of mana that had not been properly condensed.

Therefore, a proper disenchantment will not result in force release.

Full disenchantment.

I succeeded in taking that first step.

With only a fraction of my mana, I was able to compress it to the limit with calm and serenity, creating an extremely refined power enhancement that would not release any energy.

"I thought I'd gotten some kind of weird vibe from you, but it looks like you've accomplished something."

Luna smiled slightly, as if she had read something in my eyes, even though I hadn't said anything.

Technically, neither Luna nor Ronan taught me anything.

Technically, it was Arta who gave me that hint.

"Try it."

Since I knew what I was being asked to do, I went ahead and used the Enchantment.

A tiny fraction of my mana.

Not for the release of power, but for the feeling of letting my image become a stream of mana that flows through my body.

Not for combat.

It feels like a physical manifestation of a serene mind.

Nothing changes, but you feel an exhilarating rush of energy coursing through your body.

It's definitely a weaker output than when it's at full power, but there's definitely a sense that it's maximizing efficiency.

Luna watches me as I succeed in refining my magic to the limit.

And.

Looking at me, Luna puts her thumb and middle finger together and points it at my forehead.

"......Mom?"

Commonly, it's called the crab pose.

-Bam!

"Eek!"

My head was thrown back in a giant whirlwind of grinding, and it stayed that way.

No what.

Suddenly, what!

"No! What are you doing all of a sudden!"

I blurted out, and Luna smiled and pointed at me.

"Look at you."

"......?"

Luna pointed to my body, which was clearly enveloped in a pale but blue mana.

I immediately understood what she was trying to say.

A single blow to the chestnut disturbed my composure. You've lost control of your mana flow, and it's leaking outward.

"It's not ready for prime time, right?"

"It's ......."

Maintaining a tranquil mindset and being in complete control of your mana flow.

I must use this power for combat.

So the idea of being disorganized after one night of being hit was not something I could use in the real world.

With a few more deep breaths, the outward emanations soon faded and disappeared. But he hadn't disengaged his enchantment.

Help Luna up after she falls.

"Going forward, try to keep it like this for the entire day."

"That the homeostasis of the mind may be manifested in the homeostasis of the body."

"So that managing mana becomes more natural than breathing, so that by the end you don't even realize you're managing it."

"Do you understand?"

Maintaining this intact enchantment throughout the day means that you must maintain a serene mental image throughout the day.

It should become so natural that by the end you don't even realize you're enchanting.

If I can get to that point, I will have reached a point where I can maintain a serene mindset throughout the day without much effort.

Maintain a clear mind without conscious thought, without effort.

Soon, you'll enter the stage of the Mingjing Water.

"Yes."

I do disenchantment all day long, and it's very sophisticated.

You need to maintain a level of disenchantment throughout the day, and a very sophisticated level of disenchantment at that.

Could it be.

"So you start by just getting through the day."

That's what I was thinking, of course, but when Luna told me that this was just the beginning, I was stumped.

\* \* \*

What Luna asked me to do was very simple.

Maintaining disenchantment throughout the day.

The fact remains that my horsepower is one of the highest in the world. That's why I've been able to use hp buffs for so much longer than most.

Even if you just spit out the output as it is, the way it is, it will last at least two hours. That's a lot of power for a lot less efficiency.

So, it should actually be easy to maintain a full day of enchantments that only use a fraction of the amount of enchantments I have.

Of course.

It wasn't easy at all.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

-Took

"Ouch, you bastard!"

"What, what, why are you suddenly so angry?"

Arta approached and tapped me on the shoulder, and I frowned at the glow of blue magic emanating from her body.

Maintaining immobility, not just disenchantment.

Staying that way all day, every day, was not normal.

\* \* \*

For a week after receiving Luna's assignment, I was careful not to encounter any outside stimuli.

Of course, we realize that this is a misunderstanding of Luna's intentions.

What I would have to do was not lock myself in a corner or sit under a waterfall and stay enchanted all day, but rather go about my daily life and still be in a state of extreme enchantment.

It probably means that you need to maintain that state while eating, talking to someone, or helping with farming.

However, I couldn't even get to that stage.

Just by myself, sitting in bed, I couldn't last an hour with that extreme disenchantment.

I would break out in a cold sweat after about 30 minutes, and I would eventually get tired of the weeding and let it go.

Even if no one else touched it, it was a pain to keep it that way by myself.

When you put all your energy into maintaining your peace of mind, you become exhausted by it.

I was actually feeling this weird threshold where my peace of mind was being ruined by trying to maintain it.

When I got distracted, wondering if over-focusing was the problem, the texture of the enchantment changed, and I was forced to revert to the old way of enchanting, where mana was released outward.

In the first place, the old way of enchanting required extreme mental focus. It's already hard enough to get used to enchantments that drain your mental energy, but now you have to get used to a new method that requires you to focus your mind many times more.

Two weeks after realizing the new way of enchanting.

"......That's crazy."

Even with minimal external stimulation, I couldn't maintain this state for more than two hours.

\* \* \*

Eventually, I realized that this wasn't going to work, and I couldn't stand the frustration, so I called it a day and met with Arta and Lena.

"What have you been doing lately, running around begging like you're sick or something?"

"......Yes."

Arta said that's where she saw him, taking a step and resting for a moment, taking a step and resting for a moment, just in case he happened to go outside and the focus of his enchantment broke.

If a stranger had seen it, they would have thought he was a bit of a dick.

Arta nodded, as if she finally understood why I was looking the way I was.

"An entire day of enchantment? Is that even possible?"

Lena shook her head, then looked at Arta and asked.

"What about Arta, can you do it?"

"Well, I haven't tried it, but I'll probably burn out before then."

No, so he can do it all day if his horsepower allows him to, is that it?

Staying floating throughout the day.

Ellen would be the right personality to do this.

Saviolin Tana, who went on to become a grandmaster, also seemed to have few emotional ups and downs.

Of course, that's Ellen's personality, but does that mean that people who have mastered the art of magical enhancement naturally evolve into something a bit more like a chump?

But no matter how I looked at it, Arta didn't seem like that kind of guy.

He's not a frivolous guy, but he's not a dick either.

"Hey, what's your secret to staying focused?"

"......Secrets?"

"Yeah."

Arta doesn't seem like a very disciplined guy.

But Arta was capable of using extreme enchantments in real life, even if it was a practice match.

I would be very cautious about even moving around while using and maintaining extreme enchantments.

Obviously, there's no such thing as a practice match.

I don't know about you, but I don't think I'd want to be anything less than Arta.

At my question, Arta crosses her arms with a hmmm.

"Well....... I'm not sure if there's a trick to it......."

In terms of sheer power, he's better than me and Ellen. In terms of actual skill, neither I nor Ellen can compare to Arta.

"I don't know. I guess I'm supposed to stay enchanted all day like you do, but I've never done anything like that."

"Then why don't we just do it?"

Arta said, and Lena nodded.

\* \* \*

Before I knew it, Arta was doing what I was doing.

It wasn't a waterfall like it used to be, it was sitting still in a clearing and maintaining the disenchantment.

This sustained hold ends the moment I get distracted and release my mana to the outside world. I could refocus and return to that state, but what Luna wanted me to do was to maintain this state all day.

"......Whoa, damn."

I stayed like that for about an hour before I got tired of it.

There was plenty of horsepower, but it felt like my mind was being gnawed away at in real time.

Arta, on the other hand, sat still, focused, and unmoving.

I ended up sitting next to him for about three hours as I tried to focus my attention, and it got distracted.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted, I can't do this anymore."

Nearly drained of energy, Arta lasted about three hours before collapsing.

I'm feeling mentally gnawed, so about an hour.

Arta has no problem with her mental capacity, but her horsepower is limited to about three hours.

That was their limit.

"I don't know, are you saying that Arta is a big deal?"

Lena could only shake her head at this result, as she had no idea what we were doing in the first place.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I do."

"Why put a label on something you don't want to admit?"

Arta giggled, sagging.

We don't know what Arta's actual horsepower is, but it probably isn't very high. She's just using that horsepower with maximum efficiency.

This means that when I make this method completely my own, I will have strength and staying power that I have never had before.

"Anyway, anyway, I don't know. The secret to mental focus? I don't know. I don't know."

Arta said, lying sagging on the dirt floor, staring blankly at the sky.

The secret to staying focused.

When I think about it, it's like Arta said, what's the point?

I'm good at this because I'm good at focusing.

"Hmm, I'm not sure, but I think I know the difference between Arta and Reinhardt."

However, Lena, who has been watching me and Arta for the past three hours, shakes her head in disbelief.

"Really?"

At Arta's question, Lena nodded.

"Arta has no idea."

"......? All of a sudden?"

Arta bristled at the insinuation that he was an ignoramus.

"And Reinhardt has too many ideas."

"......Yes."

"So, Arta is kind of sagging, kind of letting things happen, and Reinhardt is kind of giving his whole body and eyes a workout......."

Lena looks at me.

"Reinhard, looking at you makes me tired."

"ah......."

"If I'm tired of watching, how tired must you be of doing?"

"What goes around comes around, right?"

At my words, Lena glances at Arta, who is sprawled out in the clearing.

A real-life example of how to stay focused when you're stretched thin.

Lena's simple point left me speechless.

"I do have thoughts, too......."

Arta didn't look pleased to hear Lena call him a brainless bastard.

Episode 489.

I have too many thoughts.

Arta, on the other hand, has no thoughts.

Arta nodded, somewhat in agreement, when I told him that this was why there was such a difference.

"Technically, I don't think about it much, not that I'm stupid."

"No. You're honestly kind of an idiot."

"Les, Lena....... Why am I an idiot?"

"Did you forget that time you were playing hide-and-seek with Ellen and you were hanging off a cliff and you fell and broke your leg?"

"Oh, no, when are we going to talk about......!"

That's not stupid, that's crazy.

She barely managed to squeeze out the words. Arta blanched at the sudden blackness.

"No......! That's because you wanted to win something because Ellen would win if you played anything......!"

"So you're an idiot, and you might actually be dead if Ellen hadn't found you falling off the cliff, and technically, you wanted to win, so you dangled yourself off the cliff, and she found you, so you didn't win."

"......."

Rizaira's little ones were a spectacle to watch.

It's like a kid gritting his teeth and hanging on to a cliff to try and win, or Ellen gritting her teeth and looking for it.

"Anyway, I can't tell you the number of accidents Arta's gotten into over the years, mostly when she's trying to win Ellen over."

"The old story is....... Enough......."

"You know what happened before?"

Lena was so excited to talk that she started rambling on about the accident with Arta.

The story of holding my breath for a diving competition in a ravine and actually almost drowning.

The story of how he climbed a tree to steal a bird's egg and fell down and cracked his head.

The story of how I tried to imitate Ellen's dive at the waterfall where I was meditating and passed out because I went in belly first instead of head first.

Like the time he was learning swordsmanship and got so angry that he kept losing to Ellen that he swung a wooden sword at her and got hit and passed out.

As I listened, it was almost all about Ellen.

Even when he wasn't a dummy, he was so unusual that if he did anything, Ellen would win everything, and Arta would get angry and try to win by force.

It was quite an eye-opener to hear about Ellen's past from her childhood friends.

It makes me realize that geniuses were geniuses even as children.

I feel for the little kids who have such a genius as a friend.

Of course, did I mention that the arms bake inward?

There's something about imagining a younger Ellen playing with kids like that.

Something.

I felt a tickle in my chest.

If you think about it, that perpetually stern-looking Ellen wasn't that way at all back in the day.

I'm curious to see what that actually looks like.

Sounds cute.

But I can't help but feel depressed when I think about it.

No matter what I think of Ellen, or what she thinks of me.

Because it always boils down to that, that our relationship can never be the same again.

"Anyway, you can't count the number of times you've hurt yourself trying to imitate or beat Ellen, so you'll just have to do what you're told."

"Stop....... Stop......."

Depending on how you look at it, Ellen could be an asshole, but these two didn't seem to feel that way about her.

"Arta is so one-track minded, she doesn't know what's going to happen later, she doesn't care, she just wants to beat Ellen, she wants to copy her, she wants to get hurt."

To Lena's dire declaration, Arta had no rebuttal.

"But Reinhard, I've said it before, you seem to think too much."

I have a lot on my mind.

It's something I keep hearing from Lena and Arta.

A clear mind, a calm image, and a serene heart.

It was actually getting harder and harder to maintain that.

It's been well over a month since I left Edina.

And I still don't know when I'm going to be able to leave here with a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

The month ahead is barely enough.

So two months? Three months?

If I leave Rizaira, defeated by my insecurities, I will never come back here again.

Now I know what Luna meant.

I can't achieve my next accomplishment if I'm restless because I can't handle anxiety and nervousness. I have to be able to push through it and move on.

Even if you can make it to the master class, you won't be able to use your full power if you lose the final battle to fear and intimidation.

That's why Luna is educating.

If you can't stay calm in a situation like this, it's a recipe for disaster.

No matter how nervous and anxious you are, you have to push through it, reach the next level, and make that power all your own.

So, you're forcing them to spend time on their toes, cut off from all outside information.

Nevertheless, my nervousness and anxiety about things I don't know grows, not shrinks.

So I found myself in a situation where I could focus my mind to do extreme refined enchantments, but I couldn't get used to them because of the anxiety that would amplify over time.

Too much thinking is the problem.

But I can't do that if I don't want to think about it.

It's like being told that rice isn't the whole of life when you have grape juice in your throat.

If you're out of breath and I tell you to calm down, that's what you're going to do.

"But in this case, wouldn't it be better to do it like Arta?"

"......."

"Nothing is better than harvesting this year's potatoes and worrying about next year's drought."

I do know that Lena wasn't wrong.

"When you think too much, you think about things that don't matter. So why don't you just forget about everything else for a while and focus on what you need to do?"

The words seemed to snap me out of it.

I've had a lot of people say that to me.

At one point, it was even something I said.

After your first kill in Darklands.

Ellen, covered in blood, grabbed my face and looked me in the eye and said, "I'm sorry.

Now is not the time to think.

So let's do what we have to do.

After the Gate debacle broke, Herriot told me.

Now is not the time to think, let's just do what needs to be done.

That's what I've been thinking, too, so I've been taking it one step at a time.

But now that I've left the job I'm responsible for, I've lost the mindset I had before.

Anxious about something that hasn't happened, but might happen.

You're nervous about the situation itself, being cut off from the outside world.

I keep thinking about it, obsessively, even though I know it doesn't solve anything.

Luna told me that I had held out for so long that my heart had become sick.

Lena says you don't have to think about anything you don't have to think about right now.

I don't know if Luna is right or Lena is right.

However, the anxiety and nervousness I feel is not going to solve any of my problems.

Arta only thinks about what's in front of her.

Since my goal was to make the enchantment last longer, I'm only concerned with the enchantment.

I need to do the same.

It's pointless to think about how many months it will take me to get used to this power, what it's like out there, and all that.

Worrying is not the answer.

Only action.

You can only get results by taking action, so it's time to stop thinking about unanswered questions.

"Okay, I'll try that."

Peace of mind.

Having peace of mind in a situation where I could have peace of mind means nothing to me right now.

To have peace of mind, even in situations that can never be peaceful.

That's the clarity and immobility I need.

\* \* \*

I don't think you should think about it.

The very idea of not thinking is already a thought.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but I'm doing it.

To not think, you don't think about not thinking, you literally don't think.

But for someone whose head is about to explode from thinking too much, the compulsion to not think only feeds the neurosis.

And when you start thinking about that, you inevitably move on to thinking about what you shouldn't be thinking about.

Then I move on to thinking about the things I shouldn't be thinking about right now, and I'm back to square one with the idea that I shouldn't be thinking about those things.

The wheel of thought spins, a dizzying, Mobius-esque wheel.

"Mom, what can I do to stop thinking about it?"

"......?"

No, you've got your own idea and you're going to do it! Or teach me something!

"I want you to go somewhere with me tomorrow."

Finally, are you trying to tell me something?

\* \* \*

The next day.

My hopes that Luna would finally teach me something were shattered this morning.

-Chulgrun

Luna walks into the warehouse and hears her rummaging around.

"Listen."

What she brought out of the shed was a shovel and pickaxe, and an axe and a forklift.

"......I thought you were going to teach me swordsmanship or meditation?"

"I don't think I said that."

Luna grabbed the shovel, I grabbed the pickaxe and axe, and we picked up the forklift.

And with Luna leading the way, I followed closely behind.

Luna strode off into the distance, over the mountainside that bordered Rizaira.

We landed on a mountainside somewhere.

"We're going to have to create new farmland. It will take a long time, so prepare yourself."

"......Yes?"

"You didn't ask how to not think."

Luna points to this place in the middle of the woods.

"Nothing like an overwhelming amount of work to take your mind off things."

No.

This guy is real.

Am I asking you to create a new field?

Isn't this just being taken advantage of?

"We'll cut down the trees in the neighborhood and move them to the village, and then we'll uproot them all."

You're not just doing it on bare ground, you're turning a forest into a field.

"But don't use holy water."

No.

That's too much!

"Mom....... Is this it?"

"Hmmm......."

At my words, Luna crosses her arms, tilts her head slightly, and looks at me.

"I keep telling you not to do it, but you keep telling me, Mother, so why don't you treat me like a son by actually doing it, not just saying it?"

"Ah."

Luna smirks at me.

"Son, get to work."

On my mind.

I fell for it.

\* \* \*

Luna told him to be a son and started putting him to work.

In rural areas, children are labor, so I couldn't argue with that statement.

Luna told me to get to work and left me in the woods outside of Rizaira.

It's not just a grassy plain, it's a forest.

If I cut down all the trees in this forest and split them for firewood, I'd have all the wood Lizaira needs for the rest of the year.

This is a picture of not just making farmland, but eating pheasants and eggs, and having me make new farmland, but also growing trees?

There was even a condition not to use holy objects.

I look at the forest in front of me and the axe, pickaxe, shovel, and fork beside me.

I chop down these trees, chop them up one by one, and carry them back and forth to Rizaira on a forklift.

The entire tree must be cut down, and the roots must be uprooted somehow.

Once that's done, you'll need to turn the ground over with a pickaxe to get rid of all the roots and make it more tillable.

That.

Are we sure we can get it done before winter?

You said it was an equation.

I'm not going back to Edina anytime soon, if ever.

"Hmmm......."

I've never chopped down a tree with a Relic before. Of course, Luna told me not to, so I'm not going to use it.

I picked up the axe because I knew I had to chop down the tree first.

I've sliced monsters countless times, and as gruesome as it is, I've sliced people.

But of course, I've never used an axe.

Do a tree.

I should know in my head that it's a lot of work, but I'm not sure I'd want to be the one to tell someone.

With a Strength number of 26 or higher, an A+ rank, and no Enchantment enhancements, this is a monster that could be an S-rank or higher powerhouse.

I don't know if this work will take my mind off my anguish and give me a clearer picture.

But we have to do something.

"Hoooooo......."

Focus your mind and use a highly refined magical enhancement.

The power is there.

The important thing is to get used to the idea of sophisticated disenchantment, not just chopping wood.

Chop wood while highly focused and using Enchantment.

There are many trees.

I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to this power once I've knocked down all these trees.

I take that step.

Calm breathing.

With the wind blowing and the birds chirping.

"Suck!"

I aimed the axe at the tree and swung.

-Bam!

Broken.

"Uh......?"

Not a tree, an axe.

Episode 490.

"It's broken......."

"Yes......."

Luna stared blankly at the axe, its hilt broken halfway through.

"Your son?"

"Could you please not call me that......."

Suddenly I understood why Luna didn't like being called mom.

Something is pleasantly weird!

Of course, like me, she didn't pretend to listen.

"Rizaira is not a very resourceful place. Do you know how valuable an axe or a pickaxe is?"

"Sorry......."

I'm scolded.

Almost getting killed by Luna was also a pain in the ass.

Luna tried to kill me because she knew that the existence of the demon would one day be a great threat to Ellen, and that Ellen might die.

Now, two solar years later.

I'm being scolded by Luna for splitting an axe.

Even I am bowing my head and saying sorry as if I'm guilty of death.

What it is.

What the heck is going on here?

Dizzy.

In many ways, it's immobility, it's nakedness, it's I can't do this.

"Apparently, you wielded it in your ignorance, trusting in its power, and this is what happened. Is that right?"

"It's ......."

It was so accurate that it gave me goosebumps.

"You're anxious, neurotic, fidgety all the time, and you can't do anything right."

Now that I think about it, I didn't really do anything but come to Lizaira and whine.

But it doesn't do anything right.

I'm still......! out there, because there are a lot of things......! that I can't do without......!

I knew it would sound miserable if I said it, so I kept my mouth shut.

King and archdemon of Edina.

Enemies of humanity.

And here I am, in a mountain village, being treated like a worthless piece of shit for breaking an axe.

Luna sighed heavily and went back into the storeroom, rummaged around for a while, and came out with another axe.

"This is a little old, so you're going to have to be a little more careful with it than you were before."

The first axe Luna gave me was an A-grade axe, if not an S-grade.

But this is an axe blade, and an axe blade is an axe blade, and the hilt is pretty old.

"How can I cut a tree with this......."

"You're right. I wouldn't have to chop wood with an axe like this if someone hadn't broken it in one fell swoop."

"I'd rather have an axe with an iron sack or....... or something like that?"

"......."

"Yes, I'm coming......."

Do you think there is such a thing?

The look was too much for me to take, and I had no choice but to return to the woods with an old axe that had been downgraded from A- to C-grade.

\* \* \*

You don't necessarily need an axe.

I said don't use holy objects, not don't use your body.

With the horsepower enhancement cranked up to full power, you'll be able to crush anything but the biggest of behemoths with a simple kick.

However, doing so is already linguistic blasphemy.

I'm doing this to get used to the new enchantments, and it'll be even funnier if I follow Luna's advice to create new farmland.

The moment you do that, you've already converted your audience.

It's about staying focused, letting go of distractions, and getting used to your new power.

But if you just focus on the words "chop wood and plow fields" and go back to the way things were, it becomes a chore.

Axe in hand, I focus my mind.

"Whoa......."

If you apply too much force, you'll break the axe, not the tree.

How to beat a tree.

I don't know how to do it, but I know one thing.

If you hit too hard, the axe will break.

With moderate force.

Moderation.

Swing the axe toward the tree.

-Pak!

The bark of the tree bounces unpretentiously.

I was able to control the force properly, and the axe didn't break.

However, the tree is now only slightly stripped of its bark.

How many more shots will it take for this tree to fall.

And split this fallen tree into transportable pieces.

Put it on a forklift and take it to Rizaira.

Chop down another tree.

Split.

Nargo.

"......."

-Tweet!

I see a forested area spread out in front of me.

When you're done with the tree.

Shovel out the roots of the big trees.

Turn the ground upside down and grind.......

It was supposed to be a master class.

Why, did I become a wannabe lumberjack?

\* \* \*

"Fuck."

-Pak!

I threw the axe away and lay down.

I've already unlocked the Super Focused Enchantment. No, I had to disable and re-enable it several times during the game.

Tree?

I didn't get a single cut.

I'm not just strong.

His wits and dexterity have already surpassed the culprit.

So, I was able to keep hitting the exact spot I was shooting at without missing.

But it's all about power.

I don't know how durable the axe is, so I gave it a good pounding with moderate force, but it didn't deepen the groove in the wood.

A couple of times, the heat got to me and I had to hold back the urge to just smash the wood.

Eventually, I collapsed from exhaustion.

I was lying in the woods, catching my breath, when I heard a giggle coming from somewhere.

"I told you I'd be doing this, right?"

"No, you can't help it because you don't know, that."

Arta and Lena's voices came from a distance.

Above me on the ground, Arta and Lena's faces soon appeared.

"What's......."

"Mrs. Luna told me to come see you because you must be struggling."

"Would you like some water?"

Lena held out her canteen.

\* \* \*

The moment I splintered an axe, Luna must have been convinced that I was incompetent.

I drank the water from the canteen Lena handed me.

"No matter how you slice it, you haven't done a single tree yet?"

When Arta saw that none of the trees had fallen except for one with a shallow gash, she slapped her forehead in disbelief.

No.

You've given me a lot, but never an ugly one.

"No, I can't, because I think I'll break the axe if I put too much force into it."

"Do I really need to use an axe?"

"While I'm at it, I might as well do it with an axe to get used to the mental focus......."

"Hmm....... I see."

Arta looked at the grooves in the wood and shook her head.

"It's not the power, it's the method. Who does this to a tree? Give it to me."

Arta held out his hand, and I picked up my discarded axe and handed it to him.

"Watch this."

Holding the axe, Arta aims it at the tree trunk.

"Top to bottom."

-Pak!

Arta brought the axe down, and the sheath peeled away slightly, gouging a small indentation in the wood.

After another swing, Arta sees me this time.

"This time, from the bottom up."

-Pak!

Arta struck precisely, and at the two points of impact, part of the tree fell away.

I could only stare in disbelief at the piece of wood that had broken off in a triangular shape.

Only twice.

With that demonstration, I realized what I had been doing wrong.

"You're trying to cut down a tree because you're ignorant, so you can't. So what?"

I only took pictures of the same place.

Doing wood was more like chopping wood. Arta clicked her tongue at my frozen expression.

"Well, he's a city boy, so he doesn't know what he's doing."

"Oh, no......."

b.

Still.

At least I got a little bit of a blast in the temple.

I thought I heard the Empire's best and brightest, even if they weren't actually from the Empire.

I haven't heard the word incompetent since the very beginning of my freshman year!

Somehow.

In Rizaira, I was treated like a penny-pincher who was overpaid and didn't know how to do his job.

And it's not because of some mysterious secret or special power of the town.

I just don't know how to chop wood, so I'm treated like a dime a dozen.

"No....... Where the hell am I supposed to be chopping wood......!"

I mean, where was I chopping wood before I got here, where was I chopping wood after I got here?

You don't know what you don't know!

Arta smirked at my plea.

"So you're a city slicker."

"......."

It's frustrating, but he's right, and I don't know what else to say.

"Anyway, have fun. I have to help my grandfather today."

"Yes, Reinhard. I have to take care of my brother today, too."

Lena and Arta left with those words.

Grandpa.

If you think about it, there are only a few households here, and the number of people won't change, so it's inevitably going to be a big family.

Anyway, Arta's demonstration made me realize what I've been doing wrong all this time.

To chop down a tree, you don't chop in the same place, you chop at an angle and chip away at it in small increments.

There's actually a skill and know-how to what you're doing for the sake of it.

What Arta taught me was very basic, and I'm sure there are more detailed ways to chop wood.

How to cut down a tree.

There's nothing to write home about, and there's nothing to be gained by my mastery of it.

If I leave Lizaira, I'll probably never work on a wooden bell again in my life.

How did I get into this job?

What a city slicker.

I've been laughed at for not knowing how to chop wood, and yelled at for breaking my axe.

In Edina, we had some survivors come over on a boat and we were struggling with how we were going to feed them, what murders had happened, what to do with them.

The entire human race hates me.

Even if I survive the end of the Gate, and even if I survive that, I might still have to fight Ellen later, and there might be a war between the Darklands and the Empire.

We've been talking about death and dying.

In practice, this has meant killing countless people in the name of stabilizing institutions and societies.

Here I am, in a remote mountain village, chopping down trees to make a field.

He's a city boy, he doesn't know anything, he's hearing stories like this.

I get yelled at for breaking my axe, for not doing something right.

"ha......."

Somehow.

Feeling like a normal person, I burst out laughing.

I didn't think that would happen.

When I left Edina, I was neither a demon nor anything else.

I'm just a city slicker who doesn't know anything about the workings of the countryside.

They say that place makes the man, and where I can't be king, no one considers me king.

No one honors or worships me, so no one hates or despises me.

I wondered if I could still have a normal life.

Aside from whether or not I could live like that, was it possible for me to have such feelings?

No one is asking me to be king.

No one will find hope or despair in me.

Not the Apostle of Tuan, not the Apostle of Alth, not the Devil.

It's not that I think I can forget them because I don't hear them looking for me.

However, the idea that I'm actually not that big of a deal gave me a certain weirdness.

I am the source of this world, but I am not omnipotent, nor am I omniscient.

Not everything in the world is my problem to solve, nor should it be.

I was arrogant to try to care about everything that was going on in the world.

It was just arrogance.

I was feeling anxious in this situation where everything was out of my control.

What a fool I was, unable to chop down a tree in front of me, and anxious because the world was out of my hands.

I am not in my throne room in Edina, but in the mountain village of Lizaira.

What you do from the throne is what you think about when you get back to the throne.

Not every situation is in my line of sight, and not every situation can be solved.

Thanks to Luna and Arta's comments about my incompetence, I realized how arrogant I was living in my own mind.

Your job as king is to be king.

Now that I'm a city slicker, I need to do what city slickers do and learn what I don't know.

I felt like my fuzzy head had cleared up a bit, and I had a better idea of what the true meaning of the Mingyung Index was.

There may be things I don't know about because I'm not here.

So what.

I do the best I can imagine.

Luna Artorius said you have to believe in yourself.

So, yes, I believe in Luna.

Other than that, there's nothing.

I told her that if she was going to call me "mom," she should act like a son.

So.

Your job as a son is to turn the forest into a field.

The first step is to cut down the tree.

Turn a grove of trees into a clearing, then plow the clearing into a field.

I don't know what the hell that's going to do for me.

Lizaira decided to give up on the idea.

My mom made me do it, so it must mean something!

I don't know what else!

I've been responsible for so many things in my life, I can afford to be a little less responsible.

"Hmph, hmph......."

For some reason, I burst out laughing because it reminded me of my days running around like a mad dog in the temple.

Peace of mind doesn't come after some great epiphany or cataclysmic event, it comes after being treated like an asshole.

Whatever the process, the outcome was good.

I believe Luna Artorius has a plan.

I'm a pretty useless guy, and I don't know much.

So, just do what you're told and empty your brain.

In his throne room, he spent all day in anguish and worry, but now he is Rizaira's guest.

So just do what you're told.

There's no point in trying to figure it out, you won't get any better and you won't know anything.

I pick up an axe.

I didn't know how to do it, but now that I do, it's easy.

It doesn't have to be a very strong force either.

A moderate amount of disenchantment, with as much control over that power as possible.

Top to bottom.

-Bam!

The strokes are precise and the force is not difficult to control.

In line with the groove dug by the axe blade.

This time from the bottom up.

-Bam!

Look at the piece of wood that bounced off.

Only a small piece has been shaved off.

However, it was clearly trimmed.

-Bam!

-Bam!

-Puck!

Increasingly.

More and more.

I'm chipping away.

I still don't know what float and light index are.

As far as clearing my head, I was definitely successful.

In the sense that I was doing what I was told to do, the things that were bothering me were falling away like chips of wood being chiseled away.

Lots of trees.

There were just as many trees to chop, and just as many distractions to get rid of.

Turn this forest into a plain, uproot the giants, and level the ground.

I will make this forest into a land where something can be planted.

Like planting a new seed in a new land.

I pulled out the despair and anguish that was deeply rooted in my heart.

No, even if you can't pull it out.

In the midst of that despair and pain, a new spirit will be planted.

Episode 491.

It's summer rain.

-shoot

The rain in the mountains wasn't a torrential downpour, but it was enough to keep me from going outside.

Luna Artorius stood in her raincoat, listening to the blows that came at regular intervals through the rain.

Luna slowly made her way through the rain toward the direction of the sound.

-No support!

And Luna watched as the giant tree broke and fell to the ground.

Mechanically, the young man walks over to the fallen tree and begins to chop once more.

Axing in the rain is extremely dangerous.

The sack can slip and escape your hand, and the blade can slip and twist, causing serious injury.

But the young man didn't seem to know any of that, just kept slamming the axe down at regular intervals, over and over again.

On the first day, I felt like I was struggling.

By the second day, even the old axe's pommel had broken, so we ended up borrowing an axe from another house to chop wood.

By the time Ronan put a new hilt on my dull axe and gave me a new one, I was picking up speed.

Even Reinhardt, with his unusual strength, was slowed by the fact that he had to carry the wood to Rizaira by himself.

That's how Reinhardt started cutting down the forest two weeks ago.

Luna could see that one side of the forest was empty.

There were still more trees to cut down, but we were definitely making progress.

Luna walks up to Reinhardt and says, "Don't move.

"Reinhard, it's raining, so take the day off."

-Puck!

The rain was drowning out Luna's voice, but not so much that I couldn't hear her.

But Reinhardt just slammed his axe down at regular intervals, as if he couldn't hear anything.

Luna stares at the back of Reinhardt's head.

The back of his head, where he doesn't seem to be thinking about anything but axing.

-Puck!

I see him focusing on splitting the wood at regular intervals, because the only way to accomplish the task is with an axe.

"Reinhardt."

Luna called out again, but Reinhardt was still axing away, as if he knew nothing else but what he was doing.

"......."

I'm not pretending not to hear.

It doesn't sound real.

Luna stared at Reinhardt's back, then turned and walked away.

-Puck!

As Luna walked back, she heard the sound of an axe at regular intervals.

\* \* \*

Late at night.

In a grayish cavity, a conference room.

"My lord, how long do you intend to keep the boy in Rizaira?"

An old man with graying hair and a cane asked Luna.

At Luna's side sat Ronan, and in front of him sat the people of Rizaira.

There was no hint of displeasure in anyone's expression that Reinhardt was staying in Rizaira.

Just puzzled.

There was an undeniable sense of wonder on everyone's faces.

It's already been over a month and into month two.

He was puzzled by the circumstances of the boy's stay in Rizaira and his master's decision to tolerate it.

"Until he gets what he wants."

Luna's blunt words immediately set the tone for the room.

"If it is the Lord's decision....... there must be some great meaning behind it that we are unaware of....... This is unprecedented, isn't it......."

An old woman shook her head in bewilderment.

"Liturgy......."

Luna was silent for a moment, her eyes still downcast.

"For an unfathomable amount of time, this has never been done before."

Once again, Luna sees the faces of the people sitting in the room.

Some were elderly, some were about to enter old age, and some were very old.

"The fact that Ragan was able to go out into the world knowing about the existence of the January Party was also unprecedented."

Everyone's faces turned an earthy color as the boss referred to his already dead son.

"Lord Tang....... Ragan was not taught the mysteries of the Lunar Party, so....... was able to go out into the world. As with Ellen,......."

"I was talking about liturgy, not mystery."

Luna said as she held still.

"We learned from Lagan that just because something is unprecedented doesn't mean it's unusual."

Everyone fell silent at Luna's words.

"So there's no reason why there shouldn't be a new precedent, too."

"But my lord, if something goes wrong......."

Luna interrupted the old woman's worried words.

"I'm the one who has to live with it, not you."

Silence fell over the room at Luna's calm words.

"Moreover, even if I were not here, there would be no lunar calendar; you would serve the sun and moon in the way you have been taught, and live your lives accordingly."

"Party Lord....... The Lord of the Month is only the Lord of the Month."

Luna smiles gently at the old woman, who has begun to sob.

"Nor is there any precedent for choosing a new master from among you that should not be set."

Everyone wanted to argue with her, but no one could refute her decision.

After everyone left the room, Luna and Ronan Artorius were the only two people in the room.

"My lord, do you intend to teach the child the mysteries?"

At Ronan's words, Luna shook her head.

"Nay, that would be to bind the child to the bridle of the monthly party, and how can I do that?"

Luna stares down at the floor.

"Whatever he wants, he'll have to figure it out for himself."

"So, you're replacing your hands with time."

At that, Luna stares at Ronan for a moment.

"......You knew that."

"I don't know the details, but it occurred to me that you might."

"......Yes."

Luna stares at the common passageway.

"Because all I can give him is time."

"......."

"My touching of Lizaira's time does not interfere with the world, for I am but an outsider, an unwanted intruder, in a world where I have touched time."

At Luna's smile, Ronan gave an embarrassed laugh.

"That sounds like platitudes."

"Yeah, that's bullshit."

"Shouldn't you have told Reinhard that time flows differently here than it does outside?"

"I suppose."

Not knowing anything, Reinhardt is forced to spend his time in a state of nervousness and anxiety.

"Knowing that time passes differently here would give him a sense of calm, and he would find peace of mind earlier, and he would have time to rest his tired body and mind."

"But the tranquility that has been achieved is bound to be shattered."

"Only if the tranquility is earned, will the homeostasis of that tranquility be firm."

"If you find ease and tranquility, and mistake it for your own strength, you will crumble later when true chaos and terror come."

Ronan hears Luna's words and nods slowly.

"You're purposely not telling me anything."

"Achieving your goals and overcoming your limitations are two different things."

Ronan was silent as Luna said that Reinhardt needed to overcome, not achieve.

The sound of the axe, heard at regular intervals, echoed in Luna's mind.

"Ronan."

"Yes, my lord."

"If I disappeared, would you be sad?"

At Luna's question, Ronan nodded stiffly.

"Of course."

"......."

"You're a punk as ever."

"......."

"But the human life you forced me to live wasn't bad. No, it was good."

Luna stares down the hallway.

"I've often thought lately that since I've been forced to live a human life, I'd like to experience the end of it, death."

"My lord."

"Just saying."

Luna smirked at Ronan's sentiment.

\* \* \*

Time has passed.

Reinhardt continued to chop wood.

Chopping down the entire forest was actually something Reinhardt could do in a day if he used a holy object with a full-powered horsepower boost.

However, I had to use an axe to chop down the trees one by one while maintaining my extremely refined enchantments.

As a result, Reinhardt's work was slow, as he was forced to move more slowly than usual and work with inferior tools.

Naturally, keeping a clear head throughout the day was not something I could easily do.

There were definitely times when my immersion was broken, and I was often distracted by panic as the axe blade slipped out of the sack.

But clearly, it's getting better.

An hour of intense focus soon turned into two hours. Then three, then four hours.

Later on, I was able to chop wood all day long and stay focused while taking breaks to eat and breathe.

It's been two months since I took the first axe to the tree.

Before long, Reinhardt had cut down every tree in the forest.

"How did you do it?"

Arta said as she looked at the forest, which had vanished, leaving nothing but countless tree trunks.

"But it got really fast afterwards, didn't it?"

Reinhard nodded at Lena's words.

As he strapped the axe, which he hadn't even changed the sack for a few times, to the forklift and loaded the last of the wood into the forklift, Reinhardt gave a quick tongue-in-cheek laugh.

"If someone had told me that this kind of shit was good for my sanity when I was out there, I would have thrashed them."

Reinhard grumbles and picks up a forklift loaded with wood.

"What pisses me off the most is that this actually works."

The dark emotions in Reinhardt's eyes hadn't disappeared.

However.

The emotions were still and silent.

\* \* \*

"I'm done with the trees."

"Yes."

"Took you long enough."

"Two months is fast....... but isn't that compliant? I mean, I don't know if I'd ever do something like that in my life."

That's two months.

She'd done the heavy lifting of clearing the forest single-handedly, and Luna gave her a sour look, as if she'd had enough. Ronan could only nod in agreement.

"Then we'll have to uproot the tree starting tomorrow."

"......."

No.

Can't I just say thank you for a job well done?

As soon as she's done, she says she's going to start working on something else tomorrow.

Or should I say, whimper.

No.

I've been here long enough to know I shouldn't, but sometimes I forget what I'm doing.

It's kind of ridiculous to feel bad about not getting praised for chopping down a tree.

b.

Maybe I've gotten too used to living in Lizaira......?

There were many times when I would wake up in the middle of the night because I felt like I was going to fall asleep.

I try to keep my mind off the outside world, but sometimes I have nightmares.

Still, I found that doing simple tasks throughout the day definitely cleared my mind.

"Well, at least your expression is much improved."

Ronan said.

"Is that......?"

"Yeah, definitely."

No matter what.

I was getting used to maintaining my composure even as anxiety and nervousness consumed me, and sustaining my highest efficiency enchantments for extended periods of time.

"So it looks like we've got plenty of firewood for next year."

Based on Luna's comments, it sounds like you've done nothing but good for Lizaira.

I don't see why not, and it's true that I live on Lizaira.

Whenever villagers see me stacking firewood in the center of the village, they say thank you for your hard work, and many of them leave their birdseed behind.

It's better to do something good for me and help the town than to remain a soldier.

I guess that can't be a bad thing.

Before I knew it, I was part of a rural living community called Lizaira.

\* \* \*

I've cut down every tree in the forest, and Lizaira doesn't have to worry about firewood.

There was a strange sense of pride that I couldn't quite put my finger on as I watched the huge pile of firewood I had laid dry in the sun.

If, when all is said and done.

If somehow it all works out, and the weight on my shoulders is lifted.

The idea of doing something similar to homesteading came to mind.

Demon, returning home.

It was such a ridiculous idea that it made me laugh out loud just thinking about it.

Anyway, after a long, long time, the wood chopping is over.

Of course, that doesn't mean you're saying goodbye to the axe forever.

After the axe, two other tools were added.

A shovel, and a pickaxe.

The trees in the forest are many and varied.

There were beautiful trees, medium-sized trees, and small trees that broke just by me grabbing them with my bare hands.

Small things aside.

"Honestly, I tend to think this is hard for me too."

"Do you?"

"Of course," I said, "this is normal."

It was disorienting to look at the underlying roots and not know where they were coming from.

How the heck am I going to pull this out?

Don't we need heavy equipment? Isn't that what excavators do?

I even brought Arta with me to make sure I didn't hit the ground like I did when I started chopping wood, and even he was shaking his head.

Ignoring the gigantic, dizzying trunk of a beautiful tree, I stood at the base of a much smaller tree.

I think of it as a series of steps.

As an iterative mastery task, chopping wood was meant to be endlessly repetitive, to clear my mind and get used to optimized disenchantment usage.

So, I was able to get pretty comfortable with it now.

That's it for now.

Increasing the output of an optimized horsepower boost itself.

Pulling up a tree trunk that's deeply rooted in the ground requires equipment, not skill.

But there's no such tool in the middle of nowhere.

So you have to use your strength to do things that require skill.

It's about enhancing the most efficient horsepower, and getting used to increasing its output, so that it doesn't have to release all that horsepower to the outside world.

This makes me wonder if Luna had a point when she told me to make a field.......

Doghorn.

It's more of a nightmare than a dream.

It's just something I'm doing, but it's clear that I'm giving it meaning.

"I've never done this either, so I guess I'll have to get the adults involved?"

"No."

It's not a skill, it's a strength.

"The first time, go in ignorant."

"......what?"

-Pak!

I plug in the shovel.

To create a groove to grip the base of the tree.

-Pak! Pah-pah-pah!

After some shoveling, I managed to expose some of the tree's roots.

"......I see what you're trying to do, can you do it?"

"If it doesn't work, we'll figure something else out."

I stand on a tree trunk and squat down.

I reached down with both arms and grabbed the hollow at the base of the tree like a handle.

Arta didn't look happy.

"...... That's not good."

"We'll try it, and if it doesn't work, we'll find another way."

I don't know what would happen with a full power horsepower boost, but it's all part of the process, so I'm using the highest efficiency I can use in my current state, and a horsepower boost that won't bleed horsepower.

I can already feel the extreme increase in my horsepower efficiency.

What we need to do now is increase the output itself, but keep the control of the horsepower completely in my hands.

With overwhelming force, they uproot deeply rooted trees with their bare hands.

"I am a human excavator."

"Excavator......? What is that?"

"There is such a thing."

Self-insinuation and even verbalization.

"Suck!"

With the blood rushing to my head, I try to pull the tree trunk out with my bare hands.

Thighs, arms, and lower back.

"Uhhhhhhh!"

"Crazy......."

-disable

I'm not sure, but there's movement.

becomes.

to be.

If it doesn't move at all, I don't know, but I feel like I'm doing something, so I push harder.

It's like the threads in your body are about to burst, and you're about to explode.

It's not about chopping down trees, it's about pushing the earth with my legs and pulling up the world.

With all my might.

And yet, as the mana that flows from his mind continues to flow into his body.

"That."

"Ah."

"Ah."

"Ouch!"

Screaming, he pushes himself as hard as he can, like he's never pushed himself this hard before.

-Top!

"!"

I heard the sound of something breaking.

"To......with......."

"Hey...... you okay?!"

Clearly, something is broken.

It was just my waistline.

Episode 492.

My back is out.

So, I was carried by Arta to Rizaira.

"ugh......."

"What an idiot......."

Placing a hot washcloth on my lower back, Luna sighed deeply.

You may have heard Arta's story about trying to cut down a tree with his bare hands.

"Mother....... If you use Tiamata....... I can get better......."

I've gotten pretty good at using Tiamata, even though it has the problem of requiring rage.

I wonder if my foolishness, and the resulting anger at myself, can draw on Tiamata's divine power.

-Woof

-Snap!

"Eek!"

I crouched down and summoned Tiamata, and Luna slapped the back of my hand.

"Did I forget to tell you not to use holy objects?"

"This is an injury......."

Isn't it okay to use it for an unavoidable injury?

When I turned my head slightly to plead, Luna shook her head with a stern look.

"Oh no. Take a few days off to reflect on your foolishness. What were you going to do if you broke your back?"

"No....... I can recover quickly anyway, so it's not a big deal......."

I felt like I was going to lose my mind because my back was screaming at me if I even moved my body for a second.

At my plea, Luna pressed a hot towel to my waist.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"The idea that it's easy to get better leads to the idea that it's easy to get hurt, and that's what happens."

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

She says, and withdraws her hand from my waist. She looks at me.

"No matter how easy a wound says it is to heal, no one gets hurt easily."

"......."

"Don't take for granted that you get hurt in order to accomplish something. It's your shortcoming."

Somehow.

It sounded like he was worried about my mind, not my body.

I wasn't sure if I should feel sorry for myself for being so casual about the pain, or if I should be concerned.

Or did I just look really pathetic.

Eventually.

I followed Luna's instructions and rested for a few days on my stomach, not wearing a tiara.

I've also been thinking about what it means to take pain for granted because it's so easy to escape it.

Somehow.

I couldn't stop thinking about the day Ellen stabbed me in the heart.

\* \* \*

I was laid up for about three days.

It was an abrupt break, albeit due to injury.

It was an injury that I could have easily recovered from using Tiamata, but Luna's words reminded me over the next three days that just because you can recover easily doesn't mean you should get hurt easily.

Luna and Ronan took care of my back.

It's like physical therapy, where you drive and get sick and then get better.

Honestly.

I almost got a little tired of it.

Thanks to Ronan's treatment and my basic fitness, I was resilient and the injury was completely healed within three days.

"Honey, you should go with Reinhard."

"Oh, yeah."

I thought I was going to break my back again, so I gave him Ronan.

I've gone from being an incompetent bastard who couldn't uproot a tree to being a reckless bastard who tried to uproot a tree and ended up with a broken back.

Somehow, I didn't mind being treated like that.

\* \* \*

When we reached the cleared forest, Ronan stood at the base of the tree where I had left my waist.

"You're not taking out the whole tree."

Without a word, Ronan began digging with his shovel around the trunk. If a tree root got in the way, he scraped it out of the way.

After digging a fairly large area, I soon realized that the tree trunks were deeply rooted in the ground. I stuck a pickaxe in, poked around, and dug again, revealing the full extent of the roots, which, unlike the surface, were frighteningly deep.

"Do you realize what a ridiculous thing you were trying to do?"

"......Yes."

Ronan began chopping away at the more deeply embedded trunks with his axe, one by one.

How long has it been.

Soon, Ronan gave the base of the trunk a few strokes with his pickaxe, then pulled out the massive trunk.

"This is how you do it."

"Hmm....... I don't know if I can do it right or not, but let's try."

Logging required some skill, but this seemed to require even more.

Felling followed by uprooting.

Ronan flicked the uprooted tree trunk away and dusted off his hands, as if there was nothing more to be learned from one demonstration.

Honestly, I feel like I've already seen it once and don't need to see it again.

I'm curious.

"Is that....... Father?"

"Why, why don't you show it to me one more time?"

"No, no. It's not that, I was just wondering."

I pointed to another tree stump, similar in size to the one I had just uprooted.

"Can you show me something that doesn't do this, that pulls with force?"

"......?"

I was honestly curious. Could Ronan do it?

Because he's obviously a lot better at it than I am.

"Hmmm....... Even if I did, I doubt you'd be able to follow along......."

"Haven't you tried it?"

"......."

Ronan looks over at me at my question.

Uh, is this out of line?

As if thinking about what I said, Ronan suddenly rolled up his sleeves.

Ronan Artorius.

Maybe you're simpler than you think?

So far, I don't think I've used any powers, including magical enhancements, and it's impossible to uproot that tree with normal human strength.

It was almost identical to what I had done a few days earlier.

Dig a moderate shovel around the tree, holding on to the roots.

There was no blue glow around Ronan, as there is with Arta, and as I've come to use recently.

But even as a pretender, I could sense that Ronan Artorius was about to wield a great deal of power.

It makes my skin tingle just looking at it.

"Suck!"

-Edward!

In my case, it was a broken back, but Ronan's was different.

Ronan's feet began to dig into the ground, as if the entire earth was being pulled up, and a chain of cracking and breaking sounds began to echo.

-Swoosh!

He pulled a huge tree out of the ground with his bare hands.

I could only stare in disbelief at the huge tree roots, broken and broken, with storm water running down them.

-Thump!

Ronan looks at me, tossing aside a tree root he'd uprooted with his bare hands.

"Can you do it?"

"No, not at all."

The human excavator was here.

\* \* \*

After two demonstrations, Ronan left, and I was left alone.

I wanted to see if I could do it, so I tried it.

To conclude, I could have done something similar to Ronan.

Maximum horsepower as it is.

-Thump!

"Whoa."

I disengage the enchantment, tossing the uprooted trunk aside. At full strength, I could still pull the tree out.

It's clear that my power is no match for Ronan's.

It's just that we can't rest on this level of power.

I can do this as it is, but what if I could do it at full power in an extremely stabilized disenchantment state?

You will have power like never before.

So, let's cut down the tree.

Felling followed by tree removal.

And then till the ground.

Time has already passed quite a bit.

But then again, time melts away and you have to take the next step.

Keep your mind focused, while maintaining a steady state for enchantment.

More stable, more precise.

For fuller power.

-Pak!

I put the shovel down.

\* \* \*

Uprooting the trees took longer than felling them.

Due to the nature of the work, which, unlike logging, requires digging deep into the ground, and the fact that we were not used to doing this, we had to use trial and error.

But obviously, if you put in the time, you're bound to make progress.

And the more time I spent on it, the more focused I became.

At some point, Reinhardt was able to maintain a refined state of magical enhancement throughout the entirety of his work, from beginning to end.

"We'd better not interrupt, right?"

Lena, who had been watching Reinhardt dig in the distance, turned to Arta and asked.

"I don't know if I could do it if I tried to interfere."

Lena and Arta, who had come to talk to him, watched from a distance as Reinhardt dug as if he were digging and cut the roots of the tree with an axe.

"When I first got here, I was like, 'What the hell is he doing,' but the more I look at him, the worse he is."

Arta shuddered in frustration as she turned and walked away.

Focused on his work, as if under a powerful hypnosis, Reinhardt acted as if he were blind and deaf.

I couldn't hear whoever was calling me, and I was focused on what I needed to do no matter what was going on around me.

Scary focus. And immersion.

Arta could no longer keep up with Reinhardt's focus.

Lena turns and looks back at Reinhardt for a moment.

"What the hell made him do that?"

He succeeded in distracting himself, but there was an undeniable desperation in Reinhardt's every move.

Both Lena and Arta knew that.

It's cutting down trees and uprooting trees, but there's a desperation bordering on madness in the way Reinhardt focuses on the action and pursues the next step.

What's the story.

Because what the heck.

That desperate.

"I don't know."

Arta says still.

"We're better off not knowing, obviously."

"......."

Reinhardt's Madness Frosted Desperation.

Arta had assumed that it had something to do with something outside of them, and if so, it was better that they didn't know about it.

Arta shuddered as she turned back to Rizaira.

"It's getting cold."

"Sure."

Fall was coming.

Episode 493.

In a mountain village where night falls early, even the seasons come early.

When you're done with the ugly, earth-shattering, yet delicate, task of uprooting all the trees in a logged forest.

Early winter has arrived in the mountain village.

Time has passed.

Too much has passed.

In that mindset, all Reinhardt could do was do what he had to do.

I'd already gotten used to spending my days energized. Steps to make staying enchanted as natural as breathing.

Reinhardt had already gotten to the point where he could maintain his enchantment even when he was sleeping.

A state in which your enchantment is always present, even when you are not consciously aware of it.

Now that the work of uprooting the tree is done, turn the ground over and sift through the roots and debris, and Luna's work for the summer is done.

Not satisfied with that step, Reinhardt stuck his first shovel into the forest.

-Bam!

However, the shovel blade, made of iron, made an unpleasant clang as it hit the ground.

"......."

The winter that came early froze the ground.

-Chang!

Throwing down his shovel, Reinhardt picked up a pickaxe this time.

-Pak!

The downward thrust of the pickaxe didn't dig into the ground, it hit the ground.

Once again.

-Pak!

The pickaxe strikes the ground, hitting the exact same spot.

I don't know how many times I slammed it down like that.

-Puck!

He lifted his pickaxe, and the ground gave way.

"......."

As if possessed, Reinhardt searches the ground, picks out stones, and throws them.

As if there's nothing else you need to do.

As if I had forgotten about everything but this.

-Puck! Puck! billion!

Reinhardt slammed his pickaxe down like he was possessed, and a faint, blue smoke of magic wafted from his swing.

One day like that.

Two days.

One week.

Boom.

One month.

Naturally, the task of breaking, crushing, and digging through the increasingly frozen ground would become increasingly difficult as the winter progressed.

Digging and picking became breaking and crushing the frozen ground.

When it was snowing in the mountain village, Reinhard was in the forest.

Without using any holy objects, and without using the Flame of Fire.

As if faced with a destiny, Reinhardt would find himself in a forest during a heavy snowstorm, and even when the snow turned to ice, he would break the ice and break the ground.

"It's snowing too much, at least wait until it stops."

Watching Reinhard shovel and pickaxe into the bare earth, even in winter, the lesser Luna grabbed Reinhard by the shoulders and said, "I'm sorry.

"Uh....... When did you get here?"

Reinhard replied with a blank look, as if he hadn't even realized Luna was here.

We were in the midst of a foot-deep snowstorm, and Luna was covered in snow from head to toe.

But Luna was silenced by the sight of Reinhardt.

Reinhardt never got snow on his head or shoulders, even in heavy snow.

My overheated body was melting any snow that touched my head, face, and shoulders.

"No matter how many times I called him, he wouldn't answer."

"Oh....... Really?"

"Yeah. Do you realize how ridiculous you look right now?"

Luna covered her mouth and laughed at the sight of Reinhardt.

"What do you think?"

"It's like an angry pot calling the kettle black."

He looked like a boiling pot of water, his hair billowing out of his head.

"Rest today, I command you as the chief of Rizaira."

"It's ......."

At Luna's words, Reinhardt slung his pickaxe and shovel over his shoulder and walked along the slippery mountain path.

"Not the kind of thing to do in the winter, didn't you think?"

Luna, still walking ahead, says.

Reinhardt, of course, knew what he was talking about.

Naturally, picking the ground was not a winter activity.

It was the right thing to do at a time when the ground was thawing and seeds needed to be planted.

But as if on cue, Reinhardt had to do the hardest thing to do at the hardest time.

"That's why it's better."

Reinhardt says, strapping on his shovel and pickaxe and following Luna.

It meant that when things are easy, the rewards are easy, but there's a lot to be gained by doing the hard things at the hardest times.

"I'm glad you thought of that, I was worried you'd think I'd given you a tough job just to spite you."

"Isn't that ......?"

Reinhardt's words made Luna sigh heavily as she walked ahead.

"Yes, I know now that you're twisted in this way, but I can't say that I had any intention of harassing you. I admit that there was a part of me that wanted to give you some trouble."

"Surprisingly, I know my mom is a grumpy person in this way."

Luna narrowed her eyes at Reinhardt's attack on her, which sounded remarkably similar.

"...... You don't say a word."

"You don't have to lose, do you?"

"You're not supposed to talk to them."

Luna strode ahead, not wanting to deal with him anymore.

The snow was deep enough to make walking difficult, and it was still snowing heavily.

I don't know how long we walked through the snow, Luna says to Nazik.

"Aren't you worried about what's going on outside?"

At some point, Reinhardt became possessed and focused on what needed to be done, never mentioning the outside world.

So much so that it was almost like she had to ask.

"You told me to trust you."

"I did, apparently."

"If anything goes wrong, I'm going to blame it on my mom."

"......."

At Reinhardt's sudden rant, Luna stops walking and looks back at him.

Luna's eyes narrowed as she looked at Reinhardt.

"How did you get peace of mind, but with that same old mindset, that if anything goes wrong, it's all my fault?"

"If I go to Moro, I'm just going to go the way I'm supposed to go, right? I'm just going to think that way because it makes me feel better."

"Hah......."

"If this goes badly, I'm going to blame you for the rest of my life, and you know it."

"You've been in Rizaira a long time, judging by your behavior."

Reinhardt chuckled at Luna's comment.

"It's been a long time."

Reinhardt sees snow on tree branches falling into stormwater.

I stayed in Rizaira until the seasons changed twice.

"I'd like something hot for dinner tonight."

"You must have gotten too used to it, because ...... is getting cheekier and cheekier."

-Bam!

"Eek!"

True to Reinhardt's words, Luna's tongue lolled and kicked after being fed honey chestnuts.

"Don't get too comfortable with Lizaira."

Luna adds, walking still.

"You have to leave sometime, don't you?"

You need to leave.

Reinhardt's expression hardened at Luna's line-drawing words.

We must leave Rizaira as soon as possible.

However, I realize that there's a part of me that doesn't want to leave Rizaira.

Luna's words just made me realize something.

\* \* \*

I don't know much about rural life, but I've learned that in the winter in mountain villages, just as the land freezes, so do the people.

So it's no exaggeration to say that in a place with four seasons, life in a mountain village is all about surviving winter, the season when everything freezes.

The whole act of making preserves and storing grain is more of a preparation to get through the winter when food is not available.

This is why residents are less active during this time.

It's not like there's anyone out there who's gritting their teeth like they're obsessed with something, like I am.

Winter was both a long break and an impatient time, waiting for it to be over.

Of course, Rizaira is no ordinary rural area, and the people are very strong, so food was never a problem.

Firewood for the winter?

I got enough done this summer to last me until next year.

The town's firewood shed has a huge pile of firewood that I've chopped and the townspeople have dried.

People light fires with last season's firewood, nibble at their stockpiles of food, and wait for the thawing ground to thaw and a new spring to arrive.

But now it was snowing heavily, and people were shoveling snow.

"Go up to the roof in a bit and clear some snow."

"You told me to take a break."

"......."

No.

That's right!

You told me to take a break, and now you want me to work as soon as I get back?

Luna's mouth begins to twitch.

Look at this.

This.

See, I'm trying to pout because I honestly have nothing to say.

"Yes, rest. If the roof collapses from too much snow overnight, you, sleeping on the second floor, will be the one hurt the most."

"You know what, mom? You know how you've been pretending to be someone you're not?"

"Whatever. I know."

I'm the most cringe-worthy of all because I'm the one who casually says I know.

"I used to think you and Ellen were the most alike in face, but do you know you're more alike in personality?"

"......Personality?"

At my words, Luna tilted her head as if she'd never heard of it before.

"Yeah. And then there's the pouting when you run out of things to say, and then there's the sneaky things you say."

"I hate to admit it, but based on your usual demeanor, you might as well be insulting your mother-in-law and your wife at the same time. What a son-in-law you are."

"This is what it's like to pout like this."

"Yeah, you have a knack for pissing people off, but you're wrong, so let's not talk about it."

The casualness of this conversation reminds me that I've been at Lizaira for a long time.

We walked along a path where people had cleared the snow. It was still snowing, so the accumulated snow would have to be cleared again and again.

When will this snowstorm stop.

"Do they really look alike?"

Luna said out of the blue.

"Yeah, they look alike."

I don't think people will notice the resemblance.

Maybe he was thinking of the comment about having similar personalities.

From the look on Luna's face, it was nice to be told she looked like Ellen, and she smiled.

"It's not exactly a mystery that parents and children look alike, is it?"

"Hmmm. I guess."

Luna continues to laugh.

"But that's what makes it all the more mysterious, isn't it?"

"That a being that is like me, that resembles me, but is never me, can come from me."

"That which comes from me, but cannot be me, is born and lives."

"How beautiful."

"Sometimes, I find it so mysterious, so lovely."

I didn't quite understand what Luna was saying.

Maybe it's because I don't have kids, or maybe Luna is on a whole other level of thinking.

"Why do you like Ellen?"

It was an abrupt question.

I don't know what it has to do with the snow, but Luna and I have been talking more than usual today.

Why I love Ellen.

It's been in Rizaira for quite some time, but it's something she's never brought up until now.

I've been avoiding the topic because I know I'll have to confront Ellen at some point, and that includes Ronan, her father.

Why do you like Ellen.

I thought about it for a long time, and sometimes I think about it alone, but there was only one thing I could say.

"......I'm not sure."

I can't honestly say that there was one moment or one event that made it happen.

I don't know.

I don't really know what to say other than that it just happened at some point.

"That's a satisfactory answer."

"I'm not sure if that's a good answer, but I'm glad you like it."

"I mean, we've spent so much time together, I can't really explain it."

"Is that....... is that how it works?"

"Whatever."

Luna smiles and walks away.

What's next, what's happening, what's going on.

It's not enough to have a good past without a good future.

-Woah!

-Save me!

People were busy shoveling snow, but the kids who didn't know any better were building snowmen, throwing snowballs, and just having fun.

Snowball fight.

And a snowman.

Then something occurred to me.

"I once built a snowman with Ellen."

"...... is it?"

"Not a snowman, but a human-shaped snow sculpture that looks too much like a person....... I made something that looked like a human eye and asked what it was, and he said he and his brother made them all the time."

"Haha, yeah, we used to do that because we were both unusually dexterous."

Luna laughed as she remembered a memory from long ago.

It wasn't until after I spat out the words that I realized I hadn't even put Lagan Artorius in my mouth.

"Arta and Lena did it too. Lena gave up because she couldn't do it, and Arta stayed up all night trying to make a snowman that was better than Ellen's, and she got a bad cold....... So that's when Ragan helped Arta build the snowman....... Yeah....... That's the kind of thing......."

Luna says, still smiling.

"There was a time when....... there was......."

His voice was wistful, as if he was recalling a long-ago memory, feeling both sadness and joy at the same time.

"I'm sorry."

At my words, Luna looks back at me.

"It brought back fond memories, why should I feel bad about that?"

Luna walks still.

"Thank you, Reinhard."

There was something about Luna that made me feel like she had been accepted into the family at some point.

We don't know when, or even if, that happened.

But at some point, it just became that way.

Like I don't know that moment of clarity.

Luna didn't know that.

What if Ellen were here.

I wish I had.

It's a snowy winter day.

I imagined a picture that couldn't exist, and I couldn't help but smile bitterly.

Episode 494.

Eventually, I had to clear the snow off the roof.

Given the threateningly thick layer of snow on the roof, I couldn't sleep at this point because I was worried that Luna was right and I might actually be crushed to death by the collapsing roof.

I never thought I'd live to see a snowstorm so heavy that I'd have to climb onto my roof to clear it.

According to Luna, she wasn't just saying that, it was actually quite common for roofs to collapse during heavy snowfalls like this.

Clearing the snow off the roof - not just a moderate amount, but waist deep - was a very unpleasant task.

It was a matter of shoveling the snow and then scooping it out one shovel at a time.

You need to push the snow off the roof, so when you feel like you can get some of it off, push the pile off the roof.

-Excellent

It made a spooky sound that made me wonder if it was snow falling.

As I cleaned it up, I realized why roofs collapse in the winter when there's a lot of snow.

In the end, I couldn't rest and had to shovel snow until the sun went down.

It wasn't just me, it was the other villagers as well. I had to keep clearing the streets of the village because if they were blocked, I couldn't move.

Still, when your roof is down to its last pile of snow.

"Suck!"

Thick piles of snow pushed under the roof, scary to shovel out.

-Excellent!

"Lineha......!"

I look down at the roof to see if something is wrong down there, and I see Luna looking up from the snowdrifts with a frozen expression on her face.

"Oh....... Well......."

-Tap!

Snow-bombarded, Luna shook her head and shoulders, narrowed her eyes, and sighed.

"......Dinner."

Just now.

I got a little excited because I thought it might actually work.

\* \* \*

Dinner, as I had hoped, was a meat broth with wild vegetables and meat, and thinly toasted bread.

I was also getting used to the rough but hot meals in the mountain villages.

"I don't know when the snow will stop."

Ronan nodded at Luna's words.

Until the snow stopped falling and melted, all of Rizaira's work would be confined to the confines of her home and her village.

-Smart

I was in the middle of a meal when I heard a knock on the door, and when I went out, Lena was standing there with a pot.

"Oh, Reinhardt. Grandma told me to bring you this."

"Tell her thank you, Lena."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Living in a village that was almost a community, it was common to make and share dinner. There were quite a few occasions when Luna would make a lot of food and ask me to take the extra to another house, so there were quite a few times when I had to go around on my own.

Sometimes Lena or Arta would sit at the dinner table with me, and many times I would be invited to their homes.

In the pot Lena handed me was apple pie.

There were times when the dinner menu became overwhelming.

Neighborhood, a concept that had become so foreign to me, was alive and well in Rizaira.

Naturally, I ate dinner with one more item on the menu.

I've been in Rizaira long enough that I've run into Lena and Arta, Ronan and Luna, and others quite often.

Arta's older brother, Dallas.

Lena's sisters.

Their parents, and their grandparents, and so on.

I knew almost everyone in Rizaira, if not both of them.

It wasn't a very crowded neighborhood, so it wasn't hard to memorize the names.

Always too many numbers. Too many names.

The names of the vassals were too many to memorize, and everything about Rizaira was too little.

I was reminded that the old adage about knowing how many cutlery your neighbor has isn't really true in this environment.

A town with too few people to control, too few resources to manage, and too few situations to encounter.

Some may not like the sight of being so close to their neighbors.

Overwhelmed by so many numbers and people, living under a long-standing compulsion to memorize and know them, this time in Rizaira was feeling like my last vacation.

But I was still aware of some oddities.

There are quite a few elderly people in Rizaira.

These are the people who have lived in the village for generations, so it's inevitably a large family.

Lizaira doesn't seem to be particularly hostile to outsiders, so it's not like the town was always that way, even though it's isolated now that the gate has opened. If that were the case, the village would have died out long ago.

But I'm curious about something else.

I had Arta, I had Lena, I had my grandparents, and I had quite a few siblings.

It's a big family.

But the leader of this Rizaira.

There were only two of us, Luna and Artorius.

Luna's parents are gone, Ronan's parents are gone. Ragan is dead, and Ellen is outside.

But even if they are, I don't know why they are the only nuclear family.

I wonder if there's a reason for this.

"How is the work going?"

Ronan asked.

"Ah....... I guess we'll have to watch the snow melt, but at the rate we're going, we'll be done before winter is over."

"I see."

Winter has been challenging, but it's also been a time when the pace of work has picked up. We can get it all done before spring.

If that happens, who knows what will happen.

As much as I don't want to leave Rizaira, I know I have to.

By the time winter is over, I hope to have accomplished something.

We had just arrived in Rizaira when Luna told me.

A handful of extra strength here isn't going to change anything.

I agree with what Luna said.

I haven't reached the master class yet, but even if I do, will I be able to take on that monster at the end?

But I can't stand still, and I'm spending this much time in Rizaira because I know that a state of mind that I haven't reached yet might give me new possibilities.

Even if you do reach the master class, it's unlikely.

So, in the end, all I can do is lean against the castle.

I now have some knowledge of the hidden powers of relics.

Tiamata gives you access to powerful divine powers. As such, she can wield both restorative and destructive powers.

Ellen's ramen can cut through anything.

The Alsbringer is the most powerful artifact to summon the power of the gods, but it comes at a cost.

I don't know what the true power of rapport is.

Tiamata's keyword is anger.

The keyword for ramen is sadness.

The keyword in Alsbringer is sacrifice.

Rappelt's keyword is hate.

If there's a slim chance I'll survive even reaching the master class.

Maybe we should be doing something different.

"There's something I'd like to ask you both."

At my words, both Luna and Ronan look at me.

"Tell me."

"Ask."

If the clue is in the artifact.

"Do you know where the Holy Window, Alixion, is?"

I've seen it in books, so I know what it looks like.

The final holy grail in the form of a window.

Relic of Riter, God of Courage.

Where is Alixion and what is its true power?

I figured these two would know that.

I've seen glimpses of Alixion in the past when looking up information about Tiamata and other holy objects, but I didn't really know much about it.

It's just that it's an artifact in the form of a spear.

Of course, once it's in my hands, I don't know how well I'll be able to use it, having only ever wielded a sword.

However, I wonder if the true power of the artifact might give me a one-of-a-kind possibility.

Their answer to my question was simple.

"I don't know."

At Ronan's answer, Luna shook her head, as if to say that she felt the same way.

When you say that the lapel was a monthly fee, is that something associated with the name?

But their "I don't know" seemed a little different than just saying they didn't know.

Luna says, carefully scooping up a spoonful of meat soup.

"Technically, no one can find Alixion."

"So....... doesn't exist in the world?"

"No."

Luna shakes her head.

It was Ronan, not Luna, who answered.

"Alixion is a holy grail that comes to visit."

"They're coming?"

"Yes. It comes to those who need it, which is why there have been so few Alixion appearances in its long history."

The idea of coming to you, not looking for you.

That was pretty foreign to me.

It was also quite bizarre to see a snowy mountain village talking about a holy relic, which is arguably the most important object in the world.

"When I need it, it comes to me....... Are you saying that if I need it, Alixion will appear in front of me?"

"Then everyone in the world would be able to use Alixion. Alixion doesn't answer ordinary wishes."

"That out-of-the-ordinary wish is....... What is it?"

Luna receives Ronan's words.

"It's a holy relic of Ritter. What do you need?"

a.

"Is the container....... ?"

"Right."

Since he is the god of courage, does this mean that he is an artifact that responds to the wishes of those with courage?

Courage.

Isn't that a bit of a stretch?

Going to the person who actually almost killed me and asking them to do something about it, even though it's the truth, isn't that courageous?

Don't you think you deserve to be the owner of Alixion?

Maybe it's hubris, but I certainly think so.

Luna looks at me with a stern expression on her face.

"Reinhard, what do you think is the most important thing about courage?"

"Is that ......?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what Luna was saying.

"The most important thing about courage is....... What is it besides courage? Bravery? Confidence? What....... like that?"

When I didn't seem to understand, Luna shook her head.

"Say you have a fearsome enemy. Say, for example, the otherworldly dragon you spoke of. A dreaded foe that you could never face in the usual way."

"It's ......."

"Imagine you're standing in front of it, determined to do something about it, even though you know you can't. Imagine standing in front of it with the mindset that it's going to work."

"It's ......."

"Do you think that's courage?"

If that's not courage, I don't know what is.

but then I realized that Luna had something to say, so I held my tongue.

It was Ronan, not Luna, who spoke up.

"Such a thing is not called courage, but all-powerfulness."

With that, I was at a loss for words.

"For all things to be courageous, what would it take?"

Luna holds still and stares into my eyes.

Versatility and courage.

The difference.

I think about the difference between the two concepts, which I've never really thought about seriously.

Tolerance and courage are technically very similar words. The idea of trying to stand up to something is the same.

However, all-purpose is a word that inherently implies stupidity.

Why it's stupid.

It's foolish because it's arrogant to believe that you can defeat an opponent you can't defeat.

What makes courage different then.

When all-purpose loses its foolishness, it will become courageous.

Pride and foolishness removed.

Only for the wise and those who know what they are capable of.

"......."

You fight back, even though you know you can't, even though you know it's hard.

That is, if you understand your opponent well enough to stand up to them.

I couldn't help but realize what was most important about courage.

"Fear....... ."

"Yeah."

It's not bravery, pride, or determination that makes courage courageous.

Knowing your opponent.

Fear of the opponent.

Fighting back nonetheless.

That was the true test of courage.

Episode 495.

I dread the final fight.

I'm also scared of the Ellens I might have to deal with someday.

I don't think I can take on Ellen or the dragon in my current state. At this rate, I'll have to use the Alsbringer and sacrifice my life, so I've come to Rizaira for the next step.

No matter what I accomplish here, I will be in the final fight.

So what I have is not courage, but more of a tolerance or a willingness to come.

Because I have an Alsbringer, all my actions must be universal.

I can't have true courage because I know that if all else fails, I'll end up using Alsbringer.

"Fear and dread, not abandoning it, but facing it with fear and dread, that's courage."

I nodded slowly at Luna's words.

To let go of fears, to embrace them instead of forgetting them, to face them despite feeling the fear and dread that threatens to choke the life out of them.

That's what it took to get Alixion on board.

Alyxion is a similar artifact to Alsbringer.

Just as Alsbringer chooses as its master those who can die for the world, so Alixion appears at the wish of those who have shown true courage.

If I understand what true courage is, and show it in the presence of an otherworldly dragon, will Alixion appear before me according to my wishes?

But, what does that change?

"The real power of Alixion is....... What is it?"

"The Holy Spear Alixion is a holy object that visits those who feel true terror at an enemy they cannot resist, and who nevertheless stand up to it. What would you give to such a person, what would they need?"

It is a gift from the gods to those who show true courage.

It's already conditioned itself.

True courage drawn from true fear.

What it can and should give.

"Whatever it is you're up against."

Luna's words were simple.

"That's it."

For those who are willing to fight a reckless battle, to face their fears and fears alone, only strength will do.

No matter what your opponent is, Alixion will lend you the power to counter it.

No matter how powerful an otherworldly dragon may be, being chosen by Alixion, the Holy Spear, gives you the power to stand up to it.

In a way, Alixion is the ultimate holy grail.

\* \* \*

If I were given an Alixion, all this nonsense might be for naught.

But it's ridiculous.

Now that I know about Alixion, my chances of getting one are even slimmer.

Just as my leaning on Alsbringer in the final fight is more about all-powerfulness than courage.

Standing in front of an enemy in the hopes that Alixion will find you in the final fight is a far cry from true courage.

Rather, knowing that Alixion is an artifact that responds to and chooses true courage, I realize that even if I were to exercise true courage, it could not be pure.

They say knowledge is bliss.

It was the perfect match.

I wish I didn't know, but Luna and Ronan didn't tell me when I didn't want to know, I asked.

I don't know.

Don't expect Alixion to be yours.

It is also ridiculous to deliberately fear and terrorize the enemy while pondering what true courage is.

If Alixion chooses me, that's a great situation, but otherwise, I have to stand in front of it.

Alixion is a powerful artifact and hasn't been seen much in the past.

Anticipation is a luxury.

I don't think there's some powerful force at work that's going to make Alixion show up at the wrong time in the wrong place.

So, I do what I have to do.

The eyes didn't stop there.

Before heading out into the forest, I joined the villagers in clearing the snow from the village and the roofs that had accumulated overnight.

Not just Ellen's house, but the roofs of other villagers' homes. Some of the people in Rizaira needed a young man's hands.

-It's Reinhardt! Come down and have a cup of ginger tea!

"Yes, Grandma!"

Because they were guests for so long, they were often treated as part of the village.

It was pretty funny.

No one will treat me the same way now that I've been revealed as a demon.

However, I wonder what Reinhardt, the Temple bastard, would think if he saw me out in the countryside making a big deal out of being liked by old ladies and gentlemen.

No, it's even funnier when the devil does it.

If someone were to broadcast me like this live across the continent, would they realize I'm not such a dangerous bastard?

A lumberjack, an uprooter, a plowman, and a snowplowman.

As Rizaira's life got older, she began to think of nothing else.

Once the snow was cleared, I grabbed a shovel and pickaxe and headed over the snowy mountain into the forest.

I felt a little silly going out to plow a field on a day when it was too snowy to walk, but to be honest, I was glad I did.

The harder the task, the more focused you need to be.

So in the end, the harsh situation was good for me, not bad. I'm going to the field, but it's not the goal.

"......shit."

Of course, it's true that I was getting frustrated as my feet were sinking in and the path to the clearing on the outskirts of Rizaira, a good distance away, was covered in snow.

I could honestly melt all the snow in town, not to mention the road in front of me.

I thought about just closing my eyes and writing it out, but in the end, I didn't and started trudging through the snow.

Anything I can do, Luna can do.

We still don't know what the group wants or does, but Rizaira basically doesn't use her mystical powers in real life.

I should say naturalistic.

Out of respect for Lizaira and Luna's lifestyle, I'm not going to use powers that shouldn't be there.

A lot of things would have been easier with the Flame of Tuesday.

We could have thawed and cleared the ground that was starting to freeze in the first place, so the clearing would have already been done.

I didn't.

By not doing so, I was able to create a mental state that allowed me to maintain my enchantments with extreme efficiency throughout the day and even in my sleep.

I don't think we can use the Flames of Wrath just because it's convenient now.

I realize now that inconvenience is definitely worth it.

"Ugh."

Still.

It was an inconvenience.......

\* \* \*

If left untreated, the snow that falls and accumulates will gradually melt into ice.

Scooping out the snow, breaking up the frozen snow underneath with a pickaxe, Reinhardt did the long, tedious work of clearing.

The snow that falls in the mountains in winter doesn't melt anytime soon. Often, it melts slowly until the next season arrives, and then suddenly disappears on a warm day.

So while the snow hasn't come back since the first few days, it's been everywhere in Rizaira in the winter.

On those days, Reinhardt would still follow the mountain trails long after the townspeople had cleared the snow and the children had stopped having snowball fights, returning only as the sun was setting.

Another day, two days, a week, a month passed.

The work was still slow.

No matter how strong you are physically, there are limits to how strong your equipment can be, so you have to control the force, and no matter how much you control it, it's still possible to bend a shovel blade or break an axe blade.

Reinhardt was in a trance-like state, slamming shovel blades and pickaxes into the ground and chipping away at stones.

Some days you do those things mechanically for days on end, like you've forgotten what you're doing.

And so, the winter has passed and the snow in the forests and mountains has moved beyond freezing and into a kind of sublimation.

One of those days that signals warmer weather and all you have to do is wait for the snow to melt.

Luna watched Reinhardt's face.

Reinhardt was watching from just one step behind, but he didn't even realize Luna was there.

-Poof!

A shovel that sticks too easily into the frozen ground.

-Puck!

Luna watches as the blade of the pickaxe penetrates the ground like a tofu instead of hitting it.

"Congratulations, Reinhard."

"......?"

Suddenly, Reinhardt spins around at the sound of a voice behind him.

"Congratulations?"

"Yeah."

Luna points to the shovel Reinhard is holding.

"Have you not entered the next trance?"

Reinhardt's shovel glowed with blue mana.

"Hey, what's this?"

"......."

So focused was Reinhardt that he didn't even realize he'd gone over the edge at some point.

Luna smiles at Reinhardt, who stares blankly at the shovel he's holding.

"Stop plowing the ground, it means nothing to you anymore."

"......."

At Luna's words, Reinhardt looks around in confusion.

The vast forest was almost completely cleared. For a moment, Reinhardt stares at his great, yet humble, accomplishment, and then he turns his attention to Luna.

"I'm running out of time, can't I just finish it?"

"......."

Rather than being happy to be a masterclass, Reinhardt's mouth twitches as if he's disappointed that he didn't get to finish the task in its entirety.

"Only if you really want to......."

After so many years of bizarre behavior, Reinhardt had developed a strange aberration.

"Then you're in the way, so go away."

"......."

-Puck!

With that, Reinhardt started pawing at the ground.

\* \* \*

Once I reached the master class, the pace of work was bound to pick up tremendous momentum.

It was like having the strongest shovel and pickaxe in the world, so I could use my full strength.

In the end, I managed to finish all the remaining parts of my year's work in one day. By breaking and cutting through the frozen ground.

So when I asked what I could do to distract myself, Luna's instructions to plow the field were complete.

The excitement of being a master class.

Actually, I'm not sure.

I'm not even sure when this became possible.

If there was such a thing as a wall, shouldn't we have already jumped over it?

I stare at the fork I'm holding, blue energy wrapped around it.

I can't really tell what's changed, but I can definitely enchant the objects I hold.

Technically, I wielded the sword the most, but shoveling and pickaxing turned into a master class.

No, but isn't this also a martial arts kind of thing, so you can call it whatever you want?

"Congratulations, Reinhard."

"Oh, yeah....... Thanks to......."

I nodded, dumbfounded, at Ronan's words.

"Thanks, we didn't teach you anything. You figured it all out on your own."

Luna merely ate her bread as she said that, and Ronan nodded.

You don't have to thank me for this.

Luna definitely taught me something, but not directly.

I fed them, put them to bed, and made the occasional rambling comment, but that's not technically teaching them.

To be fair, Arta did teach me a lot.

That doesn't mean I didn't really learn from them, I couldn't say the same.

Ronan only spoke of the spark of the heart.

Luna only said a few words about my feelings.

It was more about a mindset than a teaching.

Have we forgotten the agony?

It didn't.

Have you come to a conclusion about my complicated feelings?

That's not it either.

Luna and Ronan say that's why they didn't teach me anything.

However, I can't say I really learned anything.

My time with them, my days in Rizaira.

I couldn't help but think that they were just feeding and sheltering me while I went about my personal practice.

Whatever complicated thoughts I have, Luna says, eating her bread.

"I'm going to gather the villagers."

"......."

"Leave tonight."

It's nighttime, after all, and I can stay up for another day or so.

I couldn't.

By saying that, you're admitting that you're afraid to go back out into the world.

I don't want to postpone the moment when I'm confronted with things that have changed in my absence.

You can't afford to be here for one more day when you can't wait to get back home.

So Luna wants to get me out quickly, before I get weak, because she's accomplished her goal. She's not trying to get me out quickly for her sake, but for my sake.

I'm sure that's what you're thinking.

By the way.

That blunt statement.

I was disappointed.

A lot.

Quite a bit, a lot.

I was disappointed.

Episode 496.

At the center of Rizaira is the town hall.

It's where the whole village gathers during feasts, and it's where people gathered when I first arrived in Rizaira.

Since there was nothing to do in the winter, it was always a place where the villagers gathered to chat with the elderly and play with the children.

Late at night.

It wasn't a feast, but the townspeople gathered to hear that I, a longtime guest, was leaving.

"I miss you, my dear."

"He'll be fine wherever he goes. He's got a pulpit, so he'll be good at whatever he does."

"You're going in the middle of the night, why don't you go when it's daylight?"

The old men hugged me and patted me on the back.

Some were concerned about me leaving in the middle of the night, but most just nodded and said nothing, knowing it was Luna's decision.

"Thank you for your efforts."

"I feel like I'm working all the time without getting any rest."

"I'm going to have to give you a few potatoes, just hold on a second."

"I need to get some jerky. Stay here for a minute."

The aunts and uncles rushed back to the house, bringing back sacks of preserves, as if they had to give me something to eat since I was going to be gone for so long.

So much so that I can't take it all.

"Bro, why are you leaving already?"

"I didn't even get to play with my brother that much."

"Can't we just live here?"

"I was going to marry my brother when I grew up!"

"You were supposed to marry me!"

"Uht you're ugly!"

The kids were making dizzying noises.

I don't know how to handle kids, and I've never played with them properly.

But time is a bully, and there have been many times when I've tried to force myself to play with my kids, and they've bugged me all day.

I greeted people one by one, and at the end I stood in front of Arta and Lena.

"Are you going?"

"Right."

Arta is, frankly, not a sappy guy. Just like I am.

But he's the one who can tell me exactly what's wrong with me and point me in the right direction, so to speak.

I didn't have a particularly emotional goodbye to Arta.

I took his outstretched hand in mine.

"May the sun and the moon be with you."

With a quick handshake, Arta spoke in a very low voice, so only I could hear her.

Unlike Lena, it was clear that Arta knew about the monthly allowance.

"You could have stayed a little longer, I'm sure you have your own reasons for leaving."

"Well, yeah."

Lena said with tears in her eyes. In a way, she was just like the country girl I thought she was.

Lena took care of me in a place that was neither too close nor too far away.

"I guess I never got around to asking you why you couldn't come with Ellen."

Lena wipes a tear from the corner of her eye and smiles.

"Well, whatever, it'll work out."

I know enough to know that believing that doesn't make it so.

"If it doesn't work, make it work."

But without that level of faith, you can't accomplish anything.

and everything will be fine.

We'll make it work.

I stayed in Rizaira for a long time, but that's all I had to say goodbye to.

Goodbyes shouldn't be long.

\* \* \*

There were so many things that the villagers had given me, that Luna ended up giving me the bare minimum in a backpack.

I strapped on my backpack and put my long-lost scrollbook back on.

I put on the traveling clothes I had worn when I entered Rizaira. It had been a while since I'd worn it, but Luna had cleaned it.

I saw villagers waving at me from a distance as I walked back.

The Outer Rim of Rizaira.

Now it was just Luna and Ronan standing around me.

"Honey."

Ronan nodded at Luna's words.

Ronan Artorius stands before me.

Intimidating to look at, it reeked more of a male than an adult.

Despite his blunt demeanor, he is also a very vulnerable person who sometimes shows his vulnerability to Luna.

Luna isn't a big talker either, but Ronan was especially soft-spoken.

It wasn't that he didn't like me, it was just the way he was.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

He puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Are you sure you can make Ellen happy?"

I felt my breath catch in my throat at that simple question.

That's not an easy thing to say.

However, just as Ronan's question was not an easy one to answer, neither was mine.

I have no idea what the future holds.

"To be honest, not much."

"......."

Even if I die.

Even if Ellen dies.

We will make each other unhappy.

I don't know where to start or what to do to repair this twisted relationship.

"But I'll do what I can, and if I can't, I'll find a way."

We don't know how we're going to find the outcome that makes us both happy, but we're going to find it. Just as you found Lizaira by looking for a way into the master class, and were able to achieve that goal.

If there's no way, they'll try to figure it out.

I'm not confident, but I was always going to find a way, and I did.

That was the best I could do at the time.

Ronan stares at me, still.

"Yes, my words to you as you go out into the world, the best answer for you that you can hear from me is this."

"What is......?"

"But you, from what I've seen of you lately."

Ronan grabs me by the shoulders.

"I, for one, am in favor."

Probably.

I felt like I had been accepted as a son-in-law by Ronan.

"Go, Reinhardt."

It was also the last time I said goodbye to Ronan.

\* \* \*

"Follow me."

"It's ......."

After saying goodbye to everyone, Luna Artorius crossed the mountainside outside of Rizaira.

It was still winter, and I was wearing only the clothes I came in wearing.

In retrospect, I should have packed a coat, even though the temperature didn't really matter.

Luna stands on the side of a mountain outside of Rizaira, looking at me.

Just as I met Luna in the moonlight one night while wandering the Sren Mountains. Even now, when I must leave Rizaira, I find myself facing Luna in the moonlight of a certain night.

"You will never set foot in Rizaira again."

"It's ......."

From what she said, it's unlikely I'll ever return to Rizaira.

It would be a luxury to think about whether I'd ever set foot in Rizaira again, as it was unclear if I'd ever live through that lifetime.

Here I was a guest, not a demon.

Where the only thing to fear is nature.

Life in a mountain village isn't easy, but in a life with so much to fear and so many things to worry about, Rizaira was a safe place.

Where you just do what Luna tells you to do.

I realized that this is the kind of life I want to live someday.

Even if it wasn't Lizaira, I realized that when all was said and done, I'd like to leave my overly-careful life behind and live a life where the only thing I have to worry about is the weather for today and tomorrow, and food for the long winter.

But this is not the world I was given.

I have a world to live in.

As such, they could only be guests of Rizaira, not residents.

I have to leave.

"Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?"

I want to say.

I have a lot of questions, and a lot of things I want to say.

What is a per diem.

Who you are.

Why they have such mysterious powers and don't interfere in the affairs of the world.

I had a lot of mixed feelings about it.

But there was one thing I wanted to say.

"I'm sorry."

"......?"

"I'm sorry."

I know that sounds ridiculously cheesy, but I honestly feel like crying right now.

No, it's not!

I've been here for months, and as soon as they see I've moved up to masterclass, they kick me out.

This is so ridiculously sad! People are so heartless!

Luna's lips twitched slightly in embarrassment at my outburst.

"Well, that's too bad. So....... What do you want me to do, what do you want me to do......."

"You asked me what I wanted to say, not how to do it, so I said what I wanted to say. I'm sorry, I'm just saying."

"You can say things like that, and you have a cute little side to you that makes it seem like you don't."

"I know."

"......ha."

Luna glares at me in response.

"I thought you were going to ask me about the secrets of the January Party, but....... I guess I overestimated you."

"I'm human, too."

Honestly, I'm curious about that too.

But in hindsight, I wonder if it matters.

No matter what I ask or say, Luna is a rule-bound creature.

They may satisfy my curiosity a few times, but they won't change anything in the real world.

Honestly, it's not like I have any idea what a monthly fee is.

"What's with the January party....... I wonder if it has something to do with the long-lost vampires of Sunday and Monday."

Recognizing the Flame of the Day. You recognize Elyse as an ancient Archdemon.

As the name suggests, it was somewhat inevitable that the January Party would be associated with him.

At my words, Luna stares at me.

"Do you want to know? About my monthly paycheck."

Existence of a monthly party.

The secret.

"I want to know, of course."

They say that curiosity can't change anything in the real world.

Even if it didn't change anything, I was curious.

"Follow me."

Luna led the way.

Despite the winter moon, the night in the mountains was too dark.

But she led the way with slow but sure steps, as if she could see in the dark.

I followed along to make sure I didn't miss her backside.

Walking behind her, I arrived at a place I knew well.

In the summer, I once practiced zazen under a waterfall.

That deep ravine where kids used to splash around.

It was winter, so the waterfall, which was quite magnificent, was frozen solid, and the valley was frozen solid.

Luna stands over the frozen valley, looking at me.

"Let me ask you a question."

"......."

Luna opens her mouth to speak.

"Do you think we are bad?"

"......."

"Do you think it's bad that we hide from the world, that we turn a blind eye to what's going on in the world, that we hide from the children in the village what's going on in the world."

Luna didn't seem to protest.

"There's no reason to say it's bad."

There's no reason they should have to sacrifice themselves for the world. Just because they're strong, just because they wield some mysterious power whose identity is unknown.

Just because that power can help the world doesn't mean they have to risk their lives to do it.

Still, there was a certain cruelty to it.

I knew it in my head, but I couldn't say I didn't have a part of me that wanted to help.

"At the very least, I'm curious."

"What?"

"Why you have to hide. Why you have to turn away."

I stare at Luna, who remains still, looking up at the sky.

"I don't know about anything else, but I feel like I have to."

"......."

She turns and looks at me this time. There's a law in the Jiwaldang, and it's not that we don't interfere in the affairs of the world, it's that we can't.

So when she tried to kill me in the past, she seemed like someone who was determined to do something.

She walked toward the frozen waterfall.

She waved her hand, and as if space were opening up, a path appeared in the middle of the waterfall.

Even when I was zazen, I never saw the cave behind the waterfall; her power had revealed the hidden space.

This is the space behind the waterfall where kids have been swimming and playing without a care in the world.

She walked toward the path that had suddenly appeared, and I followed.

She snapped her fingers, and soon the deserted hallway began to glow with pale white magic lights. No, she wasn't even sure it was a magic light.

Luna walks down a long hallway, the pale glow of magic lanterns hanging at regular intervals along its walls.

What kind of space is this?

But I knew enough to know that I was approaching the secrets of Lizaira.

"As you say, the Januaryites are a group related to the ancient Lord Vampires, named Sunday and Monday. How much do you know about them?"

I nodded at her words.

"They're long gone, and all we know is that even the road vampires have no idea what Monday and Sunday used to be."

Monday (月曜) and Sunday (日曜).

I don't know what they are, just as Elise doesn't know what they are.

"The desire of mortals for immortality is inevitable."

She walks still down the hall.

"For a very long time, yes."

After walking down the hallway for a while, we soon came to a huge hollow.

There was something in the middle of it, like a hanger, but nothing was hanging from it.

She walked past the cavity and kept walking.

Once again, the corridor continued, and I could see strange symbols carved into the walls.

"Of course humans existed before time was written down, and the mysteries, whether they be witchcraft, runes, rituals, or forbidden arts, have existed since the beginning of human history."

"Fear of death."

"It is perhaps the universal desire of mortals to long for eternal life."

"Even before magic was systematized, before the practice of physical and mental strength in the name of enchantment became commonplace, there were countless attempts to achieve immortality through such studies and attempts in the immeasurably distant past."

"That mystery, that myriad of things that you don't really know what they are, but they're powerful."

"The end of such mysteries."

Soon, Luna and I made our way through the corridor and came to another cavity.

This cavity was much larger than the one we just passed.

In the cavity were two sculptures.

The left side was glowing yellowish and reddish, and the red and yellow were swirling together.

The right side was glowing blue, white, and yellow.

It wasn't hard to figure out what it was.

Sun and Moon.

It would have been an embodiment of it.

"The source of all existence and the end of mystery, lending power and performing miracles to those who believe and pray."

The pinnacle of mystery.

"God."

She approaches the moon sculpture, still, and places her hand on it.

"A long, long time ago, when the gods had no names, the moon-worshippers prayed."

"Give me eternal immortality."

"The moon gave them the blessing of immortality they wanted."

"Except they didn't ask the sun."

"Living in a world ruled by the sun and the moon, I prayed to only one power."

"The sun, perhaps, hated them."

"The reasons were complex, but the results were simple."

"I wanted immortality, so I had to pay a reasonable price to get it."

"Bless the moon."

"The sun had a cursed clan."

"A clan was born, cursed to be immortal, unable to walk under the sun, and able to continue their lineage only in the barbaric and archaic way of taking the lifeblood of another being."

"Do you know what I mean, Reinhard?"

Luna looks at me.

"Monday, the first vampire."

Vampires were, and are, gods.

Episode 497.

There was a time when even the gods had no names; everyone knew there was some kind of power in the world, and everyone believed in something.

The moon-worshippers among them prayed long and hard for immortality.

Therefore, they are blessed by the moonlight, but cannot live without the sunlight.

The gods lend their power as you believe.

Just as believing in a demon lends unholy power.

Since he believed in God in hopes of immortality, it must mean that he was granted immortality.

It's just that we didn't see it coming, and we were cursed by the sun.

"There would be people who were willing to do that, and there would be people who weren't."

"There would be those who would despair that they would never walk under the sun again, and there would be those who would be grateful that they could live forever in the moonlight."

"Monday and all the vampires from Monday were beasts of the night."

"I'm sure that's what some of the Mondays were thinking when they got tired of being immortalized."

"Once again, I want to walk in the sunshine."

"Once again, I want to see the world in the glorious light of the sun."

"It is only natural that a being who lives only in darkness should grow weary of it."

"They said they were trying to beat the sun."

"The clans of Monday sought to overcome the sun with their strength by receiving greater power."

"There were others who thought otherwise."

"By asking the sun for forgiveness, there were those who wished to stand in the sun's light once more."

"Sun-worshipping vampires, they became Sunday."

"Those forgiven by the sun."

"Those who would rather stand in the sun's light with strength than ask for the sun's forgiveness."

"After a very long time, both clans were able to face the sun, albeit in pain."

"That's the vampire that overcame the sun."

"It was a road vampire."

Luna sees me.

They all beat the sun, but in different ways.

Vampires are a part of ancient beliefs and are, in some ways, sacred.

They're just strange beings, blessed by some gods and cursed by others.

"But it's still only half the story, isn't it?"

They are able to face sunlight, but as I have seen, most road vampires, while able to walk in it, feel immense pain.

They just don't like it.

"Time passed, and time passed, and what seemed like eons passed, and the true vampire roots were forgotten, and another line of Lord Vampires were created."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Eventually, Monday erupted into Sunday, and another eruption gave rise to the Road Vampire clan.

I couldn't figure out how long Luna was talking about, but I knew it was a long, long time.

"The oldest of those road vampires, Monday and Sunday, were eventually forced to have an affair."

"The inevitable....... wind?"

"Yeah."

Luna sees me.

"As an immortal, I had everything, but that created a deficit. I sought to fill it."

"Pain in the Sunshine."

"And, the desire for life."

"They wanted to be human again."

"Standing in the sunshine."

"To conceive new life."

"They wanted to take back what they had already given away."

"You said you would devote the rest of your life to the service of the moon and the sun."

"Promising the gods that if they would only give me back my life as a living being, I would devote the rest of my life to worshiping them."

"They wanted a return to humanity."

Immortality, after all, is bound to create a longing for the things it takes away. She places one hand on each of the sculptures of the moon and sun in front of her.

"The vampires of Monday and Sunday, they prayed for a long time to be human again."

"They begged together."

"I begged the moon and the sun, at the same time."

"Mercy to the sun, forgiveness to the moon."

"I prayed for an immeasurably long time."

"I prayed for so long, for so long, that even the gods couldn't turn away."

"Those wretched statues that you give away in the hope of immortality, but in the end, like whining children, cry out to be taken back."

"Because I wanted to turn away, but I couldn't."

Luna looks at me.

"I have forgiven them."

The words seemed to freeze my brain.

It was the one word that turned everything I'd heard her say upside down.

Not forgiven.

I forgave you.

"What....... Now, what....... sound......?"

Luna stares at me.

"The Januaryites are the descendants of Monday and Sunday, vampires turned human. I am the Lord of the Month, their ruler."

Master of the Monthly Party.

Not one of them, but the one who leads them.

Luna Artorius.

She looks at me, places one hand on the moon and one on the sun, and says

"The will of the gods and their messenger, sent down to the world by the gods of the moon and sun."

You are not forgiven.

The one who forgave.

"I am, the incarnation of the moon and the sun."

She was more transcendent than I realized.

\* \* \*

Incarnation of the Gods.

It meant that she was a god, and it meant that she wasn't.

"The Sun Moon Party is the oldest faith group in the world. They are allowed to do nothing but worship the moon and the sun, and I have lived many years as their protector and watcher."

That's what makes Luna so special, even within the party.

It's hard to say how long Luna has been around.

The January Party is a religious organization.

In exchange for their return to humanity, Sunday and Monday vowed to devote their lives to the service of the gods.

Staying out of the affairs of the world was a promise made to the gods.

It was a truth that had been passed down from generation to generation for an immeasurably long time.

And Luna was not a member of the January Party, but rather their protector and watcher.

"Wait....... Then my dad would say......."

"Ronan is human."

At this point, I don't know if I admire Luna or Ronan for marrying an incarnation of the gods.

"I, too, am bound by the roles assigned to me by the gods, and you see why I cannot interfere in the affairs of the world."

It's okay for Luna's children to go out into the world, but not for Luna herself.

Luna herself, as well as Sunday and Monday's descendants, had been paying the price for being human for generations.

"That....... I hate to say this, but my mom tried to kill me."

"If I had succeeded, I would have been destroyed. I would have paid the price for doing something I wasn't allowed to do."

He was risking not only my life, but his own annihilation.

Having lost her son, and now facing the loss of her daughter, Luna was willing to risk her own existence to kill me.

I gave that up, which is probably why Luna still exists.

"It's just a story. Someone who watched humans for so long, he wondered what a truly human life was. He ended up wanting to live it, so he became a human....... That....... It's not a great story."

It watched humans for so long that it eventually became human.

I recall Luna's surprised but somehow pleased expression when I told her that she resembled Ellen not only in appearance but also in personality.

Luna is a god, but she's not a god, she's an oddity.

"That's it. There's nothing more to explain, nothing more you need to know."

"How did you and your father meet?"

"......."

At my words, Luna looks at me with a narrowed brow.

"There's no reason to explain that to you."

Luna snapped, as if to say, "Don't you dare.

It's time to go home.

I have to get back to what I have to face.

What happened on the outside.

I wonder if something irreversible has happened.

Luna walks toward me, still.

Now to get me back.

"Ragan was boisterous and Ellen was calm, but they were both good listeners."

She stands in front of me and talks about her children.

"How lucky I am that I'm not one of those backward, arrogant, herd mentality kids like you. I've often thought that about you."

"Well, I think I'm a good listener."

"Yeah, how lucky I was that they weren't the ones telling me things I didn't need to hear......."

Luna smiled and put her hand on my shoulder.

"But....... I guess it wouldn't have been so bad to have a son like you after all."

"You're still corrected, have another one."

"Come on!"

-Bam!

"Eek!"

In the end, I was forced to take a hit.

I wonder how many times I've been hit in the stomach and how many times I've been hit in the back.

I can't possibly be the only one experiencing what I'm experiencing.

I had a weird experience at Lizaira.

Not because it was a village controlled by an incarnation of the gods, but because it was the first time I had ever lived in such a naturalistic environment.

Luna sighed heavily as she watched me hawk for one more word.

"Close your eyes."

Is it really time to go?

It asked me to close my eyes for a moment, so I did, and I was in Lizaira.

Now that I've told you to close your eyes, I'll open them again and you'll be able to leave Rizaira.

"Mother."

"Why."

"Thank you."

"......."

That's what I really meant.

It was only then that I realized she hadn't taught me anything.

If I put myself in a monthly party, I'm bound by the rules of the monthly party.

If I had unlearned the vision of the January Party, it would have been a terrible disaster for me.

I realize now that he didn't teach me anything because he was doing it for me.

Luna is silent for a moment at my greeting.

And.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

She says goodbye.

"To you."

She whispers quietly.

"The sun and the moon will favor you."

Something similar to what Arta said to me.

Something a little different, though.

She didn't open her eyes or say another word.

The weight of the hand that had been resting on my shoulder was gone, and the air shifted.

-Heeeeeeeee!

"This is......."

Fierce winds whipping through the mountains.

I was back at the top of a certain mountain long ago when I met Luna.

The time is night.

"......What is it?"

I felt a strange sense of dysphoria.

The season is winter.

So in a windy place like this, you'd have to feel a fierce, skin-tearing cold.

However, while the wind was blowing hard, it didn't feel like it was killing me.

Also, there was no white stuff everywhere.

And crucially.

"What's......?"

The corpses of dead monsters lay nearby.

It was a long time ago, but I certainly haven't forgotten it.

In my search for Rizaira across the Sren Mountains, I had to fight many monsters.

One day, I was tired of fighting monsters in this place and called Luna.

And as if answering a call, Luna came to me, and I was able to enter Rizaira.

But the exact same view as the moment I was on my way to Rizaira.

The corpses of bleeding monsters.

There's only one thing we can deduce from that.

Time.

It was barely flowing.

"Trust me.

It was only now that I realized what that really meant.

Episode 498.

The unspoken gesture she made to the sky upon entering the village, manipulating the passage of time.

Was I actually dreaming?

Did I really go to Rizaira?

But it seemed clear to me that I wasn't dreaming, that I was entering and exiting a world called Lizaira.

"Ha, ha, ha......."

I couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't told me about this.

It might spread if it knew it wasn't timeless.

If we knew time wasn't passing, we'd be too easily lulled into a false sense of security.

So, in order to stir up my anxiety and nervousness, but also to get over it myself, I said nothing.

I hadn't been away from Edina long enough for two seasons.

I left Edina, not even a month ago.

I came back to this world after living in another world, in another time, not here.

-Whoooooooooo!

In the harsh winds, I look down at the view of the Sren Mountains.

I didn't teach you anything.

I've given you nothing.

What I need most right now.

And the most lacking.

Time.

It's a lot of time, and it's hard not to get something out of it.

"Whoa......."

It wasn't a tear, but moisture pooled in the corners of my parched eyes and I stole it roughly.

If I knew that time wasn't passing, I could actually be carefree, but I chose not to think about that kind of thing.

Luna gave me what I needed most, and I ended up getting what I wanted.

There's no telling how far you can go with this power.

However.

The actual time wasn't that long, but it was a long time away.

I, now, need to get back to where I need to be.

\* \* \*

"To be honest, I don't think you did anything wrong, um....... Part of me wants to pat you on the ass for doing a good job?"

"......."

At Olivia's words, Liana de Granz stared at Olivia with a stony expression, but said nothing.

Olivia Ranze was not in her normal clothes, but in her usual priestly robes.

In fact, since Olivia rarely wears casual clothes anymore, it became her go-to outfit.

When Liana de Granz told her that Port Mokna had been self-selecting and killing evacuees all this time, Olivia's reaction was that it had to be done.

"I personally don't like it, but I don't understand the Regent's judgment either, because at the end of the day, you lied to Reinhardt, and he would never approve of it if he knew about it, so even if it was unavoidable, a result is a result."

"......."

"Anyway, I personally support your decision, but this is our job, and it's gotten too big to do something based on personal judgment alone, right?"

"It's ......."

"You have deceived Reinhardt thus far, and consequently you have deceived me."

Most of Fort Mokna's troops are either mages of the Vampire Council or priests and paladins of the Holy Order.

They were overly loyal to Lyanna at Port Mokna in the Cult, and deceived Olivia Ranze.

Olivia was effectively betrayed by the paladins and priests of the Holy Order.

"For a guy like you, who's not naturally gifted in politics or anything, to win the hearts and minds of everyone in Fort Mokna, and to do all this, and to keep the word from leaking out....... It's a miracle."

Riana doesn't have the words to win anyone over, and she doesn't like to do it.

It was Riana's charisma that allowed her to win the hearts and minds of all of them as the commander of Fort Mokna.

"Aside from any other personal feelings or feelings of betrayal, I can be on your side."

Olivia taps her fingers on the table.

"I mean, if only there weren't this 'weird side effect' thing......."

Olivia has come to Port Mokna not to pursue Riana, nor to punish the paladins and priests of the Holy Order for failing to report what they are supposed to report.

A pit in the outskirts of Fort Mokna.

He's here to solve the mysterious signs Lucinil has discovered.

Even in an environment with enough priests and paladins, no one noticed the signs.

Only Lucinil, who is spiritually sensitive enough, was able to recognize the strange signs before they materialized into ominous phenomena.

That's why Olivia Ranze has come here to exorcize and purify.

Riana didn't realize that her carnage would lead to this.

She knew something was going on, but she didn't know what kind of disaster it was going to cause, and she was kicking herself for it.

It doesn't just fall into predictable categories.

It's just the way of the world that things pop up in the most unexpected places.

But Riana's enemies are living, tangible beings.

Since we don't know how to deal with ghosts and spirits, Olivia Ranze must take responsibility for what Riana has done.

"The Regent said we might as well not risk it and abandon Port Mokna......."

We don't know what ominous implications this risk might have, so we might as well stay out of it. That was Charlotte's suggestion.

"Because my rule of thumb is that things like this can get out of control and become more dangerous."

Not knowing what's going to happen means that even if you leave the area, some unknown ash will still hit Edina.

With this level of risk, Olivia Ranze decided it was better to be proactive than to ignore it.

After all, Olivia doesn't know what threats Reinhardt might face, so she's here to take the risk herself.

In trying to save Reinhardt from a threat, you created another threat to Reinhardt.

"I'm sorry, sister."

Olivia smirked at Riana's comment.

"Do you even know how to say that?"

"Can you help me with this situation....... to resolve this situation?"

"Well......."

Olivia twists her hair and purses her lips.

"Maybe one or two, but who in the world knows what happens when the units are different?"

Unprecedented things happen with unprecedented consequences. Just as Lucinil couldn't predict what would happen, Olivia doesn't know what will happen.

And whether it's something you can really cleanse or fight.

I don't know.

Reading Olivia's playful, yet secretive demeanor, Riana looks at her with a stern expression.

"Don't hurt yourself, sister."

"That's funny. You must have hated me pretty much."

Olivia giggles.

"Is it because someone we both dislike showed up?"

It's none other than Charlotte.

"But people are supposed to get to know you after the fact."

Riana was speechless at the malicious joke.

"Gotta go. Get back to work."

"It's ......."

Olivia got up as if she was going for a walk.

\* \* \*

Exiting the Fort Mokna command center, Olivia watched a group of paladins and priests line up outside.

They were all under Olivia's wing, but it had been a while since Riana had been delegated command.

They are the ones who deceived Olivia by remaining silent and not telling her the secrets she needed to know.

They were on edge, expecting wrath to fall.

Feelings of betrayal.

I can't say that there is no such thing.

But I agree with Riana that she made that decision, and I understand why she kept it quiet.

Now I'm on my way to deal with the side effects of what happened.

"Self....... from now on?"

Olivia smirks, as if she's not interested in judgment for those who betrayed her trust.

"I'm going to clean up your shit."

Olivia Ranze is known for her low-key demeanor, except when she's preaching.

\* \* \*

A rural area quite a distance from Port Mokna.

Olivia made her way to the scene, escorted by a fairly large group of paladins and priests.

Olivia has nothing to do with this, but many of the priests and paladins who head out into the field are directly involved.

There were those who categorized and weeded people out, and even dragged them to the execution grounds themselves.

"I agree with the need, but did you really think you could kill this many innocent people and nothing would happen?"

Olivia says as they walk through the outskirts of Port Mokna.

"Shouldn't you have done some sort of purification ritual periodically?"

That's a reprimand.

Even if Riana hadn't foreseen that a spell would be cast, the priests and paladins should have done something about it.

At Olivia's words, one of the high priests walking by her side shook his head, his complexion turning white.

"Kyo, Master....... I didn't."

"You mean you did?"

"Yes, obviously......."

How to pound a stone bridge before you cross it.

I didn't see this coming, but even if I had killed it with my own hands, I was still performing purification rituals, prayers, and blessings regularly.

Olivia's mischievous expression hardened.

"So this happened despite the purification ritual."

Too many deaths.

Grudges, resentments, and injustices that cannot be resolved by periodic purification rituals and prayers.

Anger and hatred.

The fact that this is happening despite the blessing of so many priests suggests that this is not a normal occurrence.

Olivia and her group of priests were soon on the scene.

"I think things are getting worse and worse......."

Within a few days, the tinnitus that only Lucinil could feel was showing signs of materializing, to the point where Olivia felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

Some sort of ominous discomfort that you can't see but can feel on your skin.

Chilly air.

Olivia slowly approaches the pit Lucinil had seen earlier, hidden by the rocks, and stares into its depths.

"Whatever ...... is, it's bad."

Olivia was speechless as she saw the charred corpses, stacked in a pile so high she couldn't tell how many there were.

The charred remains of those killed by Liana de Granz's blitzkrieg.

'Crazy bitch, she killed them all with her own hands.......'

Olivia bit her lip as she watched the horrific sight, which she couldn't even begin to describe.

It was his decision, and he couldn't get anyone else's hands dirty, so he killed them all with his own.

Others may have sorted and dragged them, but it was Liana de Granz's own hands that drove them into the pit and suffocated them.

-oooooooooooo

The strange resonance of the wind in the deep pit sounded to Olivia like the cries of the wronged dead.

Olivia slowly backed away from the spot at the strange ringing, which was clearly an illusion, but felt like it wasn't.

You can stare at this mess for a long time, but it won't solve anything.

"Build a Sanctuary."

The good news is that Olivia's mastery of the power of Tuan, the god of purity, is perfect for this kind of thing.

At Olivia's command, the priests and paladins begin to bustle about.

What would have happened if we had left this alone.

If you're a little late.

If the silver-haired little old lady named Gazoo of Demand hadn't seen the signs coming, these spirits might have tried to harm him by causing some sort of miracle.

Hoping this will do the trick, Olivia summons Tiamata.

-Woof

Tiamata glows, and Olivia is plugged into the middle of the field.

-Bam!

Olivia watches as the priests draw the djinn and place the holy arcs in the correct order.

-oooooooooooo

Olivia is quite knowledgeable about spirits and reincarnations. Tuan is a god of purity who rejects uncleanliness, so he needs to understand the unclean and the unreasonable.

Olivia felt an odd sensation as she watched the howling winds of the plains swirl around her.

Olivia doesn't know how many people have died unjustly here.

But from a continental perspective, it's a handful of deaths.

Liana de Granz has committed an unforgivable sin, and Olivia has no intention of denying it. She just thinks it was necessary for Reinhardt's sake.

Thousands of people were dying.

That's not the only problem.

Just as a place filled with spiritual energy can become haunted, so too can a place become a lair for demons, a place of great resentment and hatred that attracts demons.

Those who died here.

Spirits, ghosts, and psychic phenomena that roam the world.

Slaughter.

The site of a massacre of the Demon's haters by the Demon's minions.

It's not just the people who died here that are the problem, the place itself is already attracting a huge number of demons.

And with most humans believing that everything is caused by the devil, all ghosts will hate the devil.

Demon-hating spirits are permeating this place.

Like a magnet or an anthill.

If Olivia's reasoning is true, this place becomes increasingly dangerous the longer it is left unattended.

No, it's probably already more than a little dangerous.

So Olivia was right to do something about the area before it became more dangerous and bigger.

Clearly, they are not wrong. Something needs to be done, and it's Olivia and the paladins and priests who can do it.

But it's not like we haven't had purification rituals before.

This is how far we've come, even with periodic cleanups.

Priests' prayers. Paladins' exorcisms. Exorcisms.

Was it really something that could work?

Olivia watches the priests move and thinks to herself.

To honor the memory of the man I killed.

Killing you innocently, but praying for you to ascend in silence, not in anger.

What the hell are you doing.

They are entitled to prayers, exorcisms, and purifications.

To the Paladins.

To the priests.

And to yourself.

Am I eligible?

If I were an original.

As he watched his murderers try to ascend him.

How do I feel about this?

What is this, the hypocrisy of devils going to hell.

I don't know if there's a better way to do it.

Something must be wrong with this.

"Wait!"

Scared to cry out, Olivia sensed that something was solidly wrong.

-Quiet!

From the pit, an abyss gushed forth.

Olivia's eyes widened, and she saw her hatred and resentment materialized.

-Keeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

An unidentifiable circumflex of pain, hatred, anger, or resentment.

No, it was a mixture of all of those things, and Olivia gritted her teeth as she watched it howl in agony, an embodied desire.

"Yeah."

Olivia draws a Tiamata stuck in the ground.

"This can't be easy."

Olivia's entire body was enveloped in a holy glow.

Episode 499.

Olivia Ranze and the priests take a moment to marvel at the arrival of the giant army of spirits, but then they have to get down to business.

The fight against the unidentifiable masses of demons was taking on a form that I wasn't sure if I should call a fight or not.

The enormous, overwhelming figure of hate suddenly tore through the air into a pile of dozens of souls, plummeting to the ground and crashing down on the paladins and priests.

-Crrrrrrrrr!

-Ah....... Two, Tuan.......

The spirits quickly overtook the paladins and priests, and they began to cry out in agony, fainting and clutching their heads with foam in their mouths.

-Puck! Puck!

Unable to withstand the strain on their minds and bodies, their bodies and faces began to swell in a puffy mass, and one by one they began to burst.

Those who didn't explode began to exhibit strange behavior.

-Quiet!

-skuck!

As if overwhelmed by something, he began to swing his sword indiscriminately at the priests and paladins around him.

"Possession......."

It's not uncommon for evil spirits and demons to possess humans and do nasty things to them.

However, it was capable of possessing and wielding highly trained paladins and priests.

They were powerful and overwhelming demons.

Some have even had their bodies disintegrate under the weight of the demonic possession.

They were the most powerful spirits the world had ever seen.

The fragments of the original demon protruding from the torn body of the priestess begin to rampage, looking for their next host.

You don't know what to do with the possessed, but you must deal with them before they possess you.

Olivia runs toward the rampaging spirits.

"Judgment on those who have strayed from the path of purity."

Tiamata responds to Olivia's holy chant and begins to glow a brilliant golden color.

You can't think about justification.

At this rate, the priesthood will be wiped out.

You have to do everything you can.

"Peace to those who have no rest."

-Woof!

As Olivia lunges at the creature, which is trying to find its next host, she roughly stabs Tiamata.

"Power to destroy all that is beyond reason."

-Flash!

-Kaahhhhhh!

"Be in my hands!"

Olivia Ranze is the only priest in the world who doesn't appeal to God.

-Crack!

Olivia and the other priests could clearly see the storm-like release of golden divine power, and how the demons it engulfed were torn into a thousand pieces in an instant.

Olivia calls out to the priests.

"It's not something you can't defeat! Harden your heart and face it! It's just a bunch of demons that can't die and wander the world!"

Everyone in the priesthood gritted their teeth at Olivia's harsh cry.

They are the great powers against the unclean.

No matter how much time you've spent dealing with monsters, it's more in the nature of priests to confront and exorcize these unholy beings.

So don't panic.

No matter how powerful the demon, no matter how powerful the grudge.

Obviously, it can be destroyed.

\* \* \*

The devil is back.

After saying he might be gone for a while, he returned less than a month later.

But when the entourage saw the returning demon, they couldn't help but notice the strangeness of Reinhardt's appearance.

"Reinhard......?"

"Long time no see. How are you?"

"Uh-huh. It's me....... You said it would take forever....... At least you're early. Why are you touching your hair......."

Reinhardt's expression was indelibly pleased as he touched Herriot's head, saying he'd missed her.

His demeanor, eyes, and demeanor were that of a man who had spent a very long time in a very faraway place.

There was something different about not only the look in his eyes, but the momentum itself.

Instead of feeling anxious and impatient, I felt like I was well prepared, with a certain sense of relaxation and calm.

"And Charlotte?"

"I'll be in the Oval Office."

"Everything okay?"

"Oh....... that......."

"Why, did something happen?"

"That's....... You'd be better off listening to Charlotte."

It's not like the seasons have changed, but time did eventually pass.

So, it was inevitable that something would happen while the devil was away.

\* \* \*

I realize that there is no perfect justice in the world.

It was clear to me that if I chose something, I would lose something.

I also knew that when you sit down to make too many decisions, you're bound to sacrifice someone because you think you're making a good choice for everyone.

But every time the things I knew in my head became true and stared me in the face, I had to realize that this position was too much for me.

"Riana is......?"

"Yes."

Riana was sifting through the refugees.

I've lost count of how many survivors have died at Riana's hands.

I nodded dumbly, listening to Charlotte's sobering report.

I was worried that something big was going to happen in my absence.

But the stool was already there.

It was still going on as I sat there.

I just didn't realize it.

"So until you get back and make a new judgment, we're suspending all survivor searches, and we're suspending all base relocation efforts."

After all, I'm in charge.

Charlotte halted all progress, reserving all judgment until I returned.

Regardless of what happened, I can't help but admire Charlotte's abilities.

I hadn't even realized it until now, and then I saw it in the report.

At the end of the day, it's not people like me who should be in this position, it's Charlotte.

"By the way, where have you been? You said you were going to be a while, and I thought you wouldn't be back for a while......."

Charlotte shook her head.

"And something....... seems to have changed a lot."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I don't know how to say it, but......."

Just as Harriet looked a little unfamiliar with me, Charlotte seemed to feel a little unfamiliar with me.

As Charlotte spoke, I was at a loss for words.

I've spent quite a bit of time in a world where time flows differently from reality.

If you come back and say that no time has passed, will you believe me?

"Where did you go and what did you do?"

"Um......."

I can't talk about the monthly fee directly. Luna didn't tell me to keep quiet about the monthly fee, but it wouldn't do me any good to go around talking about it.

But if you ask me what I did in Lizaira, I don't really have a reason to hide it.

It's not like there's anything wrong with that, right?

If I do say so myself, what I did for a few months was pretty bizarre.

"I'm back from chopping wood and plowing fields."

"......?"

Charlotte thought I was making some kind of joke or something, and she tried to force herself to laugh.

\* \* \*

We need to think about Riana's problem.

It wasn't just a question of whether or not to punish Riana, but that wasn't the only problem Charlotte told me.

Some deep pit outside of Mott Mokna that Riana drove people into and killed.

"One soul?"

"Yeah, the Master of Demand said there might be a problem later because of all the listening that's going on there."

Apparently, Charlotte has already briefed the Senate on the matter.

I've seen ghosts in action on Vampire Council. But I've heard that it doesn't have much impact in the real world.

However, Lucinil realized that too many demons could have real-world consequences.

"Well, for starters, the Holy Order's prefect, Olivia Ranze, was dispatched this morning, so she might be the right person for the job."

"I see."

"Actually, I don't know that we need to do anything, because if we abandoned Port Mokna, that would solve the problem....... But they want to get rid of the fire roots."

With Tuan's divine power, and Olivia sharing Tiamata with me, she would be able to exorcise or purify a great many spirits.

The gathering spirits may cause some problems, but Olivia has already been dispatched to deal with them.

"And the Empire has now begun organizing a massive expeditionary force to take over the remaining gates."

Taking down gates that were once impossible with a handful of commandos.

Now the Empire is organizing a massive army to break the last of the gates.

The collective might of humanity will be gathered, and one by one, we will wage an all-out war to destroy the remaining warp gates.

The strongest and last army humanity has ever organized.

Without that army, humanity would be doomed.

"We'll have to do something about that."

You can't help them overtly, but you should think of ways to support them behind the scenes.

After all, gating is everyone's problem.

"Anyway, great job while I was gone."

"Uh, huh? No, what....... It's a job to be done......."

Charlotte's face flushed a little at my coined phrase.

I learned something I didn't want to know, but I needed to know.

She can see and read things that I can't. So, I think it was a good idea to bring Charlotte to Edina.

\* \* \*

Upon returning from Rizaira, I realized that not only was the world out of whack, but Edina was out of whack, too.

The most urgent decision was about Riana.

I could have called a meeting of the Senate to make a decision, but I decided to confront Riana face-to-face.

I know she's been cheating on me, but she's been doing it under the guise that she's making a judgment call for me.

Whatever it is, we need to talk about it.

I was hoping to find Elyse or Lucinil among the Lord Vampires, but they were absent, and the only one left in the castle was Antrianus, who had returned from an intelligence gathering trip.

"You're back, great one."

As always, it's been a while since we've seen Antirrhynchus being as polite as possible on the outside while being vicious on the inside.

I never thought I'd see the day when I'd look back on this old man with fondness.

"I got the job done faster than I thought I would."

"That's a good thing."

It wasn't actually a quick fix, but the more I talked about it, the more complicated it became, so I had to skirt around it.

Until this morning, I was in Rizaila.

I had the odd feeling that every moment of my stay in Rizaira had suddenly become an incredibly distant past.

There will never be a day when I can return to Rizaira, and I shouldn't hope for it.

Because even if everything works out the way I wish it would, I still have a ton of people to answer to.

So pretend you've had a very long, very long dream.

I couldn't imagine a life like that, and being suddenly thrown into it was a luxury.

"By the way, since you're looking for me, do you have somewhere to be?"

"I need to go to Port Mokna."

"Ah....... You mean that place? I hear there's been a lot of bad stuff going on there lately."

Antirrhinus smiled, as if he knew why I wanted to go there.

To be honest, I don't know the exact situation there, so I don't know the level of the actual threat.

"Well, I'll get right on it."

Antrianus begins casting Mass Teleport.

500 episodes

It was a hopeless situation on the battlefield against the Demon Collective.

-Betrayers of reason! May you perish before the name of Tuan!

This cleric is capable of harnessing the divine power of both demons and gods, but for now we need the power of the gods.

Olivia leapt toward the paladin, who had begun attacking priests and paladins indiscriminately while possessed.

They can't do anything for fear of offending their coworkers.

-Bam!

Olivia cries out as she twists the leash of the rampaging possessed paladin.

"Fade away, you peculiar beings!"

-Flash!

"My God, there's no place for you!"

-curl!

A golden storm from Olivia's hands enveloped the possessed paladin.

-Twitter!

-Keeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

As if set ablaze by a golden flame, the evil spirits that occupied the paladin's body oxidize in a fierce billow of black smoke.

In the soul-searing golden flames, Olivia could see the light return to the dazed paladin's eyes.

"Off....... ugh......."

But that was short-lived, as Izzy returned and the paladin fell to the ground in a heap of bubbles.

I'd only been subdued for a few moments, but it was clear that my mind was already broken.

This was just one piece of a giant demon that had dozens of pieces.

The mere act of possessing a priesthood that could be called the Hundred Warriors is enough to blow it to smithereens, dominate those who have the presence of mind to handle it, and break the minds of those who have broken free of the possession.

Olivia watches in disbelief as it is breached, even under the protection of holy power, and the demons seep into the priesthood.

This is.

Are they paying for their sins.

The sins committed by those who wield the power of the gods were not judged by the gods.

Hence the anger and hatred, the despair and terror, the bitterness and sorrow of men, piled up and congealed in the pit, condemn them.

Is it the hatred of men that judges those whom God has not judged.

But obviously, Olivia is not alone in this position.

For a moment, the dozens of fragments of the original demon consumed the priests, but then they saw Olivia, and they fought back.

Together, they were amplifying their holy power, protecting themselves with a powerful holy power that the demon could not enter, forcing it to retreat little by little.

You can fight back.

But Olivia sensed a change in the atmosphere.

A chill in the air.

The possessed look toward Olivia.

Just as you've identified the most threatening enemy in this situation.

-Currrrr!

One of the fragmented spirits, now a mass of demons, lunges at Olivia.

Olivia rather laughed.

"Yeah. Come on."

Tiamata is imbued with great divine power.

"I'll burn you."

No hate, no despair, no resentment.

It will vanish with the torch that burns the soul.

-Currrrrr!

The mass of demons lunging at Olivia was crushed by the storm of holy power released by Tiamata and vanished.

"Master, behind you!"

"......!"

But the frontal rush was meant to distract Olivia, and before she could turn around at the shout, a trio of demons were rushing toward her.

They burst out of the bodies of the possessed paladins and priests, and we were slow to react.

However, Olivia stood her ground and swung her sword at the first of the incoming demons.

-Bam!

With an eerie sensation that could hardly be described as cutting into an intangible form, a chunk of the primeval mass was torn away.

But the second.

-OffOffOff!

"......!"

It struck Olivia's cloak of divine power.

However, it could not penetrate the divine power surging through Olivia's body.

And then there was a third.

-Woof!

"Oops!"

Engulfed by the second primal mass, Olivia felt a gravity that took her breath away.

As if she were about to drown in a puddle of living mud. Olivia felt heavy, as if her limbs, as well as her hands, were suddenly out of control.

It became difficult to infuse Tiamata with holy power, let alone limbs.

Even with the torch burning away the unclean, the mass of the demon burned, but it still managed to trap Olivia.

-Currrrr!

As Olivia stopped moving, vague masses of darkness began to erupt from the bodies of the other possessed paladins and priests.

As if killing Olivia, or possessing her, is the only goal.

Dozens of demonic masses slip out of their possessed hosts and rush toward Olivia Ranze, who stands in place and tries to break free from their clinging grip.

-shiiiiprofit!

-Thump! Kung! Kugung!

One by one, like a giant lump of mud sticking to itself, chunks of the original spirit began to coat Olivia's body.

"Ugh....... Ugh......!"

The golden divine power pouring from Olivia's entire body was somehow preventing it from being consumed, but a vast amount of demons were screaming with hatred and trying to consume her somehow.

-Rescue the Lord!

Not only that, but the Priesthood also began to channel holy power to save Olivia from the attacks focused on her.

Fall or hold on.

It was a two-way street.

But Olivia, holding on with all her might, felt a chilling sense of dread as she stood in the muddy depths of the demonic muck, unable to see an inch.

It's not that they can't be defeated.

Olivia could see, up close and personal, the demons burning in the holy power Olivia was releasing, in the flames of Tiamata.

Apparently the demons are burning up and disappearing.

However, it's not just one ghost.

It is a collection of unfathomable demons.

They're here, and they seem to be fused, but they're still separate entities.

The unfathomable number of demons rush to consume Olivia as she fades away.

-Khhhhhhhhhh!

-MomAhhhhh.......

-I don't want to die.......

-Why am I.......

-Why do I have to die!

Desperate thoughts, whether from a dying terminal or a dying mind, pierced through the divine power and rattled Olivia's eardrums in the form of sound.

Despair.

-The king is.

-must die.

-Even those who side with the devil.

-Majesty.

-Everyone must die.......

-Why did you kill me?

Hate.

Olivia watched in horror as the creature, a demon that remained in the world even after death, burned its last breaths of existence to exact revenge on the demon king.

It's not a strong one.

Many.

Too many.

Even as the demons are consumed by Olivia's holy power, and the holy power of the priests, they continue to try to consume her.

As if it were self-destructing.

Like you're taking revenge with your existence.

So many demons, each one different.

But there is one wind.

Demon Death.

Fall of the Demon.

The destruction of those who follow the Devil.

Olivia gritted her teeth as she saw the hatred of mankind for the demon, the resentment of the dead.

"What....... know......."

You guys.

What the heck do you know.

Do you know even a fraction of the truth?

"You guys....... nothing....... You don't know anything......."

Unfair.

This is unfair.

You don't know anything.

The demons' hatred and anger eventually forced Olivia to react.

And it ended up being a gap in the mind.

In the end, it was a wobble.

-Bam!

Olivia's divine power has been breached.

Like water seeping through a rock.

Like water pouring toward a breached dike, which eventually collapses.

-Currrrr!

A swarm of black demons consumed Olivia's body.

"Ah....... Ah......!"

Dark spirits burrow into Olivia's mind in a matter of hours.

Must this be what it feels like to have your soul plundered.

A momentary lapse in Olivia's composure caused the last line of defense, the shroud of divine power, to dissipate, and Tiamata's golden holy glow to extinguish.

-Kurrrrrr

Swallowed up by the flood of souls, Olivia could only scream incoherently.

A single fragment has been known to strain the flesh of paladins and priests, even causing them to explode.

All those spirits rushed in to devour Olivia.

Holy magic pours in from the outside, but already inside, spirits rampaging for control of Olivia's soul and mind begin projecting cursed words not into her ears, but into her mind and soul.

The body is essentially a vessel for a single mind and a single soul.

An unfathomable number of souls begin to mingle in that bowl.

Even if it's not an evil spirit, but an innocent soul, the spirit of the person experiencing it is bound to be shattered.

But not an innocent soul, either.

If the mind is infiltrated by a myriad of spirits with nothing but malice, resentment, and hatred, with nothing but the will to destroy something, the mind can't help but be shattered.

Swallowed up by its resentment and grudge, it becomes a vengeful spirit that rages for the common desires of the spirits.

However.

"Turn off......!"

Olivia Ranze is not easily broken.

Endowed with a divine spirit, she has been incredibly resistant to all interference and harmful influences on her mind since childhood.

God does not choose humans who are easily broken.

She's not made to break easily.

Olivia is now in a stormy sea of souls, clinging to the last shreds of sanity like a drifter on a raft enduring the sinking.

Facing the tidal wave of desire that threatens to crush your will.

She's already lost the battle of the body, but if she loses the battle of the mind and soul, she'll be gone.

Fear that if you let go, even for a moment, you'll be plunged into the depths of the Sea of Souls.

She fought to keep from being pulled into the fall, which felt like spirits trying to grab her by the hair, seize her limbs, and drag her down, down, down into the abyss.

In bizarre, eerie pain and terror, as if someone was sticking tens of thousands of needles into his brain.

Olivia's fragile psyche was on the verge of sinking like a ferry in a storm.

Resentment. And hatred, and all the rest of it, threatens to consume Olivia.

Olivia lost her composure due to the repulsion of the ideas, and allowed them to take over.

So now Olivia was struggling to hold on to some semblance of sanity amidst the horror that her selfhood was slipping away.

"Hmph....... Hmph......!"

In the face of unholy beings, vengeful spirits, Olivia somehow manages to invoke the name of God.

Tuan.

God of purity.

As if repeating the name would prevent the sinking of the ego and the destruction of the soul.

I try to keep the name of God in my heart, in my soul, to keep my mind pure and strong.

Because calm is what you need to get through the chaos.

To navigate the turbulent waters, Olivia Ranze remembers the name of God.

-Kaaaaaaaaaaaah!

However, no matter how many times I sought the name of the gods, they would not lend their power to the spirit world.

The names of the stars were too far away in the stormy sea.

In desperation, Olivia finally grabs hold of her spirit, which had begun to sink, and turns it around.

Great Lords.

Five demons of the same being or of different names.

You can't abandon me like this.

Why did you choose me to fall apart like this?

I do not know what your will is, but at least you have not made me hope that the things that have brought me to the truth will be trampled underfoot by these spirits and ideas.

No matter how many times she calls out the name of God in her heart, no peace comes, and the spirits fill Olivia's mind like water.

To smash the vessel that is Olivia Ranze, and take control of her broken body.

From the fringes of consciousness and flesh, where so much is confused, where so many things other than herself have taken over, Olivia thinks.

If it falls apart.

If I disappear as I am.

Reinhardt.

You'll be sad.

If this life, which Reinhardt has saved time and time again, is finally sunk by this undeserved hatred.

Reinhardt is tormented by the thought that he has destroyed the world while trying to save it, and he blames himself for Olivia's death.

We don't want to be that way.

I can't give you that kind of grief.

I can't imagine any more despair and terror for Reinhardt, who must already be very sad and distressed.

In the torrent of souls pouring in.

End in the words of hatred for the devil they spew.

Olivia eventually let go of her obsession with serenity.

Eventually.

I'm sick of this absurdity.

Why is it Reinhardt's fault that the world is the way it is because he's trying to protect it.

Why is it Reinhardt's fault that Liana de Granz killed people out of spite and not Reinhardt's.

Why on earth should Reinhardt be responsible for all of this.

Though your deaths are sad and pitiful.

That sadness and pity doesn't justify misplaced hatred and anger.

Why.

What's so wrong with.

Does Reinhardt deserve all this hate?

Eventually.

Let go of the idea of floating on waves that threaten to swallow you up and somehow maintaining your sanity and staying calm.

A single will.

"This....... are a bunch of asshole demons......."

In the rapids, he finds a rock to hold onto.

"How's....... huh......?"

The rock, apparently, had a name: Fury.

-Flash!

And in response to her anger, the holy object unleashed a torrent of red like Olivia's mind.

-Crunch!

The priests and paladins who tried to save Olivia somehow could see a wild discharge of holy power reaching for the sky.

\* \* \*

-currrrrr

The pillar of red divine power that rose into the sky soon tapered off.

The priests were speechless at the overwhelming sight.

Olivia stood in the clearing, staring blankly at Tiamata, who was bathed in red energy.

No matter how many times I invoked the names of the gods, no power appeared.

But in her anger at the absurdity of the situation, Olivia extinguished the vast number of spirits that threatened to consume her mind.

Olivia, who held on to her sanity until the end, had a horrific experience of mind and soul contamination, but it didn't break her.

"ugh......."

But Olivia, who had already had an extremely painful experience, was close to burnout.

One of the priests rushed over to support a shaken Olivia.

Olivia looks out over the now silent field.

The spirits attacked Olivia en masse, and were dissipated by Tiamata's power in response to Olivia's wild rage.

Olivia doesn't know how many spirits there were or how they disappeared.

It's a feat, it's a miracle.

Skilled priests and paladins could not withstand even a fraction of its power, and Olivia maintained her sanity under its full onslaught, even annihilating it in one fell swoop.

There is no one in the world who wields more divine power than Olivia.

And that's because she was Olivia Ranze.

The priest who tends to Olivia says, blankly.

"Finished....... ?"

Everyone wanted this horrible thing to be over.

However, Olivia's expression was not good.

As if you had a premonition of something.

It wasn't divine magic, it was a miracle of godlike proportions, but it did what it was supposed to do.

Olivia was looking off into the distance with unfocused eyes.

An abyss.

Look into the pit.

Olivia was feeling something no one else was.

In the pit of that abyss, something rumbles.

-Currrrr!

The pit bursts open as if in an explosion, and the abyss gushes forth once more.

-Grrrrrrrrrr!

The hateful form that had risen not long ago, a collection of spirits, was immense.

However, this one was dozens of times larger than the one that had just appeared.

Just as the aggregate of spirits Olivia was dealing with earlier had been broken into dozens of pieces.

That first spirit, too, was only part of the body.

Olivia looks up at the hateful figure in despair.

She worked a miracle.

But the hatred in the world was greater than that, she says, staring at the priests, unable to even scream in the face of the overwhelming horror.

"Flee......."

Olivia was speechless.

Substitution.

How to get away with it.

From something like that, how on earth.

-quo-o-o-o-o-o!

The waves of howling spirits washed over Olivia once more.

Olivia couldn't resist this time.

Episode 501.

I was soon on my way to Port Mokna.

My mind raced. What to say to Riana when I saw her, how well the exorcism and purification was going.

There were a lot of questions to ask and things to check.

Once we arrived, however, the atmosphere in Port Mokna was more than calm, it was ominous.

"There seems to be a problem."

"...... looks like it."

A suspiciously large number of troops stood on the city walls.

Like preparing for battle.

And then, I don't know if it was a sign or not, but a shiver of foreboding ran down my spine that made my skin crawl.

I sprinted through the base and scaled the walls in one fell swoop.

"Ma, Your Majesty......."

"Line....... Hart?"

It wasn't just the soldiers who stood on the ramparts, but also Riana, who had a serious look on her face.

She hadn't expected me to arrive at this time, and the look on Riana's face was one of embarrassment and guilt.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know....... I don't know....... I don't know......."

Riana's complexion was pale blue.

An open field on the outskirts of Port Mokna.

Close to the horizon, walking in the moonlight, was a figure.

Stagger, stagger, stagger.

Dressed in colorful priestly robes and blood-red armor.

What the hell did he do with his hands, both of which were covered in blood.

As if possessed by something, Olivia saw Port Mokna looming on the horizon.

"This is....... What......."

Olivia, on a mission to exorcise demons and spirits, approaches Fort Mokna as if she's been overwhelmed by something.

His whole body was oozing out of his ears, like steam.

\* \* \*

Olivia has the power of the divine spirit.

I know as well as anyone that Olivia has an innate resistance to psychic interference and disturbance.

But something is taking over Olivia's mind.

Clearly, the trait didn't refer to immunity; it referred to a spirit so powerful that even Olivia could be subdued.

The sight of Olivia staggering back from her mission of extermination and purification seemed to strike a bizarre fear into the hearts of the soldiers on the ramparts.

We don't know specifically what happened.

However, something has taken over Olivia's mind.

Riana watched the scene, frozen in place.

The paladins and priests who went out with him are dead.

In Olivia's hands?

"I'll fix it. No one else."

"......Okay."

At my blunt instruction, Riana nodded with a stony expression.

With a quick leap from the ramparts, I walk toward Olivia, who is approaching on the horizon.

Olivia, who approaches with glassy eyes, soon lifts her head and looks at me.

Focus returns to the pupil.

It was a long way off, but I couldn't help but recognize the emotion in his eyes.

Distorted faces.

Quivering lips.

Fear.

Anger.

Hate.

I was reading only negative emotions.

A chill begins to run through Olivia's body as she looks at me with obvious disgust and hatred.

Olivia has mastered the power of Tuan, the god of purity.

I don't use it much, but I've also mastered the opposite power, Kier's power.

He's already been eaten by a dead demon, so he's using the power of corruption.

Olivia takes a step forward, her entire body enveloped in the Sacrament.

As in, when was the last time you stumbled?

With a powerful step, Olivia lunges toward me.

After leaping a huge distance, Olivia leaps again.

With an animal-like movement, Olivia lunges at me in a flash.

First hands-on since becoming a master class.

I never imagined that it would be neither a monster nor anyone else, but a possessed Olivia.

What happened to Olivia.

Will I ever come to my senses?

Can I do that?

I was confused.

I've spent a long time honing the art of finding immobility in the midst of confusion and fear.

My head is spinning, but my heart is calm.

What to do right now.

To subdue a crazed Olivia.

Other than that, there's nothing else I need to worry about right now.

"Whoa......."

Breathe.

Calm your mind and focus.

The flow of mana is extremely disciplined and refined, compressing unnecessary mana to the limit.

and compress it.

I don't use it for anything other than strengthening my physical body.

Olivia's arms, stained by the darkness, lunge at me like a beast, stretching out both arms, and I sweep them away with my bare hands.

-Carded!

Arm and arm collide with an unearthly sound.

"Evil spirits......."

"Great......!"

"How dare you, who did you touch?"

I slapped Olivia on the back of the head.

-Bam!

The blow was heavy, like a boulder being sent flying, and it sent Olivia sprawling across the field a dozen times.

You can't use a sword.

Because you can't kill Olivia.

"Great......."

After bouncing around for a while, Olivia staggers back to her feet.

I was trying to stun him, but maybe I should have hit him a little harder.

"Off......."

Olivia covers her face with one hand and begins to let out a stifled moan.

"κ΅¬λ¦Ό....... 흐....... 흐흑....... 끄흐흐흑......."

It was a bizarre cry.

Bright red tears well up in Olivia's eyes.

Is that the torment of the spirits that possessed Olivia?

Or is it a pain that I have to fight unwillingly.

Or both.

A pall of smoke rises from Olivia's body.

Through the smoke, something resembling a human figure appears and disappears.

As if so many demons have taken up residence in the body that the body cannot bear them and they are released.

"ugh....... ugh....... ugh......."

The sight of Olivia was pathetic, terrifying, and monstrous.

We don't know if Olivia is suffering, or if the spirits are suffering.

"Ewww....... Ugh!"

-Kaaaaaaaaaaaah!

-Currrrrr!

The black smoke from Olivia's body hissed loudly, and the grasses of the moor were ripped up, creating a massive shockwave.

-die.

-die.

-die.

-keep alive.

-Why me?

-I want to live.

-hhhblack.......

That wasn't all.

The shockwave didn't just generate a gust of wind, it also gave me the uncanny sensation of hearing thousands of people whispering in my ear at the same time.

But only for a moment.

Head.

I felt like I was going to explode.

While I was mesmerized by the enormity of the whispers that momentarily blew my mind, Olivia was right under my nose.

-Quack!

Olivia's outstretched fist struck me, and I was sent bouncing back several dozen meters with a dull thud.

-chieftain

"......."

Blocked.

Even as I blocked, the spot on my wrist where Olivia's fist had struck was dying.

The power of Kier, God of Corruption.

When killing Leviathan, I used Corrupted Tiamata to kill the guy who was constantly regenerating wounds.

Tainted by the Corruption, Leviathan Lance was unable to recover from his wounds and died.

Olivia's attack, using Kier's power, attempts to break through my magical barrier and corrupt my body.

-Woof!

Finally, he summons Tiamata and focuses his holy power on the wound.

Recovery isn't impossible, but it's definitely slower.

Kier's power suppresses Tuan's resilience.

My wrist is cramping.

Olivia is strong to begin with.

-Khhhhhh!

But now I felt like I wasn't dealing with just one Olivia, I was dealing with tens of thousands of enemies who hated and loathed me at the same time.

It doesn't stop there.

Hate, resentment, and the screams of those who don't want to die clutter my head as if they are a curse upon me.

You need to focus on the battle.

Olivia must be subdued.

However, I'm not hearing what I should be hearing.

The deafening pain and disorienting thoughts would suddenly give me dizzy spells, as if they were actually trying to invade my mind.

-Bang! Quack!

Olivia's physical assault doesn't stop there.

Corruption-powered attacks pierce my defenses and rot my body in real time.

When the power of Tuan, the god of purity, is reversed, it becomes a force of great corruption.

It was an unholy force that felt like it would burn my skin just by touching it.

The only reason I can withstand this onslaught is because of the power of Tiamata.

Apparently, the demons in Olivia's body had enhanced both her physical abilities and Kier's divine powers.

Olivia's holy power was already strong, but not to this extent.

-Sigh!

"......!"

The Tiamata disappeared from my hand and appeared in Olivia's right hand.

Me and Olivia share a tiara.

A bizarre situation was unfolding, with Olivia snatching the tiara I was holding.

That wasn't the end of the story.

-Kurung!

A black lightning bolt fell from the sky, and Tiamata, who had been radiating divine power, was instantly transformed into the form of a cursed magic sword.

Magum Tiamata.

Olivia comes running in with it.

You don't have time for initiative battles with Tiamata.

-Quack!

I had no choice but to take it as an alsbringer.

Gone are the days when, as in the past, Olivia was an overwhelming force to be reckoned with.

I made it to the master class, Olivia didn't.

Plus, I'm not your average master class attendee.

Because of the extreme efficiency of horsepower enhancement, I am able to produce more power than other master classes for the same amount of horsepower.

Plus, it has an overwhelming amount of horsepower.

So in power, I am overwhelmed.

-Carded!

"Great, great, great......."

Pushed back in the sword-for-sword struggle, Olivia lets out an animalistic growl and is knocked backward.

In strength, in power, I outpace Olivia.

That wasn't the problem.

"Crazy......."

The corruptive energy flowing from the accursed Tiamata was rotting my flesh.

I wonder if this is what it's like to die in real time.

If that power is my enemy, I have no problem with it.

Just kill it before it gets too long. That's it.

I can't kill Olivia, and if this goes on long enough, my arm will eventually break. And then it's over.

-Zing!

"Ugh......!"

And then, periodically, the wailing of the spirit, like a tidal wave, seemed to hit my ears and my psyche directly.

Not just physical attacks, but the power of corrupted divine forces and the curses of spirits.

A normal person would have gone crazy or died from an attack by any of those three.

You can't kill Olivia.

But if I don't kill it, it might kill me.

-kill the king....... kill.......

In the distance, on the wind, I heard such echoes.

On the horizon of the open field, a horde approaches.

-keeeeeeeeeeee!

Ghost Horse.

I could see the knights gliding across the field on their phantom steeds.

Death knight.

They all looked like they'd been dead for a while.

Paladins sent to perform a cleansing ritual have died.

Then, by the power of Olivia and the spirits, he was revived as Death Knight.

Once, Olivia and I fought a Death Knight tooth and nail in Raziern, the capital of the Kingdom of Levaina, where the cultists had appeared.

In time, Olivia now has the power to create such a Death Knight with her own hands.

It's just that it's using that power to attack me.

Dozens of ghost horses are running toward me.

It was too much to handle at the time, and it was Olivia, not me, who handled the Death Knight.

Time has passed.

Just as Olivia has gone from killing Deathknights to being able to unleash them.

I can't compare myself to what I was then, and I can't compare myself to what I am now after returning from Rizaira, or to what I was before I went there.

"Suck!"

-Woof!

-skuck!

Before the charging ghost horse could react, I had dismembered it and Deathknight simultaneously. In an instant, what was once Edina's paladin had been bisected.

Eventually, the eerie realization dawned on me that I was merely killing a former ally twice.

It's not just the Death Knights you have to deal with.

-Quack!

The real enemy I still had to deal with was Olivia Ranze.

The momentum of Olivia running up from behind and kicking me with her weight sent me bouncing wildly and rolling across the floor.

The impact didn't feel too bad, but the side of my body that was hit was stinging.

It's not the shock that's the problem, it's the proximity to Olivia and the corruption.

The Death Knights spin and charge with bizarre maneuverability.

You stand up again and grab the Alsbringer.

An Alsbringer is an object that lends you strength when the enemy is stronger or more numerous than you.

I am stronger than them.

However, Alsbringer still lends a hand when you're outnumbered.

In a moment of exhilaration, I tried to paint a picture of how I would handle the uncanny maneuverability of the charging ghost horse and how Olivia would be subdued.

-Flash!

A thunderstorm washed over the world.

-Currrrrr!

As a thunderstorm rips through the world.

-Quack, quack, quack!

Lightning began to rain down on the Death Knights.

The flesh of the recently deceased Death Knight bursts open, and the bones that make up their true flesh begin to burn and gradually turn to ash.

I turned my gaze toward Edina's walls. Through her contorted expression of despair, I see Riana reaching out.

It feels like I'm killing an ally twice, even if it's just to bring them back from the dead.

Riana was feeling similarly. No, I felt like I was feeling even worse.

I could see the despair and guilt in Riana's eyes as she realized what she had done, the loss of her longtime comrades-in-arms, and the humiliation of having to deal with their deaths.

Episode 502.

Riana was neutralizing the Death Knights one by one with lightning bolts, sniping at them from a distance, as if she could handle them.

I told him to stay out of it, but he must have thought I was dangerous.

-Quack! Flash!

You think it's all about you.

It's all their fault.

-Quack!

"Off!"

"......."

No match for me in strength, Olivia bounced off my sword and screamed like an animal.

The Death Knights charging at me are being held back by Riana.

Deathknights are the highest level of undead.

But Riana has slaughtered countless monsters in Fort Mokna so far, and has never failed to defend Fort Mokna.

And so it is with the Death Knights, as they are struck by the harsh lightning bolts summoned by Riana by the dozens, their tattered flesh scorched, their bones burning bright red until they are reduced to ash.

They are undead, but not long after death.

Some people have no face left.

Olivia is the head of the Holy Order, and after sending her priests here, she hasn't had much to do with them in person.

But Riana had commanded them for a long time, gone on missions with them, and spent a lot of time with them.

Riana probably knows best who she's killing twice right now.

He was paying for his sins by summoning dozens of lightning bolts into the bodies of his comrades-in-arms, turning their bodies to ash before they could die.

Olivia was possessed by an evil spirit, and the paladins sent on the purification mission were unable to die properly and were reborn as Death Knights.

You must fight not the monsters of the gate, but the things that were once your allies.

Riana made a mistake.

You have committed the unpardonable sin.

If so, I?

Trying to get your intentions judged is a miserable endeavor.

Just because your intentions were good, just because you were trying to save everyone.

After all, this all happened because of me, so is it really so absurd that a collection of spirits who hate me would borrow the body of someone so dear to me, Olivia, to condemn me?

As I justified in my own way.

I think their anger is justified.

For all the troubles in the world would not happen without me.

Perhaps their hatred of the devil as the cause of everything is not so unjust and unreasonable after all.

Even as the Death Knights were being neutralized one by one in a chain of thunderbolts, Olivia didn't stop.

With reason subdued, Olivia didn't look like she had a handle on swordsmanship.

"Off......."

He lets out a low cry like a beast, and wildly swings his halberd Tiamata at me like a club.

-Kang! kang! ka-kang!

It wasn't hard to parry his powerful swings.

But the wild swings weren't the problem, it was the power of corruption that Olivia wielded.

Taking Tiamata from Olivia's grasp made no difference. Taking Tiamata out of Olivia's grasp only takes away from the tempo of the fight, as Olivia takes her back.

Moreover, unlike me, Olivia could use her divine powers without Tiamata, making such a power struggle dangerous for me. Even if I took Tiamata away, Olivia would still use her powers of corruption and depravity.

Unable to hurt Olivia, I could only focus on keeping her at bay, and as such, my entire body was increasingly exposed to the aura of corruption and decay.

Necrosis begins in the skin and the whole body begins to die.

As my nerves die, my entire body becomes increasingly numb and my vision blurs.

You cannot use the healing power of Tiamata.

In a protracted battle, I will not die on the sword, but will be mummified alive by the power of corruption, as a plant withers.

Eventually, you'll have to make a move.

Something has to be done about those chunks of spirit controlling Olivia.

"Kaaaaaaaaaah!"

Once again, Olivia thrusts her sword at me, like a beast with a sword.

Avoiding it, brushing it off, just eats away at my body.

Throw a curveball.

-Ka-ching!

I grasp the blade of Tiamata, a magic sword tinged with the power of corruption, with my bare hands.

-qiibin!

As if dipped in an acidic solution, white smoke rises from your grip, and the hand that grasped the sword begins to die.

It's not just the sword.

-Bam!

"Off......."

I grabbed Olivia's nape with my other free hand.

Neither I nor Olivia can get away with this.

-Bang, bang, bang!

Olivia struggles and tries to escape my grasp, but in the end, I'm on top in terms of absolute physical output.

Olivia may be able to feed on me with her powers of corruption, after all, but she can't hurt me.

Tiamata is Olivia's, and it's mine.

Olivia holds the handle of the Tiamata, and I hold the katana.

Now that they're holding each other's stuff at the same time, they can't take it away from each other.

But my body is gradually dying.

"Tiamata......."

I turn to Tiamata, who has been turned into a magic sword by Olivia, who is subject to the will of spirits and demons.

"Be a holy sword."

When it came to killing Leviathan, I gave the exact opposite order.

-Flash!

As Tiamata pours out the energy of the Common Corruption, she returns to her original form, emitting a golden glow.

"Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

As if the light itself was causing her immense pain, Olivia, who was being held by me, began to scream.

Gripping the hilt, not the handle, I twist Olivia's throat as she tries to get out of range of Tiamata's holy power, which has turned into a holy sword.

Olivia refused to let go of Tiamata in her pain.

The will to corrupt Tiamata.

Willingness to restore Tiamata to the Holy Sword.

The spirits clash with my will.

-Currrrr!

Emitting white and black energy at the same time, Tiamata smoldered in the open field.

It's a battle between my will and the wills of an unfathomable number of angry and resentful people.

You won't win.

I don't think a single will can overcome this much desire.

Nevertheless, I don't feel like losing.

We'll show it back.

I have no intention of letting go of anything I hold on to, much less the great winds of my dreams.

I'm ready to let go of myself.

I am not ready, nor do I intend to be, to abandon anyone who loves me, except myself.

No one who loves me.

No one I love.

No matter who it is.

If peace is only complete and attainable by abandoning someone.

I.

I don't need any of that.

I'll have it all.

With everything.

I'm going to finally crush these damn evils and get up.

It's getting pushed out.

The black energy emanating from Tiamata was gradually receding.

Clearly, it's pushing back.

"Turn off....... Aaaahhhhhh!"

As Olivia cries out in pain, possessed by the spirits, I hold her by the scruff of the neck to keep her from running away.

My right hand is already blackened to the wrist, but the dead hand that should have left my will refuses to let go of Olivia.

Hands?

That's it.

It's okay to lose.

If you can revert.

If there's any chance of getting it back.

We can do better than that.

"Get lost......."

Tiamatae held in the left hand.

To the spirits that have taken over Olivia's body.

"Fuck off....... you bastards!"

I cried out, not with a wish, but with a will.

-Flash!

The world was engulfed in a reddish glow, and I could finally see the demons pouring out of Olivia's body, unable to withstand the wind pressure of the divine power.

\* \* \*

-Great!

The spirits eventually lost the battle for dominance to me, and fled to avoid exposure to Tiamata's divine power.

The expelled spirits clumped together in the air, forming a giant cloud.

It was floating in the sky, a gigantic figure, cowering, as if it had been struck by something.

Olivia was unconscious and limp, and I held her in my arms.

Something that big had taken control of Olivia's body.

The army of spirits floating in the air was larger than the mega-stadium I'd seen at the Temple.

Even if it's a soul, there's no way something that big can fit into a human body.

I couldn't help but wonder what the hell Olivia was dealing with.

How many numbers are there in the world?

-OffOffOffOff!

And it was getting bigger and bigger.

It's as if a desire attracts a desire.

Although I could not see the ghost with my own eyes, I could tell by the keenness of my senses that it was growing larger and larger, absorbing the spirits of the world with its very existence.

Like a black hole. As it grows larger, it will pull them in with even greater force.

The collection of spirits that resulted from Riana's massacre is just the beginning.

Now, regardless, I could only stare blankly up at the enormous, and growing enormous because it was enormous.

Only now could I somehow banish it from Olivia's body.

When that thing gets too big for me to handle, and the next thing I know it's on a rampage, will I be able to handle it?

How to do that.

How the hell do you do that on that scale.

Is it worth it to exorcise or purify?

The scale was overwhelming.

I can banish them, but I can't purify them with the holy power I have at my disposal. It would be impossible for Olivia, too.

What if that thing is trying to control someone other than Olivia.

Liana, Harriet, Charlotte, and Airi.

Or if you're stuck with Ellen.

I'll have to fight the battle I just did.

And those spirits would have been even bigger back then, so it might be impossible to deal with them as we do now.

And if it tries to kill me by borrowing someone else's body.

Do I have to watch the others try to kill me with the same look on their faces as Olivia did earlier?

I say, hugging Olivia, looking up at the writhing mass of souls.

"Why, why are you doing this?"

"If you don't like me, if you want to kill me, you can just try to kill me."

"Why, why are you doing this?"

What I have to deal with is what I want to deal with.

You might think their anger is justified.

So attack me. If those spirits attack me directly, that's it.

I shouldn't have to rely on the hands of people who love me to do this.

Izzie makes a reckless, nay, pointless move by speaking to a non-existent mass of resentment.

I have no idea what to do with this situation.

"Why......?"

But.

I heard the answer.

A gigantic mass of desire replies.

Like a bunch of beings shuffling around and saying the same thing.

No, it was more of an echo than a word.

The voices of so many overlapping beings echo across the field that a simple word can be heard.

"You, and only you. If you die....... ?"

His voice was filled with desperation and resentment.

-chiiiiing!

I can hear the souls stirring.

I felt a surge of emotion that I can only describe as palpable.

"Then why." "My son." "My husband." "My wife." "My brother." "My daughter."

"Mom." "Dad." "Lord." "My love." "Friends." "Hometown."

"Our."

"All."

"Girl."

"Take it all away."

"Why."

"I just want to give you one....... one?"

The words that came out at the same time were disjointed, but they all went into my mind, not my ears.

That can't be a single will. It's a collective mind.

It's like a group ritual.

They are pitiful, abominable beings, resonating with each other, united by a miserable bond of hatred, anger, and despair.

A collective named Resentment.

It stares down at me from thin air.

I could feel the clouds of giant spirits staring at me.

I could feel the resentful stare of those spirits, too many to count.

"Because you took everything we had."

"I'm going to take everything you have."

"That's....... right?"

"I will kill you, take everything you have, break and destroy you."

"For you have destroyed us."

"We, too, have the right to destroy you."

"Yes, everything."

"I have the right to take it."

I heard it from Antirrhinus.

What Sarkegaard said to Eleris in the moments leading up to the Gate incident.

Sarkegaard said.

Humanity destroyed the Darklands, so the Darklands have the right to destroy humanity.

The Gate debacle happened.

Eventually, those words will boomerang back to you.

Those destroyed, those taken, those murdered.

Since I am broken, I speak of the rights of the broken.

There are only a handful of people involved in this work.

The spirits in front of me now were on the sidelines for most of what was happening in the world.

They didn't decide anything, they didn't have an opinion.

They're just victims.

They were even killed by Riana's decision.

For them.

The right to destroy me.

Yes.

There will be. Obviously.

Other than them, who else has the right to destroy me, to hate me, to break me?

That thing is getting huge.

If left unchecked, it will get bigger and bigger, until it's too big for anyone to handle.

It will set me against those I love.

If its purpose is to cause me pain and suffering, it will do so.

"You must be scared of me."

I say to the lord of that grudge against me.

"You can't control me directly. You don't have the nerve to attack me directly. You don't have the nerve to kill me, so I guess you have no choice but to do it the cheesy way, by having me kill my own people with my own hands."

There was no answer, but I felt the stirrings of a great desire.

"What is your number, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or millions?"

"If that's all you have to show for your anger and vengeance against me. If that's all you have to show for it."

"Hate."

"Anger."

"Vengeful."

"It's not enough."

"Too much of the same, isn't it?"

Taunt.

"Weak beings."

"Because I was weak in life."

"I am weak even in death."

The only thing they have going for them is frustration.

Fundamentally, it will be in that weakness that they died because they were weak.

If they were strong, they wouldn't have died.

If only you were as strong as Ellen Artorius, warrior.

If they had the power.

He wouldn't have had to run, and he wouldn't have been killed.

I speak to such, to the spirits of the weak, to the masses.

I'm saying that this way of trying to inflict pain on me because you can't bring yourself to attack me is the way of the weak, and that you're weak even by being in a group like this.

The spirits didn't answer.

However, that wild squirming.

The menacing glint in his eye said it all.

The spirits are raging.

There is no such thing as overcoming yourself.

But.

I can't let those spirits get any bigger.

You can't put those desires into another being.

I don't want to fight the things I love.

You can no longer let others manipulate you.

"How strong is your resentment."

"If my spirit is strong."

"Let's try it."

If you hate me.

If they hate me, that's what I have to endure.

I can't make someone else carry the bridle I need to carry.

I don't think it's tolerable, but.

If it's something I have to live with.

If hatred, anger, and revenge are directed at me, whether it is deserved or not.

"Be in me."

I have to take their resentment and hatred and turn it on myself, not on others.

At my taunts, the spirits watch me.

"Why."

Toward them, you offer a final taunt.

"Are you afraid?"

I didn't need to say more.

In the body of the despairing mass, a vibration begins to rise.

-Currrrrr!

"Cursed be the devil."

"Yeah."

"We."

"Null."

"I curse you."

"With your own hands, I'll let you destroy everything you love."

A great darkness begins to condense like a cloud.

They changed their minds.

I'm not trying to get my loved ones to kill me, I'm trying to get my loved ones to kill me.

I spread my arms wide.

"Come, you weaklings."

I, for one, feel for the poor beings who had no choice but to be sacrificed.

It gives them a chance to destroy me.

Episode 503.

It's not that they're a joke.

It's not funny, is it?

I didn't think it was possible for me to endure the encroachment of the spirits that Olivia couldn't endure.

I also knew it wasn't a one-size-fits-all.

However, I didn't have a choice.

Something had to be done about the swarm of spirits that, if allowed to grow, would become an unmanageable problem.

If they could control Olivia, they could control anyone.

Fort Mokna will be razed to the ground, and Riana, who is as much hated as I am, will die.

Therefore, I imprison that body of spirits within me.

It's on me, not anyone else.

It's a hatred of me, and I must endure it.

I couldn't think of any other options.

I felt a strange sensation, as the waves of souls threatened to engulf me.

The sensation of your soul being attacked.

I wonder if Olivia felt this way.

If consciousness is like the moon in the night sky.

And if the self is the moonlit world of that consciousness.

That uncanny sensation of the moon, that consciousness, suddenly becoming too far away and fading like the stars in the night sky.

You can't illuminate the world with starlight.

So, because the distant moonlight can't illuminate the world.

I felt a vague sensation of my self being engulfed in darkness and disappearing.

They had entered my soul and mind, and I could feel their anger and hatred in my soul, not my skin.

It was unclear who this massive group of spirits were.

But the images of cruelty and despair that pass through my mind pollute my spirit.

Mental nausea, or vomiting.

The eerie sensation of it taking over my soul, pulling me into the abyss.

If it sinks, it's over.

They were brought here to be contained, not dominated.

You can't fall down.

In the vague, dark sensation of the self sinking away from consciousness.

I think.

My victims may hate me, and I may hate them.

They have nothing to do with everything that happened to me, they're just victims of everything that happened to me.

They hate me.

Hate.

Outraged.

The right to destroy.

However.

I don't intend to give myself away to them.

I'm going to hold out.

I intend to keep their hatred, anger, and vengeance locked up inside of me, so that they will no longer attract any other spirits.

I said you have the right to destroy me, not that it's okay to destroy me.

I feel sorry for them, I feel sorry for them, I feel guilty for them.

Sorry.

Can't be killed.

In Lizaira, I became a master class.

But.

What I learned from Lizaira.

What I learned from Luna and Ronan, and Lena and Arta.

It wasn't about using the sword, it was about using the heart.

Power over the mind.

The fact that it became a master class is strictly a byproduct of taking it to the extreme.

The world of the mind, soul, and heart.

I have mastered the art of dealing with it.

Consciousness was as far away as the stars.

The ego is engulfed in darkness.

Where.

Either that or stars die easy.

The light of distant stars, though hard to illuminate, cannot be said not to be light.

Even if it's a fragile light that's about to go out, if it's the light of my consciousness.

It will be immortal.

Even if you can't illuminate yourself with that starlight, it's not gone, just trapped in darkness.

I know nothing of the mysteries used by Luna Artorius.

It doesn't even touch on her powers as an incarnation.

But Mental.

And the soul.

It's a world of minds,

In my mind, I am God.

In the name of self-implication, I have always been the god of my own will and mind.

My consciousness and self were gradually dying out as the spirits flooding into my mind tried to crush and disintegrate my spirit.

But that starlight.

The power that Luna used to have.

Luna enlarged the existing moon and drew her mystical moon sword.

Not in the same way.

In the sense of reaching out to a distant star.

In the sense of tugging at it.

By pulling in the consciousness that had become distant.

To shine like the sun, not the moon.

Against the night of consciousness, when dark spirits try to consume my self.

I will hold on.

will endure.

With spirits trapped inside of me that want to eat me.

"The thing that eats me......."

I let it live inside me.

"Did you think it would be easy......?"

I will return to the world of reason and substance.

Now, when I brought my senses to the edge of consciousness, to reality.

"......?"

I was lying in bed in Olivia's arms, not in Fort Mokna, but in my own bedroom in the royal castle of Razak.

"Rhein....... Reinhardt?"

Olivia's eyes widened to tears when she realized I was awake.

"Why am I here......?"

"Hey, you're up! Hey, you're up! Hey, you're up!"

Tears welled up in Olivia's eyes, and she hugged me even harder.

Apparently, I was on the outskirts of Port Morke a little while ago.

Why the hell am I here?

I thought it was a long, long time, but when I got out of Lizaira, it was like a blink of an eye.

I thought it was a split second, but apparently it's been a while.

"Hm, hm, black...... la, Reinhardt. Me, me....... I was afraid you wouldn't wake up. I was afraid you wouldn't wake up....... Hmph, hmph!"

Olivia was sobbing and hugging me.

I wonder how many days have passed.

What happened.

I couldn't tell. I hugged Olivia, who was shaking as she hugged me back.

I don't feel like I'm straining my whole body.

I'm running out of steam.

"Is your sister....... Are you okay......?"

At my question, Olivia's lips quirk up in tears.

"Now....... Now is the time for you to worry about me?!"

Olivia's frustration at being told to wake up in the middle of all this only intensified.

"Wait....... Wait......."

"Uh, yeah. Do you need anything?"

I pull Olivia out of my arms and slide down the bed.

No, it was trying to go down.

But.

"ugh......."

I couldn't even keep my balance because I felt like my head was going to explode.

"Reinhardt, are you okay?"

"Uh....... Yeah......."

I was able to maintain my ego.

It certainly can be.

"No, you're not. You're not okay....... Look at you."

Olivia scooped me up and led me to the mirror.

"......."

When I looked in the mirror, I could see that my hair was white and gray.

I have succeeded in trapping many spirits within me.

It was definitely affecting my mind and body.

\* \* \*

After Olivia Ranze was possessed by giant spirits in Port Mokna.

The demon was unconscious for a week after receiving all the giant spirits into his body.

Olivia Ranze, who had regained her self, also had to collect herself, but she stayed by the demon's side and tended to the unconscious demon.

Everyone in the royal court, including the Senate, sought him out when they heard he had regained consciousness.

The demon, whose hair was white and graying, looked dirty.

It's not just a case of exhaustion.

To live with an aggregate of wills within one's soul that is intent on killing one's self is not possible for an ordinary being.

Even if you're not an ordinary being, you won't be able to handle it easily.

Like you're dying in real time, but you're holding on to it with your mind.

Just in case, Cultist Olivia Ranze remained by his side even after he regained consciousness.

\* \* \*

The demon was clearly conscious. But everyone could tell that his condition was getting worse and worse.

"Woof....... Woof!"

"Reinhard....... Are you okay?"

Olivia bit her lip and watched as Reinhardt slumped and gagged in the hallway of the castle walls.

"It's okay....... It's okay......."

Reinhardt, who kept repeating that he was fine, didn't look fine at all.

His graying hair was restored by Dreadfind's ring, but the demon suffered from a high fever, headache, and nausea.

Just as the mind affects the body, the soul affects the body.

Olivia helped Reinhardt, who staggered to his feet after gagging.

The spirits trapped in Reinhardt's mind could not be removed by divine power, so they could not affect him externally, but they were affecting him directly.

Olivia was able to heal his hands and feet, which had become rotten and decayed in battle.

As the demon's strength waned, Olivia was able to heal it with her divine power.

But the internal issues were out of Olivia's hands.

But the spirits planted in the demons' souls could not be purified, nor could they be healed.

\* \* \*

The Demon King was unable to manage his daily life, let alone his country's affairs, so he chose to live in the Royal Castle of Razak, nursed by the head of the Holy Order.

And the fact that the demon was getting weaker and weaker was a closely guarded secret.

In the first place, Regent Charlotte was in charge of all of Edina's affairs, so there were no problems in Edina.

However, the mood in the upper echelons of Edina was one of gloom, as everyone knew that the Demon King was on the wane.

Not surprisingly, Fort Mokna operations were suspended. We weren't sure if the threat in the area was completely gone, so we were in the midst of a major evacuation.

The blame for all of this falls squarely on the shoulders of our commander, Liana de Granz.

"......."

Reinhardt, who seems to struggle to sit up in a chair, sits in his bedroom, supported by Olivia, staring down at someone.

Liana De Granz.

The commander of Fort Mokna, kneeling before the demon, his head bowed.

Proud as she was, the Demon's claim to be her lord was a formality. That's why Liana de Granz, who had never done anything like this before, knelt before the demon and bowed her head.

"It's all....... My fault."

Reinhard stared down at Liana as she did so.

The massacre that Riana unleashed was the beginning of this disaster.

The first price was paid by Olivia Lanze.

And in order to save Olivia Ranze, he chose to imprison those giant spirits within his own soul.

The demon's soul belonged to him for now, but it was gradually dying.

Riana couldn't even take responsibility for what she'd done, for all the things she'd set in motion.

Others had to pay for his sins.

because I can't stand it.

Because it bothered me.

"If you tell me to die, I'll die."

Riana couldn't help but say that to her friend, who had paid the price for her.

Olivia watched the scene in silence.

Reinhard looks down at Liana, who says that if she has to pay with death, she will.

"You didn't know this was going to happen."

"......."

"Of course he didn't know it was a sin, but he didn't know it was going to happen, obviously."

Reinhardt's cracked voice, so unlike his usual, put Olivia and Riana in a terrible mood just listening to it.

"If your actions cause something unpredictable and unintended to happen, and other people have to pay the price, and you have to die because of it......."

Reinhard opens his mouth with difficulty.

"Well, then, I should be dead too, shouldn't I......."

"......."

Technically, what Reinhardt did and what Riana did are qualitatively different.

But the bottom line is that something unintended happened, and someone else had to pay for it.

Reinhardt's wishes eventually had unintended consequences, leading to the Gate debacle.

Riana's actions to protect Edina and Reinhardt have unintended consequences, and Reinhardt is dying.

After all, it's the same thing, and if Riana is to be punished with death for this, then Reinhard, the demon king, should be punished as well.

Reinhard watches as a tear rolls down Riana's cheek, rolls down her chin, and hits the floor.

There's nothing you can do about the problems your behavior has caused.

Reinhardt knew the misery of that better than anyone.

"We talked about this a long time ago......."

"......."

"Come on, let's do something."

At Reinhardt's words, Riana's shoulders begin to shake.

This was the Demon King's current appearance: his throat was cracked, he was gurgling, he was suffering from a high fever, and he looked like he could die at any moment.

Reinhardt is taking on more than he can handle.

Everyone knew that.

Reinhardt himself was not unaware of this.

\* \* \*

After all, it may be necessary to punish the demon for doing something it didn't order, which caused the demon great trouble.

But lives don't get you anywhere.

Liana de Granz was too important to Edina to be killed in the name of worker bees.

Liana de Granz was not punished.

The emaciated Reinhardt was being cared for by Olivia, but of course others came to visit.

"You're crazy, this."

Gazoo of demand, Lucinil told Reinhardt.

"There was no other way to do it."

They were too great to be extinguished by divine power, and they were growing larger in real time. But there was no solution other than to trap them in the prison of their souls and endure.

"That's not called a method. Do you even think this is possible in the first place?"

Lucinil was angry in the presence of the demon.

"Make it possible....... as possible."

The Demon King said, looking helpless and grim.

"I didn't make it possible, I'm just holding on."

"......."

"You haven't forgotten about Charlotte's case, have you?"

Reinhardt was silent at Lucinil's words.

Charlotte's soul eventually merged with the demon.

The demon's consciousness is gone, so there's no mixing of personalities, but the number of consciousnesses that have now entered Reinhardt's mind is hard to fathom.

"In the long run, your soul will mingle with the spirits within you and become one."

Reinhardt's face didn't change at that, but Olivia, who was standing next to him, went white.

"Well, then....... What happens?"

"I've never done an experiment this big, so I don't know the details. But I can tell you that you're not going to be yourself, you're going to be a different person."

It remains conscious for now, but as it begins to assimilate with them, Reinhardt disappears like a handful of sand in the desert.

It doesn't die, it just becomes something else.

At that, Olivia's complexion went from white to blue.

Lucinil is the mage who has dealt with the most souls in the world.

That's why I've experimented with it time and time again.

If Lucinil says it will, it will.

Reinhardt, hearing Lucinil's warning, only looked tired and said nothing.

Episode 504.

Charlotte, Herriot, and even the Senate, including Eleris, realize that Reinhardt is in serious trouble.

And as time went on, Reinhardt's condition was getting progressively worse.

Vomiting, fever, chills.

The physical symptoms were eating away at his body along with his mind.

That wasn't all.

"Huh!"

Plagued by nightmares, he woke up too scared to fall asleep.

Unable to sleep, the succubus queen, Airi, has also taken up residence in the castle at the request of Olivia, who is in charge of Reinhardt's care.

"Bali......."

"......."

Airi looked into the demon's bloodshot eyes and found herself at a loss for words.

Demons that control dreams.

Airi soothed the demon's dreams so that he could at least get some sleep.

In the end, however, even Airi's powers could not restore the demon's sleep from the torment of the spirits that consumed his mind and body.

Everyone knew.

The Devil, dying.

\* \* \*

Consciousness is like a rubber band.

It occurred to me that the moment the taut, stretched string of consciousness snapped might be my last.

What I thought was a one-size-fits-all, turned out to be a one-size-fits-all.

You've already accomplished the impossible by not being cannibalized.

But it doesn't change the fact that as long as you're here, you're in an eternal battle with the spirits.

Is that even possible?

I was already feeling myself becoming increasingly dominated by physical symptoms.

-Bam!

"Reinhardt......."

"......It's okay, my hands were just shaking."

I stare down at the shattered cup, which has fallen to the floor after trying to drink water on its own.

What's the fight.

Daily life is impossible.

Humanity's hatred and resentment toward me is being replaced by my spiritual pain, and it's affecting my physical body.

As soon as you loosen the strings of your consciousness a little bit, the words of hate start rattling around in your head.

I'm afraid to fall asleep. Airi is protecting my dreams, but I wonder how long that will last.

After a certain point of falling asleep, you never wake up again.

Then what will the ideas that have taken over my body do with my body?

Will I let my hands, the things I love, destroy themselves.

"......."

We can't tolerate that.

In this way, I don't want to and can't fall apart in a moment like this.

But how.

I was determined, but I couldn't think of a way.

\* \* \*

The royal council has been called. Except for the Demon King.

Liana de Granz, Airi, Olivia Ranze, Herriot de Saint-Hilaire, and Regent Charlotte de Gradias.

And Senate power.

Sarkhegar, Elise, Lucinil, Lerouen, Galarsch, and Antirrhinus.

All of the most important people in Edina were there, except for the Demon King.

Everyone's faces remained stoic, knowing that this wasn't anything serious.

The Devil holds within his soul an unfathomable amount of souls.

For now, he's holding on with superhuman mental strength, but at this rate, he'll never be the same.

What happens when the souls of those who hate the demon, who hate the demon, take over the demon's body and fuse with the demon's mind.

No one knows. What's important is that it's clear that it would have very dire consequences, and we don't want that to happen.

"We need to do something about it."

Charlotte said with a stern look on her face.

While not on the same scale as Reinhardt, Charlotte has had a similar experience.

As a result of fusing with part of the demon's soul, Charlotte's body has been permanently altered. This happens with one-on-one fusions, and it's hard to imagine Reinhardt's mind and body surviving a fusion of that magnitude.

"Our first priority is to separate the demons from your soul."

While everyone recognized the importance of Reinhardt, it was Sarkeghar who was the most nervous and anxious at the prospect of Reinhardt's spirit being extinguished.

"Assuming that's possible, what do we do about what happens after that?"

That was Lerouen's question.

"I've heard that the spirits split off on their own, taking over the minds of paladins and priests, or killing those whose minds could not withstand their control. Is that correct?"

Hearing Lerouen's words, Galarsh turned to Olivia, who had just seen the scene.

"Yes, I did."

Either you are dominated, or your body disintegrates because you can't stand it.

Olivia was able to resist to some extent, but even that was only partial. As the spirits' bodies seeped into her mind, she was unable to hold out and fell.

"They're no ordinary people, they're ruled by priests and paladins who have mastered divine powers, and if something like that starts rampaging in Edina, I don't know if we'll be safe, let alone ordinary beings."

Galarsch's doubts were reasonable.

To save Reinhardt's soul, we must extract the soul that has already entered his mind.

But here's the catch.

"So, let's leave the charge as it is now, is that it?"

Sarkegar gritted his teeth and glared at Galarsh.

"I think you need to calm down a bit. I'm just trying to point out that if you don't prepare for this, you might end up in a lot more trouble."

"......."

Sarkegar's anxiety was something we all felt.

But Galarsch is right.

If you act rashly in hopes of saving the demon, the last thing the demon wants is for you to die. In effect, the demon has accepted the spirits into his body and sacrificed himself so that they can no longer cause further harm.

"Separating the soul from Reinhardt's mind, annihilating or ascending it with divine power is....... impossible?"

Herriot looks back and forth between Lucinil and Olivia.

Herriot knew that Lucinil had mastered the art of manipulating souls, and so did all the Lord Vampires of the Council.

"We haven't even become one yet, so....... It's not impossible in theory, but it's too big. We could try, but....... after we split it up."

Rusinil was hard to pin down.

"I'd like to say it with confidence, but I don't have the confidence to extinguish it. I was dominated by it because I couldn't cope with it either......."

As with Lucinil, Olivia realized that it was unlikely to be possible.

"What the....... What is your highness enduring......."

Eleris mumbled to herself in despair.

Charlotte stares at the faces of the people sitting in the Senate meeting.

The Lord Vampires of the Council are some of the most powerful mages in the world, and they've been around for a very long time, so the amount of knowledge they have is far beyond the average person.

Olivia Ranze has access to a level of divine power that makes it impossible to compare her to anyone else at this point.

If you don't have an answer here, you don't have an answer.

Soul extraction is also unlikely.

It's so big that there's no way to kill it.

There is no magic, no divine power, no solution.

Charlotte thought of another way to do that.

Witchcraft, an ancient form of magic.

If you're a Detomorian, there's a way.

However, witchcraft is a force whose intentions and conclusions are unpredictable.

Not only do we not know if the power of the Dettomorian can help the Demon, but there is no guarantee that he will.

Almost everyone lost their homes, and the Dettomorians are no exception.

You may have a greater desire to harm the devil than to help him.

It's more likely that we'll end up with a conclusion that puts Reinhardt at risk again.

As such, Charlotte could not discuss witchcraft.

"So all we can do is hope Reinhardt's sanity is intact?"

Charlotte's words were met with looks of disbelief.

The look on Riana's face was the most devastating of all.

I gritted my teeth, unable to shed a tear, and stared at the table.

Lucinil opens her mouth.

"Reinhardt is already doing the impossible," I said, "originally....... As I heard last time, when souls of that magnitude mix, it's only natural for the body to disintegrate."

Even priests and paladins who end up being dominated already have a great deal of mental power.

Olivia, who was able to resist it, had a more powerful mind than his, and Reinhardt, who was not only resisting it but repressing it within his own soul, was doing something even more impossible than Olivia.

Reinhardt has already accomplished too many impossible things.

"To believe that Reinhardt can do something even more impossible here is to be complacent."

At Lucinil's words, Charlotte nodded in agreement.

It would be complacent to leave Reinhardt alone, thinking that because he's done the impossible, he'll do the next impossible.

So, you have to do something.

"Not Edina, but....... Somewhere far, far away on the continent, why not release the spirits of Reinhardt's soul?"

Airi said after a long moment of silence.

After performing a ritual in a remote part of the continent that is too dangerous for Edina, they flee before the spirits can infiltrate someone else.

In other words, you're returning to Edina having left a dangerous bomb in the world.

"Those spirits roam the continent, absorbing other spirits and growing larger and larger, until they eventually attack Edina."

Everyone agreed with Eleris that unleashing the spirits on the continent was a palliative measure, a way to postpone the current threat to an absolute threat later.

It may be a temporary measure, but in the long run, the larger swarms of spirits will overwhelm Edina and the Demon King.

If it does, there is no next time.

Edina will be doomed, and the demon cannot survive.

Everyone is at a loss. Charlotte stares blankly down at the table.

I've always gotten nothing but help.

Reinhardt always bailed him out.

He even cursed Reinhardt for not trusting him, for doing something that was tantamount to betrayal, for suffering the most in the world, and for dying.

Nevertheless, Reinhardt redeemed himself again.

However, with Reinhardt in danger, we can't be of any help.

He ends up getting help, but he can't help Reinhardt when he needs it.

They were all feeling the same way, albeit in different ways, that Charlotte was feeling right now.

Soul.

Souls on a grand scale.

What kind of magic, what kind of divine power can purify or remove it?

The moment when everyone is in despair.

"What about transitions?"

The old vampire, Antrianus, cautiously voiced that opinion.

\* \* \*

"What do you mean, transition to ......?"

Regent Charlotte asks, and Toyo's lord, Antrianus, smirks.

"Isn't the crux of the matter that if you release the spirits into the world, they will attack the demons and the world, and if you leave them alone, they will assimilate with the spirits of the Archdemons?"

"......That's right."

"In that case, I suppose it's just a matter of the beings who will be taking them into their own souls."

The mood in the room froze at Antony's fairly straightforward, brutal conclusion.

To save Reinhardt, you have to let someone else carry that heavy, gigantic burden.

"Wouldn't it be better for someone to be the scapegoat than to lose our leader here?"

You're right.

But the wording was overly malicious and creepy.

Find a scapegoat to carry Reinhardt's burden.

"I'm......."

Riana looked up.

"Let me, I'll do it."

As if it's a problem that started with you, so it's only right that you take it on yourself.

Feelings of self-doubt and guilt about not being able to do anything to help resolve this situation plagued Riana.

"Not everyone can handle it, you might die on the spot."

But Riana's words made Olivia shake her head.

You can find a scapegoat and make them carry it for you, but how many people can afford it. You can't make a scapegoat out of just anyone.

There are plenty of people willing to volunteer.

However, it's doubtful that anyone can actually pull it off.

"I have to do it. Because I'm not dead."

Reinhardt had survived, but Olivia, though dominated, had not died, so when Olivia said she would bear their spirits, the room fell silent, and Riana shook her head again.

Once again, Olivia is saved by Reinhard and is ready to die for him.

Antony smiled at Olivia, who said she would take it back.

"Whether you can afford the transition or not, once you do, the scapegoat has no place in Edina."

"......Yes."

As soon as you have accepted the spirits into your body, your self will be transformed and your soul will be fused, and you will not be the same person you were before.

"But if I'm the only one who can get through it without dying, then I have to do it."

You want to save Reinhardt, even if it means sacrificing yourself.

Even if you never see Reinhardt again, even if all you have is a future where you wander the world carrying that heavy burden.

Olivia was ready to accept it.

"Gee....... But you have a very important position in Edina. The Great One wouldn't allow such a thing, and even if He did, there would be a very big hole to fill."

Antirrhinus shook his head as if to say that such a thing would be very difficult.

"Furthermore, even if you can handle this, who will be our spearhead in the future?"

Antirrhynchus says, calmly.

"The same goes for everybody else in this room, they're irreplaceable, they're a very important part of Edina, and there's no reason why we should have to suffer such a catastrophic loss."

Four thousand kings, including regents.

And the Senate.

Each and every one of them is exactly what Edina needs.

So whether they could afford it or not, and even if they could, they shouldn't, was Antony's opinion.

Charlotte stares at Antirrhinus.

"So, Lord of Toyo, what are you trying to say? That in order to resolve this situation, someone has to carry Reinhardt's spirits, and it can't be anyone in this room. If it's impossible for anyone in this room, it's impossible for anyone else in Edina. If there's anyone else who can carry them, you're saying......."

Charlotte's face turned white as she said it.

Because I realized it while I was talking.

Why Antirrhinus said what he did.

You said you needed a scapegoat, but why would anyone in this room sacrifice themselves.

"No way....... No way......."

Antirrhinus looks at Charlotte's pale complexion and chuckles.

He giggles, as if he can't contain himself.

"Warrior."

Everyone in the room turned a deep shade of blue.

"If you were Ellen Artorius, wouldn't you be willing to carry this burden?"

All were aghast at Antony's malicious laugh.

Episode 505.

No one in Edina needs to be sacrificed to save the demon.

That's Edina's power loss.

An extraordinary being with two holy relics.

Ellen is destined to fight the Devil at some point. So, no matter what happens, she can't be with the Devil.

You're just making real enemies out of people who are destined to be enemies anyway.

Whether Ellen is possessed by the spirits or not, she is destined to fight the demon anyway.

So nothing really changes.

From that perspective, Antony's statement that no one in the room needed to sacrifice was reasonable.

Not everyone in this room knows much about Ellen Artorius. What they do know is that Ellen has semi-forced her way from being the antagonist of the Devil to the hope of humanity.

Charlotte stared down at the table, her face set in stone.

Two years after Gate.

Charlotte and Ellen shared the same guilt.

Both Charlotte and Ellen blamed themselves for not trusting Reinhardt when it mattered.

They were both torturing themselves with endless self-pity.

Charlotte was able to be with Reinhardt, but Ellen was not and is not destined to be.

Charlotte knows that there is no way for Ellen to escape the long, drawn-out process of self-pity and guilt.

But now, Reinhardt may not even exist.

Ellen would give her life to save such a Reinhardt.

If Reinhardt could be saved by taking on the hatred and hopes of every soul in the world, by being consumed by them, he would do so.

Even if your very existence is eventually assimilated by the spirits.

Charlotte knows that if Ellen Artorius could save Reinhardt, she would.

They will make that choice without even thinking about it.

If there comes a day when she has to fight for her life with Reinhardt, and it's the only way to save him now, Ellen has no choice but to do it.

Charlotte, having experienced the same guilt and self-blame, knew what Ellen would do without having to listen.

Herriot shook his head, his face turning blue.

"Reinhardt would never, ever accept it."

Whether Ellen accepted it or not, Herriot knew Reinhardt would never tolerate such a situation.

And we all agree with Herriot.

The spirits that inhabit Olivia hate her. She has accepted them into her body because she thinks it's right that she should.

The Reinhardt of today is slowly dying because of the self-hatred, anger, despair, and revenge of so many souls.

So it was clear that even if Ellen tried to take on the burden, she would never accept it.

"Of course you do, so we'll have to do this in secret, so that the Great One never knows what the lesser ones are planning."

"Since you're in such a weakened state, a simple hypnosis or sleep spell might be able to keep you asleep for a long time."

"When the Great One awakens from his deep sleep, the work will have been done."

"If they fooled me once, why wouldn't they fool me twice?"

With a sinister grin, Antirrhinus looks to a seat in the room.

"Thunder King. Isn't that right?"

"......."

Riana clenched her fists and narrowed her eyes at the malicious gaze that said, "You who have deceived the king once before, in the name of serving him, understand what I mean.

"You piece of shit......."

Lucinil gritted his teeth and glared at Antirrhinus, who, disgusted by his spiteful behavior, bellowed, "You're a fool!

"What the hell is wrong with you? What the hell....... What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Lord of Demand. Am I wrong, or do you have any answers, other than the ones I've suggested?"

Eventually, Lucinyl exploded.

"There isn't! I know there isn't! You're right, you're right, you must be right! That's the only way....... That's the only way! But....... Why on earth do you only think that way, why. Why do you only think in ways that make someone suffer?"

"That's right......."

Antirrhinus laughs.

"Well, isn't that fun?"

The grotesquely cruel laugh sent chills down Charlotte's spine.

Lucinil rises from his seat and mumbles something coldly, as if tired of the malice.

"You are a monster who feeds on tears."

Lucinil slams the conference room door in disgust and looks back at Antirrhinus.

"I, I hate you."

"That's too bad."

-Bang!

Not wanting to deal with him, Rusinil left the room.

Antony is right.

It has to be the best choice.

Fool Reinhardt one more time.

In the name of Reinhardt.

To those who can afford it, I make an offer they can't refuse.

He was right.

Antirhynchus, as a loyalist to Reinhard, did find a way to save his master.

Even if the conclusion is one of loyalty, is this the way to go?

If the intent was just to find a sequence.

Is that really loyalty?

"I don't see any other way to do it."

But. even for a true believer, that's the only conclusion that matters in the end.

"I agree."

Sarkegaard agreed with that conclusion.

\* \* \*

After the Senate meeting, Herriot paces the halls of Razak's castle in a daze.

The thought that this was a terrible plan never left my mind.

Herriot walked dazedly down the hall and stood in front of Reinhardt's bedroom.

When he opened the bedroom door, he found Reinhardt asleep.

Three people in bed.

Olivia Ranze holds Reinhardt's sleeping hand with a worried look on her face.

Similarly, Airy places her hand on Reinhardt's forehead.

And there was Riana, staring out the window, unable to look at Reinhardt properly.

Olivia continues to restore her failing body.

Airi somehow manages to hold on to her crumbling sanity.

The two of them somehow managed to hold on to Reinhard's dying body and mind.

"Look at....... What do you think?"

Olivia shook her head, looking depressed.

It's not getting any better, it's getting worse.

"The time I can stay conscious is getting shorter and shorter."

"......Yes."

When Reinhardt was unconscious, Airi had been forcing him to dream peaceful dreams so that he would not be exposed to the despair of the spirits.

This is only possible for a demon that rules dreams, and the most powerful of them all.

The good news is that Airi is skilled at using this power to heal, not mesmerize.

By touching the dreams of so many people in a healing way, I was able to touch Reinhardt's unconscious, which was in the middle of chaos.

Herriot stands still, looking down at Reinhardt, who, judging by his complexion, looks much worse for wear.

Herriot can't even begin to fathom the pain Reinhardt is in.

"How much....... bad is this?"

Harriet asks, looking at Olivia.

Only Olivia knows what Reinhardt is dealing with right now. Olivia looks at Reinhardt, who is sleeping in agony, even as Airi manipulates his dreams, and Nazik says, "I'm sorry.

"In my life, I've never experienced anything so horrible."

Olivia looks up at Harriet.

"Even if I could handle this, even if I could take over Reinhardt's pain and live with it, it would be too much to bear."

Her expression hardened at the mention of such terrible pain. She knows what Olivia thinks of Reinhardt.

Olivia has been saved by Reinhard several times. Olivia once saved Reinhardt's life.

Herriot knows that Olivia is the kind of person who would die for Reinhardt.

If she can carry it, Olivia can carry it.

However, it's not without its fears and terrors.

It was such a horrifying experience that it was inevitable that she would have some hesitation.

It is a tremendous spiritual pain to have so many hateful impulses trying to control your soul.

Herriot was even more frightened, and Reinhardt felt sorry for him, because he had no idea what spiritual torment was.

It's already a feat to endure this, but to expect Reinhardt to do more than that is to wish for good luck.

So, Toyo's patriarch proposed a terrible plan to put this burden on Ellen.

Olivia squeezes Reinhardt's hand, her gaze dropping downward.

"What can't be done to me....... I wonder if it's possible for him....... Is it....... be possible......?"

The tone was a mixture of crushing defeat and inferiority complex.

There are many people who would rather carry this burden themselves.

Airi, Harriet, Olivia, Riana, and a few of the Lord Vampires and Sarkegaard.

There are many people who want to carry this burden themselves.

"Why can't I....... not work?"

Olivia said, feeling miserable.

"......I don't think so."

Herriot shakes his head.

"No?"

"I'm just saying that if you can't stand it, it doesn't matter."

"......what?"

The Toyo's householder didn't propose this plan because Ellen can handle what Reinhardt is dealing with.

Leaving aside judgment on Antony's horrific proposal, we don't even need to discuss what Ellen would do if she were offered such a choice.

Ellen will accept of course.

It capitalizes on Ellen's guilt over Reinhardt.

Someone has to make the sacrifice, and most people can't even make the sacrifice.

And if they are swallowed up by the spirits, the damage is done. Everyone needs Edina.

The logic for Antony to sacrifice Ellen is simple.

It's not because Ellen Artorius is so extraordinary that she can handle the souls.

Ellen is bound to be an enemy of Edina and the Devil anyway.

It doesn't matter if you assimilate with the hatred of the spirits, because you're going to be enemies anyway, you're destined to be enemies anyway, you just have to take Reinhardt's burden and make it real.

Ellen is someone Edina doesn't need, and she's ready to make the sacrifice.

Antirrhinus's logic was that it was worth the sacrifice.

"Even if you can't stand it, Ellen, because you're broken. Even if your self is gone, like it doesn't matter because you're the enemy....... That's just a story......."

"......."

Aside from the question of whether it's possible or not, it's really just a matter of doing the math.

Everyone in Edina is needed in Edina.

It would be a shame for any of them to be expelled from Edina for carrying this burden.

So Edina loses nothing by passing this burden on to Ellen, who is destined to be an enemy anyway, and who is willing to take it on.

It's a wild trade-off story.

Ellen might be able to handle it, she might even assimilate.

But because you are extraordinary, you will not die when your body breaks down like everyone else.

At least as much as Olivia.

Reinhardt if it holds up well.

Maybe she can do more than that, but she's only proposing the plan because she's irrelevant to Edina.

So Olivia doesn't have to feel inferior or defeated by Ellen.

I'm not suggesting this because Ellen is the only one who can afford it.

Clearly, Ellen is a good person from Edina's point of view, but not from Reinhard's.

So we have to make up something to fool Reinhardt again.

Olivia's eyes widen and she clutches Reinhardt's hand.

Olivia doesn't like Ellen.

Even more than before, I don't like it.

"......."

But, is it worth it?

Is it okay to make such a suggestion, knowing that Ellen will accept the sacrifice as a matter of course?

"Would you rather I......."

Riana says, looking out the window.

"Maybe I shouldn't be doing this."

Ellen is out of the loop, and the responsibility falls to Riana.

I'd rather have Ellen make the sacrifice herself than have her suddenly make it.

Not to be possessed by those spirits, though the body may disintegrate because the mind cannot bear it.

You should try to do what you're willing to do.

As Riana said those words with a stony expression, her face was filled with guilt and self-reproach.

We don't know if Ellen will be able to handle this or not.

If so, Riana couldn't help but wonder if she'd rather be the one to carry this karma and be banished from Edina.

It was hard for Riana to deal with the fact that someone else was constantly having to carry the burden of her work.

Riana is just what Edina needs.

Antony's logic is that you shouldn't sacrifice, but there's no reason for Riana to follow his suggestion.

"Riana."

Airi calls out to Riana.

"Come over here."

"It's ......."

She places her hand on Reinhardt's forehead and calls him to her side.

"Let me show you what Reinhardt is going through, just for a second."

Reinhardt's image of despair and the soul in the abyss of consciousness.

"I took a quick look, but I don't think I can handle this."

He promises to show her only a small part of the pain, and looks to Riana to see if she's ready.

"That's ......, show me."

If you can handle this, then maybe she's really the one for you.

If even some of them don't make it, she's just going to get screwed.

Carefully, Airi takes Riana's hand.

"......!"

Riana was in a coma for two days for seeing some of that pain.

\* \* \*

-grunt

Ellen returned to her normal sword, sheathed her ramen, and stepped over the pile of slaughtered monsters.

The soldiers saluted Ellen, who was clad in silver plate armor.

"Thank you."

"Is this neighborhood cleaned up?"

Ellen looked around the clearing, where the cries of the monsters had died down, and climbed onto the horses drawn by the troopers.

"Yes, we have word from Shanafel that the troop march has just finished securing the area."

"Then I'm going to go back and get my troops."

"Old!"

-Hihihihi!

Ellen puts on her spurs and the white stallion starts to run.

Clad in gleaming silver plate armor, a cloak of the sun, and a sword of the moon at his waist, the warrior races through a field of monstrous corpses.

The fringes of the field were strewn with the carcasses of monsters.

After riding for a while, Ellen could see white smoke rising over the hills.

As Ellen crested the final hill, she saw a vast expanse of open land, with tents dotted as far as the eye could see.

Humanity's greatest army.

Hence, the last army of mankind.

Ellen rode slowly toward the sprawling garrison, smoke from the cooking fires rising everywhere.

Episode 506.

Technically, Ellen doesn't have a rank.

Though she has occasionally commanded units tasked with special missions in the wake of the Gate, and is under the command of the Allied General Staff, Ellen is not a member of the Imperial Army.

He had the honor of being the Empress's guardian knight, but it didn't mean much now that she was gone with the demon.

The Imperial Emperor, Bertus de Gradias, gave Ellen no rank or affiliation.

-The warrior is here!

-The warrior is back!

But every soldier who encountered Ellen, who was supposed to have no rank, saluted her when he saw her, even at a distance.

That's true up and down the chain of command.

Every single soldier, platoon leader, company commander, and even the commander himself saluted Ellen with reverence and respect.

Ellen doesn't have a rank because it doesn't mean anything to her except to annoy her.

If you haphazardly give her a rank, you'll end up with a superior to Ellen.

But if you give her the rank of Commander-in-Chief, you'll find that Ellen, a formidable fighter, will be called to all sorts of meetings.

You could simply give them an honorary rank, but Bertus didn't do that.

She has no affiliation, no rank, but she has access to everything the military has to offer: she can be recruited, she can be drafted.

Now that the troops are stationed, they've been clearing out the monsters along the marching route and in the troop neighborhoods.

By nature, Ellen didn't wear laments and rappels all the time.

But when she began living long-term on a military base where people could see her anytime, anywhere, Ellen made a ramen sword and wore it around her waist.

Sometimes, it was the soldiers who were so excited to see Ellen in real life that they were rude enough to ask to see her ramen and lapel pins.

But to be more precise, he wanted people to be able to see him everywhere.

The sight of Ellen, even at a distance, visibly boosts morale.

So when she read that her military commanders wanted her to wear it openly at all times, she began to wear it even when she wasn't in combat.

Those who have reached mastery prefer to be unarmed, with only light armor or weapons. Why wear plate armor that restricts your movements when you can defend yourself with Auror armor that is harder than steel.

Ellen doesn't need to wear plate armor, and it's not like she needs to wear a fancy plate armor to carry around a holy relic.

Of course, that doesn't make this plate armor completely useless.

This is the ceremonial armor that Adelia and her researchers made for Ellen to wear when she goes out in public, which doesn't happen very often.

Armor made only for warriors.

Of course, just because it's for show doesn't mean it's not practical.

The armor itself is a national treasure artifact with tons of enchantments, including lightweighting.

But it doesn't change the fact that it's still a show.

It's not that Ellen enjoys the stares.

The more people projected their desires onto themselves, the more they knew what the end goal was.

Demon Death.

Every time she read the wishes of those who wished for it, Ellen felt as if someone was strangling her.

Everywhere you look, there are soldiers, and they are charged with the enormous responsibility of saving humanity. And of all these soldiers, Ellen had the most important responsibility. Perhaps even more than Savior Tana.

As a result, Ellen felt even more stares and pressure than usual.

There are ironworks at any age.

It's not just the soldiers who are resting in their own private tents, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ellen.

It wasn't just the Imperial Army, but all the elite soldiers and commanders from other regions and nations, including the Empire.

In the early days of the expedition, there were more commanders and knights who wanted to know who they were and say hello than there were unsuspecting soldiers.

Ellen couldn't turn them away, and when Saviolin Tana heard of the situation, she moved Ellen's barracks and ordered that no outsiders be allowed in.

After that, at least Ellen would not be disturbed by anything while she returned from her mission and rested in her tent.

Such a garrison, where Ellen's barracks are located.

Ellen handed the reins of her horse to a soldier and walked inside, receiving a salute from the soldiers who stood guard to ensure that no outsiders were allowed inside the garrison.

Quite an unusual and special area of the Garrison Barracks.

For Ellen, this garrison area was still better than the alternative.

"Uh, Ellen. You're here?"

"Yes. Adelia."

"Good work, Ellen."

"Thanks, Louis."

Ellen nodded as she was greeted by Adelia and Louis Ankton, who were moving about with their magical supplies.

Where troops drawn from the Temple reside.

A little further in, a garrison of troops from the Royal Class.

No one here calls Ellen a warrior.

As a result, Ellen sometimes felt like she was returning to a moment in her past that she could no longer return to.

\* \* \*

Not every student at Temple was drafted into the military. Not everyone had a combat-related major.

The Temple Royal Class, however, was almost entirely wiped out, with the exception of Bertus and Reinhardt, who were in their second year of Royal Class when the gates opened.

Everyone had a job to do and a role to play, if not as much as Ellen.

"Kaier, I told you to keep the arc crystal charged!"

"I'm doing it! I'm going to eat first!"

"How many times have I told you to do it ahead of time when you don't know when you'll need to use it?!"

"Ugh, it's always chattering like a mouse."

"What, a rat? Did you finish telling him?"

"You don't even go to classes at Temple, what kind of senior are you, you don't call me brother?"

"Why are you my brother, you bastard!"

Ellen watched from afar as Redina and Kaier bickered, still children, though quite tall in their two years.

Lydina, aka No Casting.

And Kaeir, the giant magic talent.

The two had been partners in battle for quite some time.

One can shoot magic without casting, but has a paltry amount of power, and the other has tons of power but can't cast magic.

So, ever since Adelia created the Arc Crystal, which is a giant version of a power cartridge, it's been a long-standing practice for Kaier to charge it whenever he has time, and for Redina to draw on that charged power to do her magic.

An arc crystal designed to draw mana from Khaier who is unfit to use it.

It can only be used by Kaier, and the magic within it is designed to be used by Redina. It's a very large artifact that Adelia created for that purpose in the first place.

It's so huge that you can't move it by hand, but as a base defense strategy against a massive onslaught of monsters, I couldn't think of anything better.

Only those who have seen it in person know the spectacle of thousands of fireballs falling from the sky and wiping out waves of monsters.

No matter how much energy an Arc Crystal has, Redina can use it up in a short amount of time.

As a result, the Arc Crystal will always be low on magic.

There's no better match for their abilities, but their relationship was deteriorating the more they worked together.

"Huh? Ellen's here?"

"Yes, sir."

When Redina saw Ellen watching from a distance, she sidled up and pointed a finger at Kaier.

"Say something to that asshole, because I told him to pre-charge his phone and he didn't do it right?"

"No!"

Kaier glanced at Ellen in the distance, tilted his head, and barked back at Redina.

"I'm a human being, stop treating me like I'm some kind of energy charger!"

"So what are you, an energy charger, you bastard, and what do you do with your research because I want you to go into combat like Ellen, and is it so hard to hug an arc crystal for a few hours?"

She's not being playfully angry or scolding.

They are genuinely upset.

"Do you know how many people died the other day because their perimeter was breached? Is that hard for you to understand? What do you think you're doing? If you'd just put a little more charge on it, none of this would have happened!"

Kaier is not pleading for moderation either.

It was Caierdo who was genuinely upset.

"I almost died a couple of times last time because I ran out of energy. Do you know that? Do you think I play? Do you think I have nothing to do? Do you think you're anything without me?"

This is a war against monsters.

People actually die, and Redina has to watch people die because her arc crystal doesn't have enough power to deal with the monster.

Kai'er, the Massive Magic Talent, also does not have an infinite amount of magic. You'll have to wait for your depleted energy to recover before you can recharge your Arc Crystal.

I'm working on it.

However, I didn't love it because of the things that happened that were out of our control.

They don't get along.

And it's getting worse.

When the words finally started to come out, Ellen gently placed a hand on Redina's shoulder.

"Stop, stop, stop, senior."

"......."

"Kaier, go eat. Get some rest."

"......."

Ellen intervened and they stopped fighting.

Redina gritted her teeth and stared at the dirt floor of the garrison.

A little more.

A little more.

If I could have done something.

They didn't have to die.

The thought makes her angry at Kai, her most important supporter.

Even though I know it's stupid.

Eventually, Redina covers her face with both hands and lets out a stifled groan.

"I feel like....... I feel so stupid......."

We know we're doing the best we can.

We hurt each other by saying things we don't have to because we're saddened by someone's death.

"......rdina?"

In the distance, a man wearing a paladin's insignia sees Ellen and Redina and approaches.

"Adriana......."

Adriana left the Temple, but after the events of the Gate, she returned to the Order of Tuan to fulfill her paladin duties.

Despite her problems, including alleged ties to the devil, Adriana received a pardon, not a commutation.

We don't know the truth about everything that happened, and it's frustrating and heartbreaking, but Adriana was fighting this war like everyone else, doing what she could.

"What's wrong, did you and Kai get into a fight again?"

"......."

Adriana looks at Ellen as she gently puts her arm around Redina's shoulders as she releases her pent-up tears.

"Get some rest, Ellen. You must be the most tired."

"It's ......, sir."

Ellen watched as Adriana picked up Redina and carried her to the tent.

Ellen knows there's a shade on Adriana's face that she can't erase.

Someone Adriana cared about, Irine's wild dog.

In the end, he played the most direct role in Loyar's death, and Adriana was by his side.

I don't think there's anything to be said for resentment, but Adriana never once resented Ellen.

War.

The war against monsters was destroying people.

That was true even for students from the royal class.

Ellen herself was no exception.

\* \* \*

Even non-combatants from the Royal Class have a role to play. Adelia, for example, was a non-combatant who used her unique talents to design the power cartridges that are so critical to this war, and she continues to make improvements.

Others, like Kono Lint, have no combat skills, but are tasked with spatially moving around the battlefield, teleporting mortally wounded soldiers to the rear or bringing troops into battle.

Some, like musical talent Lanyon Sesor, were busy conducting military bands and performing comforting concerts and other morale-boosting activities within the garrison.

Everyone had a role to play in the Gate crisis, and everyone was doing their part in this final push.

Ellen ate in the communal dining tent at the Royal Class Garrison.

They could have eaten in a private teepee, but Ellen didn't want any special treatment.

While Ellen was sitting still and eating, someone sat down across from her.

"I see you're back. Ellen."

"Ah....... Yeah."

It was Ludwig.

\* \* \*

Due to the effects of Moonshine, all Royal Class melee majors now know how to enchant.

But Ellen is the only one who made it to the master class.

But Ludwig is also one of the four who realized the power of magical enhancement on his own in first grade.

Ellen, Reinhard, Klippmann, and Ludwig.

Each has their own role, and while Ellen is so advanced that she tends to go solo on missions, the Royal Class students work in groups based on the number of people needed for a mission.

The Royal Class students tended to move together, partly because they were from Temple, partly because they were good, and partly because of the bonds that came with it.

While there are stories like Redina and Kai'er, student mobilization usually has a positive effect.

In such student combat operations, two close-combat majors stand out the most.

Klippmann was the combat talent, and Ludwig was the stamina talent.

The soldiers knew that Ellen's level was too high, but they also knew that the two of them were incredibly skilled.

"When do you think the next march will be?"

At Ludwig's question, Ellen pauses to consider the bread.

"Maybe in four days or so....... I think."

"Four days....... Yeah, right."

Ellen doesn't know much about Ludwig.

However, I knew he was always cheerful and a little irritating.

At some point, however, Ludwig stopped smiling at all.

The ravages of war.

And that the devil was there all along and you just didn't know it.

That made Ludwig lose his smile. Not only had he lost his smile, but his face and eyes were filled with anger and hatred.

Not long into the march.

B-4, Ashur with the Divine Power talent was killed in the Garrison Defense.

After that, the glow of hatred and anger in Ludwig's eyes was unquenchable.

Episode 507.

Someone is bound to die.

A lot of people had already died, and so had the Royal Class students.

A swarm of flying monsters attacked the rear area where you were healing wounded soldiers in a base defense battle.

Ashur was torn to pieces by the monsters on the spot.

It wasn't that long ago.

So the melancholy and sensitivity that pervades the Royal Class garrison has only intensified since Ashur's death.

A classmate died.

We all knew that dying was an inevitability of the Gate crisis and the war, but the death of someone close to us was bound to shock everyone.

Everyone is grieving, and some are still grieving.

But what Ellen saw in Ludwig's eyes was not sadness.

In the midst of all that anger and hatred, Ellen could sense that Ludwig wanted revenge.

Though she didn't watch Ashar die, Ellen was just as shocked.

And the death comes back to Ellen as guilt, not resentment and hatred.

Who will be dead and who will be alive at the end of this final march.

-degree

Ludwig takes a bite of the sausage and puts it down on his plate.

"You."

"......?"

"Last time, when Reinhardt was in the ecliptic."

Ellen felt her heart tighten at the words.

The Demon Invasion of the Zodiac and the Capture of the Empress.

Everyone knows the story. The story ended with Ellen defeating the demon, so the damage was done, but the morale of the zodiac was through the roof.

Ludwig tells the story.

It was an event that left a huge scar on Ellen's heart.

"On purpose....... you didn't fight properly or....... or something like that?"

Ellen's hand trembled slightly at the words.

"......."

Under Ludwig's gaze, Ellen felt like she was being interrogated. After looking at her for a moment, Ludwig shook his head.

"......No. You wouldn't do that. You wouldn't do that."

"......."

Ludwig stares at Ellen with eyes as deep and dark as the abyss.

"That can't be right, can it?"

"......."

"You're a warrior, chosen by the gods, chosen by two holy objects, chosen to defeat a demon."

Ludwig looks at Ellen and says.

"Warrior."

To Ellen, Ludwig's words sounded like a threat.

"Sorry, that was rude. Presumptuous. It's not my place. How dare you talk to me."

Ellen felt goosebumps all over her body as she watched Ludwig muttering to himself.

"I've never beaten Reinhardt."

So defeating the devil is not something I can do.

As he says this, Ludwig looks at Ellen.

"But you, you've always been stronger than Reinhardt, so it's kind of....... Weird......."

What I can't do, because I can't.

Things you can do, but don't.

It was a penetrating stare, like he was questioning whether or not that was the case.

"Ludwig."

"......, Scarlett."

A calm-faced redheaded girl eating next to him calls out to Ludwig.

"Don't put pressure on Ellen."

"......."

"At least you're comfortable here, Ellen, it's going to be the hardest for you."

Ellen is already under intense pressure from many quarters.

Ludwig nodded slowly at Scarlett's cautionary words, as if to say that to Ellen, here, now.

"Yeah. I guess so."

Ludwig looks at Ellen.

"I'm sorry, Ellen. For making you uncomfortable."

Ellen kept her head down, shaking her head horizontally.

"No....... It's okay."

Ellen said nothing more, except to stare at the hand holding the bread.

In the end, Ellen didn't eat well.

\* \* \*

In the Royal Class garrison, Ellen's barracks aren't exactly the biggest.

The largest barracks are those of Adelia and the alchemical talent Christina. Setting up and taking down the barracks requires a significant amount of manpower, as do the materials needed for magical research, so you'll need several wagons for your personal research supplies alone.

While Adelia doesn't participate in the battle itself, the artifacts she develops and improves are the most important in large-scale battles.

Christina and Adelia.

If the Gate debacle was ever fully resolved, and humanity was ever able to rewrite history, their names would be mentioned in the same breath as Ellen's.

They had a lot of necessary research supplies, and Ellen didn't really have any personal items aside from two holy relics.

Ellen has never been much of a room decorator.

As such, Ellen's tents are quite spacious and compartmentalized, with amenities to make her stay as comfortable as possible, but nothing fancy.

Nightfall Garrison.

Ellen disarmed her plate armor before reaching the barracks.

-Chulkuk

Ellen watched as the armor's seams unraveled of their own accord, floated through the air, and reassembled in its cradle.

This type of armor requires someone to help put it on and take it off, but the specially made silver plates did not.

"Whoa......."

The armor is designed to keep you as active as possible, but it can't help but be uncomfortable.

More than the actual discomfort, I was stifled by the gravity of the act of walking around in such fancy armor.

\* \* \*

Ellen sat still, soaking in a bathtub in a tent that doubled as a bathroom.

A few times.

Ellen splashed hot water on her face.

Pressing her thumb and forefinger firmly into the corners of her eyes, Ellen takes a deep breath.

"Hah......."

Again and again.

"Hah......."

Again and again.

Several times a day, I feel like I'm going to suffocate under the pressure.

It's true that we're doing what we can.

I'm better than everyone else, I can do more than everyone else, and I'm actually carrying a heavier load than everyone else.

But people's expectations are too high and too big.

And the last thing they want to do is to do it with their own hands.

If you'd rather be dead.

If you disappear from the world.

If I die in the middle of a mission, I don't have to feel this way anymore.

Ellen thought about it dozens of times a day.

But he also knew that he wasn't allowed to do that.

Live.

Just knowing you're alive keeps people hopeful. You can't die.

If there's an end to be reached, you're alive until that moment.

Even if you don't know what to do with it.

It must be alive.

Ellen resolves.

A bleak future awaits, but it's only bleak for you.

For now, we need to finish the march.

Destroying a continent's warp gate can only be a good thing for the world, and it has to be done.

Until then.

What happens next is what happens next, and I'll think about it then.

"Hoooooo......."

Ellen takes a deep breath and somehow manages to calm her confused, dark mind.

Once she had calmed down enough, Ellen took a bath and changed into her new clothes.

When her hair was properly dried and she stepped out into the center of the barracks in a towel, Ellen couldn't help but be impressed.

"!"

Even though she was dressed properly, Ellen reflexively opened the collar of her shirt and looked at the unannounced visitor.

Ellen's tent is enchanted, so if you activate the lock, no one can enter. There have been some rude people who have tried to enter the barracks.

However, someone has entered his tent with the lock activated.

Someone in a robe, a little shorter, sat there as if waiting for Ellen.

"......who."

Feeling a sense of foreboding, Ellen immediately summoned Rafelt and Rament and pointed them at the mysterious figure.

But Ellen soon found herself gaping.

In-young, wearing a robe, removes his hood.

"It's been a while since....... in a while."

"Herriot......?"

Herriot de Saint-Ouen looked at Ellen with a sad expression on his face.

\* \* \*

A few months earlier, Herriot and Ellen had crossed paths.

During the Demon's attack on the Zodiac, Ellen and Harriet made eye contact for the briefest of moments.

Of course, we didn't have a conversation.

Inside Ellen's tent.

Harriet looked at Ellen with a sad expression on her face.

Herriot came to her. Ellen recalled her laments, but they were facing each other with some distance between them.

They were friends.

After the events of Reinhardt's disappearance, Ellen and Harriet were able to call each other friends.

Herriot hated Reinhardt, but cried in the rain when he was gone.

Ellen thought Reinhardt was gone because she said something she couldn't say to him.

Together they went in search of the missing Reinhardt.

We became friends after that.

And now.

The two ended up in a strange relationship where they could not and would not call each other friends because of Reinhardt.

Ellen still doesn't know what Herriot's purpose is for coming to her.

However, they have the wrong idea.

Are we friends, yet.

Ellen kept her eyes down.

I'm not sure if Harriet is thinking the same thing, and I can't quite meet Ellen's eyes.

"I'm not in that situation, but......."

Herriot cautiously opens his mouth.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"......."

You've already cleaned up the surrounding area.

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting for you on the southern outskirts of the garrison."

Ellen nodded, and Herriot teleported away.

\* \* \*

At Herriot's suggestion, Ellen ventured south of the garrison. There was no one to stop her.

On the southern outskirts, Harriet waited for Ellen in a moonlit clearing.

Herriot and Ellen walked through the moonlit fields.

The corpses of the monsters were strewn about.

After stationing there for a while, you take care of the monsters in the area and get your troops moving again. Arrive at the next destination, destroy the gate, and head to the next gate.

That's how the last of humanity's armies will move until the last gate is destroyed.

"Saying "how are you" is not a good time to say....... to say how are you."

Herriot smiled bitterly as he tried to rhyme, then realized it was a bit of a stretch.

Like Reinhardt, Herriot was out there somewhere, keeping an eye on the human world, including the ecliptic.

Ellen had a lot of questions. Where she'd been and what she'd been doing. How everyone was doing.

Somehow, some way, we're all getting along in this wretched world.

But Ellen couldn't bring herself to ask the question because she didn't think she was qualified to do so.

They walk for a while without talking.

The fact that you have to choose what to say to each other is already a sign that you've drifted too far apart.

You don't want anyone else to see you having this conversation.

Heriot may not be the devil, but he's hated just as much.

This coalition is the last and strongest army of mankind.

That's why the immediate garrison includes the Grand Duke of Saint-Tuan and his mages.

Ellen was somewhat aware of the situation of the Grand Duke of Saint-Thuan, whose daughter had betrayed humanity, and who had been blindsided by the end of the war.

Although he was a brilliant wizard and had already achieved great things, his soldiers and commanders treated him as a quasi-spy, ready to betray the Grand Duke of Saint-Tuan at any moment.

Herriot would know that his father and his father's army were in that garrison.

"Our coworkers are....... How are you?"

Herriot asked about his peers, not his father.

Ellen's breath caught in her throat at the question.

So far, everyone, somehow, is safe.

But one person.

"Ashur is....... dead."

"ah......."

It wasn't a motivation that I would characterize as close to Ellen, or even to Harriet.

Class B, number 4.

Ashur, who was gifted with divine power.

All she knows is that he was a good-natured, timid guy.

Ellen knows that Ashar has saved many lives with his talents in rear support after the Gate, even if he hasn't been in combat.

The death of a classmate who wasn't so close.

Hearing the story, Herriot walks away with a puzzled look on his face.

The deaths of your classmates will only be the beginning. Whether by accident or by too many monsters.

One by one, one by one.

It will die.

Both Ellen and Harriet knew it would be.

Herriot didn't mourn or cry over his death.

I just walked around in a daze.

Usually, when you meet someone you haven't seen in a while, you'll start with a nice little story and then get down to business.

But that's a world where there is no such thing as an appropriate topic.

Speaking of classmates, I have to tell a story about a classmate who died.

It's hard to bring up a lighthearted topic near a garrison of troops deployed for war, and when you do, it's only going to make you feel more disconnected from reality.

It's impossible to talk in moderation and get to the point.

Herriot finally stopped, looking determined.

Depression and sadness in those eyes.

There was a lot of self-loathing about having to bring up things that I couldn't be responsible for or afford, hoping that someone else would sacrifice.

"Ellen."

"Yes."

When Harriet stopped, Ellen stopped, too.

"Reinhardt is....... might die."

"......what?"

For the first time, Ellen realized that certain words could make her heart stop.

Turning to Ellen, who was lost in thought, Harriet began to talk.

Herriot couldn't tell the whole truth, because he couldn't tell the important story, the story of the demon kingdom built on the Edina Archipelago.

Feeling self-conscious about it.

A story of so much death in the world that the spirits of those who have died have coalesced into one, growing larger and larger.

The story of how Olivia Ranze was possessed by it, but Reinhardt banished the spirits and absorbed them instead.

As a result, the story goes, the demon is slowly dying under the pressure of spirits with hatred and resentment toward him.

Ellen was stunned by the revelation.

And I could only gape in disbelief at the unbelievable story of how she had taken it into her body because of the harm and damage it would cause.

When he finished, Herriot rolled his eyes.

His eyes were red and bloodshot.

If you can do it, you want to do it.

If there is another way, I'd love to find it.

However, the sight of Reinhardt dying in real time was a clear indication that he didn't have much time.

I can't save you, so you save me.

I feel sad, miserable, and shameless for having to say that.

You could have sent someone else.

Antirrhinus, who suggested the job, could have come himself.

However, Herriot chose to come in person.

I couldn't put this request in someone else's mouth.

At least you're a friend.

No matter how miserable and tormented you feel about saying this, you feel like it's your duty to ask Ellen for this favor.

"Reinhardt to....... Save me. Save Reinhardt....... Save Reinhardt."

"......."

Ellen looks at the sobbing Harriet.

He wonders how he can save Reinhardt.

Ellen thought she knew what Harriet was talking about.

"Well, if I can handle it, I can make....... I don't know how, but....... that I can do that?"

"......."

Harriet stares at Ellen, still.

-nod

I can't bring myself to say it, so I just nod, crying.

"I'll do it."

Without a second thought, Ellen nodded. The fact that Ellen said it so casually puzzled Harriet.

"Ellen....... I know I asked you to do this, and I know it's ridiculous to say this out loud, but....... too much, too fast....... It's not your call."

"I'll do it."

"Ellen......."

Ellen doesn't really know what she's getting herself into, and so rather than deceive her, Harriet has to explain how dangerous it is and what it will bring.

"You'll die. Your soul will disappear. You'll be eaten by those spirits and your existence will cease. Or you'll become something else entirely."

Death, or the cessation of existence, or the permanent transformation of the self.

"Well, let me ask you a question."

"......Yes."

"If I accept them into my body, if I allow them to dominate my body....... I, Reinhardt....... hate him?"

Ellen Artorius is gone, and a new Ellen Artorius is born, consumed by demon-hating spirits.

"Maybe....... It will."

"To the point where you want to kill them. To the point where you actually try to kill them....... right?"

"Maybe......."

The warrior who loves the devil is gone.

All that's left is a puppet of hatred and resentment, one that hates the demon so much that it wants to kill him.

"Does it have to be that way?"

Ellen asks, and Harriet purses her lips.

Just a possibility.

Ask about the likelihood of your self surviving without being annihilated.

"I don't know....... I don't know the details either....... But I do know that Reinhardt....... is somehow hanging on right now....... maybe you won't go away either. But....... I can't be sure. No one really knows what's going to happen......."

Nor can we say that it is necessarily possible for the self of Ellen Artorius to remain unassimilated with those spirits.

Reinhardt has already done the impossible, and Ellen Artorius can do even more impossible things.

There are no absolutes.

It's just that it's never really close.

Ellen thinks.

If she disappears, Ellen will one day fight Reinhardt.

Ellen's body, possessed by the will to hate the demon, will do just that.

Obviously, I don't want that.

But if you don't do something about it now, Reinhardt will die.

There may be another way, but I don't have the time to find it right now.

He saves Reinhardt by bearing the hatred of men. It's not ideological, it's practical.

They really embrace hatred and resentment, and later become the devil's enemies.

If it can save Reinhardt.

If we can save Reinhardt now, we can save him later.

May I disappear.

Is it okay to die.

Is that the price of distrust.

It's not a total get-out-of-jail-free card.

However, I live for a little indulgence.

There are no guarantees that you will disappear completely.

Even if it's a remote possibility, there's no reason not to bet on it.

There's no guarantee you'll die.

And the words I once said.

When you said I'd die for you.

Beyond time, the moment has come for me to live up to those words.

The moment had come when I could repay Reinhardt, at least a little, for his distrust.

"I thought I would die for Reinhardt. Go on."

"By the way."

"On the subject of."

"When it mattered, I put Reinhardt in more pain than death because I didn't trust him."

"To me, something like......."

Ellen smiles sadly.

"I'm glad I can do something like this."

"......."

"It's a good thing, even for me, even for this....... there's at least one thing I can do for Reinhardt."

Ellen sees Herriot crying.

"There's something I can do for Reinhardt, thank you."

Eventually, Harriet burst into tears when she saw Ellen like that.

Episode 508.

After saying goodbye to Herriot, Ellen returned to the garrison.

"I'll be waiting for you in two days, at midnight, in the fields south of the garrison.

Ellen doesn't know what she's supposed to do specifically, but Herriot leaves her with those words.

Ellen was afraid and curious about the fate that awaited her.

But perhaps he will cease to exist, or perhaps he will assimilate into the alien spirits and become the very will that hates the demon and kills Reinhardt.

Ellen realizes that this is a choice that could lead to Reinhardt's death.

But if you don't make that choice, Reinhardt might die right now.

The price of saving Reinhardt now may be killing him later with my own hands.

Just as Reinhard didn't have a choice, Ellen didn't have a choice.

Knowing that he couldn't handle it, that it would destroy the whole of Edina, Reinhardt tried to lock the thoughts inside of him.

Like him, Ellen has no choice but to take the path she must take now, even though she knows it will lead to her ruin later.

If you can blend in with the rest of the world and become a demon-hating warrior, people will love you.

It's about overcoming the disparity between reality and the ideal in a completely strange way.

I'm not at all willing to do that.

I have no intention of letting my existence fade away.

It's just a matter of not running into them.

Even if you're a warrior who wants to kill the demon, if you can't find it after the gate situation is resolved, you won't be able to fight it even if you want to.

Ellen crossed the garrison and returned to her tent.

Inside the tent, Ellen sits dazedly on her cot.

What it's like to cease to exist.

Ellen doesn't know what death is, because she's never been dead.

So Ellen doesn't know what it is to be alive and not be alive.

They don't know how to defend their existence.

However, we can save Reinhardt.

Ellen decided to think only about that.

Also.

We can see Reinhardt once again.

Ellen holds still and steals a glance. Her stolen hand was wet.

"......."

Ellen carefully steals a few tears from her eyes.

It was a situation where you had to meet them as an enemy and treat them as an enemy.

He despaired that one day he would see Reinhardt again, and that it would be inevitable that they would have to fight for each other's lives.

But instead of facing them as enemies, the reunion is to save Reinhardt.

I can't tell you how grateful, thankful, and thrilled I am for that.

Even if it's the last time we ever meet.

\* \* \*

Since the continent is full of monsters, an army's march will travel a certain distance, clear the area, set up a garrison, clear it, and move on.

Therefore, once a garrison is established, there is time to ensure that the marching route is properly secured.

It also takes time to set up and take down garrisons.

So even in the midst of a tight marching schedule, there is time for rain, and before the garrison was dismantled and the march began, Ellen had some free time.

Two days later, when most of the soldiers were asleep, except for night patrols and guards.

Ellen arrived alone, at the time and place Herriot said she would, at the time and place Herriot said she would.

There, Harriet was waiting for Ellen.

"There you are, Ellen."

Harriet was still looking at Ellen with sad eyes.

There was no one else in the field but Herriot.

Just as Reinhardt so casually sacrificed himself to protect Edina.

Ellen, too, is willing to sacrifice herself without a second thought when told that she can save Reinhardt.

I think I'm ready for that, and so does Herriot.

But that didn't mean I could take it for granted when I saw someone else's willingness to sacrifice so casually.

I don't want to lose Reinhardt, so I sacrifice Ellen.

This is a suggestion from Antrianus, Lord of Toyo.

We all know there's a lot of malice in that suggestion.

But it's also true that everyone agreed to the proposal.

Ellen would naturally be willing to sacrifice herself for Reinhardt, and she's going to be fighting a demon later anyway.

Because there's no one in Edina who can afford it.

Everyone agreed to the cruel plan to make a real enemy out of someone who was going to be an enemy anyway.

Once you agree to Antirrhinus' plan, no one is immune to its malice.

The anguish, self-loathing, and guilt that the others who agreed to sacrifice Ellen would feel would be exactly what Antony intended.

No one is free of the sin of sacrificing Ellen.

"We're going to a ceremonial place."

"Yes."

Blue energy lines began to emanate from Herriot's entire body, and soon he and Ellen were able to teleport to another location.

Ellen doesn't know what this place is like.

Just a place where a giant dust cloud is drawn.

Five beings stand on each axis of the circle.

Elise, the Gazoo of Tuesdays.

Gazoo of Demand, Lucinil.

Lerouen, Gazoo of Thursday.

Galarsh, the Gazoo of Friday.

Antirrhinus, Gazoo of Toyo.

Ellen didn't recognize everyone's faces, but she did recognize two.

When Ellen appeared with Harriet, I saw a glint of guilt in some of their eyes.

And the old man was smiling wryly at Ellen.

The look in his eyes gave Ellen the creeps.

That wasn't all.

In addition to Herriot and the Lord Vampires, Liana de Granz and Olivia Ranze were there.

In both cases, it was a face Ellen hadn't seen in a long time.

Neither Riana nor Olivia could look at Ellen properly.

Riana realizes that she is the cause of all of this.

He can't look at Ellen properly because he knows he can't handle even a fraction of what Reinhardt is going through.

In the midst of her mixed emotions, Olivia couldn't look at Ellen properly.

This isn't because Ellen can handle it, it's just a passing off.

Being an extraordinary being, there is a definite danger that the self may disappear, even if the body does not.

Does he even realize what's happening to him?

For the first time in her life, Olivia was feeling something akin to pity for Ellen.

We didn't really say hello.

It wasn't a situation where that was possible.

All eyes were on the center of the circle, where the five archmages stood.

Ellen isn't sure what the ritual means.

However, in the middle of it all.

There was an image of Reinhardt lying on what looked like a ceremonial altar.

You don't know if they're asleep or passed out.

Beside the altar, where Reinhardt lay unconscious, a pink-haired demon repeatedly flicked Reinhardt's forehead gently.

What Ellen doesn't know is that the Succubus Queen has purposely put Reinhardt to sleep so he won't wake up.

There are some faces in the room that Ellen recognizes and some that she doesn't.

There is no need to share a statement, the joy or sadness of reunion, or any other words.

"When you're ready, proceed to the center altar of Wenjin."

Lucinil, the silver-haired girl, was the only one to say so.

It was drawn by Lucinil, who has mastered the magic of working with spirits.

Lucinil has never practiced the magic of transferring souls to other bodies on this scale.

However, I crammed as much knowledge as I could into this article.

"Ellen......."

As Ellen started to head toward the source, Herriot called her back.

Liana de Granz and Olivia Lanchester watch Ellen.

None of the three could tell Ellen anything. No one knows how Ellen will change now that Reinhard has taken on his burden.

"...... I'm coming."

With those words, the meaning of which is unclear, Ellen leaves Harriet behind and walks toward the center of the circle.

When Ellen reached the altar, the pink-haired demon stood still and backed away from the circle.

Like leaving Reinhardt in charge.

Even through her pretense, Ellen could tell that Reinhardt was in very bad shape.

I could tell by his parched lips, pale complexion, and cold sweat on his forehead what he meant by dying.

"line......hart......."

Ellen sits down at the altar and embraces Reinhardt.

It was a different meeting.

Unlike his theatrical battles, Reinhardt was emaciated.

Ellen doesn't know what she's carrying or how heavy it is.

However, we have to deal with what Reinhardt is dealing with.

I'm up for it.

Reinhardt, whom Ellen had placed on her lap, was fast asleep.

-Start the ritual.

At the word of the silver-haired girl, the five Lord Vampires begin to start up something of an origin.

Olivia Ranze also keeps an eye on the ceremony, having summoned Tiamata just in case.

In the glowing dust, Ellen stares at Reinhardt's face.

I wonder if it's the last one.

I wonder if that's it.

I wanted to be able to do something for you, and I was able to.

It may not be the last.

But it might be the last time.

Ellen bows her head toward Reinhardt and kisses his forehead.

But how fortunate I am to be able to hold her like this.

How grateful we should be.

With that in mind.

Because it's the last one.

Because it's asleep.

What I wanted to say.

"That you're sick."

Until the last moment of consciousness.

I could go on and on.

Ellen looks at the unconscious Reinhardt with sadness in her eyes.

"The things that get you down."

During the ritual.

"I'll....... I'll take it all."

Ellen told Reinhard what she had wanted to tell him for so many years.

Feeling guilty and sorry.

And about favorite hearts.

"I love you so, so much."

It whispered for an eternity.

\* \* \*

I often lost consciousness.

I didn't realize that my body and soul were getting sick and tired.

I thought that what I had to bear was what I had to bear.

There was no other way, or so I thought.

Someone had to take care of that giant black hole of aspiration that would multiply if left alone.

So in my dying moments, I knew I had to find another way, but I couldn't let go, so I gave my body away.

Airi said.

Wait, I need a good night's sleep.

In the depths of my unconscious, I'm trying to find some way to cure myself.

So, sleep soundly.

I didn't know how to do that.

I was just too tired, I was just too tired.

So I drifted off into a deep sleep with Airi's hand stroking my forehead.

Literally, it was a deathly sleep.

It was my dreams and subconscious that I couldn't really control, even with the powers of a succubus queen, but somehow I was able to fall asleep very deeply.

And then, in the abyss of that consciousness, I felt a bizarre sensation.

Something.

That sense of escaping.

The bizarre sensation of a dam of wastewater in my mind and soul, the walls of which are crumbling and suddenly it's all going somewhere.

The things that have been taking up most of my consciousness and trying to rear their ugly heads at every opportunity are fading away.

In that uncanny feeling of refreshment and release, where the pain of mind and body suddenly disappears, I felt myself slowly returning to consciousness.

"......."

The blurred vision slowly finds focus.

I am, embraced by something.

No matter how many times I blinked, the focus would not return.

I don't know how much time has passed or in whose arms I am now.

But from faint body odor and temperature and blurry shapes.

I was getting a familiar feeling.

"El......?"

Even as my vision returned, it didn't occur to me that it was anyone other than Ellen who was making me feel this familiarity.

Soon, someone came up and pulled me to my feet. As if to pull me out of his arms.

When I regained my vision, I couldn't make sense of the situation anymore.

Ellen sat in the center of the circle, a strange magic circle.

I couldn't help but realize that it was Ellen who had been hugging me all this time.

Ellen asks why?

Supporting me were Elise and Olivia.

What the heck was going on?

Before my eyes, unable to comprehend the situation, Ellen rises from the altar, still.

But Ellen's vibe was a little weird.

In the almost unfocused look in Ellen's eyes, I couldn't help but feel that something was wrong.

Like backing away from something you're afraid of, Elise and Olivia take a step back, holding me up.

"Oh my gosh, you've been holding out."

Ellen, mumbling to herself.

"This is what....... you've been dealing with, Reinhardt."

With a tone and demeanor that seemed to be holding something back, I could only slowly figure out what was going on.

"Now......."

I alternate between looking at Elise and Olivia.

"Now....... To Ellen....... To me......."

There was an indelible look of guilt on their faces.

"What....... did......?"

Olivia was biting her lip, and Elise was gritting her teeth.

I wonder if this is what it's like to be cut off from reason.

"You're asking me what I did!"

My cries were met with silence from both of them and everyone else standing around.

I don't know what it is, but I think I know what it is.

Why does my body feel so light, and why is my mind so clear when it has been foggy ever since I accepted it?

Why are Ellen's eyes so cloudy?

No way.

They took that.

Ellen, in the distance, purses her lips.

It was a bizarre behavior, but I couldn't help but cringe at the expression that formed at the end of the quivering of his lips.

With all the strength she has left, Ellen finally raises the corner of her mouth.

Ellen smiles at me.

As if it were the last.

"Hi, Reinhard."

Say goodbye as if this is the last time you will ever meet.

With that said, there's other magic at work in the source code.

-Flash!

With a flash of light, Ellen's form disappeared.

I slowly look around at the faces of the people in this room, in a space I don't recognize.

Load vampires.

Riana.

Olivia.

Herriot.

Airy.

No one dared to look me in the eye.

Only Antirhynchus stood still, staring at the spot where Ellen had disappeared with a look of satisfaction on his face.

\* \* \*

Ellen Artorius appeared in a field south of the garrison where she had encountered Herriot.

At the end of the ritual, it was time to let Ellen go, as there was no telling what she might do with a large group of spirits in her body.

Ellen stood alone in the clearing where the night had fallen.

Ellen felt with her whole body, with her soul, what Reinhardt had been dealing with all this time.

Hate.

Vengeful.

The echoes of resentment, which seemed to take every negative emotion in the world and amplify it a million times over, were enough to make me lose my mind.

I wonder if I can afford this.

In the midst of this tidal wave of desire, can you remain yourself?

Is it possible to keep my heart for Reinhardt, floating like a sculpture, in the midst of such a huge wave of emotions?

The mind is so small that it will be swept away by the waves.

Ellen senses that her thinking is becoming tainted.

The devil must die.

The devil is the cause of everything.

There's no point in screaming that it's not.

With so many entities already in his soul, the truth that Ellen cries out is only drowned out by the waves of resentment.

These spirits could not enter the demon's body and kill him.

However, it has taken up residence in the body of a warrior, the demon's arch-enemy.

What difference does it make.

-Crrrr!

-knowwhat!

In the distance, you hear the cries of a monster.

Monsters are everywhere, and even when you've cleared a safe marching path, new ones are bound to pop up somewhere.

The scale is around seventy.

They all look different, but Ellen sees them coming toward her.

-Slurp!

As he pulls out the ramen, the Voidblade is colored by the darkness of the Abyss.

Like a projection of the night sky, the Voidblade Ramen is a little different than before, with galaxies and star clouds visible within.

Abyss.

The Voidblade, which projects only the abyss, shows that the sorrow Ellen feels is now so great that even the stars that shine in it are dead.

A sword that projects nothing but darkness, not the night sky.

Ellen grabs it and sees a swarm of monsters charging at her.

On such an Ellen's shoulders falls the cloak of the sun.

A sun god's cloak with protective powers.

The color of it was a little strange.

The sun god's cloak fluttered menacingly, as if projecting the sun's fiery inferno.

No, in fact, in the cloak of the sun, infernal flames begin to flicker and burn.

To add to the grief.

Hate.

Ellen stares at the swarm of monsters closing in.

-Kurung! Kureng!

As if animated, the flames were actually flowing out of the cloak.

The monsters didn't even come close to Ellen.

-Bang! Quack!

As if alive, a whip of flame extended from the sun's cloak, striking the earth, crushing and incinerating the monsters that had gathered.

Ellen watched as the dirt melted away with a single blow and the crimson flames gradually spread.

Immortalized by hatred.

A warrior carries the hatred and sorrow of men on his back.

The devil must die.

No, you can't.

In the vortex of the soul, as Reinhardt did.

The will of Ellen Artorius, too, begins to die.

But unlike killing the demon's spirit, which was meant to kill his body.

The spirits were imbuing Ellen Artorius with great power.

You must become stronger because you must kill the demon.

Therefore, unlike when they possessed other beings, the spirits did not try to destroy Ellen.

In fact, in some ways, it empowers her.

Ellen reaches up to the sky.

-Bang! Quack! Kwagagagagang!

The surviving monsters are incinerated by fireballs raining down from the sky.

Earth-melting flames.

Flame of Hatred.

"......."

Ellen Artorius became the master of that hatred.

Episode 509.

Now that he was free of the spirits that were killing him, he regained his strength as if he had never been sick.

Everything was back to its best.

But there was silence among Edina's senior leadership.

Very few people know what happened.

Liana de Granz fooled the devil with her dogma.

But this time, the whole entourage worked together to fool the devil.

Even if they were trying to save the king, they didn't ask the king's doctor.

So even though he was doing it to save his king, he couldn't help but hold his breath as he watched.

You're furious. It's bad enough that you've been cheated again, but this time it's with all of your closest associates.

Everyone was afraid because they didn't know how the demon's anger would be expressed.

Not Harriet, not Olivia, not Irie, not Charlotte, not the Senate.

He was afraid of what Reinhardt would say about it.

But.

The demon said nothing.

Anger.

Sadness, too.

Hatred.

Resentment.

I didn't say anything.

The demon sat all day on the tallest spire in Edina, and said nothing.

What you're thinking, how you're feeling.

I don't tell anyone.

Rather, it scared everyone.

What the devil is thinking.

Reinhardt hasn't even opened his mouth to say what he's going to say about this.

Everyone held their breath and watched the demon's eyes.

\* \* \*

The high spires of Edina.

The castle was originally built on a cliff, and the top of the tallest spire was a favorite haunt of the devil.

It's a great place to take in all the sights of Edina.

"Reinhardt......."

"Yes."

"Eat this, haven't you eaten anything today?"

Reinhardt looks at the sandwich that Harriet has brought him.

"Thanks."

The demon accepted the sandwich and took a bite.

You're not exactly starving.

It's not like I'm ignoring anyone.

It's not that I blame anyone in particular.

They just sit on top of the steeple all day.

I don't know what I'm thinking, but I've been looking down on Edina from the spire all day.

I didn't ignore anyone who tried to talk to me.

Charlotte is in charge of all things national anyway, so there's nothing Reinhardt needs to do in Edina.

So you can do this all day long and Edina will still be fine.

Herriot was fidgeting, unable to sit next to Reinhardt, but also unable to leave.

Once Reinhardt realized what had happened, he didn't blame anyone, nor did he point fingers.

I was just doing this.

Everyone was feeling guilty and afraid in that behavior.

"Pfft."

"......?"

Reinhardt is silent for a moment, then looks up at Herriot.

Herriot felt a flicker of fear in Reinhardt's gaze.

I wonder what he's trying to say now.

What anger, what rebuke, what price to pay for deception.

When Harriet is feeling her heart tighten, wanting to hear what Reinhardt has to say, but afraid not to.

"Last time I tried it, I liked it, you know, that thing. Dream manipulation."

"Oh......? Uh, yeah."

Reinhardt had a different story.

"The ability to control Airi's dreams... do you think it could be done with magic?"

"Huh? Why is that all of a sudden?"

"No, I felt like I was going to lose my mind, but it was better when I stayed with her when she slept."

It sounds totally weird.

"What if we implemented that as an artifact or something, like a dream wavelength or something. I was wondering if we could enchant it and make an artifact or something that emits an aura or something like that, so that everyone who lives within a certain area has good dreams or something like that?"

"Uh....... Huh?"

Herriot said Reinhardt could talk about this, but he doesn't think he's in a position to do so.

But without even mentioning it, he was saying something else entirely, something that could be considered trivial.

He was acting as if he'd forgotten about Ellen Artorius.

Of course, it would be pointless to lash out and get angry about something that has already happened, but Ellen is not a pointless person to Reinhard.

But out of nowhere, we're talking about an artifact about a dream.

Herriot had no idea what Reinhardt was thinking right now.

"If we could gradually plant those artifacts throughout Edina, wouldn't that help people heal from their trauma?"

"Uh, huh....... I guess so."

"I'm not saying you have to build it, just think about what it would be like if you could."

Reinhardt could only say that while munching on a sandwich.

Everyone was doing this knowing that Reinhardt would be furious.

But people were learning in real time that the scariest reprimand is no reprimand at all.

You don't know what he's thinking because he doesn't say anything, and you don't know how angry he is because he's not angry at all.

In the midst of this tension, someone had to step up.

A week after that incident.

"Your Highness."

Elise climbed the spire where Reinhard was killing time.

\* \* \*

"Uh, hello?"

Reinhardt nodded slightly and shifted his gaze back to the city of Razak.

Eleris stares at Reinhardt's figure.

There was no anger, no sadness, no strangeness in his expression.

Eleris didn't know what to say to the silent demon.

"Your Majesty, about the last time......."

"Oh, that."

Reinhard looks at Eleris.

"Why?"

Elyse seemed to freeze in her tracks as she responded, "Whatever.

She couldn't tell if he was nonchalant, distraught, or holding back his emotions. She didn't know what to say, but eventually she had to find the words.

"Are you sure....... correct?"

As awful as it felt to ask someone who couldn't possibly be okay, she couldn't help but speak up.

Your pent-up emotions may explode.

She didn't know what to do if that happened.

"Hmm......."

The Demon King stares out across Razak in silence.

"You've said that before."

"What are you talking about......."

"I hope it's not going to be a sad relationship. It was. Me and Ellen."

"ah......."

Eleris remembered when the demon had spoken.

In the Darklands, Eleris, under an assumed name, accompanied Ellen and Reinhardt.

After learning that Ellen was the sister of Lagan Artorius, Eleris had said so as if foreseeing an ominous fate.

Son of a demon and sister of a warrior.

I had a premonition that the relationship was never going to end well.

In time, the Devil's son became the Devil, and the Hero's sister became the Heroine.

It's already a sad relationship.

Beyond sadness, it became a cruel relationship.

"I guess it was supposed to be like this."

"Yes......?"

"Whatever the reason, whatever the cause, whatever the intent."

Reinhardt can only stare down at the city of Razak.

"I think it was supposed to be like this."

Eleris couldn't understand the demon's words.

"No matter how hard I try, no matter how much I don't want to be in that situation, I feel like it was meant to be."

A warrior who fears to fight the devil has come to bear the hatred of mankind.

It's inevitable that you'll end up fighting.

"So there's no point in blaming anyone, that's just how I see it."

You can't escape this world of forced endings.

The devil wasn't really blaming anyone.

Eleris didn't understand what the demon was talking about.

The logic of which only the devil himself can understand.

These days, the Devil isn't looking out over the city of Rajak.

[Preview is enabled].

I could only replay that message, and what it showed me, over and over again.

Himself, who lost his life to Ellen.

Ellen stares down at the scene in disbelief.

Ellen stood there, staring down at Reinhardt with blank eyes.

Finish.

He holds the Voidblade with both hands, inverted, and stabs it into his chest.

Then, kneeling before the fallen demon, slowly dying.

Again and again.

Again and again.

I was just watching it over and over again.

"So anyway, tell everyone not to worry because I'm not really mad at them."

Reinhardt smiled thinly and said, "Yes.

\* \* \*

The future that the preview shows me is like the last evil I need to suffer.

Ellen kills me, and I kill myself.

We don't know what moment that will be.

But if things continue as they are, one day I will fight Ellen and be killed by her.

Then, Ellen takes her own life.

That was the last future I was given.

I don't know what remains outside the landscape I saw. Is Edina doomed, is humanity doomed, or is both intact?

After or before the gate incident.

I don't know.

After all, the path I need to take is fixed in some way.

You won't be able to bully them into giving you back what went into Ellen. This time, she won't cooperate.

Even if I can get it, I can see a future where things twist and turn and I'm fighting Ellen in a different way.

So accept it.

Fixed future.

You must fight Ellen.

If I don't kill it, I will die, and if I die, Ellen will die.

I don't know if the Ellen I see is the Ellen who has lost herself in the desire. I don't know if she is in control of her body.

In any case, no matter how I try to avoid it, the future will find me.

So there was no real anger.

I've been exposed to so much maliciousness that I can only feel a sense of despondency that this is how it's supposed to be.

Can we change this future.

The preview is not there for my despair.

It shows that if you can change this future, change it.

Of course, in hindsight it feels like I'm just showing it to you to see my despair.

It's not hard to change the future as I see it now.

Either I die now, or Ellen dies now.

If either event occurs, that future disappears.

It's all too easy to kill yourself, so I don't see that future as absolute.

Not an absolute future, but a future that is all too easily changed.

But the easy way out is not one I'm going to take, so that future is coming.

If this future is truly unstoppable, and it's just there to fuck with me, then the fucker shouldn't have shown it to me.

The point of this is to show you that you're going to be in this situation at some point, and to get your ass in gear.

The future doesn't arrive the moment you know it.

Just like some of the futures I saw didn't happen.

This case is simple.

If I'm weak, I die, and so does Ellen.

So, I just need to be stronger than Ellen.

It just illustrates that simple fact.

I'm sure everyone was wondering why I wasn't angry, why I wasn't reprimanding anyone.

But I can't do that until I explain how I feel because I'm the only one who can understand why I'm doing this.

"You have called, Great One."

From the spires of Razak's royal castle, I heard the voice of Antrianus, who answered my call.

I was told that it was Antirrhinus who suggested that Ellen should carry my soul.

Always.

A crazy old man suggesting options that seem to be for me, but aren't for me at all.

"Are you angry with me?"

"That doesn't mean much."

I speak without looking at Antony.

"Apparently, I thought you were going to kill me."

"What good would that do?"

It's not that I'm not angry. Antony's case is special.

It's true that the heat is on.

But what's the point in being angry?

What's the point of killing Antony?

We tried to prevent a gate, but we got a gate.

If the world is like this, why shouldn't I be able to get what I want so easily?

It's not going to be easy, so it's better that way.

I guess that's a bit of a stretch, though.

And getting Ellen back.

I wonder if it's even possible.

No matter how unlikely it is.

No matter how impossible that is.

I don't think all possibilities are closed.

So, do what you can.

"I'm about to make you an offer that will be hard for you to refuse."

"Hehe....... That's interesting."

Antirrhinus, amused, began to listen to me.

Episode 510.

The Devil has called a meeting.

Razak's Royal Chamber.

In the presence of the Senate, the Regent, and all the other dignitaries, the Demon King gives a brief instruction.

"Organize an elite unit."

Reinhardt didn't mention Ellen Artorius' work at all, as if to say that this wasn't a rebuke or a lesson in everything that had happened, but rather a discussion of what was to come.

"The goal is pre-emptive action against monsters in the path of the Allies."

Fort Mokna is being withdrawn. And since Edina doesn't need as many troops to defend it, a significant number of troops remain.

Despite losing a significant number of paladins and priests during the last purge, Edina's power is not that great.

There were still quite a few troops left.

Now the last army of humanity is marching to break down the gate.

But it's a slow process.

After advancing a certain distance, you set up a garrison and focus on making the path around it safe. Then you advance, set up a garrison, and repeat.

With an entire continent at risk, it's a no-brainer.

"If the troops march faster, they'll be able to deal with each gate faster, and we'll be able to end the gate crisis a little sooner."

So the Demon's Army does what Imperial scouts and extermination troops are doing now, but a little further ahead of time.

In other words, an escort force unknown to even the allied forces is leading the way.

"In such a way that once we have a path of advance, we cooperate in the gate-breaking operation?"

At Regent Charlotte's question, the Demon King shook his head slightly.

"It's going to depend on the situation, because if we run into them, they might attack us. There might be situations where we can help, and there might be situations where we need to stay out of it."

Herriot nods at the demon's words.

"Yeah, if we get it wrong, it could be a three-way tie, and that's not a good thing."

With the priority of destroying the gate, if the human army senses the presence of a demonic force, things can get really weird.

So we move in ways that support them where the armies of humanity can't see them.

Just clearing a path of advance would be a massive undertaking.

Leave the gates in the hands of humanity, and help when necessary, but your primary mission is to ensure the safety of the march.

"It's the kind of thing you could secretly negotiate with the emperor if you had to."

A complete end to the Gate situation is something that both the Empire and Edina need, so it's entirely possible to conduct such negotiations underwater and keep the rank-and-file soldiers in the dark about it.

"I want my sister to organize the army."

The Devil looks at Olivia Ranze and says.

With the Holy Order controlling the bulk of Edina's military power, it makes sense for Olivia Ranze to organize the army.

"Yeah, okay."

Olivia nodded with a stony expression.

"I need all of you to cooperate in this operation. Is that possible?"

The five gajus nodded at the demon king's words.

A devil who has nothing to say about what needs to be said.

So, everyone is in debt to some degree.

As a result, they were more inclined to follow his instructions and commands than ever before.

And just like that, everyone was racing to end the gate debacle once and for all.

"That's the end of the meeting, but stay with Airi, we have a story to tell."

The meeting was dismissed at the Demon King's simple command, and as instructed, the succubus queen, Airi, remained in the room.

Airi stiffened and moved to the demon's side.

The last time it happened, Airi was the one who put Reinhardt to bed.

So I was on edge because I didn't know what I was going to hear.

As children, Airi and Bali were enemies.

And in reality, Airi was in the position of beating up Valerie.

But now, many years later, Valier was undeniably a demon, and he had demonic powers.

Now that she has her horns back and can harness magic, Airi is stronger than she was before she lost her horns and can wield many powers.

But after what she'd done, Airi was as small as a mouse in front of a cat when the demon told her to stay.

Looking at the Demon King, who is silent for a moment, Airi speaks up, her lips trembling slightly.

"That....... If that's what you asked me to do last time, I'm at least trying it out......."

Implementation and artifactualization of dream magic into regular magic.

I asked Herriot to do it, but I needed to get Airi's cooperation, and she was already working with Herriot on that.

"Really? Do you think you can do it?"

"I'm not sure yet, but the scribe says....... I think I'm onto something."

It's not the magic of the demons, it's the inherent power of the demons.

He hadn't thought about it, but he seemed to have a sense of what Reinhardt was asking him to do.

A country where everyone is guaranteed a comfortable place to dream.

I don't know if that really means much or not, but if there are a lot of hurting people out there, it's bound to help a lot of people.

"Good, then."

The demon smiled, as if he'd just been pushing his luck and hadn't expected it to work.

But that's not what he's here for, and he looks at Airi.

"Anyway, there's nothing for you to do now that we're not searching for refugees, right?"

"Huh? Ah....... Yeah. Actually, yes."

Airi's original mission was to take care of the psychological state of those who arrived in Edina. This included practical counseling, encouraging them to dream, and more.

The early days of Edina's founding were hectic, but as the number of evacuees dropped off dramatically, Airi was able to slow down a bit.

And now that Port Mokna is completely shut down, there will be no replenishment of evacuees.

So I could leave the traditional counseling and dream care to the other succubi.

So in the long run, Airi may have to take on a different role.

"You know, the last time you saw my dreams."

"Ah....... Yeah."

"Pretty good, for sure."

The Demon King has never experienced firsthand what it means to have a succubus queen take care of your dreams. The last time was the first time he'd felt her power in the first place.

The fact that he was able to somehow hold on to his dying mind was a testament to Airi's power.

"So I want you to see my dreams in the future, preferably every day."

Airi suddenly understood what the demon was talking about.

No matter how much you pretend to be okay, your mind will be in turmoil and filled with anger.

The spirits that haunt her soul and mind may be gone, but Ellen has taken them with her.

So the demon was just holding in all the negative thoughts and words, and it was very painful. Even though the spirits are gone, it's very possible that they're still having nightmares.

So you can tell them to take care of their dreams.

It's not an accusation or a reprimand, it's a request for help.

"Yes, you can, and I'll make sure you have a good dream."

Airi nodded, somehow overwhelmed by the thought that there was something she could do.

Not to get energized, but to help Reinhardt regain a calm state of mind in a peaceful dream.

Hearing Airi's words, the demon shook his head.

"Well, ....... I know what you're thinking, but it's different."

"...... is different?"

The Demon King looks at Airi.

"I don't want a good dream, I want a nightmare."

"......?"

Airi's mind seemed to freeze at the Demon King's nonchalant words.

Not a peaceful dream, but a nightmare.

I want that.

Why?

"Let me dream that Ellen is trying to kill me. Every day from now on."

Airi didn't know what she was hearing, didn't understand.

\* \* \*

Through Airi's power, I somehow managed to hold on to my shattered spirit.

But the spirits that sought to destroy and consume me were no longer in me, they had metastasized into Ellen.

So I don't need to try to get that calm image anymore. I already know how to do that in Lizaira.

A succubus is a dreamer.

A monk essentially enters someone's dream and takes their energy.

The squadron's succubus queen, Reina, has put many soldiers to sleep in this way. Soldiers who were unable to overcome their drowsiness were unable to focus on the battle, and if they fell asleep, the succubus queen would drain them of their energy and they would never wake up again.

Right now, Airi and our succubi are anomalies, using their powers much differently than they were intended.

It is usually used to seduce someone to absorb their energy, or to give them peace of mind.

Then you can do the opposite.

If you can make someone have a good dream, completely independent of regular absorption.

Completely unrelated to regular absorption, it could give someone nightmares.

The moment you have to fight for your life with Ellen.

I need to get used to the moment itself.

Even if it's just a dream, if I can get used to it, I'll be able to stay calm in the situation, and the work of changing the future will start with that.

From that day forward.

In the bedroom where Harriet and I slept, Airi began to keep watch.

Both Airi and Harriet looked at me wistfully as I asked for a nightmare on purpose.

You can only imagine what I'm trying to accomplish with this.

There is no set future.

There is only a future to be determined.

I change the future.

I've changed it over and over again.

I realize now that the future, which is so important, never changes.

I, will change.

"How....... do that?"

"How do I do that?"

Airi looks at me with shaky eyes at my question.

"Pain or....... these things....... to not be felt, to weaken......."

"You need to make it stronger."

"......."

As if she knew I'd say that, Airi looks down at me in bed and bites her lip slightly.

It's a fight in a dream, a wound in a dream, a death in a dream.

The more pain the better, as long as no one actually gets hurt.

He was looking at me like, "Do we have to do this?

Airi puts her hand on my forehead.

Airi's hand on his forehead was warm.

But those hands will plunge me into a deep nightmare I don't even want to think about.

The Succubus Queen.

If Airi were to subside someone with malicious intent, she could plunge them into a sleeping hell from which they would never awaken, regardless of regular absorption.

"Good night....... Bali."

I heard Airi's shaky voice in my ear.

I drifted off into a deep sleep.

\* \* \*

Dreams are inherently unconscious.

When you are aware, your brain is awakened and pulled into reality.

Lucid dreaming is very difficult to do artificially, and it's hard to control.

But the dream I'm having now is very special. In my dream, under the control of the Succubus Queen, I was dreaming in my waking state.

A vast reedy forest.

Time is day.

Is the season fall.

Season, time of day, and location.

I don't know if it's Airi's idea or mine.

But maybe, just maybe, it's just my imagination.

What I asked Airi to do was to give me nightmares of Ellen trying to kill me.

But Airi doesn't know much about Ellen.

So the Ellen that appears in the dream will be the Ellen that is constructed based on my understanding.

Ellen Artorius as I imagine her.

Then Ellen moves with the intention of killing me.

What if Ellen had been so completely assimilated by the spirits that inhabited her that her sense of self had disappeared, and she had become a puppet whose only desire was to die.

The Ellen I see in front of me now, and the Ellen I will see later, will be the same person, regardless of her actual skills.

A shell of Ellen with no self, only the will to kill me.

I summon it in my dreams and.

Later, you may have to actually fight such an Ellen.

-pot!

Amidst the reeds that obscure the view, a figure rises up.

In midair, Ellen, clad in Voidblade and Cloak of the Sun, slashes at me.

-Quack!

You duck back, and the shockwave from your sword slash blows away some of the reeds.

The Ellen Artorius of my dreams, vacant-eyed, charging straight for me.

-Bam!

The clash of the Auror-bladed Alsbringer and the Voidblade sent another shockwave through the air, and this time Ellen and I both bounced off each other in the recoil.

Ellen as I imagine her.

I've never really beaten Ellen.

How good is the real Ellen and the dream Ellen?

I still remember the inscription on the lapel.

Immortalized by hatred.

This is Ellen, carrying all the hate in the world.

Ellen would then be able to wield the true power of the Rapelt.

We don't know what that force is specifically.

I can only speculate that it's some kind of fire-related force.

So I don't know much about Ellen now.

So, the Ellen of my dreams will be weaker than the real Ellen.

I don't know how strong Ellen is, having unleashed the true power of the two holy objects.

-pot!

Darting through the reeds, Ellen's Voidblade stabs me in the chest.

I parry his blade with my Alsbringer and stab him in the nape of the neck.

At this rate, you'll be able to punch Ellen in the throat.

Strike.

That.

In my dreams.

Is this okay?

I.

Ellen?

That moment when I find myself afraid to watch Ellen die, even in my dreams.

Already the sword has slowed, and its grip is slipping.

The power in my sword is weakened, and the hesitation of the moment is not lost on the being in the dream.

A brief hesitation.

Taking advantage, Ellen spun around, striking Alsbringer with her left elbow.

Swinging a Voidblade that bounces back along its trajectory.

-skuck!

It blew my head off.

\* \* \*

Died six times to Ellen.

The real Ellen would be stronger than my imagination, which means that if the later fight had actually happened, it would have played out exactly as it did in the preview.

When I died six times, it wasn't because the Ellen of my dreams was too strong.

I've had my fair share of dueling with Ellen. So even if it's just my imagination, I'm no stranger to crossing swords with Ellen.

However, against Ellen, who was attacking me with the mindset of killing, I realized how difficult it was for me to swing my sword with sincerity.

It's a dream, so there's no harm in hurting her, but the moment my sword is about to touch Ellen's body, my body freezes up on its own.

Ellen in my dreams moves only to kill me, of course, and I'm afraid to hurt her, even in my dreams.

Aside from the question of skill, aside from the question of how strong I imagine Ellen to be.

Faced with the prospect of ending Ellen's life, I stiffen in terror.

Since it's a dream, it won't have any real-world consequences, so you don't have to hesitate to hurt Ellen.

But what if you get too used to it?

Could it actually end up hurting Ellen, or even taking her life?

Your darkened vision returns.

This time, the backdrop was a magical star at night.

The central garden of the ruined Mawang Castle.

The site of the fight between Lagan Artorius and the Ancestral Valier.

Across from me, Ellen stares at me with her Voidblade.

-pot!

In the end, it doesn't change the fact that you have to get used to this situation while dreaming about it.

-Bam!

The Voidblade and Alsbringer clashed, scattering stone dust in the echoing shockwave.

Episode 511.

After twenty, I stopped counting.

I've never been able to subdue Ellen.

The amplified pain in the dream was more painful than the actual wound, but it didn't wake him up. Airi was artificially controlling it.

-currrrr

So when I woke up, I could see that the morning sky was cloudy and thunderous.

A storm is brewing.

I could feel Airi's hand still on mine, where it had been just before I fell asleep.

"Good morning....... Morning. You must not have slept well......."

Airi would have had to focus on my dreams, so she wouldn't have slept at all. Airi's expression wasn't too happy either, probably because she kept seeing me dying miserably in her dreams.

Putting aside the question of whether or not this is a good idea, I woke up in the morning with one clear side effect.

"Well, this....... I don't feel like sleeping at all."

"No wonder......."

I woke up and I'm tired.

It's a no-brainer.

After all, dreams aren't meant to last for hours.

But I had the nightmare for the entire time I was asleep, so I was dazed, like my brain was overloaded.

It's more like a side effect of your brain doing extra work while you're asleep.

If I keep doing this, I'm going to be exhausted and unable to push myself when I really need to push myself.

Every day seems a little overwhelming, and I think I need to take a break every other day or two.

On the bed across from him, Harriet was asleep, hugging a large pillow.

"Ugh....... Reinhard......."

Airi hugs her pillow hard, wondering what she's dreaming about, even though she's not the one who touched it.

My Paxton, sometimes you're so cute I want to bite you.

"Do you think this....... work?"

Airi asked, keeping her voice low so as not to wake Herriot.

I was killed dozens of times in one night. And the pain in his dreams was worse than the pain in real life.

After feeling a different kind of spiritual pain, almost devoured by spirits, I guess this is okay.

Just because you've been in pain doesn't mean a little pain isn't pain.

Luna said.

If it's easy to get better, it's easy to get hurt.

It hurts so badly, it's obviously the wrong thing to do from Luna's point of view to try to ignore the pain.

I know that pain now won't buy me happiness later.

It's obvious.

But I can't think of any other way to do it.

To avoid seeing that future I saw in the preview, where Ellen ends up killing me and I end up killing myself.

"I have a feeling it's a necessary evil."

"......I see."

I, for one, am about to die a lot.

"By the way, get some more sleep."

"Uh......?"

"Still, you should get some sleep."

Airi puts her hand on my forehead again.

I didn't feel like I slept at all, which means I need to get some real sleep.

It's hard enough to give someone you care about a nightmare on purpose.

I could have resisted all I wanted, but I surrendered my consciousness to the touch.

"This time, I'm not going to let you dream."

In fact, Airi and I both knew that the best sleep is when you don't dream at all.

\* \* \*

The most elite of the Demon King's forces began to assemble.

The Lords of the Vampire Council and the vampires under their command.

Priests and paladins of the Holy Order.

And an army that includes some of the mightiest of demons.

As a force that needs to maximize its mobility due to mass teleportation, it is not large in numbers, but an elite force of very strong individuals is beginning to form.

The Lord Vampire Houses, the Holy Order's Prelate Olivia Ranze, and Regent Charlotte select their elite soldiers.

He will lead them to clear a path of march for the armies of humanity.

Their vanguard, unbeknownst to humanity, was being organized.

-Rumble

Razak was hit by an unexpected storm.

The waves were rising, and it was getting harder to steer the boat.

The docks were bustling with activity, with ships being anchored more securely to prevent the fleet from being swept away, and the mermaids who gathered the ocean's resources had also slowed down.

A cottage in the outskirts of such and such a Rajak.

The beach in front of it.

"Daughter, why are you getting soaked in the rain?"

Duchess Yelena de Granz.

The woman, no longer a duchess but merely Yelena de Granz, approached her daughter, who was sitting idly on the beach in the rain, and asked.

"......."

Her daughter, better known by her nickname, King Brain, said nothing, just stared blankly at the waves in the distance.

Because of his duties at Fort Mokna, he saw his mother very little.

And since it's not her job to organize an army at this point, she has nothing to do until further orders from the Demon King.

So Riana was now on a non-vacation at her mother's mansion outside of Razak, one of the many villas that the Duke of Granz once owned across the continent.

The first summer vacation at the Temple. Riana spent a few days at the mansion with her friends.

I can't go back to that time. Everything has changed too much.

The word vacation is foreign to Riana.

I can't remember the last time I took a proper break.

You worked hard.

I tried to work hard at everything. I felt like I had to do something, that there was no such thing as time to relax.

There were many moments where she was faced with important choices, and she made them.

And the consequences of that choice.

Riana had created yet another huge disaster in a sad world, and she could do nothing about it.

Olivia Lanzaga.

Reinhardt.

Ellen Artorius finishes.

I have taken over and taken over the things that stem from Riana's sins.

There was nothing Riana could do about it.

Yelena looks at her daughter, who is staring blankly at the beach.

She has no title or authority in Edina. However, by order of the King, she has been granted a certain standard of living and bodyguards, though not as much as she had as a Duchess.

Of course, Yelena knows what her daughter is doing and how important she is.

Your daughter, whom you rarely see, stares blankly at the beach as soon as she gets home.

It's raining so hard, and I'm just standing there in the rain.

It's hard to tell how much guilt is in her eyes, but she eventually puts the umbrella down.

Then she sits down next to her daughter, who sits dazed.

"Riana."

"......Yes."

"Is it hard?"

"......."

At her mother's question, Riana turns her head slightly to look at her.

"I don't deserve to struggle."

"......."

"You can't tell me I'm struggling."

Riana says, and turns her attention back to the beach. Jelena places a gentle hand on her daughter's wet shoulder.

"It's so hard that you have to say that."

"......."

"If it's hard, it's okay to cry."

It's hard enough to say that you don't deserve to struggle.

It's okay to cry if it's hard.

Riana shakes her head at her mother's words.

"I can say that because I'm a mom."

"I can say that because she's my mom."

"Anyone else would have said....... I wouldn't say that."

"I don't deserve to cry."

A mother and daughter who had a terrible relationship.

However, after the death of Duke Granz, things have changed since the Gate incident.

After all, they are the only two blood relatives left in the world.

How sad that is.

What a relief that is.

They are now sadly aware of that fact.

Yelena doesn't know why her daughter is having such a hard time.

"Yeah, I don't know, I don't know why you're doing this, but I guess I can say this because I'm a mom. Because I'm a mom."

Yelena doesn't know what her daughter did.

But you can read something in those eyes.

Indelible guilt.

"I mean, no matter what you've done, no matter how unforgivable you've been. No matter what you've done, no matter how much you've wronged......."

"I'm your mom."

"Because you are my daughter."

"It's okay to cry in front of your mom."

"Even if you can't forgive yourself."

"Even if you don't think you deserve to cry."

"It's okay to cry in front of your mom."

"That's why we're family."

At that, Riana looks at Yelena.

Rhianna, who didn't allow herself to cry because she didn't think she deserved it.

He still can't forgive himself and doesn't know how to come to terms with the many deaths and harms he caused.

I've killed countless people with my own hands.

It killed a lot of people.

-currrrr

On a stormy beach, Riana eventually broke down in front of her mother's smile.

"Mom......."

"Yes."

"You have committed the unpardonable....... sin."

"I see."

"Unforgivable, I thought. Worse than I thought....... Worse than I hoped....... More than I could have ever imagined....... has happened."

Yelena held her daughter still as she began to squirm, her face contorted into a hideous contortion.

"I see......."

"Mom....... Me....... I am....... I don't know how, what to do....... I don't know......."

Yelena couldn't give her daughter the answer.

"If I....... I don't know if I hate something after all, if I'm trying to avenge my dad, if it's okay to be me....... I don't know anymore......."

All I can do is hold her in my arms as she cries with guilt and cry with her.

"That's what I thought....... My daughter. That's what I was thinking....... you were thinking......."

Holding her daughter in her arms, Yelena de Granz brushes her daughter's wet hair and back in the rain.

No answers, no advice, no nothing.

But you can hold them and cry with them.

That's what family is.

"Hmph....... 으흐흑......."

Thunder King (雷鳴王).

Liana de Granz faints in her mother's arms.

The tears that the lightning-wielding psychic has been holding back finally spill out.

Then the sky starts to open up.

The dark clouds have lifted, and the sun is shining through them, a deceptive sight.

It's a muddled image created by real tears, shed from the heart.

The storm created by her powers dissipated in Riana's fever.

Yelena and Riana could only stare at the lying landscape through their tears.

She was Liana de Granz, who learned to control lightning in a fit of rage.

In her grief and guilt, Riana's abilities took another step forward.

\* \* \*

"Uh....... What?"

I could only stare in disbelief for a moment as Riana spoke.

"The last storm, it stopped suddenly."

"You did, I guess?"

The storm came out of nowhere, rumbled on for a few days, and then suddenly tore the sky apart.

This was a very strange phenomenon and caused quite a stir amongst myself and Razak.

Then Riana came by and said she suddenly thought it was her.

"So the storm ended because of me. I don't know if the storm started because of me in the first place......."

"......."

"I know it sounds crazy, I know."

I can see the doubt in her eyes, wondering if the chain of events has caused her to lose her mind. Riana blushed and muttered something incoherent.

"But the timing is....... I don't know what to do with that."

"What's with the timing?"

"That....... Well....... that......."

Riana hesitantly began to explain to me what had happened over the past few days.

Eventually, Riana's eyes widened and she started to sob, unable to wipe the guilt from her face, unable to stop feeling sorry for herself.

Despite all of this, Riana would have been miserable.

It would have been painful to the point of wanting to die.

It was quite painful to see that side of Riana, who had always been strong and tough.

Riana's explanation was long, but it boiled down to this.

I hugged my mom and sobbed, and the storm stopped.

"Gee, really....... I know that's really weird, but the timing of that....... like that!"

Riana's eyes were bright red, her face flushed, and she shouted, then suddenly shrank back.

"That, that....... That's not something I should be upset about. Sorry......."

"Just be yourself, as usual. I don't want to blame you, and I don't want to see you different."

It's more uncomfortable to see her slumped over like this.

"Hmmm....... So we need to verify that you can control the weather, or that you're a psychopath who thinks he can control the weather."

"The horse is......! Do you want the horse to do that?"

"Well, I can see that you're definitely not in the right frame of mind in terms of losing your temper."

The way her anger flared up and then she couldn't even take a picture because she was so sorry for me, I knew she wasn't normal.

"Come with me, I think I need to check it out."

I take Riana's arm and lead her.

"If you can really control the weather, why don't you do it here?"

People will say the sky is falling.

\* \* \*

It's also possible that Riana is mistaken.

The knot in my stomach manifested itself in the form of a storm, and the moment it was released, the weather cleared.

I'm sure if someone told me that, I'd introduce them to Airi. You're clearly mentally ill and need to get some counseling.

But it wasn't just anyone who said that, it was Liana de Granz.

In the original, Riana's abilities were specific to the Blitz, but as the story progressed, her abilities became more than just the Blitz itself.

It's now possible to stick a wing in dry air.

Thunderbolt.

A blast from the sky.

Soon the sky.

It's not out of the realm of possibility that Riana's abilities could evolve into weather-related abilities.

If Riana's ability has indeed evolved to cause weather changes, there's no telling how she might use it later.

But we need to check it out first.

Of course, you need to know that you can cause weather changes and to what extent.

Since we can't do this in Razak, we'll need to go somewhere off the beaten path.

"Deserted island?"

"Yeah, I need to check on something."

So, I took Riana to find Lucinil.

\* \* \*

Since the Edina Archipelago is a collection of islands, there were many uninhabited islands in the first place.

One of the unnamed islands, which is quite a distance from the inhabited islands.

After getting information from the mermaids about the deserted island and confirming the coordinates, Lucinil cast Mass Teleport and traveled with them.

"It's a nice view."

In the first place, it's a place where the emerald waters shine.

In my Temple days, I used to come here for summer vacations.

The disconnect between this soothing landscape and the real work I have to do and what's happening on the continent is strange to me.

"But what are you going to do on a desert island?"

Lucinil tilted her head as if to say, "I'm here because you asked me to, but what are you going to do?

I look at Riana.

"I heard that Riana's superpowers might be more advanced, so I'm going to find out."

"More advanced?"

Lucinil shook his head, as if summoning a lightning bolt was already an impressive feat, and there was nothing more to be gained from it.

Yeah, I'm wondering about that too.

You've found a deserted island, but it's a sunny beach just like any other vacation spot.

"Let's do whatever it is."

At my words, Riana scratches her cheek in confusion.

"Well, you know what......."

"What is that?"

"No, I'm saying....... Before I told you....... you wouldn't have tried to do it yourself......."

a.

I think I know what the problem is.

"......I don't know how to use it?"

"......."

Riana has some awareness that her powers have improved, but she doesn't know how to use them yet. It's not impossible that it's actually just a coincidence.

"ugh......."

Riana concentrates on the shimmering emerald waters.

-Flash!

I could see hundreds of thunderbolts streaking across the sky and slamming into the ocean.

The flash of a thunderbolt piercing a very distant ocean.

And.

-Currrrrr!

Deafening thunder rumbled in my ears, staggered by time.

A thunderbolt in dry air, a few moments of concentration, and you've got hundreds of them.

The aggressiveness of Riana's abilities ranges from good to disastrous.

"This isn't it."

"......So."

Riana nods shakily at my words.

Awesome is awesome, but what you need to do is change the weather, not summon lightning.

"Something....... that feels like it can do something, but also feels like it can't....... It's a really weird feeling."

The origin and workings of psychic powers are unknown, even to the psychics themselves.

So Riana was in a state where she felt like she could do it, but she had no clue.

Lucinil is an archmage, but he doesn't know anything about psychic powers, so he just shakes his head.

-blink, blink, blink, blink!

In the end, Riana fought for a long time, sending thunderbolts into the sea.

It looked like it wanted to summon something other than lightning, but no matter how hard I tried, it wouldn't show up.

-Currrrrr!

It must have been twenty minutes or so.

"But, Archdemon."

"Yes, my lord."

"I know lightning strikes at sea level and nothing happens, but....... what if mermaids stick their heads out to see what's going on and get struck by lightning?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"......!"

Just in case.

A lightning strike in the ocean isn't going to kill the fish, but it might electrocute some mermaids who happen to stick their heads out.

Eventually, the three of us, including Riana, sat down on the beach.

"Just....... Was I mistaken......?"

Riana began to seriously consider that she might be a psychopath who believes she can cause weather changes.

Lucinil was understandably dumbfounded.

"But you know....... and when you could summon lightning......."

"Uh, ah....... Yeah."

With the death of her father, Riana is able to summon lightning.

And if Riana did indeed awaken a new power, it would be a new power triggered by some emotional state.

"So, if you're going to be able to wield a new power from some emotion......."

"So I just need to get into that emotional state?"

It was Lucinil, not Riana, who picked up where I left off.

"If a superpower is the ability to respond to emotions, then this time you were able to change the....... weather change, you should be in a similar state to what you were then, right?"

Lucinil says, smiling broadly.

"Then let's make it feel like that."

Me.......

By the way.

He must have been in a very bad mental state.

Isn't it painful to have to artificially put yourself in that state?

Riana's complexion turned an earthy color when she heard Lucinil's suggestion.

I wouldn't say I'm in a great state of mind right now, but I'm in a great state of mind on purpose.

You were probably feeling depressed or something not unlike that.

If you're in a situation like that, and you've caused the weather to change without realizing it, you're being depressed on purpose.

And to send Riana into a downward spiral of depression.

It's pretty easy when you think about it.

About five minutes of watching Riana grimace, unable to do this or that.

"Hey."

"......?"

"Help?"

Riana tilted her head at my offhand remark.

"You're helping....... What?"

"Enough details, help?"

Riana didn't seem to have a clue what I was talking about.

"If you can help....... would be great......."

"Um, yeah."

I grab Riana by the shoulders and look him in the eye.

"Don't take what I'm about to say the wrong way, I'm trying to help you. Okay?"

"Uh......? No, what the hell are you talking about......."

"It's all because of you."

Riana is broken.

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Riana squatted on the beach, head down, speechless.

-Rumble

"I don't think that's a coincidence, do you?"

"......Yes."

The sky, which had just been a brilliant blue, was now dark with dark clouds, and I could hear thunder rumbling in the clouds.

If there's anyone in Edina right now who could kill Riana with words, it's me.

It's all because of you.

With those words, Riana stared blankly at the grains of sand on the beach.

I'm not serious.

Riana wanted to find out for herself if she could really change the weather when she was in an extreme mood, so she said something she didn't mean.

And that back view.

That's what you were thinking.

It's more painful to me.

Riana stares at the sand for a long time, then lifts her head to look up at the blackened sky.

I can't help but notice that it's definitely working.

How long has it been.

Riana gets up, dead-eyed, and walks over to me.

"Some more."

"......?"

"More, say something."

No.

I know what you're thinking!

"...... is so perverted you guys."

Lucinil looks back and forth between the dead-eyed Riana and me with an exasperated expression.

"Is ...... okay?"

I'd do it if I had to, but I'm afraid I'd be stomping all over Riana's already half-dead psyche.

It looks like it's going to crumble if you tap it.

"No, it's not good, it's not good, I want you to do more."

It's definitely working, so beat it some more.

Is this okay?

As I listened, I wondered if Riana was going to strangle herself.

Tearing a kid's mind apart verbally, even if it's for the sake of awakening their abilities, when they're already mentally unhinged....... I already did it, but is it okay to do more than this?

"......Okay."

After all, Riana is asking for it.

In the end, hearing some words of rebuke from me may be part of the process for Riana to come to terms with herself.

Maybe it's better to be criticized than to hear nothing at all.

I don't know, but Riana may need my criticism, regardless of her awakened powers.

I got yelled at, and I paid the price.

I don't think so, but it might make her feel a little better.

I sat down next to her, leaving Riana in the sand for now.

And talk about things that are terrible to say.

"To be honest, it's not all you."

Once you've decided to do it, you don't want to do it in moderation.

"This is what happened because of this and that, right?"

"......."

"Well, a lot of people died, and....... Olivia's sister had a rough go of it, and I almost died, too......."

"......."

"Later, it became a matter of me killing Ellen, or me having to kill Ellen......."

"......."

"So, for the past few days, I've been having nightmares about Ellen killing me on purpose, so that I won't be so easily killed later."

"......."

"So....... all of this."

"......."

"How did this happen, and is it all because of you?"

Riana's lips quirk up.

Eventually, Riana burst into tears, her whole body shaking.

"Sorry....... Sorry....... Sorry....... Sorry, Reinhard......."

Even though she knew I was doing this on purpose, she couldn't help but be distracted by my words.

"I....... I did it all wrong....... It's all my fault. It's all, it's all my fault....... It's all because of me......."

I put my hand on Riana's shoulder as she shivers, and whisper in his ear.

"You said it's all your fault. You didn't say you did anything right, did you?"

Never.

"Well, what did you do right?"

"Black....... ugh....... ugh! ugh......! ugh!"

I didn't want to do anything half-assed.

Soon, it started to rain.

-Kurrrrrr

The rain soon became a storm.

\* \* \*

-Shoot!

A storm was brewing with fierce winds.

The waves roared, and the thunderclouds raged, sending sharp bolts of thunder to the earth.

At this point, it's clear.

Riana is right to realize that she has the ability to control the weather.

Not even a goblin.

When you cry, it rains.

I stand on the beach, facing the raging sea and the pounding rain.

-Hey, you know Valerie doesn't really think that way.

-Ah, I know....... I know....... I know. I know....... I know....... ugh....... Ugh.......

-Uh-oh. Let's be gentle with him. You've completely destroyed him.

Lucinil had Riana under a palm tree and was patting her back, trying to soothe her somehow.

You realize you've said more than that.

But maybe that's what she needed.

Riana didn't pay for her mistake, and she couldn't be held accountable for anything that happened because of it.

So even a little.

Even if it's a rebuke or an accusation.

I'd rather hear something like this than have to pay a small price for it.

It doesn't make me feel any better, but I wonder what it means to be blamed for it.

A storm is brewing, a thunderstorm is brewing.

The harsh sound of the wind against my skin, the raindrops hitting my face in the wind.

Weather changes.

Is that it?

Is that it?

I stand in front of Riana, who is sitting under a palm tree, with Lucinil petting her.

"Archdemon, stop......."

Reading the determination in my expression, Rusinil shook his head in pity.

But I don't intend to stop.

"Riana."

"......Yes."

Riana struggles to lift her head and looks at me.

"Wake up."

"Stop it, you've checked, what else are you going to do here, huh?"

Lucinil shook her head, grabbing Riana by the collar as she tried to get up at my command.

We know that weather changes are possible.

Riana's abilities have evolved.

Riana's expression was miserable and desperate as she tried to hold back her tears somehow.

"What the hell am I going to do with this?"

"......."

"Pull it out a little more."

I point to the beach.

"What difference does it make if we make it rain a little bit?"

Can rain kill monsters?

Can you kill monsters with wind?

Lightning was originally a power that could be used.

"Some more."

"......."

"Show me something more useful."

"......."

"If you're going to take responsibility for what you've done, you're going to have to show me something more useful than this."

"......."

"Do you think that's enough?"

"......No."

Riana shakes her head in disbelief.

I don't know if that's what he meant or not.

Riana has blossomed a new ability, and it's definitely no ordinary one.

But Riana found a new use for herself and reported it to me.

Then some more.

Something more substantial, something more practical, something more useful.

More disruptive.

There should be such a thing.

I said something I didn't mean to say to provoke Riana.

But not from now on.

"Show me. If it's not there, make it happen."

I'm serious.

"If you're going to be held accountable for what you've done, you're going to have to show me something more than this, am I right?"

"Valerie, you are!"

Lucinil finally gets impatient and grabs the hem of my shirt.

"Well."

"......."

Meeting my gaze, Lucinil froze, unable to say anything more to me.

"Am I wrong, answer me."

"......You're right."

You can't kill a monster with a rainstorm.

So something, something bigger.

Something more destructive.

"If you know, do it."

Is it possible to be responsible for sin?

I don't know.

But Riana and I are alive and we've decided to do something about it.

This requires strength.

If hope is power, then we must find it.

If anger is empowering, then you should embrace it.

If desperation is strength.

You should eat despair.

At my harsh command, Riana stares at the beach with dead eyes.

I don't know if it was the power of my words or the despair and depression that my words stirred in Riana.

-Currrrrrrr!

In the distance, I could see a giant molten rock rising, sucking up the seawater.

Lucinil stared at the disaster, open-mouthed, beyond the overwhelming weather phenomenon.

I didn't settle for a storm, and when I dug a little deeper, I found this power.

Power enough to cause a disaster beyond a storm.

Riana may be the most powerful psychic of them all.

That's it.

I'll need to get more comfortable with the force here before I can use it in the real world.

By the way.

But you know what?

"That....... I know that's not what you're going to say after all this shit......?"

"......?"

I could feel Riana's panic as my tone returned to normal after all the commanding and berating.

No.

I tried to get the ability out somehow, and it's good that I did.

-Currrrr!

I could practically feel the violent storms generated by the giant lava flows.

"Can you get rid of that....... Can you get rid of that?"

I was thinking about pulling it out, but not at all about how to get rid of it.

Riana and I lock eyes.

"......."

"......."

It's no wonder I'm helpless, and it's no wonder she's helpless.

Even if it's a deserted island.

What the heck is going to happen when that tornado touches down in a populated area?

Eventually, the last card.

I couldn't help but look at Lucinil the Archmage.

"Well, my lord. Can't you do something with your magic?"

"...... I know the magic of calling a tornado, but do I know the magic of dismantling a naturally occurring tornado, and the magic of calling a tornado can't even bring me back from the dead on that scale."

Lucinil was equally helpless.

In the end, it comes back to the basics.

This is a weather phenomenon created in response to Riana's depressive imagery.

That said, once Riana's sanity is restored, the storm and the maelstrom disappear.

"You do realize this was all just talk, right?"

"......."

Riana's face contorts at my words, and she begins to burst into tears again.

That's it.

You know, the one where you get scolded by your parents and can't even cry, but when they pat you on the back, you burst into tears.

"ugh....... Ugh....... Hmph!"

"Whoops, yeah. Cry. I felt bad."

I start patting Riana on the back. Lucinil, drenched in rain, looks at me with a frightened expression.

"Bali, are you really....... You're a real piece of shit."

"......."

Anyway, me and Lucinil soothed Riana all the way through.

Fortunately, the molten metal quickly dissipated.

The storm continued to fall.

\* \* \*

Since we still had quite a bit of time before deployment, Riana, Rusinil, and I were able to spend a little more time training on the desert island.

Of course, we weren't eating and sleeping on a deserted island. I'm training with a mass-teleporting archmage, and there's no reason why I should be.

"You go home and sleep tonight."

"......home?"

"Go to your mother's and sleep. Come to the castle tomorrow before noon."

I instructed Riana, who looked puzzled. Riana shook her head, her expression still grim, as if it was necessary.

"Go hold your mom's hand and go to sleep. Why do you have to be in a bad mood all the time, even if it's the strength that comes from being in a bad mood?"

"I'm just doing this for ......, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

I chuckled, and Riana looked like she was going to cry again.

I'm rather impressed with your puns, as usual.

"Yeah, I'm going to go home and cuddle with my mom because I'm depressed, dammit."

Riana smiled wistfully, almost self-deprecatingly, and strode off.

"Hah, powers that come from being depressed. Being a superpower is complicated."

"Still, it's better than no power."

"......Yes."

Lucinil looked wistfully after Riana as she walked away.

\* \* \*

That night.

"Riana?"

"Uh."

Today was one of those days when I didn't call for Airi, so it was just me and Harriet in the bedroom.

"Manipulating weather events....... That's crazy."

Harriet sat up in bed, her eyes shining with excitement as she scribbled in her journal.

You can even call a tornado.

But it doesn't end there, and Riana's abilities certainly have more potential.

You can make it cloudy, you can make it rain, you can make it snow, you can make it hail.

Taking it a step further, what about natural disasters like earthquakes?

We don't know the full extent of Riana's superpower potential.

For now, we'll focus on developing Riana's abilities until she's ready to go.

"So Riana's powers only manifest when she's depressed?"

"Uh, so the harsh words made me feel like I was depressing not only her, but also myself."

"Harsh words?"

"What....... You know, this thing......."

"ah......."

Herriot nodded wearily, as if he knew what she meant without being told in detail.

Not for me, who had to say it, not for Riana, who had to hear it, and not for Lucinil, who had to watch it unfold.

We couldn't hammock each other.

"That must have been hard....... You, too, Riana."

I couldn't help but feel horrible, wondering if I'd have to do this again tomorrow.

She was writing something down in her journal, thinking about it, writing it down again, thinking about it, writing it down again.

"Well, ....... But, come to think of it, do I really need to?"

Harriet looks at me as if she's remembered something.

"Do you have to....... What, do you have to say something you don't like?"

"Yeah, do I have to?"

"I couldn't care less because it seems to give me strength when I'm depressed......."

"No, if being depressed is a condition, I don't need you to....... say something you don't even want to say."

"So how do you make it depressing?"

This whole situation is weird and awful in and of itself, seriously talking about how to make your friends depressed, but this.

"I thought medication would be enough?"

"......?"

What is.

What does that mean?

"Wouldn't it be enough to mix up a mood-lowering drug? Why do you have to say such....... hurtful things to say."

"No, that....... that....... bad?"

The word "medication" makes me cringe, so I couldn't help but think that Harriet's words sounded harsh.

"As long as there are no side effects."

"......, right?"

"A drug that makes you feel depressed, except for the addictive part and stuff. I guess there's nothing you can't do if you want to make it."

While Christina was responsible for the creation of the Moonshine, which, in retrospect, is the secret of alchemy, Herriot played a role in the creation of the Power Cartridge as well as the Moonshine.

So it stands to reason that Herriot must have some knowledge of alchemy as well.

Herriot scribbled something in his research journal, then tore off a page and handed it to me.

"I'll show it to the Lord of Demand, and he'll know what it is, so you can mix it up and feed it to him."

"Well, it's still medicine....... Are you sure you're okay?"

"...... You don't believe me?"

"That's not true, but......."

At the mention of drugs, Harriet's eyes widen in horror.

If you're going to beat me up and make me depressed, you might as well do it with drugs, because when the drugs wear off, I'll feel better.

If Herriot is right, and there are no side effects, I think this might be exactly what Riana needs.

No.

But to be prescribed antidepressants instead of antidepressants later in life is just ridiculous.

Is this right?

"As with all medicines, long robes are a no-no, just so you know."

With that, Harriet turned her attention back to her journal.

Power is nice, but you can't hurt someone with words like this.

They'll just end up eating each other.

So use drugs instead.

That was Herriot's prescription.

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Rumors have spread throughout the Alliance that the warrior, Ellen Artorius, has awakened another power.

They all marveled at the sight of the battlefield as the main body marched forward and the vanguard swept through the monsters.

A huge wave of flames poured from the sun's cloak protecting the warrior, sweeping the monsters away.

Lesser monsters are reduced to ash in waves of flame, while those that can withstand the flames are known for their Voidblades, which slice through anything.

The warrior was the judgment of the sun and moon, sweeping the waves of monsters from the front.

But the flames of hatred pouring from the sun's cloak did not shield Pia.

As such, no one could get in the middle of a fight that Ellen was sweeping away.

Most of the Allies were encouraged by the fact that the warriors had grown stronger.

When we say most, we mean not all, after all.

While everyone marvels at the warrior's majesty, the troops from the Temple who know Ellen are uncomfortable with the appearance of Ellen Artorius.

Something is wrong with Ellen.

He was already soft-spoken, but even more so than usual.

His eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he would occasionally grab his head and say strange things.

After marching, a reinstalled garrison.

The garrison was visited by the emperor and the popes of the five major orders.

Under the guise of improving the morale of the Crusaders as well as the Allies, the Emperor, unlike the Popes, had an ulterior motive.

He had come to check on Ellen Artorius after receiving a report from Saviolin Tana that she was not feeling well.

Ellen Artorius' Tent, inside the Temple Garrison.

"Ellen."

"......Yes."

Emperor Bertus was understandably disturbed by Ellen's condition.

Bertus sat across from her, staring blankly at Ellen, who was staring off into space with cloudy eyes.

At Bertus' side was only Saviolin Tana.

Ellen has awakened another power she hasn't been able to use until now.

But aside from being stronger, there was something seriously wrong with Ellen Artorius.

"You look like you're sick."

"......."

Everyone who knew Ellen saw her and asked how she was doing.

Are you sick, are you okay.

But every time Ellen heard that question, she shook her head.

She's just tired, she says. Ellen scanned her surroundings with cloudy eyes and a narrowed brow.

Like you want to see what's around you.

Ellen sees the figure of Bertus, and the figure of Tana, the violinist, standing beside him.

"Not long ago, I met....... Reinhardt."

Ellen still had a sense of self.

\* \* \*

Bertus and Saviolin Tana know the truth about the Gate situation.

So Ellen decided it was okay to tell them what had happened.

Reinhardt was dying, and he took on the burden.

When I briefly explained what had happened, Bertus and Saviolin Tana were stunned.

A phenomenon caused by too many deaths. It overtook Reinhardt, and Ellen inherited it.

There was no way Ellen could be in her right mind.

"Call me irresponsible, but I can't help it....... I had to do it, I guess."

"......."

"......."

I had to save Reinhardt, Ellen mumbles in a dazed, almost stunned state.

Neither Bertus nor Tana could deny that it was reckless.

However, it's not like we don't recognize Ellen's desire to save Reinhardt in that situation.

"My ego will probably fade away, but it won't hurt people....... obviously."

Even if the self disappears, it does no harm to the humans who carry the hatred of the demon. You will only become a puppet with nothing but hatred for the demon.

When Ellen tells Bertus and Tana about her secret meeting with Reinhardt, it's not for any other reason.

Now that she's unleashed Rafelt's true power, Ellen is stronger.

"So, when the whole Gate thing is over....... kill me......."

After the gate incident, Ellen, with her self gone, is going to try to kill the Devil.

"Before I, Reinhardt, tried to kill you......."

So, let them die when they've served their purpose.

Ellen turned to Tana and Bertus.

\* \* \*

"What is this."

"......."

-Currrrrrr!

An alchemical drug concocted by Lucinil from a recipe given to him by Herriot.

After eating it, Riana summoned three tornadoes to the beach in quick succession.

I don't know if this is correct or not, but it seemed like the only way to really bring out the power.

Of course.

"......."

It was very distressing to see Riana dead with a pale complexion.

"......Let's only use it when we really need it."

"I guess so......."

Riana nodded slowly in agreement with Lucinil's words.

It was a dangerous drug that was too sure to work.

I won't be able to trigger her abilities by grinding her to a pulp.

What to say.

Riana's struggle was almost painful to watch.

In a way, it looks like they're being punished.

In any case, the bottom line is clear.

After taking a depressant, Riana is invincible.

\* \* \*

Riana's medication had a definite effect.

I don't know if you can call this a drug.

Not a pill to make you feel better, but a pill to make you depressed.

Can a drug be called a drug if it has the opposite effect?

In fact, I'd argue that it's what makes the drug worthy of its name.

They say it won't have any side effects, but I don't think you can use it very often because it's almost like it's a side effect.

The more you use it, the sicker it makes you.

That's probably why Herriot said not to wear it.

Riana focused on Herriot's words, not that she shouldn't wear it, but that it would have no side effects other than the potency itself.

Even when I wasn't looking, Riana was practicing with Lucinil on a deserted island, as if trying to get to the bottom of her abilities.

It's nice to have accelerated ability progression, but is it really a good thing?

Riana was abusing herself.

Olivia and the Lord Vampires were well on their way to selecting their elite and preparing for war.

From the moment we step forward, the army's march will accelerate, and the gate will be closed faster and faster.

And aside from preparing for war, other things were happening, one by one.

I was also fighting with Ellen in my dreams every other day.

Still, it didn't work.

If I'm not in the right frame of mind to hurt Ellen, I'm at a disadvantage.

The Voidblade Ramen will cut through everything it touches, except for holy objects.

Even if I became a masterclass, I was still lacking in overall specs, and I wasn't prepared for the fight.

I had to suffer a defeat that would end in one hundred and one, my death.

The pain I felt in my dreams in the moments leading up to my death was a bonus.

"This is already done?"

"Yeah. That wasn't that hard."

I stared open-mouthed at the milky white obelisk that replaced the fountain in Razak's main square.

People coming and going were looking at the suddenly erected obelisk and scratching their heads as if they wanted to know what it was, but they didn't really know what it was.

By my side were Harriet and Airi.

"The scribe's abilities are truly, truly amazing."

"Well, is that......."

Unaccustomed to compliments, Herriot scratched his cheek at Airi's words.

Obelisk of Dreams.

Herriot not only succeeds in interpreting the magic of his dreams, but also quickly succeeds in artifactualizing them.

I feel like I've been scribbling research notes for days, and now I'm trying to make this.

"We'll pilot it for now, and if it works well, we'll roll it out to other regions."

"Good."

I don't know how much a good night's sleep can mean at this time of year, but as someone who has had some pretty ferocious dreams, I'm sure it's something that will help people.

\* \* \*

Interfering with dreams is not technically magic, but rather an ability unique to succubi.

Herriot's ability to turn them into artifacts was already beyond the capabilities of most archmages.

Herriot's capabilities are nowhere near what they were as a freshman.

You've gone from being one of the most talented geniuses in the history of magic, to being fully capable of it.

Oddly enough, it was Charlotte who helped Herriot develop the artifact so quickly.

In the past, when I've had to act as her assistant, she hasn't been able to take time for herself.

But Charlotte is doing a great job of doing what needs to be done without being an assistant, so Harriet can spend all her time doing what she wants to do.

But this.

This feels a little weird.

In the end, it's a good thing that Herriot is able to focus all of his time on his research.

It's nice that Charlotte has taken over everything I've been doing and is doing it better than I ever could.

But it was a little too objective to realize that I was being an idiot and taking up her time.

It's kind of like.

I have to admit, I'm feeling a little self-conscious.

"......."

"What's wrong?"

That night, as we sat in bed getting ready for bed, she looked at me and shook her head when I didn't say anything.

"......what?"

"Are you angry?"

"No, not at all."

"...... doesn't look happy."

I don't feel like I've offended you, and there's no reason to be upset. Technically, I wish it hadn't been implemented so quickly, but there's no reason to feel bad about it.

At my denial, Harriet glares at me.

Come to think of it.

I've spent the most time with Harriet since we took over Edina's government.

So, because he's spent so much time with me, he's the most sensitive to my mood swings.

Literally, I can fool anyone else, but I can't fool Herriot.

In the end, I couldn't help but sigh at the gaze.

"No, I'm just wondering if I've been taking up too much of your time."

"My time......?"

"Yeah, this is what you get for just this much focus, and if I could have run the country on my own, you could have done something else. Something more constructive and progressive. ....... What can I say, you could have done something that only you can do......."

Herriot was too good to be my assistant.

But everyone else around me was busy doing their own thing. I reluctantly let Harriet serve as my assistant, but she was an irreplaceable asset.

If Harriet hadn't been my assistant and had been working on her research, she could have been doing something greater, something that only she could do.

I wish I was a little better at it.

Now that Charlotte, whose qualities were clearly superior to my own, had taken the reigns, I could not help but think of what I could have accomplished in the time that had already passed.

"What the....... was that?"

"I know it's a dumb question, but what can I do about it?"

I sighed, and Harriet smiled wryly.

"Well....... Hmm......."

Harriet squats on her bed, contemplating.

"What I could have done if I had been doing something else....... I honestly don't know, because I was busy, just like you were busy."

"......."

"Still, I liked it."

Harriet looks at me as she says that.

"It was nice to be close to you."

"......Yes."

It leaves me speechless.

I couldn't bring myself to look at Herriot's face.

"Just because I could have done something else doesn't mean that the work we did together is gone, and just because Charlotte can do what we did faster and better doesn't mean that the work we've somehow done is worthless."

"......Yes."

Yes, you're right.

Age seems to have become irrelevant at some point.

At some point, I realize that I'm relying too much on the people around me, and in some ways, they're wiser than I am.

Not to mention being nice to listen to.

It may not mean anything to you, but that's what people need.

Herriot was, and still is, the closest thing to me.

Herriot said he's glad he did.

Aside from the practical efficiency and other possibilities.

I'll admit, I liked it.

From that point on, Herriot was dedicated to me.

I mean, they were trying to give me everything.

When she finished, she went back to writing in her journal.

Now that she doesn't have to act as my assistant, she's still busy.

I keep trying to find something to do.

"But why don't you take it easy? Do you have any more work to do?"

"I guess we'll have to wait and see about the obelisk, but not much else."

"Anything else?"

"I'm learning about the art of betrothal, Lord of Demand."

Engagement.

You're suddenly learning the art of seduction from Lucinil in the middle of all this? At my question, Harriet looked at me and smiled sadly.

"Ellen, you're going to have to get it back somehow."

"ah......."

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

"This is what we had to do because we ran out of time. There might have been another way."

"......."

"I don't want to forget that Ellen took on everything."

Harriet writes in her research journal.

"Ellen is also my friend."

It was Herriot, not Antony, who suggested that Ellen shoulder the burden.

Ellen is also a friend of Harriet's.

I had forgotten the obvious for far too long.

She's been writing in her journal for a while and suddenly looks back at me.

"So don't try to thank me."

"Uh......?"

"Well, that makes me feel bad."

To Herriot's question, I had no answer.

Episode 514.

After the Gate debacle, Ellen asked Tana and Bertus to kill her.

"You can't do that.

'There has to be another way. Ellen.'

Naturally, they had no intention of granting Ellen's request.

It's the hope of humanity, and it's not for nothing that Ellen should remain a symbol of hope for the rebuilding of humanity after the Gate is over.

Because I don't think Ellen deserves to die that way.

Bertus said he would find a way. Gather the remaining Five Lords and perform a cleansing ritual or whatever.

He said he would do anything to get Ellen back.

Bertus immediately set up a meeting with the five patriarchs who were inspecting the garrison.

"Is this what you mean when you say the warrior is possessed?"

"We don't know why, but it's eating away at the warrior's ego, and we need to gather all the priests for a purification ritual right away."

Bertus didn't mention that Ellen had voluntarily accepted the spirits, because he didn't need to.

The strongest army in the world, it is home to the majority of the priests and paladins of the Crusader Order.

With the power of the priests of the Five Great Houses, they cleanse Ellen's body and soul of spirits.

Whether it's possible or not, you should try.

"Do I really need to?"

"......What?"

Bertus narrowed his eyes at the Cult of Alth pontiff's words.

"If the spirits are more than even a warrior can handle, and he ends up losing his self. Doesn't that mean they are reborn as someone more suited to be a warrior?"

This time it was the Pope of the Tuan Order.

The worship of the God of Purity is actually an affirmation of the warrior's situation, as he is being consumed by unclean spirits.

"I have heard that the warrior has awakened new powers and is more powerful than before. If so, it is because of the added power of the spirit within him. What could be more right for mankind than for the warrior to be stronger?"

Bertus gritted his teeth at the Cult of Als pope's comment.

Tuan and Alth's Relics chose the Demon.

As such, they are in a very bad position compared to other denominations.

It's no wonder the crowds shun the two denominations, and priests and paladins find themselves on the outs even in this garrison.

It is Tuan and the Cult of Alth popes who most desire the Demon's demise.

Once the Demon is dead and gone, we can dream of rebuilding the Order.

While it's true that the newer religion, the Cult of the Champion, has the most support right now, the two Orb Lords who chose the Champion, Mensis and Shalam, are also very popular with the public.

The Cult of Riter, the God of Courage, has nothing to do with demons or warriors, but at least they're out of harm's way.

Thus, as the Demon rises, the Cult of Riter and Mensis gains support.

It is ironic that the popes of the Alsatuan Order, who can only dream of rebuilding the Order if the Demon dies anyway, must hope for the Demon's death even though their god has chosen him.

So, regardless of the circumstances, I'm in favor of Ellen Artorius being reduced to a demon-hating shell of a warrior.

Just as the popes of the Tuan and Als wish for the death of the Demon, so do the popes of the other three orders.

Only when the demon is dead, and the warrior has fulfilled his role and lost his symbolism, will the religion of the Cult of the Warrior cease to exist.

Only then can the Five Great Houses regain control of the continental faith.

The popes of the Five Great Houses of God had hoped for the death of the Demon King.

"You know what the devil intended, don't you?"

Most importantly, they were among the very few people who knew the truth about what happened at Gate.

The popes of the Five Great Houses were present when the demon Reinhardt was interrogated.

As such, he knew that the warrior Ellen Artorius would not be able to truly kill the demon.

At that, the Pope of the Order of the Ritter stares at Bertus.

"Isn't the Imperial House of Gradias the biggest culprit in causing the Gate to happen because they don't trust the Devil?"

"......."

"Now that you know the demon is good, do you feel some sort of obligation, some sort of duty, to try to prevent more sad things from happening to the demon and the hero?"

Bertus was speechless at this.

Because, as the Pope of the Order of the Ritter says, it's all horrifyingly true.

"Your Majesty, there is no point in regretting something that has already happened."

"Whether the devil is good or evil, it doesn't matter now."

"Before Gate happened. If we had believed that about two years ago, a lot of things would have been different."

"It's too late to believe the devil, so our caring for him won't change anything."

"After Gate, good and evil have become meaningless, and the only definition is survival, and nothing more."

"What's good and evil in a fight for survival?"

"The devil must die."

"Not because it is good, but because it is necessary for the survival of humanity, the empire, and the Five Great Houses."

Bertus was speechless at the words of the Pope of the Order of the Ritter.

Bertus could not utter a single word of rebuttal to those truths that seemed to stab him in the heart.

I should have believed it sooner.

Now, if you believe in the devil, nothing changes.

It was all true, and Bertus could only remain silent in his misery.

"Since the warrior was so close to the demon and she knows the truth about all of this, everyone in this room knows that she is someone who cannot truly harm the demon."

The people in this room know things that most people don't.

Those who know the truth know that warriors are not the ones who can fulfill people's faith.

He knows that the warrior cannot fulfill his desire to defeat the demon.

But things have changed.

The warrior's ego, his inability to hate the demon, will be gone, and once the spirits have consumed him, the warrior will be able to do what he truly needs to do.

The popes have no reason to help cleanse Ellen's soul of the spirits, whether they can or not.

"So the way things have turned out, it can only be a good thing for humanity."

Berthe and Tana look at the five popes.

No one is willing to help.

The Crusaders are ultimately driven by the orders of their leader, Elayon Bolton, and the Five Primarchs.

And is this really a bad thing for humanity.

Bertus couldn't argue with that.

And you're the one who caused all of this by not trusting Reinhardt when you should have.

When Reinhardt was interrogated, the five patriarchs were practically bridesmaids.

Saying that the real blame lies with the Imperial House of Gradias is not a provocation, it's simply the truth.

As such, Bertus knew best that he had no right to blame them.

In the fight for survival, there is no right or wrong.

The great patristic popes were no longer followers of God.

A man who fought only for the survival of the Church and its authority was not worthy to be called Pope.

But in the fight for survival, it's not about survival and rebuilding humanity, it's about heroes and demons.

To feel sorry for them is to prevent their predestined futures, which have nothing to do with the survival and hope of humanity, and to seek coexistence with an unrealizable demon.

Does he really deserve to be called the Emperor of Mankind.

The popes weren't popes.

The emperor was also not an emperor.

\* \* \*

After the meeting concluded, the popes began inspecting the garrisons again to encourage the Crusaders.

In the command center barracks on the hill, Bertus was perched on one of the scattered wooden crates, looking out over the garrison.

"Your Majesty......."

"......."

Saviolin Tana looked at Bertus with concern.

Bertus stared out at the garrison with a stony expression, and said nothing.

The popes weren't wrong.

The true cause of every problem is complex, and it's impossible to say who is the real culprit.

However, there's no denying that the Gradias Yellow is a very large part of the reason.

In the words of the Pope of the Order of the Ritter, there's no point in believing now because you didn't believe when you should have.

Bertus knew better than anyone that he wasn't wrong.

For humanity, the devil is better off dead.

And if you're going to die, you might as well die a hero's death.

In the death of a demon, people will find hope, and no matter how dire the situation is, they will believe that the last demon is dead and that only prosperity lies ahead for humanity.

Hope and despair are ridiculous concepts.

Both have no practical use in saving or killing people.

But despair actually kills people, and hope actually saves people.

Just two for that hope.

Reinhard and Ellen Artorius.

Let them wallow in their own despair.

Is it right that they should take all the despair of others for the sake of humanity's survival and reconstruction?

One ceases to exist, the other loses his life.

They are both idols.

An idol of hope, a warrior.

The Devil, the idol of despair.

It is the emperor's right to sacrifice the two idols to anesthetize the people with false hope so that he can rebuild humanity and reestablish the Five Great Houses.

No one comes and goes.

The area around the command center barracks has been cleared of people and the popes have left, so it's just Tana and Bertus here now.

"Lord Tana."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I thought I had the qualities of an emperor."

"......."

"He may not be the greatest emperor of all time, but there's no one like him in his time, or so I thought."

Bertus smirked.

"When Charlotte came back to life, I did quite a few pictures in my head."

"If it was a picture, would it be......?"

"A painting where I could be emperor."

Bertus looks off into the distance.

The blue sky was clear and clean, as if oblivious to the tragedies of the world.

On the ground, you can smell the smoke of cooking meals and hear the banging of weapons.

Even as funerals for fallen soldiers continue to be held.

The sky doesn't know it.

"When I'm better positioned than Charlotte, when I'm less positioned than Charlotte. Or when my position was irreparably compromised. I had thoughts about all of those cases in my head."

Bertus was already emperor, but before he became emperor. He had many plans in his head to become emperor.

"When Charlotte returned, I felt a great sense of crisis. Emperors aren't elected by the people, but they can't be ignored. The position of a princess who had been captured by the devil and returned from her ordeal was bound to have a great deal of influence."

The surviving Charlotte de Gradias was a very strong contender for Bertus.

"When they even managed to pull a stunt and get a temple, a royal one at that, I thought they were going to take it away from me."

"......You did."

"But what the heck."

Bertus chuckles.

"Lagan Artorius's sister is in my class."

If Charlotte hadn't survived, Ellen wouldn't have meant much to Bertus.

But with Charlotte's presence, Bertus needed a symbol that would threaten her political position.

Saviolin Tana seemed to know what Bertus was talking about.

"How Ellen Artorius and I ended up getting married. I mean, that was one of my schemes."

"That's right......, that's right......."

Arranged marriage.

Even better, if she was the warrior's sister, she would have a solid political position.

"But they looked at me like I was a rock rolling on the side of the road."

It's not exactly ignored.

However, I didn't really pay attention to it.

Ellen Artorius was such a person.

Everyone was fairly indifferent.

"It was a political necessity for me, not a personal interest at all, and it was just something I had to do anyway. I didn't make a big deal out of it."

"......."

"And then, at some point, you're stuck with Reinhard, the beggar, all the time."

Temple, Royal first year, Class A.

Ellen started hanging around Reinhardt, who had no talent, all the time.

Ellen, who had been indifferent to all of them, was strangely interested in only one.

At the time, Ellen didn't know who Reinhardt was.

Whether or not Reinhardt knew who Ellen was is beyond Bertus' knowledge.

The warrior's sister who was never interested in anyone.

Reinhardt was a beggar, an incompetent, a bad-tempered bastard, but he had a secret: he was a demon.

They gravitated toward each other.

There was no reason to be friendly, but we were.

"All the plans I'd made were worthless and unused, all the pictures I'd painted were gone, but I was still emperor."

In a way I never wanted to.

The previous emperor had died of overwork, and the empress was unable to take over the throne.

Bertus was never able to write the many drawings to become emperor, but he did become emperor.

"I think there's a certain inevitability to the two of them."

They were the first to get to know each other.

Now, it's the furthest away.

They value each other, but are forced to antagonize each other.

Bertus feels a certain inevitability in this malicious painting.

Each was a part of that inevitability, and each did its job in its own way.

Bertus stares out over the vast expanse of the garrison.

"The emperor should do what his head convinces him to do, not what his heart convinces him to do, or so I think."

"......."

"Especially at a time like this."

We should follow the path of reason.

Especially during these challenging times. Because it's foolish to pick the option that appeals to you.

When you don't know if the path of reason will lead to a good outcome or not, it's all too easy to see the consequences of making an emotional choice.

"I know that the words of bullshit popes may be dirty and messy, but they're not wrong, and I know that I have no right to condemn them."

The choices of the popes of the Church of the Lord can be cruel and vicious.

But there's no denying that it's a reasonable choice in this situation.

Bertus knows best that the Imperial House of Gradias has the most to answer for.

Saviolin Tana stared at the Emperor's weakness.

"What is the best....... what?"

"......."

The emperor's question was short, but overly difficult.

The best is easy.

It's best to let Ellen Artorius, now that her weakness is gone, kill the demon.

But that's just the best we can do at the moment, and we don't know if it's truly best or not.

"When I found out Reinhardt was the Devil, the best thing I could do was not to believe him. There were so many lies out there, and if you believed in the Devil then, you were crazy."

"...... did."

"The best I could reasonably do was not to believe Reinhardt at the time."

What was best then, was worst now.

The best you could do with your head at the time doesn't change what you think now.

The devil was not to be trusted.

So I didn't believe it.

But that choice brought the worst of the worst to the world.

Gate is a case of the best choices leading to the worst consequences, and a lot of people being held accountable for something that wasn't their choice.

"If the best thing for Ellen now is to leave her alone, is it a leap to think that it might be the worst thing for her later?"

"......."

"It's a leap."

Tana didn't answer, but Bertus was smiling bitterly, as if he knew without being told.

There have been times when the best choice has led to the worst outcome.

It's just a leap of faith not to choose the best, because the best choice you make now may lead to the worst outcome.

Bertus just knows it now.

What's best for you now could easily be the worst for you later.

A choice is a choice, and we don't know if it's for the best or for the worst until time reveals the consequences of that choice.

There is no best or worst.

There are only choices.

"I can't leave them alone like this."

Bertus couldn't leave Ellen alone like this.

We don't do this because we believe it will be best later.

It's just something that you choose to do because you want to do it.

Emperor qualities.

That's why Bertus doesn't think he has it in him anymore.

Episode 515.

The Five Great Houses refused to cooperate, so cleansing Ellen of the demons in her soul was not even an option.

Then your only option is magic.

Bertus summoned the imperial wizards.

"It's impossible....... ."

Bertus' face hardened as he listened to the archmages' opinions during their discussions with the imperial mages.

"Visions that deal with souls are extremely rare, Your Majesty."

Magic that deals with spirits.

It was never properly studied because it was categorized as alcohol in the first place.

The art of betrothal, which was studied to improve the condition of the princess, is just one of the spells that deal with the soul.

"It's not that there aren't wizards who have studied and understood conjuration, but....... but they are extremely limited in what they can do."

After listening to the tales of the imperial wizards, Bertus could only feel sorry for himself.

Magic that deals with souls is extremely rare.

Those who have reached the level of Archmage are able to apply their understanding of conjuration to work magic with spirits. But the number of spirits inhabiting Ellen is incalculable.

Even the magic to transfer the spirits from the demon's body to Ellen's body was already a miracle.

The imperial wizards' answer was that magic was reserved for those who had studied it for a long time, such as the Lord Vampires, who had lived for unfathomable ages.

The Imperial Archmages are not far behind the Lord Vampires in terms of combat prowess and magical application, as humans are particularly gifted in the Five Elements.

But the weight of time lived is different.

There is a difference in the total amount of absolute knowledge.

As a result, things like large-scale soul transfer, which are only possible for Lord Vampires, are out of the reach of the Empire.

And even if it could be done, it's doubtful that anyone could afford it.

Priests don't cooperate.

There are no magic solutions.

"......."

Was it an illusion that I could do anything?

I can't leave it alone and want to do something about it.

Despite being the emperor, there is nothing he can do for them.

Bertus could only stare at the round table with a stony expression.

Magic.

Divine Power.

Is that really the only way.

Otherwise, it's not really there.

"If it's an ancient secret or mystery that we don't know about, there may be a way to do something about it, but....... We currently have no way of knowing......."

"Ancient rain of......?"

"Yes."

Ancient Rain.

At that, something clicked in Bertus' head.

Spells.

There is such a thing as witchcraft.

Bertus could recall that one of his classmates had a talent for witchcraft.

\* \* \*

No one knows what witchcraft is.

He had the talent to learn at Temple, but there was no teacher at Temple who could teach him the specialty of Dettomorian.

Just as Temple's students were leaving, there were teachers leaving.

Royal classroom teachers are no exception.

While there was a role for commanders in the management of students, it was primarily the responsibility of the teachers.

Royal Class Second Year.

It's been two years, so I should be in fourth grade, but Temple's curriculum is stuck.

I'm in charge of the second year students of the Royal Class, and I'm also in charge of the retiring wizard, Mr. Mustang.

After the death of Mr. Eppinhauser, who was in charge of Class A, siding with the Devil, all of the Royal Class sophomores were under Mr. Mustang's care.

In front of Bertus stood Mr. Mustang.

Bertus is the emperor now, not the student, and so Mr. Mustrange stands before the emperor, stiffly, answering the emperor's questions.

"It's not just witchcraft, it's psychic......."

"Yes, Your Majesty. That, yes."

Despite the fact that his student was an emperor, a pretty bizarre situation, Mustang stood still and broke out in a cold sweat.

A talent for the spiritual realm in addition to witchcraft suggests that the Dethomorian may be able to do things that many archmages and clerics have been unable to do.

Of course, it's not necessarily a possibility, but the mere fact that it's a possibility is enough to make Bertus grasp at straws for now.

B-8, Detomorian.

"You're not in the garrison, are you?"

"That's right!"

Even non-combat majors have their moments. Like Adelia in Magiccrafting and Christina in Alchemy.

Even musical talent Lanyon Sessor is on hand to keep morale high at the garrison.

However, the Detomorians, with their talent for witchcraft, were not in the service.

In other words, it's still on the ecliptic.

Of course, there is no need or obligation for every student of the Temple to enlist in this war. There is no need to force those who are not useful to the fight, and who are not useful to the combatants.

"During the initial march, I was a belligerent, and although I was motivated....... other students and soldiers were anxious, so I decided to leave......."

"Anxious?"

The Detomorian was not originally determined to remain in the ecliptic; rather, it was terminated for a period of time and then returned to the ecliptic after being determined to remain in the ecliptic, Mustang explained.

"Yes....... That, that......."

Mr. Mustang began to ramble on to his student, Bertus, who was a great authority.

As the explanation continued, Bertus could not help but make a face.

First of all, Detomorians do not participate in combat. They don't have talents that help them in combat per se.

But they mumble unintelligible words all day, and when the garrison is set up, they stay in their tents and don't come out.

Worse, it keeps asking for bizarre things.

I don't need raw chicken, I don't need bones, I don't care if it's a field mouse or a field vole, it's just different if it's a mouse.

They're mumbling unintelligible words, bowing to bizarre idols made of bones when someone peeks inside their tents, dancing with lit candles, and other bizarre things.

It's a sinister, unexplained pagan summoning ritual, and it's bound to make the soldiers nervous and start bizarre rumors.

Inevitably, an ominous story spreads that one of Temple's students seems to be possessed by the devil.

"What the hell is that doing?"

"I've been asked many times as a principal, and they say they don't know the exact effects....... So when I asked him if he shouldn't do something like that because it makes people anxious, he said that he can't do it because it's the only thing he can do....... That's why......."

"...... That's what happened."

No one knows exactly what the spells and rituals the Dethomorians mutter mean.

But it's clear that they're practicing sinister rituals, using human sacrifices, and doing other bizarre things.

The effectiveness is unknown, but it's definitely demoralizing.

And morale is a major problem in the military.

Of course, the sheer size of the army means that a single Detomorian can't have a huge impact on the morale of the entire army, but it's definitely having a negative impact in certain areas.

So, at the Temple garrison, the teachers conferred and sent Detomorian back to the Temple.

Bertus and Saviolin Tana couldn't help but shiver as they listened to Mr. Mustang's explanation as he broke out in a cold sweat.

"I hope ...... is okay, Lord Tana."

Charlotte is still in the same class and has some knowledge of the Dettomorian, but Bertus has little idea what the Dettomorian is really like.

There's no way a guy who follows an army around performing bizarre pagan rituals is sane, even if he pretends to be.

Even if all other possibilities have been cut off, can we really put the hope of humanity in the unidentified consciousness of a faceless creature?

Neither Tana nor Bertus had an easy conclusion.

\* \* \*

-Whoosh!

"Hmph!"

"Ellen......? Are you okay?"

After a meal in the garrison barracks, Heinrich von Schwarz checked on Ellen when she suddenly grabbed her head and bent over.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's okay....... It's okay......."

Holding up one hand, as if to say don't worry, Ellen leaned back and chose her breathing.

"You have to go out tomorrow, are you okay?"

"Okay......."

"No, you don't look okay at all."

Heinrich looked at Ellen, who was in serious condition, and clicked his tongue.

"I'm taking over the mission tomorrow, get some rest, you're going to die doing this."

"......."

Heinrich von Schwarz, Pyrokineticist.

Before long, Heinrich was strong enough to be recruited for a large-scale extermination campaign. As such, Heinrich was one of the strongest Temple students to join Ellen's operation.

So over the course of two years, Heinrich and Ellen operated together quite a bit.

Ellen tries to say it's okay, that I can go instead, but Heinrich is already walking away.

Not the kind of pain that feels like your head is going to crack, but the kind that feels like your soul is going to shatter.

Ellen chose to breathe in place a few times.

Repeat as your vision blurs and then sharpens.

There were times when I thought I was going to pass out from the words ringing in my head.

"Ha ha....... Ha ha......."

Those who don't know the details only know that Ellen is exhausted.

Everyone she passes asks her if she's okay, and she can only barely answer the question.

Ellen decides to go on a mission, but Heinrich takes over.

Knowing how much stronger Heinrich's abilities have become, Ellen doesn't worry about that.

But in the midst of a bizarre sense of blurred identity, Ellen desperately tries to stay awake.

It will eventually go away.

I don't want to disappear now.

I want to hold on as long as I can.

We don't know if that will be today, tomorrow, or next week.

I want to hold out as long as I can.

"Ellen......?"

In the distance, through my blurred vision, I saw someone approaching.

It was hard to see, but Ellen could tell it was Kliffman approaching.

Kliffman.

A-5 Cliffman.

Talents are combat.

And.

And.......

"......."

As if a clouded mind could prevent thinking. In her clouded mind, Ellen could think of nothing but Cliffman's name, number, and talent.

What role is Cliffman playing right now.

What you're doing.

Nothing comes to mind.

Suddenly.

Ellen's eyes glazed over.

Very briefly.

It was just a brief blur of vision, like the blink of an eye.

"......Heh!"

However, it was like being submerged in deep water and then being pulled up. With a strange sense of elevation, Ellen came to her senses.

"Huh....... 헉......."

Ellen couldn't help but freeze.

It was like closing my eyes for a second and then opening them.

However, Ellen was stunned by the sudden change in her surroundings.

"Are you awake?"

"Ellen......."

A moment ago, they were in the garrison, and Ellen could see the ceiling in front of her.

The marquee should be visible, but it's not.

It was inside a building.

"Hello, is this....... Here......?"

Ellen opened her eyes, not to the tents of the garrison, but to a familiar ceiling.

At the last second, Cliffman was right in front of me.

But now, on either side of her were Emperor Bertus and Savior Tana, and Ellen was lying in bed.

"Why would I....... temple to......?"

I closed my eyes and opened them, and suddenly it was like I'd skipped forward in time.

Ellen knows what the ceiling is in front of her.

This was the recovery room in the Temple Royal class dormitory.

I closed and opened my eyes, but I was out cold for quite a while.

Ellen stared at the ceiling, wide-eyed and dazed.

"Why would I....... Why would I....... here......?"

At Ellen's question, Bertus and Tana couldn't help but give her a wistful glance.

\* \* \*

Ellen told Bertus that she had been out cold for about four hours.

Ellen fainted in front of Kliffman.

After being taken to the garrison barracks, Bertus and Saviolin Tana received Ellen's recruits and were transported to the ecliptic via mass teleport.

Her mind was as heavy as a soaked cotton ball, but her body was fine, and Ellen was soon out of bed.

Royal Class Dormitory Recovery Room.

Ellen, along with Reinhardt, would frequent the place.

But now that most of the students and teachers had left, the entire dormitory was empty, including the recovery room in the Royal Class dormitory.

Of course, the remaining non-combatants were still in the dorms, and the dorms were being managed by minimal users.

But the Royal Class dormitory, where the students had all but disappeared, retained its splendor, but had a bit of a bitchy vibe.

It's a lot of space, but it's all empty.

The atmosphere is quite different, but the Royal Class dormitory had a similarly somber vibe to the castle of Epirus.

This is what happens when a person disappears.

Take a moment to feel that strange, chilling sensation.

"But....... Why did you bring me here?"

Ellen asked.

He closed his eyes and opened them, shocked at how much time had suddenly passed, but also wondering why he'd brought himself to the dorm in the first place.

"I'm here to see Detomorian B-8."

Detomorian.

Talent is a spell.

Ellen seemed to have some idea of what Bertus was thinking.

Episode 516.

The only attendant Bertus brought with him on his return to the ecliptic was Saviolin Tana.

The more people who know about Ellen's condition, the better.

Detomorian was in a clubhouse, not a dorm.

Department of Occult Studies.

A club created to study witchcraft, with Detomorian as the sole member and president.

Ellen, not to mention Bertus, hadn't been too close to the Dettomorians in the first place, so this was the first time she'd heard of the occult research department that the Dettomorians had created.

Unsurprisingly, the circles aren't exactly rolling right now.

So with the entire temple nearly empty, it's hard to imagine that there would be any extracurricular activities, and the area with the highest concentration of extracurricular buildings was even more deserted than the rest of the temple.

As soon as Bertus, Ellen, and Tana reached that part of the Temple, he felt a sinking feeling.

"......."

Is this right?

Is it really possible to see the possibilities in this?

While they didn't have the cooperation of the Five Great Houses, the forces of the Devil, who were sure to be with Olivia Ranze, didn't have an answer with divine power either.

Even the continent's greatest archmages had no answers.

And only one student.

Is it right to bring Ellen here because she uses some mysterious power called witchcraft?

Standing in the desolate landscape of the frat house area, Bertus was reminded of how unrealistic his expectations were.

But it's a step forward.

If it's impossible to solve, it's probably worthwhile just to know that it's impossible.

"Let's go."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Bertus followed, with Tana helping Ellen, who stumbled occasionally and couldn't quite keep her balance.

\* \* \*

"I don't have ......?"

Inside the Department of Occult Studies.

Bertus looked at the empty Occult Studies clubhouse and shook his head.

The blackout curtains were drawn, so the room was dark, even in broad daylight. But there was no sign of the Detomorian.

"And what's so dark?"

Bertus approached the curtain to check out the frat house.

"Don't touch it."

Bertus moves toward the curtain, but Ellen stops him.

"If you mess with it, you're going to get....... I don't think so."

"......Yes, Your Majesty."

It's hard to see in the dark, but the interior of the Occult Studies Department is littered with strange idols, just as Mustang had reported.

We don't know if it's just lying there or if it's installed. But Ellen knew that nothing in this room should be tampered with.

No one here knows much about witchcraft, but whatever it is, you don't want to mess with it.

"These are....... What the hell are they?"

Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Bertus couldn't help but marvel at the strange sculptures and extinguished candles inside the circle room, as well as the bizarre coven of shamans and unidentifiable traces of research.

If he wasn't a Temple student, the sight alone would have gotten him arrested for studying sinister black magic.

"But where is it?"

Detomorian says he heads to the frat house building every day, but he's not in the frat house.

I wonder if he went for a late lunch.

"Underground."

Ellen says.

"I think it's underground."

"......?"

Ellen's words made Tana and Bertus wonder.

But Ellen was only saying that with out-of-focus eyes, like she was feeling something.

\* \* \*

Just as the upper floors of a fraternity house are unused, so is the basement.

The basement was often used to store equipment for clubs.

At Ellen's uncanny assurance, the three of them went down to the basement of the clubhouse.

-Clunk! Clunk!

"It's locked."

The large door to the basement is completely locked.

"Looks like ...... is locked from the inside."

If the lock is on the outside and you can't get in, it means it's locked from the inside.

"I think they closed it down......."

It could be that the building is unused and the door to the basement is locked.

But Bertus had a strange feeling.

"Well, let's get in there."

With a single swipe of the auror blade protruding from the tip of her index finger, Tana pried the locked door open with a partial slash through the door.

Upon reaching the ground floor, Bertus couldn't help but frown at the state of affairs in the basement, whatever the basis of Ellen's uncanny confidence.

"This is....... what the hell is this?"

Upon entering the basement level, Bertus and Tana couldn't help but feel the hairs on the back of their necks stand up as they saw the strange symbols painted on the hallways and ceilings.

Strange symbols and zines were drawn on the hallways and ceilings, as if the entire space had been written in magic circles.

"Something....... there."

We don't know what it does, but it's clear from Ellen's words that it has something to do with witchcraft, and that the Detomorians are doing something in the basement with the door locked.

Bertus, Tana, and Ellen descended into the basement, careful not to step on or touch the spell circle, in case it had any effect.

The basement was designed to be two stories.

Both the first and second floors were covered with unidentified shamans and symbols.

Bertus stared at them and grunted.

"We didn't build this overnight......."

"It looks like......."

The clubhouse had been unused for quite some time. It was almost certain that the Dettomorians had been drawing and setting up this circle in the basement of the clubhouse, locked away, for a very long time, even before the formation of a large army.

Ominous, ominous, ominous, and it sent a shiver down Bertus's spine, even though he had no idea what the coven meant.

The three soon found the Dettomorian.

A large warehouse in the innermost part of the second floor of the basement.

In the darkened basement, through the open door of a large warehouse, the three could see numerous candles lit.

Hundreds of large candles were strewn about in disarray, their melted wax dripping onto the warehouse floor.

And in the center of those countless seconds, the Detomorian sat still.

In the light of the candles, Bertus could see idols made of bones and numerous shamanic circles painted in blood.

As if aware of the visitors, the Detomorian slowly raises its head and looks at the three standing in the hallway.

"What......."

Bertus looks at the Dettomorian, who sits still, as still as if at the epicenter of an unholy ritual.

"What are you doing here......?"

If it doesn't mean anything, I'm afraid to have it.

I'm afraid that if it means anything, the implications of this mega-shaman are not auspicious.

Bertus exclaims with a narrowed brow.

"What are you doing!"

Always a dark complexioned boy.

Detomorian.

The boy watches them in the dim light of the candles.

Bertus asks the shaman boy sitting among the candles, feeling his hair stand on end.

"Wishes."

Dettomorian says.

"I'm wishing for 'peace'."

In a place that doesn't seem to have anything to do with peace.

Detomorian said he is praying for peace.

\* \* \*

The explanation from the Dettomorian, who was performing some sort of ominous summoning ritual, was simple.

Wishing you peace.

It still looks ominous, it's still suspicious, but Bertus doesn't know witchcraft.

So we don't know what this ominous-looking ritual actually does.

As such, they cannot be punished or interrogated.

You won't be able to tell if a Detomorian is lying or telling the truth.

"You can come in......."

Detomorian said to Bertus, who was hesitating outside the warehouse.

Passing through the candlelight, Tana, Ellen, and Bertus approached Dettomorian.

The warehouse was filled with blood-red glyphs.

Is this how you wish for peace?

Does that work?

Bertus doesn't know.

"Is there such a thing as an origin....... What is it?"

"I don't know."

"......?"

Bertus was dumbfounded by the absurdity of it all.

"I don't....... I don't know."

Detomorian stared at the dying candle.

"Just....... and do what you can."

"......."

"I can't fight, because that's all I know how to do......."

Detomorian stares up at Bertus, his complexion grim.

"So, that's why we're doing this."

The shaman is performing a ritual that even he doesn't recognize.

"Just....... I'm praying, right?"

"That's right......."

Many a helpless man has prayed to the heavens and projected his hopes on a hero.

You're just doing a ritual that may be a meaningless prayer.

"Do you think something like....... will work?"

Bertus looks around the warehouse and stares at the Detomorian in disbelief.

"Maybe not......."

The Detomorian holds a large, half-melted candle in the palm of his hand.

"But....... might be there."

Detomorian stared into the flickering flame of the candle.

Bertus felt his breath catch in his throat at the slowness of the Dettomorian's actions.

In other words, it might not mean anything at all.

"You....... since when do you do this shit?"

"Continue to......."

Muttering strange, unintelligible words.

Bowing and dancing to strange idols.

No matter where he is or what he is doing, Detomorian continues to pray for peace.

For a long, long time after the Gate debacle.

Unable to fight, the Dettomorian continued to raise me up to some unknown power.

Ever since the Gate debacle.

For over two years.

How is this any different from the prayers of ordinary people, only on a different scale.

Bertus didn't know whether to feel small or great when he heard Dettomorian say that he kept praying because it was all he could do.

It might not work, but it might.

But Bertus takes note of the Dettomorian's words.

Not revenge or destruction, but peace.

The Detomorian's words of peace are stuck in my head.

Detomorian's profile has already been passed to Mustang.

From a primitive tribe in the north.

In a world where the fields and plains are filled with monsters, it's likely that the Detomorian homeland is long gone.

The Dettomorian doesn't know the truth, so he can't help but wish for the Demon's death in revenge.

Nevertheless, Detomorian prayed for peace, not revenge.

"So....... your origin was successful. Assuming that makes sense, in what way does peace....... be achieved?"

At Bertus's question, Detomorian shakes his head.

"I don't know."

Detomorian puts down the candle he was holding.

"If peace is not achieved....... my origin will have failed......."

"......."

"If peace is achieved....... my prayers will have been successful......."

This is a consequentialist thought.

"Of course, regardless of the success or failure of my prayers....... peace may come, but......."

Detomorian shakes his head, as if he knows without being pointed out.

"Then....... just because it's a good thing......."

So I kept praying for peace, Dettomorian adds.

"Because adding the possibility of hope....... can't be a bad thing......."

Detomorphic origins can fail or succeed.

Or maybe it didn't mean anything at all.

But at the end of the day, if there's even the slightest bit of promise in the origin itself, there's no reason not to try it.

So I kept praying for peace.

In the basement of an off-the-beaten-path, now-abandoned building.

Strange glyphs, shamanic circles, and idols are set up, bowed to, and endless rituals continue.

As Bertus looked at the Dettomorian, he felt a certain sublimity that he couldn't quite place.

Just as Bertus cannot read the meaning of the shaman's words, he cannot see the value of the Dettomorian's ritual.

But I was convinced that it wasn't something to ignore.

"So....... Why are you here......?"

Bertus suddenly realizes that Dettomorian is speaking to him as an emperor.

Ellen's case is special, but the other students no longer consider Bertus a friend.

Detomorian, however, did not seem to have much reverence or fear for Bertus, who had become emperor.

This shaman only acts and moves with his own set of principles and values.

In keeping with its values and principles, it was praying for peace.

"There's something I need you to help me with."

Bertus still doesn't believe in witchcraft.

However, Dettomorian decided he could trust them.

\* \* \*

Bertus talked about Ellen's condition.

So many spirits have taken up residence in Ellen's body that her sense of self may be lost.

How to get rid of it or make it go away, or how to make Ellen not go away.

"......."

Detomorian looks at Ellen, who is sitting in front of him.

Ellen was straining her eyes, desperately trying to stay awake. But as if it were too much, her eyes were temporarily blurring and then clearing.

As if it's falling apart in real time.

The Dettomorian examines Ellen's complexion.

Warrior, Ellen Artorius.

They never had a chance to talk when Temple was running properly.

Just as Ellen is a stranger to the Dettomorian, the Dettomorian is a stranger to Ellen.

What peace is.

The Detomorian attempts to create that peace through origins, but doesn't actually carry it.

But Ellen was actually carrying quite a bit of the weight of that peace.

"I don't have the skills to touch 'this'."

Dettomorian looked at Ellen and concluded, all too hollowly.

No way.

The despair on the faces of Bertus and Saviorin Tana was palpable as they turned and listened.

Detomorian gets up from his seat and walks away.

Rummaging through his leather backpack, the Detomorian retrieves a small piece of bone.

The Detomorian takes a carving knife of some sort and slowly begins to chip away at the bones.

As you chisel, polish, and grind.

For hours, the Dettomorian carves a symbol of something.

Bertus, Tana, and Ellen.

I watched the Detomorian for a long, long time.

When the Detomorian has finally carved the symbol from a piece of bone, he pierces a groove in it and hangs it on a leash.

Detomorian hands Ellen the finished, crudely shaped necklace.

The moon drawn in the sun.

It was a symbol of that.

Although he says he can't touch such a thing, Detomorian makes Ellen something.

It's just a small symbol, made without much ceremony.

"Is this....... protect me......?"

Ellen asks, staring down at the necklace in her palm.

"Anyone can originate from ......."

The Dettomorian originated with a large circle of shamans, but the truth is that prayer can be done by anyone.

Aside from the authenticity of whether or not it really works.

"Just as I wish you peace......."

Just as the Dettomorian wishes for peace.

Like hoping and praying for something to add to your possibilities, even though you don't have the power to change the world.

"You, too, can....... that you don't disappear."

Ellen can pray that she doesn't disappear.

It's a world where if you believe in something, someone will lend you their support.

Ellen was chosen by two gods, the gods of the moon and the sun.

May you be protected by a greater power, not a shaman like yourself.

Detomorian carves a symbol of a being that can lend Ellen strength and gives it to her.

"May this be a milestone in your soul......."

He promises to pray for Ellen as well.

"May the sun and moon be with you.

Ellen remembers something her mother once told her.

Moon and sun.

Gingerly grasping the symbol, carved from the bones of something.

"Thanks......."

Ellen put the amulet the shaman had given her around her neck.

\* \* \*

After taking the amulet from Detomorian, Bertus, Ellen, and Saviolin Tana left the temple.

Ellen and Tana must return to the garrison.

And Bertus wasn't done yet, so he'd be in the garrison for a few more days.

"Will it work....... ?"

Since we don't know if the witchcraft really works or not, we may have just wasted our time.

We don't know what kind of power Detomorian really has.

I don't know if they have powers or not.

Magic proves its existence by being magic.

Divine Power also proves its existence as it summons the power of the gods.

But the three of them hadn't seen the true nature of witchcraft.

We don't even know if it really works. If praying for peace brings peace, why do we need all the material things?

It's so hard and hopeless, I wonder if I'm just making it up as I go along.

There was a man called the Emperor, a knight called the First International Sword, and a warrior called the Hope of Mankind.

The very idea of relying on the uncertainty of witchcraft is terrifying.

Although he had spoken to the Dettomorian and received an amulet as if possessed, Bertus left the temple wondering what he had done.

This is not going to protect Ellen.

I couldn't help but think about it, and I almost felt bad for leaving the battlefield and bringing Ellen to the temple.

"It might not work."

But Ellen walks on, clutching that shallow symbol around her neck.

"But, just in case."

Detomorian was praying that peace might not come, but that it might.

Maybe the amulet can protect Ellen.

But I might be able to keep it.

"I guess it can't hurt to have something like this."

Just in case there's any chance at all.

As the Dettomorian says, Ellen will believe.

If you pray for this as a signpost for your soul, if you believe in it.

that I may not go away.

If believing that is enough to keep you from falling apart, then the talisman is already working.

Ellen believes.

So it was clear that Ellen was feeling a bit of clarity in her clouded consciousness.

Episode 517.

Detomorian stared at the door of the warehouse where the three visitors had disappeared.

"Origins have already been made.

Dettomorian knew that the sacrifices he had made for so long had already touched something.

It's a ritual for peace.

But Dettomorian does not know if it has touched a power that has the power to truly bring peace.

And while the ending may be peaceful, the process is not.

If you have touched a dark power, peace will come through a dark process.

If you have touched the power of good, peace will come through the process of good.

If you have a weak origin and are in touch with a weak power, you will not be able to bring peace.

The shaman knows neither the process nor the conclusion.

It's something that shamans have been doing since ancient times, raising sacrifices and performing rituals in hopes of something.

Dettomorian recalls the abyss he felt with Ellen Artorius.

How can we be sure that it's not a recalculation that was influenced by the origin?

It's entirely possible that what was created was touched by the influence of the origins, and then turned around and found its way to the warrior.

We don't know how Detomorian's sacrifice will affect the world, and whatever happens, it won't be strange.

The unusually large, naturally occurring collection of spirits that possess Ellen may or may not be the product of a Dethomorian ritual.

The shaman knows nothing, and can be sure of nothing.

However, here's hoping.

The Detomorian slowly gets to his feet and begins to rearrange the seconds.

Origins have already been done.

Detomorian saw something that might be the result.

So let's move on to the next origin.

More intuitive and clearer origins.

"......."

Prayers for lost souls.

A prayer that this money doesn't get any bigger.

One of the most common roles, and one of the most important, given to shamans since time immemorial, in ancient times.

Start the soul.

\* \* \*

"One hundred....... authorized."

The best and brightest of Edina's elite.

Mages of the Vampire Council.

Paladins and priests of the Holy Order.

And a handful of powerful demons.

No more, no less, a hundred in total.

A hundred and five, if you count the direct squad I personally lead.

Divide into five units of twenty people each.

Lord Vampires serve as captains of each unit.

And a squad directly under the Demon King, including myself, who I will personally carry with me.

My immediate squad of five: myself, Liana de Grants, Herriot de Saint-Ouen, Airi, and Olivia Ranze.

Unit 1, Elise.

Unit 2, Lucinil.

Unit 3, Lerouen.

Unit 4, Galarsh.

Unit 5, Antirrhinus.

Archmages with maneuver initiative are in charge of each unit.

Five Vampire Lords who can use mass teleport, one per unit.

We will move separately, unit by unit, to clear a path for the Allies.

"We have one rule. If you encounter Allied forces, never engage."

It is very likely to cause unnecessary conflicts.

Our enemies are the monsters of the Gate. If we clash unnecessarily and reduce our forces, we will only bring bad things to each other.

"Also, when engaging the monsters, there is no need to overpower them. Remember, our goal is never annihilation."

The last thing we need is for our side to bleed out while we're trying to secure a path of advance. We don't have to do everything.

Our purpose is not to destroy the gate on behalf of the Allies, but to help them get to the gate faster. The difference in power between humanity and us is still obvious.

I wanted to get the gate situation wrapped up a little quicker.

In order to set the world back on track.

We don't know what the ending is that we need to reach.

Now, it's time to get to the ending.

\* \* \*

A huge army is a huge consumer group in itself.

It's going to take a lot of mass adoption.

In the original Demon War, humanity's armies used warp gates to conduct massive supply runs.

However, warp gates are no longer available, and the continent is overrun with monsters making it impossible to maintain supply routes, so most resource transportation must rely on the mass teleportation of the Archmages.

Humanity's ability to rely solely on mass teleportation for supply is low, but it inevitably faces limitations the longer the army is deployed.

So if we don't end the war soon, there's a chance that humanity's last army will starve to death, not because it's fighting monsters, but because it's starving itself.

So in order to end the war quickly, this expedition must end quickly.

So we become their vanguard, unbeknownst to even the Allies, and we sweep their path first. The Allies will realize they have a vanguard they don't know about.

And Bertus and other senior Allied commanders will soon realize it's us.

It is foolish to fight among ourselves, and commanders will try to avoid conflict as much as possible.

Of course, it's too complacent to think that there won't be soldiers or knights charging at me.

Therefore, you should avoid contact as much as possible.

And another one.

We need information about our allies.

"Be careful, Sarkegar."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegar bows his head.

As always, Sarkegar will infiltrate the garrison and provide us with a map of the Alliance's route and details of their operations.

You could probably get in touch with Bertus directly, but that's risky.

The danger is to Bertus, not me.

If that gets into someone's ears, things get serious.

Also, Bertus is not in direct command of this army and is in the ecliptic during peacetime, so our information will be slow to arrive.

So, it's better to let the enemy remain the enemy.

As always, Sarkegar, who specializes in undercover work, will be able to relay information from the Allies to us.

Spy to help your opponent, not to hinder them.

I don't even know what's what anymore, aside from the fact that my main audience has been converted.

-Kurrrrrr

We all watched as Sarkegar transformed into a hawk and soared into the sky.

"Okay, let's get started."

We have now left Edina and arrived on the continent.

We'll return to Edina for maintenance from time to time, but we'll be spending a lot of time in the field.

Until the gate event is completely over.

It was going to be a long fight.

\* \* \*

The Allies also have a vanguard.

We don't know much about them yet, but they'll probably have a vanguard of very powerful fighters like Savior Tana and Ellen.

It would be a force that could react quickly in an emergency and would emphasize mobility, both in and out.

We will operate from a position slightly ahead of the Allied vanguard, as encountering that vanguard could cause us some headaches.

In terms of absolute troop numbers, the Allies are vastly outnumbered, so we don't have to kill every monster in our path.

If we can handle it, it will significantly reduce the amount of work the Allied vanguard has to do.

Don't overdo it.

The army of five spreads out in their assigned direction, slaying the monsters.

Then, the five of us, led by myself, go even deeper.

The city currently targeted by the Alliance is Rahstran, a large city in the northwestern part of the continent.

But before you get there, you'll have to pass through many small and medium-sized cities, including border crossings.

The Gate Crisis ends when all warp gates in the doomed territories of the Empire's third-largest empire, Ryzeln, are destroyed.

It was too much territory to handle, and the Empire had originally planned for it to be the last restoration point when Ryzeln fell.

As such, the warp gates in all of Regeln's territories were completely untouched.

It's about restoring all of a country's territory after it's been taken over by monsters.

Lahstran was the largest of the cities on the border of Ryzeln.

There are a total of seven warp gates in the city.

But monsters also come out of the gates of small and medium-sized cities that you have to pass through to get to them.

In other words, small and medium-sized cities are passing points, and large cities are the main targets.

"If the outlying areas are like this......."

"So......."

While other units were executing their missions, we were reconnoitering points far ahead of them.

A point so far ahead that nothing we do here will affect the Allied vanguard or our own troops.

The vanguard of the vanguard of the vanguard.

I stared blankly at the monsters flooding the Riseln borderlands, a border post with, at best, one small warp gate.

The distance is long, and we have the high ground, cloaked in Herriot's stealth spell, watching the situation unfold.

-koooooooooooo!

-Grrrrr!

Flying monsters roamed the fields and ruined cities, as well as monsters that overrun the land.

The number is almost unfathomable.

And there will be more and more of them the further in you go.

Me, Harriet, Olivia, Airi, and Riana.

The five of us have a bit more scope for what we can do.

"Let's try them one by one, see what works best. If we can take out a small town by ourselves, why not?"

I look at Riana.

She can summon lightning storms. And Riana's ability to kill in a wide area is unmatched among us. You can think of an entire continent and there's no one like her.

Even the magic of the Lord Vampires can't match Riana's destructive power.

But Riana has awakened new powers, and the breadth of her abilities is unlike anything we've seen before.

Weather changes.

It changes the weather on a regional scale.

Literally, it's a superpower that reaches beyond the horizon of your vision, and then beyond that horizon.

Also, psychic powers are not manifested through the expenditure of energy called magic.

"Whoa......."

Riana, her expression calm, stares at the monsters raging around her.

You've already seen what you can do.

It's not just storms, it's not just tornadoes.

After taking a depressant, Riana begins to manifest her powers with a depressed but confident look in her eyes.

"It's going to get a little, cold."

It's only October.

It's too early for winter.

But the clear blue sky soon gives way to clouds, and the air changes.

Before we knew it, white steam was coming out of all of our mouths.

The wind is blowing.

-Heyyyyyy!

The wind soon becomes a fierce gust.

Gradually, the wind swirls in, mixing with the flurries, and soon it's a blizzard that you can't even see coming.

"Nor....... No......."

Herriot's eyes widened, his mouth hanging open in disbelief as he watched.

Large-scale weather events.

A blizzard is brewing.

-Kaahhhhhhhh!

-delete!

Flying monsters crash as their wings snap and break due to sudden weather changes and gusts of wind.

The wind blows the flying monsters down.

But it's not real.

Riana mumbles to herself in the harsh gusts of wind, her face stony.

"Let's see how many of them don't freeze to death."

Freezing to death monsters that normally wouldn't exist in the cold.

That's the real power of this blizzard.

Episode 518.

Every monster is different.

Some are symmetrical, like a proper living organism, while others are more indescribable.

Some need to eat to survive, others don't.

Some are resistant to cold, others to extreme heat.

Some are so resistant to magic that they can't be killed by it, while others won't even listen to most weapons.

We're not trying to kill all those monsters.

It's slicing.

It's a way to exterminate those who can't stand the cold.

Cold isn't the only thing you can use.

Of course, a very hot climate, like the middle of a parched desert, could dry them out and kill them.

Riana causes climate change over a large area, primarily reducing the number of monsters.

Maybe forty below zero.

Add a blizzard to the mix, and the temperature will be even colder.

And it's not just the monsters that have to endure the cold, we do too.

While Riana used her abilities, we sold our shelter and used Herriot's magic to keep warm.

-Off!

The screams of monsters howling in the cold echoed in all directions.

No monsters approached the shelter Herriot had built.

We spend our days in safe spaces, waiting for a blizzard to freeze the monsters to death.

"Aren't you going to freak out when the Allies come?"

Olivia smirked, hugging the light that Herriot had summoned.

Outside, it was freezing cold enough to freeze my tongue if I tried to spit, but inside the shelter it was warm.

"Well....... I wonder if the snow will be all melted by the time we get here."

"Hmm, do you think so?"

At Airi's comment, Olivia tilted her head in disbelief.

The Allies are aware of our presence anyway.

If we can destroy the gates of a small city on our own, we'll do it, but we don't want to overdo it.

"Everyone go to bed, if the monsters find this place anyway, the alarm will wake them up."

At Riana's words, we were all ready to sleep in the tunnels.

Airi will help us fall asleep. Not being able to fall asleep in an unfamiliar bed is a surefire way to get out of shape.

Airy also has a role.

Riana's powers are extensive, but so is Airi's.

I will put the monsters that should be asleep, into a sleep from which they cannot awaken.

You die in the cold, swallowed by a suma from which you cannot awaken.

How many monsters will walk the earth alive tomorrow morning?

And more importantly.

"Bali."

"......."

Airi puts her hand on my forehead.

Time to dream about Ellen killing me.

I can't even count how many times I've died so far.

There is one thing I can count on.

Yet, it hasn't won once.

\* \* \*

The dreams I have with Airi's help include shadow boxing and more specific image training, which I always lose.

No, you don't lose, you get killed.

Maybe I fell asleep during a blizzard.

In my dream, I could see Ellen in a snowstorm blowing across the frozen landscape.

-Heeeeeeeee!

Ellen looks at me, her dark hair fluttering in the blizzard.

In dream battles, there's always something that happens.

Ellen stares at me for about three seconds.

It's just a mental image I've created that has nothing to do with the real Ellen.

Ellen's hair blowing wildly in a blizzard and her calm expression.

And the unfocused eye.

It never says anything to me, and it always tries to kill me.

I wonder if Ellen's situation isn't so different now.

Or maybe it's hanging on somehow.

As long as I'm aiding the Allied advance, I may run into Ellen at some point.

I wonder if Ellen was the same person then as she is now.

-Woof!

The snow around her explodes as she takes a step forward, and through the wave of snow, Ellen leaps at me.

-Ka-ching!

Strike Ellen's sword with Alsbringer.

I'm afraid to look at the real Ellen.

With the same eyes you have now, with the same demeanor you have now.

I think they would kill me without hesitation.

I'm not afraid of death.

I was afraid of those eyes.

-Bang! Kakang! thump!

A blizzard of shockwaves from the exchange of swordfire.

I'm afraid to face Ellen.

Nevertheless, what you need to do is the same.

Real life Ellen may or may not look like this.

I.

I'll get you back.

At all costs.

\* \* \*

The next day.

The overnight blizzard had left a huge pile of snow at the entrance to the shelter, so Olivia and I cleared a path through the snow to get outside.

-POOF!

"Ugh....... That's not something I'd do often."

"So be it......."

After a moment of grumbling, Olivia and I, as well as the three who followed us, were speechless at the sight before us.

The blizzard had already stopped.

Even Riana herself, who created this situation.

The whole world had turned white.

Literally, all I could see was snow, snow, and more snow.

It was as if the snow had consumed everything in the world. Not a blade of grass, not a tree in sight.

Of course, there were monsters roaming the snow-covered ground.

Large, medium, and small.

Clearly, there were monsters out there that could withstand the frigid temperatures.

"The monsters are almost....... dead......."

However, the number of monsters that had been swarming like bugs had already been drastically reduced.

"It's more than a little effective."

But anything more than that is welcome.

What could only be accomplished after a massive killing spree with an army, a one-night blizzard could do.

Only Liana de Granz in the whole world could do that.

Now that the monsters have been drastically reduced in number, we can destroy the warp gate.

"Umm....... But you know what?"

Olivia shakes her head and points to the ground, where snow has covered everything.

"Warp gate, where is it?"

"......."

"......."

Definitely.

With everything covered in snow, we couldn't even see where the warp gate was.

\* \* \*

Since the monsters kept coming out of the warp gate, we could only assume that the place where they were spawning was near the gate.

Riana wanted to use her powers to melt the accumulated snow, but I restrained her.

I don't want to do myself any favors by taking depressants.

From the blizzard-covered ground, we could learn more about the unexpected effects of climate change.

Most of the flying monsters crashed and died. Their wings snapped and they crashed because it was impossible to fly in that wild blizzard.

Monsters who couldn't stand the cold froze to death.

So far, so good.

But many of them were crushed under the accumulating snow.

A small town on the Riseln border.

It was up to me to figure out where the small warp gates were and break them down myself.

With a direct hit on the source of the monsters, the Allies should be able to get here quickly, as long as they take care of the wandering monsters.

Even without a change in the weather, I was able to melt the snow with the flames of my fire, and we were able to make our way through, but the surviving monsters were buried in the snow.

I hope it dies of its own accord.

"I broke the gate, but......."

In the darkness of the snow, we were able to accomplish more than we set out to do.

Not to reduce the number of monsters, but because I was able to destroy one warp gate, albeit a small one.

"Is this thing going to melt until the Allies arrive......?"

It's still warm out, so the snow should be melting quickly.

We had to come up with something pretty crazy.

\* \* \*

The speed of the Allied advance can only go so far.

So, having succeeded in neutralizing the warp gate of one small city, we've exceeded what we set out to do.

The Allies are still quite a ways away from us, and it would be pointless to clean up a spot so far ahead. If we clean up the monsters now, they'll be burning again by the time the Allies arrive.

So we just need to time it right and clear a spot where we know the Allies will be arriving some time later, at the right distance, ahead of the Allied advance party.

So we didn't have much to do for the time being, other than keep an eye on Allied movements and see how each Lord Vampire unit was doing.

"I think I can stay back in Edina."

Herriot said.

Around Herriot's neck is a necklace.

A bluish cuboid in the shape of a rectangle, a fairly heavy necklace with eight of them in a row.

Power cartridges.

It's Adelia's invention, but of course you can make a Heriot.

As far as I know, Adelia is constantly improving their power cartridges. Not only in terms of performance and horsepower charge, but also in terms of changing the material itself so that it can be mass produced.

I've also heard that they've created a new type of super-sized power cartridge called an arc crystal.

Absorbing Kaier's magic and using it for Redina.

I thought it was a fun idea.

Just as Adelia made her own modifications to the power cartridge, so did Herriot.

Whereas Adelia modified the Power Cartridge for the benefit of others, Herriot modified the Power Cartridge for her own benefit.

Eight power cartridges.

Auto-rechargeable.

When you use all of your mana, you recharge by absorbing mana from your surroundings.

Whereas Adelia's focus was on improving the power cartridge so that it could be mass-produced, Herriot created a unique power cartridge.

The materials, the design, and the power cartridges that I've been making in my spare time are by Herriot, but those eight are the only ones.

Because it's meant to be used when it matters most, and because there's a risk of it breaking if you play around with it, Herriot has been sitting on the shelf, unused, until now.

Herriot's horsepower isn't lacking, but it's far below that of his Archmage counterparts, the Lord Vampires.

So even though I understood the magic, I couldn't use it.

Eight self-recharging power cartridges make up for that lack of horsepower.

Soon.

The reason we don't have a Road Vampire, Edina's greatest power, is because Heriot can fill that role perfectly now.

It can be used for mass teleportation as well as teleportation levels.

Kudos to Herriot for creating a unique power cartridge that recharges itself, and kudos to Adelia for modifying it so it can be mass-produced with inferior materials.

Both would be great. After all, they're both just building things that the situation calls for.

Anyway, we can go back to Edina for now.

The troops led by each of the Lord Vampires have also been told to never overextend themselves, so if it looks like they're going to take damage, they'll consider retreating first.

I've told them that as long as they're operating separately, their judgment is the most important thing, and they'll figure it out without me looking at their status.

"Hmm......."

We're sitting in a snowdrift, eating preserves.

There's no point in clearing the way before the Allies get here.

You can return to Edina.

But there's not much to go back and do.

"Ashur....... That guy....... was dead, right?"

At my words, Harriet, Riana, and Olivia's complexions turned sour.

Ashar was a classmate of ours, and from Olivia's perspective, they had met in the religious club Grace.

B-4 Ashur.

Divine Power Talent.

We're not that close, we've only talked a few times.

Someone dies.

People have been dying since Gate, and as the fighting escalates, it's inevitable that more will die.

Isn't this what we do to minimize that inevitable death?

In the original, the main character, Ludwig, dies at the end.

Naturally, classmates are also dying. Saviolin Tana dies, so of course there are deaths among the students.

Some people make it to the end, like Ellen and Herriot and Delphine and Scarlett.

However, the situation is different from the original.

Too different.

Ashar wasn't meant to die.

The future is different, the fight is different, and people who shouldn't have died are starting to die.

Guys who die in the original may survive.

Conversely, in the original story, the survivors may die.

Ashir's death signaled that this was beginning to happen.

It doesn't just happen in hard, brutal fights. People can die in ways that are more like accidents.

Those deaths.

You can't save everyone, but you can save your classmates.

If there's a way to give them a break from death, I think we should do it.

You never know who will die in a fight.

Reducing the size of the fight they have to go through, reducing the monster, is the only thing we can do now.

You can't do much more for the guys who die in the fight.

However, there are other ways to die.

Because of the changes to the original, life and death in a fight is unpredictable and can only be prevented.

But some things haven't changed from the original.

Politics.

Death by politics will happen on schedule.

As long as the people involved in politics are alive, so are the dynamics involved in politics.

The knowledge that comes from the reorganization of power will be the same.

As long as their humanity is intact, politics will cause them to want to kill someone.

The fights are unpredictable, but the political relationships remain the same.

"Heinrich, I remember."

Harriet and Riana nod at my words.

Heinrich von Schwarz.

You are a Pyrokineticist.

The Prince of Cernstadt.

A prince who had no influence, but can only grow stronger.

"He's about to be killed."

Killing, not fighting.

Riana and Herriot's eyes widened at that.

Episode 519.

The way is clear.

The Alliance will soon recognize the intervention of an unknown force, but not yet.

And if you clear the path too early, other monsters will take its place.

So until the Allies begin their next advance, our units will have some time to play out their primary operations in real time.

"I need to see the status of the Allied garrison.

Heinrich von Schwarz is assassinated.

However, the exact timing is unknown.

So we decided to look at the trends in the Allied garrisons.

I can get the information from Sarkhegar, who should already be infiltrating, but I need to see it with my own eyes.

It wasn't just Heinrich's problem, there were a lot of things I wanted to see with my own eyes.

How the Temple guys are doing, how they've changed.

And I wanted to see how things were going for Ellen.

The other four said it was too risky, but what Sarkegar can do, I can do to some extent.

You can't turn into a beast, but you can turn into a person.

The Allies are outnumbered.

Even one is too many.

As such, it shouldn't be difficult to get around the garrison disguised as a member of the Allied forces.

And this war basically doesn't do much about security and spying issues.

Your opponents are unspeakable monsters.

There is no spying and no surprise because the enemy is always coming for you. There is no such thing as information warfare. Bertus knows I'm not dangerous, so he's not going to be on the lookout for my forces.

Since they know I'm watching, it's possible that they've designed the situation to make it easier for me to see what's going on. Of course, that's a bit of a stretch.

I arrived near the Allied garrison dressed as an Imperial officer.

Herriot teleported me away.

"......that's a lot."

I'd heard about it, but I'd never seen it in person, and the sheer scale of the Allied forces left me speechless.

If there's a crisis, I'll flee to Scroll, and if there's no such crisis, Herriot will be waiting to take me to Edina at a designated time at a designated location.

Due tomorrow.

"Your Highness, do you recall your rank and affiliation?"

Beside me was Sarkegar, disguised as my attendant.

"Lieutenant Lindell, Disciplinarian, 4th Training Command, 1st Imperial Legion."

Of course it's bullshit. Buddha exists, but there is no such thing as Lt. Lindell.

Why officers, so that the common soldier doesn't question who's where.

The reason for this is because there are very few of them in this Allied garrison.

Their job is to train recruits from the ecliptic and then deploy them into the field with supplies via mass teleportation, but they don't need to be there.

But it's not the only one.

They're actually officers in the garrison, but they're very few in number. So it's very unlikely that you're going to hear, "I'm a disciplinarian and I don't know anybody like you.

Other officers would say "disciplinarian" and move on.

So I've created a false identity that allows me to move around this garrison without anyone bothering me.

It was a cover story recommended by Sarkegar, who had gotten to know the garrison pretty well in two days.

This isn't even necessary in the first place.

There are so many soldiers and officers in a garrison that they don't all recognize each other, even if they're from the same army.

It's Sarkhegar's job to provide a bird's eye view of the entire Alliance.

There's only one thing I want to see.

To determine the status of the Temple Royal Class garrison.

\* \* \*

Sarkegar is a man of his word.

I thought I was doing a good job, but I had given Sarkegar a pretty big task.

He can transform without any base, so we just sent him into enemy territory. You said to gather information.

Within two days, I had not only mapped out the distribution of allied forces across the vast garrison, but I had also come up with a plausible cover story for my inability to transform into a beast or bug.

No, but if you're good at your job, that's a problem in itself.

When you throw something at them and they do well, there's this expectation that they're going to do well.

What makes a great subordinate.......

Isn't that what happens when you're good at something, you end up taking on more and more difficult tasks?

If being great makes you dangerous, shouldn't you be better off not being great?

The garrison was so noisy that even if Sarkegar and I spoke normally, it would be impossible for anyone to overhear.

-Move! Move it!

-Emergency muster! Four platoons assemble!

Not to mention the shouting all around the garrison.

-Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

-PushBenefit!

A sound like the pounding of an army drum echoed in the air.

"You must be busy."

"Yes, the top combatants are, but the logistical costs of arming the lower ranks are enormous."

"Of course......."

Master classes can use Auror blades, and higher level combatants are given higher quality weapons. For example, enchanted.

The self-repairing longsword that Ellen and I used when we went to the Darklands is also considered a luxury item. Such luxury items can be damaged in battle, but they are durable because of their inherent quality.

A lowly soldier doesn't even get a chance to hold such a thing.

Relatively low-quality arsenals are their lot.

So once you're in combat, even if you survive, your gear is bound to be damaged.

This is why garrisons can only churn out so much armor until the blacksmiths are too scared to set up a garrison.

Spear and sword, bow and arrow.

-Bang!

I could hear the smelting of armor and the sound of grass, and I could see Union blacksmiths with reddened faces.

I realized how much manpower it takes to fight a war, and how many non-combatants, but somehow more important than combatants, are involved.

I know in my head that war isn't just about swords and spears, but seeing the bustling Allied garrison made it seem like it was right up close and personal.

I am a part of this war, but we can always return to Edina, our headquarters, at any time in the prime numbers.

This army is so large that the number of people who can travel very long distances via mass teleportation is extremely limited.

Many will not be able to return to their homes until this war is over, and many more have technically lost those homes.

I could also hear people's conversations to some extent if I concentrated.

-Well, at least I'm not starving. That's better.

-What does it matter if I die tomorrow?

-Have you ever starved to the point of wanting to die? I'd rather be dead than alive.

The safest thing in the barrel of a gun is a soldier.

Some say it's better to die than to starve, while others fear the shadow of death.

The war was tangible, the hatred, fear, and hope of the people was palpable.

There were conversations cursing me, and there were conversations praising Ellen.

Some wondered if it would be possible to feed this army until the war was over.

There were conversations between officers who worried about the fate of humanity if this army was wiped out.

-What happens if a demon attacks us now?

-No matter how powerful a demon is, how can he raid this place when there's Lord Tana and the warriors here? Without going insane.......

-Didn't the Demon slaughter dozens of Swordmasters on the Ecliptic the other day?

-But then he lost to you. You stabbed him through the heart. In truth, the demon may already be dead.

I walk through the Allied garrison with a bitter smile.

"That's quite....... That's a lot of space."

The Union garrison was large and populated.

So there was a lot of back and forth, and a lot of variety.

It wasn't just Saddam who was clamoring for a successor, but the usual suspects in an army like this.

And then there were the weird ones.

-Woooooooo!

From somewhere, I could hear the sounds of soldiers crowding and admiring, and there was a scene unfolding there that I never thought I would see in a war zone, especially under these circumstances.

-Kung!

-I told you, I'm a dog person.

There was a soldier who made a sneaky little brown dog sit, stand, and do other petty tricks, and there were soldiers who watched.

"What....... do you have a dog, a military dog?"

Even the squeaky-clean Chuck and Chuck were mongrels, so they weren't military dogs. This wasn't a war for military dogs.

"Surviving wild beasts seem to be trickling into Allied garrisons. Or perhaps the humans are finding them and bringing them in on purpose."

Just as humans survive this mess, so do the beasts.

"As you can see, the commanders didn't seem to mind if they thought it was good for the morale of the troops. It's not a lot, but there are quite a few units like that."

They may have been rescued, or they may have come to you because they think you will protect them.

-Ohhhh!

The soldiers are in awe of the dog's silly antics.

The survivors protect the surviving beasts.

It's just a dog. It's probably fed, and I don't know if it's a platoon or a company, but the soldiers in that garrison are going to keep that dog around.

They will cherish that dog, even though it has no role in this war.

It doesn't mean anything, but it's important because it doesn't mean anything.

Sarkegar stared at the spectacle.

"Your Highness."

"Uh."

"I, for one, wished for the destruction of all men."

Sarkegar stares at the soldiers, who laugh at the dog.

"But I don't think this is what you were hoping for....... I guess."

They have broken us, so be ye broken.

Sarkegaard wanted that.

That's why I'm watching a broken humanity.

Sneaky dog.

What makes us different from those dogs.

Sarkozy's thoughts seemed to have gotten complicated. It wasn't about forgiving humanity or anything.

But you'll feel a certain inevitability when you look at the broken things and can't help but hate them.

It's hard to put into words what we feel.

I can only describe the view in a few words.

A broken humanity laughs at a dog.

You look at what's still there and try to forget what you've lost.

We drove through the landscape.

\* \* \*

"That's a long way."

"I guess that's to be expected with such a large force."

The Union garrison was so large that it would take three months just to get to where Temple's troops were stationed.

They didn't have officers on horseback in the garrison for nothing.

Of course, we don't need horses now that we can run faster than a horse at a sprint.

But when someone who is nothing more than an Allied drill sergeant is sprinting through the garrison at superhuman speeds, things can get very awkward.

The Temple Garrison is also considered quite important to the Alliance, so it's almost in the center of the garrison, so it's the same distance from all sides.

Eventually, we made it to where the Temple troops were stationed, even within the Allied garrison.

Many of Temple's students were drafted into the military. And Temple had a student population of over 100,000 to begin with.

As such, even an army of students is a massive force, and even without the use of magical enhancements, the level of combat power of Temple students is far beyond that of ordinary soldiers.

They are either professionally trained in no-tech or have studied magic.

Temple's forces are no match for the Allied mainstays.

There, a huge number of weapons from the temple were placed in the hands of the students.

You and Sarkegar have entered the Temple garrison.

Unsurprisingly, the average age of those coming and going was very low compared to other garrisons, both male and female.

Students are educated in the same environment regardless of their status.

But many have lost their homes and many have lost their countries.

Your identity has become a mystery.

Even among the nobility of the Empire, there are many who have lost their estates.

So it's safe to say that now that status has truly become irrelevant, they are all equal under the umbrella of student-turned-soldier.

"They teach in this environment, too."

"I suppose."

I nodded at Sarkegar's words.

It's not just the students, it's also the teachers.

In addition to combat-specific classes, we also conduct general training from time to time. There are no exams, of course, but it's not like the human race is extinct yet.

You may not be able to train for the future often, but you still have a class.

That's probably true for the Royal Class side as well.

Of course, Temple powers, and more importantly Royal Class powers, have little time for such general training.

Temples aren't completely dead.

When there are students and teachers, something called education can occur.

As if to shout out that you can't just train in a temple.

Sarkozy and I walked on, feeling pretty hopeless at the sights I had described.

The centerpiece of the Temple Garrison.

Royal Class Garrison.

I had no choice but to face the challenges I knew were coming.

"It's a defense......."

The Royal Class garrison area had a circle of barriers around it.

This had already been reported before Sarkegar started gathering information.

"As I said, the Royal Class garrison has strict access control."

"...... Looks like it."

"Apparently there were too many people trying to get a glimpse of Ellen Artorius, even from a distance, and some even broke into the barracks."

This is also something that didn't happen in the original.

Ludwig is the master of Alsbringer, and Ellen is the warrior's sister.

As it turns out, their fame has skyrocketed, but they weren't gated like this.

I wonder if this is me after all.

My presence has squared away the fame of my arch-enemy, Ellen, and made her more prominent in the Alliance than she was before. Your work on the Gate so far will be important.

It even gets to the point of stalking.

So we ended up building this fence around the Royal Class garrison, with soldiers standing at the entrance with lights in their eyes to keep an eye out for unwanted visitors.

Herriot had entered Ellen's barracks by spatial travel.

I wouldn't have gone through that entrance in the first place.

No fake identities, no nothing.

There's a sign on the fence that says, "No unauthorized persons," so no one is going to get in there without a reason.

"I'll take it from here."

"......."

Sarkhegar can shapeshift into something other than human in the first place, so he could have gotten into that Royal Class garrison.

I can't.

But Sarkegaard does.

I even knew that in the first place.

Of course, I only saw the Royal Class garrison, not the Allied return, so I can't say it's obviously meaningless.

But it would be even more ridiculous to bring him in now and have them both move in there with a spatial shift.

As long as it looks like this, even if I could get in there, I'd be an uninvolved party entering a Royal Class garrison.

You can't just go in as someone on the inside. The Royal Class garrison is not very large. It would be crazy to have two people in the same place.

Sarkhegar would be able to sneak in and check out the people without being seen.

But you've come this far.

We've come this far.

Among the tents and huts of the garrison, Sarkhegar prepares for his transformation.

It will turn into a bird and fly away.

But.

I want to see.

What happened to everyone.

How everyone is doing.

I know it's just a pain in the ass to check.

Still.

There are some things you want to see.

"Sarkegar."

"Yes."

"I'll do it."

"......Yes?"

The image of the soldiers laughing at the dog came to mind.

"You're controlling the people, not the beasts."

You're in control, not the beast.

And it's an environment that doesn't need a lot of beasts.

The existence of the beast itself is not suspicious.

"Can we do this?"

"I, Your Highness......."

"No, but we can try."

If it's a beast, you should be able to get in there.

I've never done this before.

However, it hasn't been done, not impossible.

\* \* \*

Sarkegar's shapeshifting abilities allow him to turn into a bug or a dragon.

But I haven't tried it.

I didn't even dare to try because I was told that if I did it wrong, I might not come back.

So I wanted to be able to change into either human or demon form, but at least maintain a "humanoid" appearance.

But right now, it's impossible to get in as someone else.

I could have taken Sarkozy's word for it, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

I didn't need to come here if I was going to listen to it instead of seeing it with my own eyes.

Sarkeghar's face fell when I told him that I would suddenly turn into a beast.

But you should be able to get back on track.

If it doesn't, it's going to be self-implied, unspoken, or whatever.

We're not going to have this ridiculous situation where you're transformed into a beast and you can't get back, and you're screwed. At least there's a way to get achievement points or something in case you don't make it back.

Do.

Blind spots in the Temple garrison where people can't see you.

-Angel

I became a cat.

Why cats.

First of all, cats are small, and if they're spotted lurking around and eavesdropping, they'll probably let it slide.

No matter how weird it is, if it's cute, they'll understand.

Because that's what people do.

It's dangerous to turn into a dog, because you might suddenly be put on a leash. It's bad for hiding.

My supplies and clothes didn't fall to the floor.

I'm not sure, but I'm guessing that Sarkhegar's ring has some sort of function, like when Sarkhegar turns from animal to human, he doesn't appear naked.

But the ring was hanging from my ear, invisible. Like a piercing.

And the problem.

It's not easy to move your limbs.

What to say.

It's hard to put into words, but it's not like you're moving a limb, it's like you're operating a machine for the first time in your life.

You know, the kind where you have to fly a fighter jet you've never flown before.......

More like a mobile suit than a fighter jet?

No, I've never ridden either, so it doesn't really matter what I say, but.......

-Burr

I feel like a bum.

My limbs don't move the way I want them to!

No, it's not a limb.

All four of my legs won't work! I can't even walk!

Is the cat's limbs out of sync?

How do you extend your claws?

Am I supposed to know how a cat's limbs work or something?

I was frozen in place, wobbling on my right front paw, hopping on my hind legs.

-Hair!

Eventually, I couldn't even stand up straight, so I just rolled over onto my side.

Literally, helplessly.

-Burrrr

You're lying on your side, shivering, but your body isn't moving.

Was this really that hard?

What has Sarkozy done so far?

First of all, the four-legged cat is like this, but how did you do the bug thing, how did you do the winged beast?

-Cat!

Sarkegar can even talk, but he doesn't make any sounds other than meows.

"......."

Sarkegar stares down at me as I flop onto my side, my limbs flailing.

Why buy and suffer.

And then.

-Snarl!

Eventually, Sarkegaard changed his look, too.

A cat like me, but a little bigger.

-Angel

-Pulp! Flick!

Sarkegar tumbles out of place.

As if to say, follow along.

-pot!

Why is the tail going up?

-.......

Sarkegar the Holy Grave stares at me.

He shakes his head in silence.

You can't.

Stop.

Back to normal.

It was a nod of determination.

No, it's not changing, it's just that whatever it is, I don't know how to operate it yet!

You can do it if you know how!

No documentation?

-Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!

I blurted out, and Sarkegar stared at me for a long moment.

He stomped on my foot and started doing things as if he was trying to teach me something, one step at a time.

The.

Honestly.

I had no idea what it was trying to teach me.

Episode 520.

Among Temple garrisons, the entrance to the Royal Class garrison is guarded by guards drawn from the Temple.

Of course, only a select few are allowed to take on this role. Not only are the Royal Class students' individual strengths important, but the famous warrior Ellen Artorius is in residence here.

It's not just a bunch of dudes, but dignitaries and celebrities from all over the world. Ellen's fame is indescribable.

So, starting with the bullshit about not knowing who I am and ending with those who would yell at the guards if I tried to bring Ellen over, the Royal Class garrison gatekeepers are made up of people who can ignore such rude high-level bullshit without snorting.

As such, the garrison is off-limits to all but designated personnel, and the penalties for attempting to sneak in, or being caught doing so, rise to the level of an Imperial Emperor.

Of course, that doesn't mean they've gone away.

Such an access control situation.

Absolutely no access except for designated 'people'.

The only thing under control is people.

"......?"

The gatekeepers, who were scanning their surroundings in anticipation of the usual rambling and clueless dignitaries, widened their eyes when they saw a cat stalking toward the entrance of the garrison.

"Cat......?"

"What kind of cat is that?"

"Really?"

There's one on foot.

But in the mouth of the walking black cat was an equally black little kitten, dangling by the nape of its neck with a bite.

-Angel

The cat that had been bitten by its mother was letting out a pitiful cry.

A black cat strolls into the Royal Class garrison, unperturbed by the gatekeepers.

"That's interesting....... I've seen dogs, but cats? Did they get mixed in with the supplies?"

"No way."

Since cats are not subject to access control, the gatekeepers could only stare at the back of the black kitten.

Soon, the guards could see a grotesque figure.

The mother cat strutted into the Royal Class garrison with her kitten in tow, carefully setting the kitten down in the middle of the busy base.

Then, with a burst of speed, it blazed through the Royal Class base barrier and disappeared.

-Cat!

The guards stare at the baby black cat lying on the dirt with a blank expression.

"......This or that?"

"...... I think so?"

Sarkeghar abandoned Reinhardt.

\* \* \*

-Cat!

The kitten's voice just sounds like a cry for help from a small animal.

It's like, "Hey, don't throw it away like this!" but who's going to understand?

Naturally, the cry of a small animal suddenly appearing in such a place was bound to attract attention.

"......What is this, a cat?"

And the first one to spot the cat was Kono Lint, a teleportation powerhouse.

Naturally, many people heard the cat's cry and began to gather in droves.

Except for those who are off base on a mission, everyone flocks to the cries of a small beast they don't recognize but know.

Adelia, Christina, and Louis Ankton, who were conducting research in the garrison, including Kono Lindt.

And the other students in the royal class were bound to come. It's not just the sophomores who are here, it's the existing seniors and juniors as well.

Surely a beast, or at least a cub, is not to be seen in a place like this.

"How did the cat get here?"

"Some places have dogs, but that doesn't mean they can't have cats."

"I saw a big cat that looked like that run away earlier, did he abandon it?"

"Oh my God. I feel so sorry for you......."

"How cute is this?"

"Who actually raised you?"

"You had a mother."

-Cat!

Of course, my original plan was to transform into a cat and sneak around the garrison, picking up stories and spying, but I never figured out the controls and was forced to be a spectator.

Kono Lint, the original discoverer, grabbed a purring kitten by the scruff of the neck.

"Hey, hey, hey, watch out!"

"No, not that......."

Picking up the small beast quickly, Kono Lint shook his head at the sight of the black kitten.

"Hey, do you think you're sick?"

-Burrrr

The black cat, hobbling around on all fours, looked pretty bad.

-Cat!

Of course, no one understood that it was screaming, "Put me down, you son of a bitch.

\* \* \*

The poor kitten, abandoned by its mother, was taken to a restaurant marquee.

It's not because you're cold, it's not because you're floating, and it's not because you can't get up on all fours.

It's not because I'm cold, so a blanket won't stop me from shaking, and it's not because I'm sick, so I won't magically be able to control my limbs.

"You must be in a lot of pain."

"Why wouldn't it be better?"

"So cute......."

Naturally, a corner of the large dining hall marquee was packed with students.

The grim and gritty world of war is a far cry from the euphoria of seeing something cute.

Therefore, all the students crowded around to see this poor but precious guest who had suddenly appeared.

I put a plate of milk from the cafeteria in front of her, hoping she was hungry, but she just shivered and couldn't bring herself to take a bite.

"Right!"

Kono Lindt, who was watching, clapped his hands.

"Maybe he's stressed because people are looking at him so much."

Everyone in the room nodded at Kono Lint's words.

Stress is everyone's enemy, and for a little beast like this, it's a big, potentially life-threatening enemy. We all knew that intuitively, even if we didn't realize it.

"Let's leave it alone for now."

A bunch of psychics and superhumans, all of whom have a finger in every pie, united around a kitten.

The black kitten watched, shivering, as they swarmed and then scattered.

\* \* \*

It didn't take long for the smallest of news to spread: a kitten had suddenly appeared in the garrison.

So, once the curiosity got the better of them, there was no shortage of students coming to the restaurant.

Of course, not everyone was interested.

"......That's interesting."

Redina shook her head, but paid no attention, as if she had better things to do.

It was rare, but not unheard of, to find a surviving beast, and Redina's shoulders heaved at the thought of such a thing.

Of course, most of them paid at least a little attention.

The battlefield was just too crowded.

Like soldiers with their dogs, Royal Class students wanted to see a little bit of that little animal in the emotional desert of the battlefield.

Among them was Adriana, a Temple dropout who eventually ended up in the Royal Class.

"Are you sick......?"

-Angel

Adriana carefully approached the kitten and cast a healing spell on it, just as the other Faith majors had done.

"......Since Adriana's doing it, it seems to be working, right?"

The black cat, which had been shivering like a dead man walking, stirred and lifted its head, rubbing its head against Adriana's fingers.

"How did he get here....... Poor thing."

Adriana smiled sadly at the little cat rubbing its head against her fingers.

I can't tell if it's a bond or what, but it's clear that the kitten likes Adriana a lot.

Adriana petted the cat for a while, until she was called to duty and hurried out of the restaurant's tent.

"Oops, I thought I was here to eat......."

Eventually, Adriana was distracted by the cat and had to go on a mission on an empty stomach.

\* \* \*

We don't know if Adriana's healing magic worked or not, but the kitten gradually regained her strength as many students dropped by and tended to her.

Of course, that's not what happened, but it certainly looked that way to onlookers.

The tremors began to subside, and I began to move my limbs that hadn't been moving properly.

Eventually, after shivering in his blanket, he managed to get up on all fours.

"Look at that, he's standing up."

The students, who were afraid of startling the cat, watched with bated breath as if they were witnessing the miracle of the century.

Many of the students watched as the cat moved carefully, step by step, as if for the first time.

The kitten began to walk in circles, staying still within a certain range around the blanket. As if it were practicing something.

Despite Kono Lint's warnings not to bother, everyone was unusually excited about the arrival of this strange guest.

"And the mother cat abandoned him?"

"That's right."

Adelia and Christina stood by the kitten, who had just begun to walk, and gawked at the scene.

"Are you hungry? Eat this."

Christina held out the milk dish, and the kitten didn't even pretend to see it.

It's a full stomach.

Milk is not a common food in this situation.

"Are you hungry?"

You're hungry and you don't want to leave Malgo and eat like an animal, but who knows.

The kittens would occasionally squeak, spin in place, suddenly jump up on a pole, flail their front paws, and do other bizarre things.

It's like trying to check the function of your body.

\* \* \*

As night fell, those who had gone out on missions began to return one by one, unless they were on long-term assignments. Naturally, word of the cat spread, and many people came to the restaurant to watch the cat.

You thought you were on a stealthy reconnaissance mission, but your body didn't cooperate and you ended up making them find you, but you still accomplished your mission.

"Cat......?"

When Ludwig was told there was a kitten in a crowd, he shook his head once and went back to his dinner.

"......That's weird."

It's certainly strange to have kittens in a place like this.

Ludwig paid no attention to the rest of his remarks.

Klippmann saw the group of people, but he didn't seem to be curious, so he sat down alone and began to eat.

The black kitten watched the crowd for a moment longer than he would have liked.

"......."

Scarlett squatted in front of the kitten, frowning as she debated whether or not to offer her hand.

"If it's just a little bit....... can I touch it?"

Scarlett asked Anna de Gerna, who was standing next to her, cautiously, as if to ask for permission.

"Wouldn't that be okay......?"

As if emboldened by Anna's words, Scarlett cautiously reached out to the cat and succeeded in petting it once, albeit cautiously.

The cat allowed Scarlett's touch, though not as much as she did with Adriana.

"You're so cute......."

Scarlett, who doesn't tend to react strongly, was stomping her feet.

And when Anna reached out with a wicked grin after seeing that Scarlett had successfully petted her once, the kitten slowly backed away, as if some kind of trauma switch had been triggered, much to Anna's chagrin.

Only the cat knows what's going on.

If the original kitten had really been a kitten, it might have been a problem for it to ride on so many people's hands, but since it wasn't really a kitten and wasn't really a cat, it didn't matter.

Of course, the cat, tired of all the attention, sat between the blankets, watching the people come and go.

"Shouldn't we give it a name?"

Kono Lint, the original discoverer, casually mentioned it to a group of students.

As if you've already decided to keep this cat in the Royal Class Garrison.

"Right, we need a name."

Delphine nodded vigorously in agreement with Kono Lint's statement.

Konorint wasn't the only one who had already decided to keep a cat that hadn't even been around for a day.

"How about black?"

"......."

"......."

"......."

"Gu, is it gross......?"

As everyone watched in silence, Kono Lint broke out in a cold sweat.

"It's too lush before it goes bad."

"Oh, I see......."

Scarlett, who is very rarely a harsh talker, has said enough.

"I know."

As he watched, Erich de Lapaeri spoke up.

His eyes narrowed at the words.

"Give it a bad name and it will live long. Let's call it dog poop."

-Ahoy!

"I don't think so."

"Right."

"Do I understand what you're saying?"

"And if it's not a dog, what kind of dog poop is it?"

"I hear this is how you live longer......."

"Shut up."

"ugh......."

Erich's opinions were drowned out by the indiscriminate dismissals here and there.

"How's Lily?"

Christina's rather cute name got a few oohs and aahs.

-Hello!

But the black cat didn't like either the dog poop or the lily.

Of course, I don't think they understood what I was saying, they just thought it was good timing.

Lily.

"Hmmm....... Lily....... Lily......."

With that, Kono Lint crossed his arms and began to ponder.

"Wait a minute."

Lint walked up to the cat, who was sitting quietly, and grabbed one of its hind legs.

"Is this a male?"

-Haahhhh!

Before you know it, the kitten is able to grind its teeth.

\* \* \*

Many hands make light work of a ship.

However, too much of a good thing is a bad thing.

Now, the Royal Class was a ship that was going nowhere because it had too many men.

With so many possible cat names, it's easy for a cat to end up with a name that sounds like this and a name that sounds like that, and then nothing.

After all, what was a small beast to say, the interior of the Royal Class garrison was strangely cheerful, beyond much gloom and despair.

Maybe it doesn't take much hope to quell despair.

The little things.

Keeping those little things.

Maybe there's hope in seeing the little things that still remain.

In the midst of this strange excitement, students have mixed feelings.

The more important missions take place farther away from the garrison, which is why Ellen Artorius returned to the garrison quite late.

Naturally, the rumors of the cat's sudden appearance were bound to get around to Ellen, who arrived for a late dinner.

Everyone was vaguely aware that Ellen had been suffering from fatigue lately.

So, as if everyone had found some measure of comfort, if not consolation, in the little kitten's presence, Ellen finished her meal in a daze, and was led by the other students to stand in front of the kitten.

"Some mother cat must have come and abandoned it today."

"I wonder if they wanted us to raise them?"

"What do you think, is it cute?"

"......."

Ellen looks at the small animal in front of her through blurry eyes.

Cat.

Ellen couldn't hear people talking, or even the small animals in front of her.

It became distant and blurry, and I felt like it was all going to disappear.

The cat raises its head when Ellen appears and looks exactly at her.

As if you want to verify something.

Ellen squats carefully, as if mesmerized, and places her hand under the cat's chin.

"Uh, lick."

The onlookers watched as the little cat licked Ellen's hand.

The unfamiliar sensation of her hand being licked seemed to bring some of her clouded mind back.

"......."

Constantly.

A cat constantly licks its own fingers.

Ellen felt as if the small gesture had somehow awakened a sensation in the tips of her skin that had been dulled.

The cat's low, plaintive meow wakes me from my blurred vision.

Ellen could finally see what was in front of her.

Black.

Small animals.

Ellen opens her mouth, and Nazik speaks.

"Cat......."

Everyone watched the strange exchange with bated breath.

Episode 521.

A kitten that appeared out of nowhere.

But the cat, who hadn't shown much interest in anyone except Adriana, seemed to take a great liking to Ellen.

"Ellen must be good."

Adelia, who had been watching Ellen and the cat, said as much.

"This cat hasn't eaten anything today, will he eat if Ellen gives it to him?"

Kono Lint's words made Ellen look over. When Ellen turned her head, there was a new, slightly lukewarm plate of milk.

"Why don't you give it to me?"

At Adelia's words, Ellen cautiously accepted the plate.

Ellen looks at the cat, which is staring at her.

Ellen doesn't know how to read a beast's expression.

But I get this weird feeling that he's reluctant, but he hasn't eaten anything, and I've even heard that he looks a little sick.

Ellen sets the plate down in front of the cat and nudges it toward her.

Squatting down, Ellen looks at the cat.

-.......

The cat looks at the plate, then at Ellen, and so on.

It's like they're watching you.

Eventually.

Finish.

Gearco.

The black kitten sticks its head in the saucer and starts licking the milk.

He refuses to drink milk no matter who offers it to him, but when Ellen offers it to him, he can't resist.

-Ohhhhh.

We all realized that Ellen is the kind of person who makes the impossible possible.

Ellen watched the black cat licking the milk with cloudy eyes.

Ellen began to slowly stroke the cat's back as it lapped up the milk.

\* \* \*

Currently, the Alliance doesn't include only units directly affiliated with the Empire, otherwise it wouldn't be the Empire and not the Alliance.

This is humanity's greatest army, the sum of its parts.

Despite being outnumbered, the Archduke of the Duchy of St. Thuan and his wizards are at war, and the surviving empires have gathered all their forces and sent them to the Alliance.

It's no surprise that the most powerful of these empires, the First Kernstadt, sent the most troops after the Imperial Army.

It's a war for the fate of mankind, and we're off to war.

Cernstadt's troops, then, as the second most successful state after the Empire, must have been considerable in number and very important to the Allies.

Such was Heinrich von Schwarz, the youngest prince of Cernstadt.

Pyrokinesis, a combat-related superpower, is now comparable to Liana de Granz's thunderbolt.

Of course, Riana awakened her weather manipulation powers unbeknownst to them.

-Currrrrr!

Heinrich watched from his horse as the waves of fear burned the monsters.

The troops that had followed Heinrich watched the spectacle in disbelief.

Somehow, Ellen Artorius was able to tap into the true power of the fire elemental, but naturally, it was Heinrich who was more adept at using it.

The monsters on the ground were burned to ash by the waves of fear.

Next, Heinrich watches a swarm of flying monsters fly across the sky.

Just as there are many different ground monsters, there are also many different flying monsters.

However, flying monsters are everywhere, as they have more freedom of maneuver than ground monsters.

That's why no matter how much you clean up the area around you, you have to be vigilant and keep your eyes on the sky.

Watching the swarm of flying monsters fly by, Heinrich focuses his abilities.

"Brace for impact!"

At Heinrich's shout, the troops tensed.

All the troops saw a red flash in the sky, a single point of light.

-Flash!

Momentary oblivion.

-Crackle!

And with a deafening explosion that seemed to tear your eardrums apart.

Heinrich watched as the approaching flying monsters were thrown off balance by the shockwave and slammed to the ground.

Fire isn't the only weapon.

It's all in the power of Heinrich von Schwarz, including all the additional effects that flames can produce.

\* \* \*

Every power is different, but any power that involved destruction and force, as was the case with Riana, was considered a very important power in the Alliance if the wielder was of a certain level.

Heinrich von Schwarz is a prime example, while other examples include psychics who can control the wind.

Redina's superpowers are also very important, albeit conditional.

Heinrich's abilities allow him to take on large-scale missions similar to Ellen's, and they often overlap.

As such, there have been quite a few occasions over the years where Heinrich has taken over for Ellen on joint missions or when Ellen Artorius is not feeling well.

So, from the Temple Royal class. That said, psychics have risen to prominence in the wake of the Gate, if not to Ellen's level, and are bound to have a significant presence within the Alliance.

After completing his color and annihilation missions, Heinrich returned to the garrison, receiving salutes from soldiers who recognized him one by one.

Not as much as Ellen.

Naturally, Heinrich can't be as famous as Ellen, who has two holy relics and is considered the Devil's arch-enemy.

-Prince.

-Prince!

-Prince, look at this!

However, whenever they passed through the Cernstadt garrison, Heinrich was treated as a hero alongside Ellen.

Heinrich waved to the soldiers who shouted for him to see them.

Even in the face of great tragedy, people will always find hope somewhere.

The youngest prince of Cernstadt, Heinrich von Schwarz, was seen as one such hope by the people of Cernstadt.

Whenever Heinrich sees people find hope in him, he feels a weight lifted from his heart, like a very heavy stone.

But the pressure was never something I hated.

"Heinrich, are you back?

"......."

Heinrich winced and muttered quietly as a voice seemed to pierce through his head.

Psychics all have their place. Even if it's a non-combat related ability.

The voice that pierced his head was the telepathic voice of Ivia, formerly B-7.

Ivia's abilities had now grown by leaps and bounds, and she was tasked with spreading the will of the Allied Command to the various units.

While not directly related to combat, it is perhaps the most important ability in warfare, as it allows for instant communication over long distances.

As such, Ivia is almost forced to live in the General Quarters rather than the Royal Class Barracks.

Technically, Ivia is the lone communicator in this massive army.

'Go to the Cernstadt command center barracks. The military commander of Cernstadt wants to see you.

"......Okay."

A voice like a direct punch to the brain.

No matter how many times he tried, Heinrich could never get used to it.

Telepathy.

Though not a force for attack and destruction.

I don't know if it's ever not a force for destruction.

The ability to interfere with someone's brain from a distance is probably the most dangerous superpower in the world.

Every time Heinrich connected with Ivia telepathically, he felt a strange sense of unease.

\* \* \*

After debriefing the mission, Heinrich headed for the Cernstadt military garrison, just as Ivia had said.

Heinrich was almost as famous as Ellen in the Cernstadt military garrison, so much so that soldiers and knights saluted him with awe and respect whenever they saw him, even if he couldn't see them.

I couldn't answer every salute and cheer one by one, and now I'm on my way to the summons of the military commander of Cernstadt.

Heinrich quickened his pace and headed for the area of the military commander's barracks.

The garrison was vast, and Heinrich had to walk a long way to reach the barracks of the Cernstadt military commander on the hill.

The knights and guards guarding the area saw Heinrich, saluted him politely, and cleared the way.

Once inside the military commander's barracks, Heinrich soon saw a familiar face.

Two men sitting on the left and right.

"You're in the middle of another big operation. Good job."

A man with a serious expression.

"Isn't that a bit too much of a royalty roll, though? Isn't it okay for Empire royalty to be consumed? I think we need to protest."

A man with a disgruntled look on his face.

Both were older brothers of Heinrich.

"Stop, by that logic, there is no such thing as a good soldier."

"But my sister......."

"That's it. How long are you going to keep the youngest, the one you don't see much, parked here?"

And the woman sitting in the front row.

"There you are, youngest, have a seat."

The sharp-eyed woman glares at Heinrich.

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich, military commander of Cernstadt, first princess of Cernstadt and heir. He bows to Louise von Schwarz.

The youngest.

Sibling treatment.

Only after the world has come to this does Heinrich find himself treated as a brother by the brothers who had treated him as a stranger.

Louise von Schwarz, the eldest daughter.

The eldest son, German von Schwarz.

Second son, Alfons von Schwarz.

The Five Men, Heinrich von Schwarz.

All the brothers are in one place.

\* \* \*

Seated at the head of the command circle, Heinrich slightly avoided the gaze of Louise von Schwarz. First Princess of Cernstadt and heir to the kingdom.

With the king unavailable, the military command of Cernstadt fell to his heir, Louise.

She is also the head of the Royal Knights of Cernstadt.

That means she's not only in command, but she's actually very good at it.

Heir to Cernstadt and head of the Royal Knights, plus Swordmaster at the age of twenty-four. Louise von Schwarz.

Heinrich was always afraid of his sister's piercing gaze.

Both of Heinrich's grandchildren graduated from the Royal Academy in Cernstadt a long time ago.

Louise von Schwarz was even an early graduate of the Royal Academy at the age of eighteen.

Just as the Gradias Empire has temples, Cernstadt has an academy system.

It was a royal undertaking that was expected to one day surpass the Temple and draw talent from all continents to the Royal Academy of Cernstadt. And indeed, the Royal Academy of Cernstadt was a prestigious educational system, if a little lacking in comparison to the Temple.

Heinrich's brothers were all admitted to and graduated from the Royal Academy of Cernstadt, not the Temple, because, of course, it would be untrustworthy to send royalty on royal business. It's the same reason why the Gradians entrusted the education of their royalty to the Temple.

But.

Heinrich von Schwarz was sent to the Temple, not the Royal Academy in Cernstadt.

That's not because Heinrich is an important person.

I just wanted to get it out of the way.

The brothers are all together, and Heinrich is the fifth, or sixth in number.

The fourth and fifth are not here.

No, not in the world.

Heinrich von Schwarz as a young man whose abilities had just been awakened.

They were burned to death by the panic Heinrich had caused.

That's why, when Heinrich was older, he went to the temple.

No, you've been kicked out of the temple.

\* \* \*

"My sister....... You called me because......."

"There is no reason for brothers to gather, and since you are not in our army and we do not see each other, we have invited you to eat."

Louise said, and as instructed, the food soon began to arrive, one by one, on the tables in the command center barracks.

The siblings are seated at the table and begin to eat.

It's not a cozy scene, and there's not a lot of conversation going on.

But it's important that we're sitting here together.

Siblings.

Heinrich's heart raced at the words.

It had been a long time since Heinrich had been treated as a brother by his brothers.

I didn't get to go to the Royal Academy, where all the royals go, and I was pretty much abandoned at the temple.

Eight years old at the start of Temple's primary education.

At the age of eight, Heinrich went to the Temple in the name of education.

It was effectively an exile. The royal family of Cernstadt may have paid for his education, but they had no idea how Heinrich was doing or what he was doing.

Because I wasn't interested.

To the royal family, Heinrich was just a royal scion with the cursed power to kill two brothers.

It was a simple accident, and one that Heinrich was too young to remember.

An accident that happened too young.

A prince abandoned too young.

So, in fact, Heinrich is a stranger to his brothers, whom he has only been able to see more often now that he's become a significant figure in the post-Gate world.

No face, no attitude, no behavior.

Even his two older brothers, who ignored or hated him.

The big sister who was always chilly and now seems to be cold.

It was only when Heinrich had made his mark and become an important person that he was treated like family.

Abandoned royalty.

Only after Heinrich had become an important person, a person with a name and value in the name of power, at a time when humanity's reputation was on the line, could he be a brother again, albeit a reluctant one.

Heinrich had a tendency to overestimate himself.

I knew in my head that I was abandoned royalty, but I didn't accept it.

I am the Prince of Cernstadt. I am the next in line of the First Empire.

That was Heinrich's pride and joy.

Until some nutcase gets into Royal Class and grinds himself to a pulp not long afterward.

I know now that he's not actually a shitty beggar, but a demon with an extraordinary and alarming history, but it doesn't make any difference.

Hearing harsh words you've never heard before in your life, and even getting hit.

Making a fool of yourself in front of a classmate you had a crush on.

Heinrich realized he was weak.

You have a great background, but it doesn't really support you.

I had to recognize and accept that I wasn't really that different from a beggar, but that I was a lot worse.

Even the force that was given to me was not properly honed.

Heinrich tried to make it work.

To make the power we're given into something tangible.

Reinhardt goes from being a goofy classmate to a fearsome force to be reckoned with.

He definitely knows what he's talking about.

So after the Gate, even as he used his powers to kill monsters and save people, Heinrich continued to improve his abilities.

That's why Heinrich could be so important right now.

He was able to abandon himself and be treated as a brother again by his brothers who had treated him like a nobody.

In the past, Heinrich had a tendency to overestimate himself.

This is how Heinrich would have judged the situation.

My brothers finally recognize my value and accept me back into the family.

Once these things are done, I will be able to return to the palace and live as a member of the royal family, if not the heir to the kingdom.

You should have felt a sense of pride and accomplishment.

After being abandoned by his family, he would have been happy and content to return to that place for whatever reason.

However, there is no Heinrich from his arrogant, self-indulgent days.

Someone taught me how to do something called topic identification.

What you can and can't do.

Who I am.

What I need to do.

Heinrich is now able to look at himself and his surroundings quite dispassionately.

"When this is over, will you return to Cernstadt?"

Louise asks as she slices the meat.

In the past, I would have said yes.

He wants to be recognized by his siblings and parents for rebuilding the country.

I would have answered that.

But the other two siblings are bothered by their sister's question.

He intuited that the brothers were focused on his answer.

Return to Cernstadt.

I just miss the embrace of my family.

But what he will do when he returns to Cernstadt, what he will do to rebuild his country and recognize his brothers.

Think about the problems that come with being in a strong position.

The older sister is thinking about herself now.

How it would be understood, how it would be accepted, how it would be accepted that I was so innocently longing for the arms of my family.

Of what his brothers and countless others would think of him.

on how to view it.

Think about it.

The longing to return to the embrace of family, the many things that foolish naivety will bring.

Intuit that there will be people who are afraid of it.

Heinrich thinks his older sister is thinking of him.

"There's a lot going on in the world, so I'm going to be gone for a while....... I don't think I'll be back, and if I do, it'll be for a few days....... for a few days. If the Temple is rebuilt, I'll have to finish my studies. I don't know if that day will ever come, but......."

Heinrich felt the tension in the room soften at his answer.

"Yeah."

It's overwhelming to be recognized as a brother again.

A family that is forced to accept because of circumstance, because of fame, because of power, cannot truly be a family.

Heinrich von Schwarz had a realization.

"Well, that's a shame."

Louise looks at Heinrich and slices the meat and pops it into her mouth.

Know your topic.

A guy who is now cursed by the mere mention of his name.

The things I learned to do because of him were coming in handy in the wrong places.

Episode 522.

After eating with his brothers, Heinrich was returning to the Temple garrison.

The time is night.

On his way home, Heinrich was thinking about what his older sister had told him.

I invited them to eat, but they didn't end up eating.

"I don't agree with Alphonse that the Empire is pushing you into operations that are too dangerous, but they are pushing you.

'I can't help it, given the circumstances, but you're royalty in Cernstadt, an important member of the royal family, one of the cornerstones of our future. It is quite uncomfortable for the Empire to have such a talent at its disposal.

'So I'm going to put you in the Cernstadt chain of command. That doesn't mean it will be permanent. There will come a time when you will be required to cooperate with the Temple forces, including Ellen Artorius, as well as the General Command, if necessary.'

'But before you were a student at the Temple, you were royalty in Cernstadt, and you are our brother.'

"Therefore, I believe it is right that we should have authority over matters concerning your personal life.

"He's the youngest. Do you agree?

Cornerstone.

Royalty.

Siblings.

Future.

The words from his sister's mouth tickled Heinrich's heart.

What a great thing to hear.

What a way to get a person's heart racing with just a few words.

No matter how much Heinrich wanted to hear it and how he was treated, it was strange to feel like he was really back in the family.

Heinrich walks through the garrison, where night has already fallen.

Yes.

That kind of power deserves to be recognized.

Heinrich stops in his tracks.

As if to put the brakes on the arrogance that once again reared its head.

You stop and look up at the night sky.

The.

It's just that it was lonely.

It's definitely weird to have your heart skip a beat at just a few words like that.

I'm just a weirdo because I was abandoned so early in life.

Come to think of it, Heinrich is royalty, but he has little memory of living like royalty.

So I don't even know what fraternization among royalty looks like.

So, you realize the strange realization that you're missing something you don't even know you're missing.

No favors are given for no reason.

That's true between siblings, and it's even more true when they're labeled royalty.

With power and influence, he was accepted as a brother again.

It's not about you, it's about power and influence.

Ruiz says he's going to get authorization from the High Command for his safety.

On the surface, the argument is that he is royalty in Cernstadt before he is a Temple student and Imperial citizen, and that he is important to the rebuilding of the country and should be protected, but the truth behind this is different.

Ruiz won't allow Heinrich to manipulate her without her permission.

This means strengthening Cernstadt's influence over the Allies.

Now that she's made herself useful, Louise wants to take control.

Brotherhood.

The truth that you don't even know, that you've never tried, that the drink is too sweet to drink. It shows up when you remove the false veil of emotion.

Consider Ellen's case.

Ellen Artorius is very important to the Alliance right now. Both as a morale booster and as an actual force.

The Allied Commander-in-Chief can decide which operations to deploy Ellen to.

You can direct Ellen to help the Cernstadt forces, you can direct her to help the Crusaders, or you can mobilize her to help other empires.

Every member of this coalition will want Ellen to fight alongside them.

If the decision-making power is in the hands of the high command, not Ellen, then everyone will be forced to meekly follow the dictates and orders of the high command.

It shouldn't be an emotional decision, but at the end of the day, the Alliance is a group of human beings.

If they don't get the support they need, they're going to suffer a lot of casualties.

Ellen can even clear the battlefield by herself.

Ellen has a single body, so if there are two operations going on at the same time, she can't help one.

The impact of having that decision-making power in the hands of the commander-in-chief can't be underestimated.

Heinrich's case is no different.

Already nearly unstoppable in melee, Ellen gained a wide range of offensive abilities when she awakened the Sun Relic.

Heinrich was more destructive than Ellen before she had that power.

Heinrich's destructive abilities really shine when faced with a large group.

So, instead of being subject to the influence of the General Staff as she is now, Louise is trying to gain control of an important strategic weapon, Heinrich's personal life, in order to gain influence in reverse. Heinrich's influence will begin to accrue the moment he is incorporated into Cernstadt's army.

Not because they're brothers, but because of their usefulness as weapons.

So what to do.

Do you really want to listen to your older sister, who is only out to take advantage of you under the guise of family?

You don't even consider yourself a brother, do you?

What good can come from being used by a brother whose only purpose is to be used?

An army on the march to save the world, to rebuild humanity.

Within that army, is there this conflict over the slightest bit of initiative?

Not too silly.

Too much.

Isn't this a little silly?

Why should there be conflicts of interest when there is only one goal?

Heinrich walks with a lonely look on his face, staring into the night sky.

"......whoops."

Heinrich does not know brotherhood. He was separated from his brothers too soon.

I don't know more about politics. I was removed from politics too early in life.

So both were too difficult for Heinrich.

Whether to listen to Louise or not.

Heinrich didn't know.

\* \* \*

Back at the Temple garrison, Heinrich noticed a bit of a commotion inside.

It was Lanyon Sessor, playing his guitar in the center of the garrison.

Garrison guards, passing knights, and Temple students gathered around, listening to Lanyon's performance.

Lanyon Sesor, who leads the military band, travels to each garrison to play music and sing.

The gift of music.

Lanyon Sessor could play almost any instrument, as well as compose, conduct, and sing.

If this were peacetime, and Lanyon Sessor had been allowed to graduate from Temple as he should have, he would surely have become a performer, composer, and conductor whose name is known across the continent.

But at the beginning of humanity's final march, Lanyon Sesor plays music and sings for the soldiers who have lost or left their homes.

Music is a talent that is secondary to combat.

But Heinrich knew that Lanyon Sessor had a big role to play.

The value of music to energize the depressed, to calm the mind with a soothing performance, was something Heinrich felt every time he listened to Lanion play after Gate.

It's a talent that has nothing to do with combat, but it's a talent that people might need the most. Heinrich thinks.

He plays a guitar with a soothing melody and sings to people in a low voice.

It was a song with the message that one day there would be peace.

Most of the Temple garrison was listening to Lanion's song.

Lanyon Sessor has written quite a few songs since Gate.

In fact, there were quite a few songs about Ellen defeating the demon king Valier, and they were very popular.

When Lanion saw Ellen turn blue and gag when she heard the song in person, he stopped writing songs about her.

Songs about warriors are the most popular, but Lanyon hasn't written or sung a song about Ellen since.

Maybe it was the pressure, maybe it was something else, but I knew that Ellen was very afraid of those songs.

Heinrich could see Ellen out of the corner of his eye, perched on a crate, concentrating on the song.

Ellen carried so many burdens that she sometimes felt sorry for herself. Heinrich wasn't sure what had changed, but he noticed a necklace around Ellen's neck that he hadn't seen before.

And I saw her clutching the necklace with one hand as if it were something precious.

You've been looking tired lately, how did that work out for you?

Heinrich had his work cut out for him, but he knew that Ellen's burden was on a different level.

It's more than one person can handle.

"......Hmm?"

But Heinrich couldn't help but see something a little different.

People were so engrossed in Lanyon's music that they kept looking in Ellen's direction.

There was something on Ellen's lap.

"Cat?"

A black and white cat was sitting on Ellen's lap, and she kept stroking its back.

"Hey."

Turning at the sound of a voice addressed to him, he found himself face to face with the ever-singular Conor Lint.

"Uh....... Well. But what is that, a cat?"

At Heinrich's question, Konorint shrugged.

"Oh, you're late and don't realize it, but I've been in a frenzy today, with that cat, who just came in and ditched me."

"...... is it?"

"After Ellen came back, she just stuck to Ellen. I don't know if she knows what she's doing or not....... I'm glad Ellen seems to like it though."

Kono Lint looked at Ellen with a wistful look.

In Royal Class, everyone knows the stakes and the pressure Ellen is under.

Whereas elsewhere she was respected, admired, and expected, in Royal Class, Ellen was perceived as the unhappiest person in the world and someone who needed to be taken care of.

With a few exceptions.

Ellen continued to stroke the cat's back with a blank expression on her face, and the cat surrendered to the touch, looking at the garrison.

Cat.

It's a nuisance, but it doesn't have to be.

"I don't know if someone is secretly keeping a cat, or if someone had one and it escaped, but people love it, so maybe it's something."

"......, right?"

"Yeah, well, she seems to like it, so at this rate, she's going to be raising it, but does she have time for that?"

"Well, someone else will take care of that."

"......Yes."

Ellen has been looking extremely tired lately, but she's still focused on something. I don't know if it's comforting or not, but she's paying attention to something.

And that's it.

The sight of Ellen petting the cat was very foreign to Heinrich.

And Heinrich felt something was amiss.

The feeling that the cat is looking exactly at you.

Or should I say, stare.

It was a very bizarre feeling, like I was being looked at by an animal and somehow being read.

It occurred to me that it was looking at me exactly as I was looking at it.

"No way.

Heinrich smirked, thinking that the events of the day must have made him sensitive.

The performance continued, and Heinrich was intrigued by the cat's presence, but he didn't want to distract Ellen, who seemed to be concentrating on something else.

-Angel

When the cat meows low, Ellen nods idly and tickles the cat under the chin. Just as the cat seems to like her, Ellen seems to like the cat, though she can't quite tell.

Heinrich's idea was that anything that could revitalize this depressed garrison would be good.

It could be the music of Lanyon Sesor, or a kitten that appeared out of nowhere.

Kono Lindt thumps Heinrich on the shoulder.

"By the way, I got a letter today. I'm going to open it with the kids. What do you think?"

"Good."

At that, Heinrich nodded.

It was a quiet night, with low cat meows and the sounds of instruments and singing.

Episode 523.

A letter to the war chest.

At a time when supplying requires the magic of mass teleportation, letters are quite a luxury supply.

Nonetheless, letters arrive at regular intervals.

A letter to the troops asking them how their families are doing would be a huge morale booster, reminding them of the people they're supposed to be protecting.

Of course, with a large army, the number of letters asking for well wishes could be so high that it would disrupt the supply of other critical items.

Normally, yes.

Unfortunately, many soldiers have lost family members who need to be able to communicate with them.

Therefore, the number of letters arriving is small and, ironically, they are not very long, which is why the General Headquarters is able to deliver them only occasionally.

After Lanyon Sessor's performance, Heinrich headed to his barracks in Lindt.

The letters were already categorized by recipient.

In the barracks were Kono Lindt, Heinrich, Klippmann, and Erich de Lapaeri.

Cliffman was rifling through the letters with his usual cold expression.

"And Kaier?"

Erich shrugged at Lindt's question.

"You're probably hugging the crystal tower. I don't think he's coming. He said he was going to sleep there tonight."

A large-scale magic storage artifact called an Arc Crystal.

Despite Redina's daily berating, Caier is also responsible for the only thing he can do.

They're not doing what they should be doing, but they're not doing what they should be doing.

It's just that when the inevitable happens, you know that hating each other isn't the answer, but you can't help but hate.

The best duo, but they hate each other.

"Well, I'll pass this along."

Kono Lint held up a few letters from Kaier, then blinked once and disappeared.

-Whoosh!

Once again, there was no letter in Konorint's hand as he appeared out of thin air.

He traveled to the Arc Crystal and handed over the letter.

"Wow, you've grown up a lot."

Kono Lindt chuckles at Erich's comment.

"Yeah, I'm a little big. If you ask me."

Erich and Heinrich laughed at Konor Lindt's comment.

It's not the same as it used to be.

Long gone are the days of only being able to teleport naked. There is no longer a penalty to Kono Lint's ability.

"By the way, you're the most numerous again."

Lindt's words made Heinrich sit up.

The most letters are addressed to Heinrich.

It's a bit, well, weird.

Most of the letters in this room are not from family members.

Conor Lindsay, Erhido, and Cliffmando.

There's no such thing as a letter from home, because they've all been displaced by the Gate.

Not all of them saw their family members die, but at some point they had to accept that they were no longer in this world.

The sadness and anger about it is there, but it doesn't come out.

But the letter is there, in front of Erich, in front of Conor Lindt, and in front of Klippmann.

The most of them reached Heinrich.

Erich crosses his arms and laughs.

"The guy who saves the most lives among us gets the most letters, of course."

This was a letter from the people they saved.

"No, technically, I've saved a lot of people, too. It's hard to kill a monster, and there's no one like me in rescue operations."

Erich chuckled at Konor Lindt's comment.

"You know what, it's more shocking to see a horde of monsters burned to death right in front of you, and you're whizzing around, so people don't even know you've been rescued, so it's more like Heinrich, isn't it?"

Konorint sighs heavily and picks up a letter envelope.

"...... That's right, Chet."

In the Royal Class garrison, Heinrich is the most common recipient of letters.

Not Ellen.

Letters to Ellen are too many to begin with, and she doesn't even deliver them.

If Ellen gets it, she can't read it, and if she starts delivering it, it'll disrupt other supply shipments; the postal service has a sign warning that they can't deliver letters to Ellen.

So it was inevitable that Heinrich, the next most famous person after Ellen, would receive the most letters.

[Hi, Heinrich. I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Seria, and you saved my life in Aristotle about a year ago. I wrote to you last time, but I don't know if you got it].

To be honest, Heinrich doesn't remember the faces of the people he saved.

Because there were too many.

But when they mention the region, Heinrich's memory of what he did there, how many people died there, and how many people he saved is a blur.

The letter writers were children, adults, and soldiers who had once served with Heinrich.

Letters from soldiers who are no longer able to fight. Those who were mortally wounded and crippled because they were not treated in time.

They send a letter wishing Heinrich well.

Some people don't stop with one get-well letter; they write periodically.

Heinrich doesn't know their faces, but he remembers their names.

I can't afford to do that now, but when I was based in the ecliptic, I used to take the time to reply from time to time.

The letters vary in content, but in the end they all express gratitude for Heinrich and wish him well.

Heinrich tries to read every letter that comes his way.

When Heinrich has seen so many deaths that he sometimes despairs, wondering what the point of it all is, these letters remind him that what he has been doing has never been for nothing.

So just as they find hope in Heinrich, he finds hope in these letters.

That I can live with it somehow.

That I can survive somehow.

So Heinrich reads the letter with a pensive expression.

Kono Lint and Erich read all the letters that arrived.

Erich was also a bit of an athlete at the start of his program, but he didn't really hold his own.

But talent.

It's the talented few who get into the royal class.

Talent is rare.

In addition to the growth amplifier of Moonshine, Erich had to gain a ton of hands-on experience.

As a result, Erhi de Lapaeri has gained a level of combat prowess and divine power comparable to that of a high-ranking paladin in the Crusader Knights.

They're hand-picked from every continent.

It's only natural that such talent would grow so quickly. It's inevitable, even inevitable, that someone will achieve a level of mastery in a short period of time that would take decades of bone-crunching work.

Even within the Royal Class, Erhi's rate of progression to High Paladin in just a few years is rather moderate.

Comparing Ellen and Reinhardt to anyone else is a bit of a stretch. They are in a different league than anyone else.

One is a warrior, the other a demon.

Aside from those two, there are a few others who are growing too fast, even within the royal class.

A good example of this would be someone like Klippmann, who received more letters than Heinrich in this position, or Ludwig, number B-11.

They had awakened to the power of magic on their own before the events of the Gate. With Moonshine's assistance, they're already on the cusp of mastery.

The two of them had such a refined ability to manipulate power and magic that they could probably reach a master class before the year was out.

In some cases, like Delphine Isadra, who awakened a new power, Elementalism.

Scarlett, for example, was considered a top-tier power, if not as good as Ludwig and Klippmann.

Cliffman read the letters with a stoic expression, crumpling them up and stuffing them into his pocket.

"I'll be there."

As Klippmann turns to leave the barracks, Lint speaks to him behind his back.

"Hey, but how long are you going to operate alone? You used to be able to do that, but now you're moving with an army. There are limits to solo action."

"......."

At Lindt's call, Klippmann stood in place and fell silent.

After a moment, Klippmann says briefly.

"I'm better off alone."

"No matter how confident you are, you're going to get yourself killed."

"Well......."

Cliffman mumbles to himself.

"It's always worked out somehow, so it will always work out somehow."

With those strange words, Klippmann left the barracks. Konorint smiled bitterly as he watched Klippmann leave the barracks.

"I'm afraid I'm going to die in a really bad place with that......."

"Leave her alone. I think she's got a superpower."

Erich sighed heavily at Konor Lindt's words.

"I think so, but I don't know if it's possible......."

Cliffman in Combat Talent.

The purpose of talent is to win.

Winning somehow is a function of the Combat talent.

"If you're like me, and you've had a few experiences where everyone in your unit dies and you're the only one who comes back alive, it's scary to lead a unit."

"That's right, but......."

Combat is always variable.

You may encounter unexpected circumstances, too many enemies, or too many unreasonable enemies.

During the long, long years of dealing with the gate crisis, there were countless units that were decimated because they couldn't handle the variables.

He killed a lot of monsters and saved a lot of people during the Clifford's Gate crisis.

And I found myself in a lot of unexpected situations.

There have been operations where I've been with, and sometimes led, units that have been wiped out, and even master classes.

There were times when I faced enemies that were moderately powerful, and other times when I faced enemies that were too powerful.

Cliffman has come close to death many times.

But each time, Cliffman somehow survived.

In the midst of the murder and slaughter of men far stronger than he, Cliffman crushed, tore, and crushed the creatures and survived alone.

Opinion is divided on who killed the most monsters.

Maybe it's Ellen, maybe it's Saviolin Tana, maybe it's Rhydyne.

But when asked who performed the most miracles, the answer was always Clifford, not Ellen.

Ellen and Clifford, it seems, always win.

But the process is different.

Ellen was always stronger than her enemies.

Their attacks could not penetrate Ellen, and her Voidblade always tore through the monsters' flesh with ease.

But Cliffman is different.

Cliffman often faced enemies who were stronger than he was, and who were out of his league.

Still, we won.

I always came back with a victory in my hand.

However, I've had several experiences where my coworkers didn't come back.

So at some point, Klippmann began to move on his own.

If it is your talent to win at all costs, and if that talent only protects your life.

You don't have to take someone with you.

If combat is a talent of some supernatural power beyond what you're already gifted with, throw yourself into a random battlefield where you always win somehow.

We're going to win somehow.

So you don't need a coworker.

That was Kliffman's argument.

Of course, I wouldn't trust the Imperial Household or the High Command with such supernatural powers and just throw Cliffman out there in the middle of nowhere. It would be like investing certain power in an uncertain force and leaving it to die.

As such, Cliffman travels alone.

It's one thing to always do what you can do with competencies, but it's another to somehow do what you can't do with competencies.

On a battlefield where even the mightiest among us are dying, Cliffman somehow manages to make it out alive.

While everyone in the Royal Class is unusual, everyone agrees that Klippmann is a particularly unusual talent.

Of course, that depression and despair, that feeling of carrying death on your shoulders, was clearly felt by everyone watching Cliffman.

Klippmann returns to his barracks, and Heinrich reads the letters left for him.

Everyone had already read all the letters that had come my way, so Kono Lint and Erich talked to each other.

"What should we name the baby?"

"......What the hell?"

"No, there's this girl who writes to me every month or so. She obviously likes me. I can't remember her face, but I think she's a girl."

"......What the hell do you want me to say?"

"Why don't I ask to see you after the war, and you'll meet me if I reply?"

"You should meet him....... Why don't you ever change?"

"It is said that if a man becomes imprudent, he dies."

Kono Lint still has its quirks.

Heinrich can hear the conversation even as he reads the letter, and he chuckles.

It's probably a good thing in a situation like this that the old, immature me remains.

Suddenly, Heinrich sees that only one last letter remains.

It was a strange letter.

Most of the time, the letters had the sender's name on them. And most of them had names Heinrich couldn't remember.

The addressee is Heinrich von Schwarz.

But the sender.

[From a friend].

It said friends.

Heinrich has no friends outside of this garrison.

Shaking his head, Heinrich tore open the envelope.

You feel like it's from someone who claims to be your friend.

But when Heinrich saw it, his eyes widened.

It's not a thank you for saving my life.

It's not about what kind of friend you are.

[Your brothers will kill you].

In the letter, there was just that one line.

Episode 524.

Heinrich was silent in the face of a short letter from his brothers saying they would kill him.

Wondering if it was the wrong letter, Heinrich checked the envelope again.

From a friend, to Heinrich von Schwarz.

So it couldn't have been a misdirected letter.

"What is it, what's that look on your face?"

Konorint asked, seeing Heinrich's expression harden.

Let's talk.

I got a strange letter.

But Heinrich folded the letter and tucked it into his arms.

"Uh, no. No big deal."

"...... is it?"

If this letter is a malicious prank by someone, there's nothing to say.

If the letter is truly meant to alert you to a crisis, then there's no point in sharing it because you'll be in danger just by knowing about it.

"I'm going to go now. I need to get some rest."

Heinrich gathered up the letters with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Heinrich walked back through the garrison to his barracks with a stern look on his face.

After organizing the letters, Heinrich closes the entrance to the barracks and sits down in a chair to stare at a letter from an unknown person.

It's not a misdirected letter.

And there's no such thing as a friend who will write you a letter like this.

Anyone can write to Heinrich, so it's not impossible that this is just a prank.

It's a simple sentence that says your brothers are going to kill you, without any real content.

I can't believe this.

Trust is foolish.

But.

"When this is all over, will you return to Cernstadt?

If brothers start to see themselves as competitors instead of brothers.

Seriously, is it impossible for that to happen?

We could dismiss it as a bad joke, and I think we should.

But it was bringing up a possibility that Heinrich hadn't considered.

There's no naïve belief that the siblings are just letting the talented youngest back into the family fold.

But Heinrich understood that, at best, the brothers were trying to use me. They wanted to use me to strengthen their own influence, and with it, their hold on the High Command.

That's how I was taking it.

But then you take it a step further and kill yourself.

"That doesn't even make sense......."

This can't happen.

This can't happen.

No matter how strong his position in this war becomes, Heinrich does not see himself as Cernstadt's successor, nor does he intend to.

The current heir to the throne, Louise von Schwarz, is also a powerhouse in the ranks of the Swordmasters, and she continues to make her mark. So there's no shortage of accomplishments.

Heinrich, Ruiz, they're all just taking credit.

They're even at war right now.

This very important war is not yet over, and even if your brothers were actually willing to kill you, they would not attempt it.

Whatever the case, if the contents of this letter are true, it was after the war.

It should be.

What a ridiculous, dangerous, and foolish thing to do, to kill one of your own, one of the greatest forces in the Alliance, at this moment, just because he's a threat to the throne.

I don't know politics, I don't know my brothers, but if you think about it in a normal, rational way, this should never have happened.

Before it's all over, before you've even gotten past the brink.

You don't want to make stupid choices for the next crisis after that one.

But. there's also unnecessary politics and favoritism going on here.

People are stupid, Heinrich knows.

Even within this army of men with a cause, Heinrich saw and experienced the foolishness of those who still looked too far ahead or too far behind.

But.

Still, if the sibling.

The brothers call themselves.

You don't want to kill it.

Shouldn't that be the case?

"Yeah, that can't be right......."

Heinrich burned the letter in his hand, destroying it as a useless distraction.

Heinrich stared at the scattered remains of the letter as it turned to black ash.

\* \* \*

It was time for everyone to go to bed, and it was time for Ellen to go to bed as well, since she didn't have any night ops commitments.

For some reason, he kept a cat that liked him for a while, and eventually brought him to the barracks.

I was originally going to put it back in the restaurant where it belonged.

'He's a kitten, don't you think you should stay with him? She's been abandoned.......'

Adelia's words made Ellen think for a while, and she finally brought a cat to the barracks.

The cat seemed to struggle for some reason, and eventually, unable to get out of Ellen's arms, it somehow managed to drag itself into Ellen's barracks.

Somehow, my foggy consciousness and mind seemed to calm down a bit.

As he released the ceremonial armor he was wearing, the cat watched as the armor returned to its rack.

It's strange, and I wonder if I'm in this place because of an encounter with a strange little beast.

Ellen found it bizarre that her hazy consciousness could be restored by just one cat.

I feel like I've fallen under some kind of magic.

That's it, Ellen is going to wash up.

Ellen stares at the cat.

We don't know where or how it came from.

It wasn't particularly dirty, but I'm sure it was rolling around in the dirt of the garrison.

Although she'd never owned an animal before, Ellen thought she should wash the kitten. Dirt wouldn't be good for the kittens.

Ellen picked up the cat, which was sitting still on the barracks carpet.

-Angel

Cradling the small crying cat in her arms, Ellen made her way to the barracks' bathroom area.

And I wonder if he realized where he was being pulled.

-Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

"......?"

-Cat!

The cat began to squirm in Ellen's arms, as if sensing its fate.

"I need to wash."

-Ahoy!

"......."

When they entered the bathroom, the cat squirmed, as if to say "no," and then slipped out of Ellen's arms.

Ellen watches as the cat drops to the floor and scurries away.

I can't even hide properly, so I'm shivering with my head stuck in the corner of the tent.

I don't think it's fair to force them to wash when they don't want to.

Ellen didn't want to bother the little creature.

"......."

If you think about it, cats don't like water.

Ellen unbuttoned her shirt, thinking the myth must be true.

\* \* \*

After washing up in the bathroom, Ellen wondered what was so scary, so she scooped up the kitten with its head in the corner and sat it on her lap.

While I popped his head with a towel, the cat sat still and purred.

I wonder if it's cold.

You said you felt like you were sick.

If you look closely, you'll notice that it seems stiff, like it's a little broken.

Unlike the image of a sleek cat, this one looks a bit creepy.

As she dried her hair, the cat slowly got up, slid off Ellen's lap, and began to cry at the entrance to the tent.

-Angel

"......?"

It's like asking someone to open a door for you.

Ellen's tent has a different lock than the others.

This means that these small animals, as well as humans, can't just walk in and out.

"Are you going to......?"

I thought it was a little weird to talk to an animal, but that's what Ellen asked.

A kitten abandoned by its mother, or so Ellen had been told.

So, with nowhere else to go, I wonder where it's going at night, or if it knows how to get back to its mother.

Unable to tell what he was thinking, Ellen could only stare at the cat.

The black cat stares at himself, too.

One is speechless, the other is mute.

I don't know how long we stared at each other in silence.

As if giving up, the black cat walked back toward Ellen from the entrance of the teepee and tried to leap onto Ellen's cot.

-Puck!

-Ang!

"!"

He wasn't used to jumping, though, and landed headfirst on the corner of Ellen's cot, which wasn't very high.

"Are you okay......?"

Ellen gently picked up the black cat, who was sprawled out on the barracks carpet, and placed it on the cot.

A cat that can't jump.

-Burr

The cat sits still next to Ellen and purrs.

It was almost as if he was embarrassed, and Ellen couldn't help but smile.

Then, Ellen was surprised to find herself laughing.

This is the only thing that makes me laugh.

I'm not done laughing yet.

Ellen finished drying her hair with a towel and tickled the nape of the cat's neck, which was still trembling in shame.

\* \* \*

The cat seemed to have given up trying to get somewhere and decided to stay in Ellen's barracks.

Now that the job is done, all Ellen needs to do is rest.

It's also important to rest properly. No matter how strong Ellen is, the battlefield takes its toll in an instant. If you don't sleep or rest properly, it will affect you the next day.

The fatigue and flashes of consciousness I've been feeling lately are qualitatively different from that.

It certainly doesn't make you less combat capable.

Even as your consciousness fades, even as your vision blurs, your sword knows the way to go, and your body moves on its own, swinging in the optimal path toward the enemies you need to tear apart.

It's a strange sense of deprivation, as if another being is taking over your body as your own consciousness fades.

As such, Ellen felt as if her body had been taken over by someone else and that someone else was wielding her body instead.

So even when I felt like I was suffocating under the weight of fatigue and pressure, I was in a strange state of mind where my combat power was actually increasing, not decreasing.

Turning off the light and lying on her cot, Ellen stares at the black cat curled up in front of her face.

The black cat's golden eyes, and the pupils within them, dilated in the darkness, stared back at him.

It was a very close call.

If they were human, they'd be close enough to see their reflection in each other's eyes.

Ellen has never owned an animal.

Even in my hometown of Rizaira, there were a few families with dogs, but no cats.

In Lizaira, animal was usually a word for hunting.

I never thought about growing it, of course.

It's not that I haven't seen cats before, but I've never seen them this close before.

But today, Ellen reached out to a cat she'd never seen before, a cat that shouldn't be in a place like this.

The cat licked his fingers as if he knew something.

That unfamiliar sensation.

But the sensation felt strangely familiar, like a reminder of something Ellen was losing.

Before he knew it, he had brought this strange cat into his tent, and now he was staring at it from his bedside.

The cat continues to stare at itself in the dark.

Golden eyes.

Those eerily familiar eyes.

For some reason, Ellen felt like the little animal understood her.

Ellen laughed at herself for thinking that.

"I can see why some people have animals....... I think I understand."

-.......

Despite not being able to speak, it's not nurturing.

They grow because they can't speak.

You can project any emotion you want and arbitrarily assume you're understood.

You don't know anything, but you think you know everything.

In that moment of feeling understood in the cat's eyes, Ellen realized it was a reflection of her own need to be understood.

The black cat gently nuzzled his head against Ellen's face.

I think it's just an illusion of understanding, as if I really do understand.

Ellen placed her hand on the cat's back and stroked its head gently.

It was amazing that such a small being could hold onto my fading consciousness.

I felt a little less tired, overwhelmed, and hopeless.

So something was definitely happening now. Of course, due to the effects of fatigue, Ellen's consciousness was sinking deeper and deeper into sleep.

I somehow managed to stay awake today with the help of that little being, but I wonder how far this can go.

The little guy will only get a little help.

It's bound to go away at some point.

"I don't want to disappear....... I don't......."

Ellen grows increasingly drowsy and looks at the cat through glassy eyes.

In a blur of consciousness.

Somehow, Ellen thought she saw a tear in the corner of the little cat's eye.

The cat could cry.

Ellen felt funny thinking about it.

Since when are tears only for humans?

Because humans can cry, and humans are animals after all.

Tears are not of men, but of beasts.

Then, of course, cats can cry.

However, Ellen didn't know why the cat was crying.

A person should be crying, but a cat is crying.

"Don't cry......ma......."

In her fading consciousness, Ellen gently wiped the tears from the kitten's eyes.

\* \* \*

As far as sleeping goes, Ellen tends to sleep a lot.

Back in the good old days, Ellen was the kid who always woke up late, whether she went to bed early or late.

I didn't have a mother, father, brother, or sister to blame for sleeping in.

The boy who woke up late became the girl who woke up late.

But when Ellen went to the temple, she realized that she was used to rules.

I was able to wake up much earlier than my standard bedtime and do my morning workout.

It wasn't until I was older that I realized that I could sleep less whenever I needed to, and that I could sleep less if I had to.

At Temple, I cut back on sleep voluntarily, and now that I'm in the military, I cut back on sleep out of necessity.

And it's not just Ellen. It seems like everyone needs to start their day early.

The days are getting shorter, so Ellen wakes up in the early hours of the morning with the sky still dark and has to get to the command center for Operation Hadal.

After making the proper preparations, Ellen donned her inner armor.

-Bang, bang, bang, bang!

When she activates the armor holder, Ellen's usual ceremonial armor clings to her body and the seams of the armor weave themselves together.

He wears the Moon God's sword at his waist and the Sun God's cloak over his shoulders.

Although there are no major missions for the time being, Ellen is assigned to the vanguard, a fixed task that requires her to constantly check the safety of the garrison's marching routes and slay any monsters that appear.

You're assigned to a unit by your command center, receive operational orders, and head out into the field.

Because camping is so dangerous, we usually try to wrap up missions in the same day, but sometimes it takes a few days.

-Angel

"That must have been loud......."

Woken by the sound of the armor being put on, Ellen watched as the black cat yawned on the bed, rubbing its eyes.

The black cat stared at Ellen, wide-eyed and fully armed.

Wearing colorful plates all over her body, Ellen squatted in front of the still-sleeping cat.

He gently tickled the cat's nape with his index finger.

"...... offended."

Ellen cautiously bit her hand, wondering if the metallic feel of the gauntlet around her hand would be harmful to the cat.

"I have to go."

It's only been a day, and Ellen has gotten used to talking to her cat.

As if he understood, the cat hopped off the bed and settled down next to Ellen.

-Puck!

"......."

-.......

Just as I wasn't used to jumping, I wasn't used to landing, and I couldn't even get off that little bed properly, so I spun around and landed on my stomach.

How clumsy.

Still, the cat got up and cried at the entrance to the tent.

Do they really understand what they're saying?

Ellen had such strange thoughts.

When I unlocked it and opened the tent, there was already a bustle of early risers.

Ellen isn't the only early riser.

The black cat that exited the tent with them also cries at Ellen's side.

-Angel

Just as Ellen was trying to go somewhere, the cat seemed to be trying to go somewhere.

In the same way that a cat can have the illusion that it understands you, Ellen somehow felt like she knew what the cat was trying to do.

It was the strangest feeling I've ever had in my life.

Were cats originally free animals?

Ellen doesn't know much about this.

But just like you're trying to get somewhere, the cat seems to be trying to get somewhere. Even though it doesn't seem to be able to run properly.

Whatever it is, you can't force it. There's no such thing as yourself.

Ellen looks down at the cat looking up at her, and Nazik says.

"Wow, again."

-Angel

With a meow that seems to be an answer, the cat begins to walk cautiously away.

You say you're going, but the cat gets there first.

I told him to come back, but will he really come back?

That's an unknown.

Sleeping with a strange cat isn't a bad thing, even if it's a one-night-only oddity in your life. It was quite an experience.

But if the black cat comes around again, that's not a bad thing either.

With that thought, Ellen walked down the street.

Episode 525.

Late afternoon. Scheduled appointment location.

"......?"

From a hidden spot on the outskirts of the garrison, Herriot could see a black cat approaching in the distance.

"......cat?"

She froze as she watched the cat grow larger and larger as it approached, soon taking the shape of a familiar human.

"Reinhardt?"

"......."

Reinhardt was shaken by what had happened in just one day.

"What, you can turn into a cat, and since when?"

Herriot panics when a cat appears out of nowhere and turns into Reinhardt.

"For now....... Let's go back to Edina. I'll go tell her."

Reinhardt, his mouth tightly closed, had a lot of things he couldn't say.

\* \* \*

The royal castle of Razak, capital of Edina.

"......Ah, you couldn't get into the Royal Class Garrison in human form, so you turned into a cat?"

"Yeah, and Sarkegar threw me out there?"

He spent hours trying to teach me this and that, and then when he realized I had no clue, he dumped me in the garrison and ran off!

He told me that if I went to Moro, I'd only have to go to Seoul, and that it would work out because it was cute.

I thought I'd be able to get it out on my own!

Sarkegar....... I thought you were a loyalist.

Did I have anything stacked against me?

Isn't it weird that there's nothing stacked?

Considering the long, long history of pooh-poohing, it's kind of weird not to feel guilty, right?

Isn't it a good thing we've been so forgiving?

"Whoa, my original plan was to turn into a cat and then hide here and there to eavesdrop on the conversation, and if I got caught, I figured I'd just be cute and get away with it......."

"So it's the other way around?"

"......, so to speak."

"......."

Eventually, the aggro of the entire royal class gravitated toward me, and I even spent a night in Ellen's tent afterward.

I like how this turned out.

Along the way, there were too many memories I didn't want to relive.

"Konorint that son of a bitch is......."

"Konorint? What's wrong with him?"

"......No, it's not."

"What, what happened?"

I don't even want to think about it!

"Is he the kind of kid who bullies animals?"

"No, that's not right......."

"Then why are you upset?"

Well, that was a nice touch.

I know you were trying to get me a little something!

If it weren't for her, I'd be Lily!

"No. I really don't want to talk about it......."

"...... Something must have happened."

We've had a lot of surprises along the way, but I can't help but feel that we've done well.

I wasn't spying on them, but I was getting a front row seat to the royal class, one by one.

I even got the closest look at Ellen, which is what I wanted to see the most.

I also checked in with Adriana to see how she was doing.

Ellen is a demigod.

I don't know if that was an influence or not, but Ellen was definitely holding up better than I was.

Maybe there's a difference between the spirits trying to kill me, but no reason to try to kill Ellen.

I don't know how long that will last, but it's clear that Ellen is handling it better than I am.

But maybe we should be more afraid that even Ellen, a half-god, is being eaten by it.

Sarkegar would stay at the garrison to synthesize the information, and I would be the only one back.

"The other units, by the way?"

"I guess they're still in the game, because we ended it too early."

"Sure."

Our mission was quickly cut short when Riana summoned a blizzard, turning the area into a sea of deathly snow.

The other units, led by the Lord Vampires, are still operating.

When the Allied advance resumes, we begin our work once again.

I also checked the status of the garrison.

"And Heinrich?"

And something that's important enough that it's kind of Ellen's job right now.

"I did send a letter through Sarkeghar, but it's not in......."

We've been warned, but the jury is still out on what will happen next.

\* \* \*

We know that letters are delivered all over the garrison, including the Royal Class garrison. So it's a no-brainer to slip a letter through Sarkegar.

However, I don't think it's a complete solution to the problem.

"Can a letter be....... in one letter?"

Herriot looked at me nervously.

"We could talk about it in person....... obviously."

"Yeah, so maybe we should talk about it a little more?"

I couldn't agree more with Herriot.

In fact, as much as I hate to think about it, that's exactly how Harriet talked to Ellen.

"Information is only as good as its source."

"......."

"What guarantee do I have that Heinrich will take my word for it? He might think it's a ruse to distract the Allies."

Very few people know the truth about Gate. So there are very few people who will believe me, and Heinrich is not one of them.

Any contact with Bertus is dangerous to him, not me, and I can't have any more contact with Ellen.

At best, you'll eventually come face to face with it, as I did this time, in cat form.

That's a pain in the ass, too.

I told him to come back, by the way.

I never intended for this to happen, but it's good for Ellen to visit her regularly. What's the point of visiting Ellen as a cat?

I wouldn't say it's nonexistent, but I also don't think it means much.

Things got weird, and I started to wonder if Ellen would be sad if I didn't visit her.

Sarkegar, you were so irresponsible.

When you get back, the real.......

Real.......

I'm guilty of so many sins, I can't blame you.

It's now impossible to say anything to Sarkegar, who has been the most pampered of all.

In fact, in the end, I was more successful at gathering information than I needed to be.

Anyway.

Talking to someone in the Alliance in the name of Darklands should be avoided at all costs.

"I'm sure there's a lot of people I lived with at the Temple who would kill for a snowball's chance in hell, and that includes you, Olivia, and Riana."

I can forgive my cat, but I can't forgive myself. That's just the way it is.

It's not just that this happened to me.

Most students lost their homes and families.

Unless you're from the ecliptic, it's happened to quite a few people.

So I would be an ironclad support for them.

And there I was in the cafeteria in my kitten form, eavesdropping on conversations between students.

Of course, most of them were talking about cats, but I also heard stories from beyond.

Hate for me.

There was also a fairly large segment of the population that had been swallowed up by it and didn't care about kittens at all.

For example, Ludwig.

I could feel that something had changed drastically since Ashur's death.

We don't know what's going on in Cliffman's mind, but we do know that the formerly shy and reserved Cliffman is now less talkative in a different way.

When the topic of demons came up, the mood was subdued.

The arrival of the kittens seemed to lighten the mood.

It's one thing to hear it and quite another to see it.

I saw it with a cat's eye and felt the atmosphere of royal class firsthand.

There are a lot of people who will never forgive me.

Does knowing the details make a difference?

What if people realized that Ellen and Charlotte and Bertus and Gradias were also responsible?

They will hate Ellen with me, and the Empire with them.

We've seen that it's just the beginning of an era of hate that won't end until everything is destroyed.

Heinrich didn't lose his family, but he's in the midst of them.

So if I or my people go and tell you that truth, you're not going to believe it, you're going to doubt it.

So, I'd rather be anonymous.

I don't want Heinrich to know that I'm the source of the information, because that might make him not believe me.

If they know the truth about the gate situation, that's a bigger problem.

You'll learn that I, and the Imperial Family, were responsible for the Gate debacle in the first place, and that we've been hiding it all this time.

It's better not to know the truth.

The mere knowledge of it is bound to divide the alliance.

"But....... How do you know that's going to happen?"

I stare out the window at Harriet's question.

Know the future.

But that means nothing now. Because now I don't know the future.

Except for "that future" that you see in the preview.

"Because sometimes things that happen between people are just too obvious."

The people are the same, the power dynamics are the same, and they start to change.

Then the events in the change that were supposed to happen will continue to happen.

Herriot seemed to think I was being a little disingenuous.

Heinrich von Schwarz is an abandoned prince.

As a child, he accidentally killed his brothers while awakening to his powers.

That's why they were kicked out of the temple.

So in the early days of the Temple, I didn't really fear any repercussions for beating Heinrich. I knew that the Cernstadt royal family had no interest in Heinrich.

"Still, I can't predict everything....... It's also not my area of expertise......."

I did that because I know the people and events I created, not because I know the complex dynamics of politics.

So, what happens after that should be handled by a professional.

And as always, there's a good chance there's something else I'm not aware of.

This doesn't mean there aren't hidden things going on.

Charlotte would be able to tell me what more I need to do here, what more I need to know.

"But you know what......."

"Huh?"

But then Harriet turns and looks at me.

"I want to see it too."

"What? What did you see?"

"I just didn't see it right."

a.

I think I know what you're talking about.

"No....... Why would anyone want to see that?"

"It's just interesting, huh? No?"

Herriot came running up to me in a frenzy of excitement.

No, I mean, what's with the cat?

Actually, I don't like cats that much.

There's nothing to love about a cat that used to make weird noises all over the neighborhood when she was in heat. I've never owned one.

I chose it because it's easier to hide than a dog, and I don't think I'll ever need a leash. And because cubs are kind of cute.

And actually, when the whole Royal Class garrison came to see me, I was like, "What's so great about this, they're all lighting up!

I think it's cute.

This much for something so cute, even in the middle of a barren, bloody war zone?

That was it.

Even I didn't expect Ellen to be so interested!

I don't want to turn into a cat!

I still don't know how to operate it, so I'm not sure what to do either!

I can walk and run now, but I don't know how to do much more than that.

"Mmmm, do it, do it, do it, do it. Hmm?"

This.

Won't she cry if I don't?

No, but what does it want to see so badly?

It's been so long since I've seen Herriot this excited, it's almost embarrassing.

"......No."

It's not much different on the other side, but when Harriet does this, I can't say no.

"How did this happen......."

In the end, I lost.

I can't look away from Herriot's sparkling eyes.

I used Sarkegar's ring again.

After some time, Herriot looks down at me, who has turned into a small black cat.

Uh.

By the way.

As it gets smaller, the.

If the angle is less than that.

"It's ......, it's you!"

Herriot hastily covered the hem of her skirt.

-Hello!

No!

You're the one who asked me to change!

This is the second time I've done this, and I don't know what to expect!

Harriet pulls back, her face gaping, and looks at me on her knees.

"Ooh, wow......."

Herriot came to me on his knees, and with a sweep, he scooped me up like a cat.

-Hello!

"Awww, ears, how cute!"

Harriet hugs me fiercely.

It's reaction rich.

"I love you!"

-Cat!

Break your back!

\* \* \*

Edina's scribe, Herriot de Saint-Ouen, suddenly started wandering around the castle with a cat in his arms.

"Mr. Scribe, do you have a cat?"

"Yes! Isn't that cute?"

"Oh, yeah....... Your ears, they're cute......."

Herriot held up a scowling black cat to the vassals and purred, "Isn't that cute?

Holding the cat in her arms, which somehow felt forced, she showed it off everywhere.

Everyone was quite pleased to see the scribe, who had always been so grown-up and serious, laughing around like a kid his age.

Many people fear the devil, but the scribe was certainly making a good impression on everyone.

When you're out and about like that, you're bound to run into people.

"......What is it, a cat or you?"

Olivia Ranze was no exception, as she traveled to the palace to speak with the regent.

"Cute, right?"

"......What's with the cute cat face, and I don't like cats, they're cheap, on the subject of animals."

"......."

Olivia's words brought a smile of conversion to Herriot's face. Olivia narrowed her eyes at the questioning smile on Herriot's face.

"Ha, I see you're trying to makeover with a cat. You're disqualified because you've been sleeping with Reinhardt for half a year and haven't slept with him."

"Hmph, hmph....... Really?"

Olivia's expression froze under Herriot's caustic gaze.

Because a dreaded speculation came to mind.

"What? You can't be......?"

"Hmm, I don't know about that, we'll see."

Herriot scooped up the cat with a flourish and kissed the black feline.

-Hello!

"Cute, right?"

"......what's up, what's up."

Then, Olivia looked.

The cat suddenly transforms into a human form in an instant in Harriet's hands.

"Hey! What are you doing!"

Reinhardt, his face gaping, covered his mouth and grunted.

"????"

"What, I said I was going to kiss my cat!"

"Why am I your cat!"

"What, what, what....... What the hell? What the hell is this?! What's going on?"

Olivia watched, frozen, as the cat-turned-human threw a fit.

"This....... you damn kid!"

Olivia squealed, and Harriet giggled as Wang Sung walked away.

"Me too! I love puppies!"

"What are you talking about, both of you!"

This time, Olivia's request to turn into a puppy wasn't a plea.

Reinhard tried to embarrass Olivia by transforming into a dog the size of a wolf, but Olivia thought the bigger the better.

Episode 526.

The city of Razak was in an uproar over a brawl between an unruly scribe and the head of the Holy Order.

-Puppy!

-Is it a cat?

-Dog! Dog! I love dogs!

-A cat? You really don't know what you're talking about.

Naturally, with nothing better to do before her next deployment, the brainiac Liana de Granz, who was waiting in the wings, couldn't help but notice the bickering.

Cat or dog.

What a bunch of nonsense in a place like this.

-No! I'm not going to do anything, what are you two fighting about?!

Between the two of them, who looked like they were about to punch each other in the face, was Reinhardt, his face pale.

You say you're going to scout out the Allied garrison, but you're back.

"......What are you guys doing?"

Riana asked Olivia and Harriet, whose faces were spread wide as she approached.

"Riana! What do you think?"

"What do you think?"

Riana shook her head at Herriot's question.

It was Olivia who answered.

"Ha, it's the same for him. Of course it's a dog. Dogs are better. I'm sure he'll agree."

"It's a cat!"

Herriot exclaimed with a grunt.

Olivia and Harriet began to glare at Riana.

Reinhardt turned away from the situation for some reason, as if he didn't want to hear it.

Dog or cat.

Riana's deliberations were short-lived.

"At least it's dog food, right?"

"!"

"Uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh!"

Olivia's mouth dropped open at the short answer, and Harriet was stunned.

Reinhardt, too, had been turning a blind eye to the situation, and his face had turned a deep shade of blue. Riana shrugged at the reaction.

"I thought we were talking about what would be edible in a food shortage?"

"Bitch......."

"Lee, Riana......."

"......Don't take your antidepressants. You're getting weirder and weirder."

Riana started giggling at the three's shocked reactions.

"Just kidding, of course."

Riana was getting tired of it.

\* \* \*

"You were transformed into a cat?"

"......Yes."

After hearing the details, Riana crossed her arms and thought for a moment.

Reinhardt as a baby black cat.

I returned from the Royal Class Garrison with a bunch of cuteness.

"It's coming up a bit."

As if she were about to throw up, Riana made a gagging motion.

"Did you do it because you wanted to!"

"Then who forced you to do it?"

"Well, that's....... That's not it! That's not it! Uh, originally! The original plan was....... Forget it. What's the point of explaining?"

"So Olivia was arguing that dogs are better, and Harriet was arguing that cats are better?"

"Yeah. A cat, of course."

"You're like this because you like ugly things that have no loyalty. You follow animals that have no character."

"Oh....... So you're saying you're a bitch....... Is that it?"

Olivia's face turned bright red as Harriet laughed, covering her mouth.

"What?! Fucking....... Did you finish your sentence?"

"I thought you said you were!"

"Stop it, both of you, stop it, it's my fault I turned into an animal!"

Reinhardt's face grew wide, as if he couldn't look at the two dregs with his eyes, and he exclaimed.

"Huh!"

"Chet!"

They both turned away as if they didn't even want to look at each other.

"It's a dog or a cat......."

Riana crossed her arms in thought and began to ponder.

"Actually, dogs and cats are too common."

"......I chose it because it's common."

"I want to grow reptiles."

"......?"

"How about a snake? I'm either a snake or a lizard."

"What can I do?"

"No, you said cats can do it, dogs can do it, why not snakes?"

"So why would I!"

Reinhardt said no way, and he didn't listen.

"Ha, you're never going to change from pretending you're not and not getting any cuddles, you sneaky little bastard."

"It's not like that!"

In the end, Reinhardt exploded.

\* \* \*

Charlotte didn't get to visit until late at night because she'd been pestered by Riana, Harriet, and Olivia all day.

The dog vs. cat debate is a time-honored one, but Riana has been asking for something outlandish: she wants to see me turned into a reptile.

Of course, Riana hasn't done any transformations since she showed up.

If you show them enough, they'll get used to it.

But.......

Honestly.

"Wow, again.

I feel like I should turn into a cat and go to the Allied garrison.

I'm not sure, but it seemed like the cat was acting as a sort of neuroleptic for Ellen.

And then you feel bad about showing it to Ellen, so you show it to everyone else, and then you spend more time walking around in your animal form than your human form?

What is this?

I wasn't looking for royalty or anything, but a pet demon that can transform into any animal?

Terrible.

I've dug my own grave again.

Eventually, as the sun was setting, I was able to find Charlotte.

Charlotte, in charge of ruling Edina, has been busy.

I was stuck in my office until the middle of the night.

"Ah, Reinhardt. I heard you were back."

Charlotte, dressed in a black dress, stood up and smoothed her hair as I knocked on her office door.

It's technically a hierarchy, but there's something about acting too much like a hierarchy....... What can I say.......

That's a bit of a stretch.

By the way, didn't he hear about my beastly transformation?

"Are you busy?"

At my words, Charlotte shook her head.

"Not really, I'm done for the day, and I need to think about something."

I'm glad you didn't hear that.

Even Charlotte asked me to show it to her, and I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Charlotte stares at me, as if to say, "We're done here, if you need anything, just ask.

Black hair and evil eyes.

Honestly.

I think it's the devil's image.......

It's not as cute and cuddly as it used to be.

I feel like a queen now, not a maiden.

Now that I've gotten used to it, I don't think this is a bad look for Charlotte.

Something like that.

Weirdly.......

That.......

Well.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Consultation?"

At that, Charlotte shakes her head. As if there's something you need to talk to me about.

And.

-Crackle

That sound came from Charlotte's stomach, not mine.

You've done your work, but you haven't eaten.

"......You gotta eat and work."

"Well, yeah......."

Blushing, Charlotte shook her head in disbelief.

"It's not exactly a secret, so let's get some food and talk about it."

"That, uh....... Yeah."

Charlotte followed me silently.

\* \* \*

Edna is not a very colorful or vast place to begin with.

The structure itself is a castle, not a palace. It doesn't have a large ballroom, a court orchestra, or galleries.

Compared to an imperial palace, Edina Castle is a thatched cottage.

"Are you uncomfortable living in a place like this, or did I ask too late?"

I asked Charlotte, who was walking alongside me, and he shook his head in dismay.

"No, no, really. I really don't care. You know I don't care about this......."

I couldn't help but watch Charlotte's expression die as I spoke.

Since being kidnapped by the Demon King, Charlotte hasn't had much to eat or sleep on.

Charlotte is silent, as if we have unknowingly and unwittingly crossed each other's thresholds.

After my identity was discovered, I never really got to talk to Charlotte.

Why I had to do it, why I should have done it. Charlotte couldn't hear me, and I wasn't in a position to tell her.

We didn't speak to each other for another two years, with the only truth being that I really wanted to stop it.

The same is true today.

Charlotte was feeling guilty about me, and she kept apologizing for it, but we never really talked about everything that happened from our first meeting until now.

Why I cheated.

He knew you were a princess, and he'd been lying to you all along.

About the truth about your kidnapping.

About the days of carrying letters back and forth.

And yet, it dawns on me that we haven't talked about anything.

In the face of something as big as the Gate scandal, the fate of the world, and running a country, I wondered if it was okay to bury small stories.

Charlotte had already buried her questions in her guilt, so she didn't need to talk about them.

I walk to the cafeteria with Charlotte, head down and speechless.

Let's eat something for now.

Let's talk while we eat.

Whatever it was.

\* \* \*

"Directly....... directly?"

Charlotte looked at me in disbelief as I walked directly into the galley instead of calling for someone.

"Who says the devil can't hold a sword?"

"Yeah....... I do......."

I have little sense that I am a king, and no idea of the discipline or dignity that comes with being a king.

And, honestly, it's been a while since I've wanted to make Charlotte something with my own hands.

Honestly, in all seriousness, I'm in a hierarchy with these guys, but I don't know if they see me as a lord or not, but to me they're just friends.

I can only do so much on my own. So I rely on my friends to help me.

I don't know if it's right to think like a king, but I can't change my mindset from this.

And in fact, after the water sword, the knife is the only thing I've held in the temple that I've gotten tired of.

I made a lot of them, and ate a lot of them.

Between meals before breakfast and at night after evening training.

With Ellen.

Sometimes with Harriet, sometimes with Charlotte.

"......."

I can't help but cringe when I think back to my Temple days.

It makes me think about the things that have changed.

I think of moments that have become irreversible.

I definitely had that thought back then.

That one day, everything would be different.

I knew it was bound to happen.

Even in that moment, I kept thinking that there would come a day when I would remember these days, that this moment could never last forever.

Those thoughts ended up being true, and I had no choice but to live in the now, unable to return to that moment.

But just because you know, just because you think it's going to happen, doesn't mean it's going to be easy to accept when it does.

Moments of no return.

Irreversible relationships.

I find it infuriating and frustrating.

Also, I was sad.

\* \* \*

It's kind of funny that Wang Sung isn't given the same environment as an academy run by the empire, but the empire is a different beast altogether.

It's not the same environment as the temple, but it is a king's castle after all.

We had plenty of food, it was getting late, and Charlotte doesn't eat much, so I made a light sandwich.

A glass of water and a sandwich.

"Thank you, Reinhard."

"What's the big deal?"

"But......."

It didn't seem like much, but Charlotte was impressed, her eyes lit up, and she began to eat her sandwich.

I made mine while I was at it, so I had a sandwich too.

"When is your next departure?"

"Well....... That's up to the Allies, not my will. I'll have to keep an eye on that."

"Well, I guess so."

I don't make the decision for the Allies to advance, so the nature of our job is to follow their movements, and we don't know when the next deployment will be.

As the Allies advance and we send out our vanguard to secure the advance, we strike further ahead.

"By the way, I'm glad you're okay, I hope the other unit is too."

"Probably," I said, "because we've all agreed that if I run out of steam, I'll just bail, and I don't have to push myself."

Loss of manpower at the wrong time is devastating. The Lord Vampires had been made aware of this, so it shouldn't be a problem.

Avoid conflicts with allied forces as much as possible.

If it's a battle where you expect to lose men, walk away.

As long as these two guiding principles are followed, other units shouldn't have too many problems.

Come to think of it, there's something I need to tell Charlotte, too.

Not that it matters to Charlotte.

"Also, I destroyed a gate, albeit a small one."

"I heard that from Harriet, but I'm a little worried that destroying the warp gate might be a bit much......."

"Not too much. Technically, it was just her or him doing it."

It's only a squad of five, but even then, the four of us, minus Riana, don't have a moment of weakness.

He summoned a massive blizzard, turning the area into a near-blizzard, and many of the flying monsters crashed and burned, while those that remained were buried in the snow, either crushed or suffocated.

"I wouldn't put too much faith in it though, you never know how long it's going to work."

Charlotte nodded, knowing that Harriet had already been briefed.

"Yeah, but I think it's still going to be a pretty big trump card in our game plan."

"Yeah, I guess so."

The strategy was to reduce the number of monsters with extreme cold, but after experimenting with it, we realized that it had a significant side effect.

Like I said, every monster is different. If you want to kill them with their environment rather than a direct hit, you'll need to use a variety of methods.

Some are similar to common creatures, while others are completely different.

That's why we need different types of deaths.

Verbs and fallen verbs.

That's all I was thinking about, and then I realized that I was choking and suffocating.

I've found that blizzards are quite a versatile weapon.

Of course, it's somehow even more horrifying that these monsters survived in such extreme conditions.

"We'll probably be able to handle a small gate like this and march through it on our own, but I don't know about a medium-sized gate, and I don't think we'll be able to handle a very large gate on our own."

Blizzard is a very useful weapon at this point, but at some point you'll encounter enemies that it doesn't work against.

"By the way, the Allies are going to be pretty flustered when they arrive......."

"I don't think the snow will melt by the time you get there, but whatever."

Once you've got Heinrich, you'll be able to bombard him with flames and the snow will melt in no time.

If it doesn't work out, Riana can step in again.

I mean, it's massive environmental destruction, but that's none of my business. I've got a lump in my throat.

Charlotte finished her sandwich and looked at me distantly.

Yes, we decided to talk.

For some reason, we've been cooking and eating together on separate nights, and we just feel like talking about things.

It makes me feel sentimental.

Even though I knew it wasn't the right moment, the sentimental feeling was quite foreign to me because it had been so long.

Still, you have to do what you have to do.

I don't know everything.

And there's a lot it can't do.

So I have a lot of people around me.

People who can think things I don't know, people who can do things I can't.

They are all important to me.

"Do you know anything about the Schwarz family?"

"You mean Cernstadt, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

Charlotte tilts her head, not sure why I'm asking this.

"You know as much as you need to know, right?"

It's not a minor power, it's a first world country.

Number Two among human nations, so to speak.

So Charlotte knows as much as she needs to know.

I thought that was pretty funny.

It's not about knowing what you know, it's about knowing what you need to know.

Not as much as is commonly known, but as much as she should know as an empress.

In other words, there is knowledge of unknown details.

"I know Heinrich."

"Yes, Heinrich von Schwarz. He was a classmate of mine. Ever since the Gate debacle....... I understand he's been quite active."

"He's about to be assassinated by his own brothers. That's what I'm thinking."

"......What, assassination?"

Naturally, Charlotte's reaction was one of disbelief.

Episode 527.

When Charlotte hears that Heinrich von Schwarz is about to be assassinated, she looks incredulous.

No, I know that doesn't make sense.

Well, it does happen, right?

I know it's all my fault!

"Just pretend it's happening and tell me."

"Yes."

Issue.

Heinrich is killed in the line of duty one day when he goes on a mission as usual.

It's not an assassination, it's disguised as a death by monsters.

In the original, as now, Heinrich is still an asshole by that point, but his position has become very important, so it's a very big shock to the Allies as a whole, as well as to the Royal Class.

Ludwig watches Heinrich's funeral, which is carried out with alarming speed at the hands of Cernstadt royalty, and realizes that something is amiss.

Ludwig, who reports to Bertus on the point, is authorized by Bertus to investigate the matter in secret.

While the Allies mourn, Ludwig follows up on his own suspicions and, with the help of several people, realizes that the Cernstadt royal family is responsible.

In the aftermath of this event, Bertus, enraged that such petty politics had caused such a disaster at such a time, executed all of Cernstadt's royalty and forcibly unified the chain of command under the Empire.

At the time of the original story, Bertus was acting Emperor and serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces. Of course, the previous Emperor, Neliod de Gradias, is now dead, and Bertus is the current Emperor, so he's traveling back and forth between the Imperial and Allied camps.

Anyway, after that, of course, there is a huge backlash within the Cernstadt army, and there are even some desertions.

In this situation, Ludwig makes a strong appeal to the Cernstadt army. Let us not give up this war on which the fate of mankind depends.

In the original, Ludwig has the Alsbringer, which is very symbolic in that context.

So, the story is that Cernstadt's troops will stay with the Allies at Ludwig's urging.

If left alone, Heinrich will die.

Heinrich is a classmate, but before that he is a very big force for the Allies.

Power bleeds, the coalition splits, and then it's sewn back together again.

Ludwig's persuasions and the cause win him over, but the alliance continues to falter in the days that follow as the Imperials and Cernstadt's allies work together.

It's a bad thing to wake up to.

So I hope this doesn't happen.

I've warned Heinrich in a letter, but I don't know if that will really work or not.

"Anyway, let's say Heinrich is assassinated, and I want to resolve this case in a way that doesn't kill Heinrich and doesn't hurt the Allies, is that possible?"

Direct contact with Heinrich would likely be futile. He wouldn't trust me.

But what if I killed all of Heinrich's brothers-in-law?

That alone creates a huge chain of command.

And if I don't do something about it, a demon appears in the Allied garrison and kills the Cernstadt royals.

Your allies' hatred of you will be through the roof, and there will be a lot of unrest within your alliance. You never know when a demon might attack your allies.

And if I do that in the first place, Heinrich will never forgive me for killing his family. He'll never know that he'd be dead if he hadn't killed them.

If all else fails, I may take this route, killing all of Heinrich's brothers myself. But I realize that it's not the best option, it's not the only option, it's the worst option.

No matter what I do, the hatred against me is so great that even Heinrich from here on out considers me an enemy of the family, and I don't see why I should have to carry that extra weight on my shoulders.

It's possible to disguise the fact that it's not you, but someone else.

Whether through Sarkeghar or myself, by assassination.

After all, there was an assassination within the Alliance, so there will be a disturbance and the Alliance's progress will be slowed.

There will be a reorganization of the chain of command, and if the Allies start commanding Cernstadt as in the original, there will be a problem.

The chaos doesn't stop when subordinate commanders pass the baton.

Even if Heinrich, the sole heir to Cernstadt, were to take over the baton, he'd have a problem: He's only strong because he's strong, but he's never led or commanded before, and he doesn't have the talent.

After all, the three men who want to kill Heinrich are clearly men of some use.

Three royals who, if left alone, will cause an accident, but who are doing just fine with what they have to do right now.

They're villains because they have irreplaceable needs, and removing them causes problems.

It's easy to clean up.

However, post-cleanup issues pose a different set of problems.

So as noiselessly as possible.

To pass the case off entirely in a way that doesn't kill Heinrich and doesn't cause too much trouble within the Allies.

Is that possible?

I can't think of anything else here, so I turn to Charlotte.

"Hmmm....... I'm not exactly up to speed on the Allied situation, but....... Reinhardt, I think I have a pretty good idea of what you're thinking......."

Charlotte begins to seriously consider my question.

"Heinrich's sudden rise to prominence is bound to make his brothers nervous....... So we want to keep him alive and get rid of him before he becomes a bigger problem....... Hmm....... I don't think that's entirely out of the question."

Charlotte shakes her head.

"But it's a matter of possibility, not necessarily certainty that it will happen?"

It's possible, but there's no guarantee it will happen.

"If it was an assassination, they'd probably try to cover it up, like he was killed in the line of duty, something like that....... That's what the Schwarzes did....... I wonder if they're dumb enough to do that......."

Dumb things.

I have to agree with Charlotte.

The gate situation isn't even finished, and the brothers kill Heinrich for being too powerful.

So in the original, when Bertus realizes what's going on, he's not only angry, he's incredulous.

In this situation.

In moments like this.

One of the Alliance's most important forces, even its own brothers, is killed over a mere royal dispute.

Bertus loses his temper and, with the authority of the commander-in-chief, executes all the Cernstadt royalty.

Rather than go to war with these crazy things, we might as well kill them and make a little noise.

In fact, the Allies were on the verge of splitting, but Ludwig saved them from disaster.

In the end, it was clear that Charlotte had decided that the incident was too stupid to happen.

"Yeah, it's a possibility, but it can't hurt to be prepared, right? The Allies' bleeding is our bleeding."

"Okay, so let's assume that's how things are anyway. What....... If there really is an assassination, Heinrich will probably be untouchable by the time this war is properly concluded, even by the House of Cernstadt....... It doesn't seem so improbable."

"Hmm, I guess so. She'll get almost as much hero treatment as Ellen."

Ellen's overstated status is not lost on Heinrich, the beggar.

Finally, Ludwig, the original protagonist, is nowhere near the fame of Heinrich.

So by the time the Gate crisis is over and the rebuilding of humanity begins in earnest, Heinrich will already be an unsung hero, not just in Cernstadt, but everywhere humanity is alive.

"If that happens, Heinrich may have to be king, even if he doesn't want to be."

"Well....... for sure. That could be a possibility."

The darker the times, the more powerful the symbol.

As the youngest member of the Cernstadt royal family, Heinrich may be forced to take the throne almost unwillingly.

The youngest, who, if alive, will have such influence that he will have to be king, whether he likes it or not.

Brothers who are resentful of being usurped as successors by such a youngster and want to kill him before he becomes untouchably famous.

Charlotte seemed to be convinced that it was a real possibility.

"In the end, the question is not whether Heinrich will be assassinated or not, but if he is, how will you stop it......."

Charlotte's brow furrows as she considers.

"I suppose it would be easiest to work things out through Bertus, but that would mean Heinrich would be completely on the Empire's side....... So we'd have to cut him off from Cernstadt altogether, which would only require convincing Heinrich....... and the status quo would be maintained, but that's a risk."

"I realize that contact with Bertus is dangerous....... but if that's the only way to do it, I suppose we have no choice."

"There's more to it than that."

Charlotte shook her head.

"The Schwarzes are likely to take this as interference in their internal affairs."

"I'm offering to take care of ......'s pain, and you're going to throw a fit about internal affairs interference?"

"Of course."

Charlotte sighs.

"Cernstadt is the First Reich."

"......, right?"

"Not now, but don't you remember the Orbis class?"

"Ah."

The Orbis class would also be at the end of the gate, and while the class is gone, the students remain. Therefore, students from the Orbis class will also remain in the Temple garrison.

One of the many things that happened because of what I was doing was the collapse of the Orbis class.

The relationship between the Orbis class and the Royal class can be described in a single word.

Inferiority complex.

Eternal first and second place.

The Empire and Cernstadt are like that.

"Cernstadt is the closest country to the Empire, so there is a tremendous sense of inferiority in Cernstadt, not only to the Empire but also to its people. How much more so to the Schwarz family?"

"Oh....... I see."

The nations closest to empire are, after all, the ones with the strongest aspirations for empire.

To be precise, it is the Schwarz family of Cernstadt that envies the Imperial House of Gradias the most in the world and feels inferior to it.

"The Empire hasn't stayed that way because history hasn't recorded it. How many times has the Schwarz family tried to overthrow the Empire?"

There is an enemy of humanity.

Empires were built under its banner.

But that's not to say there hasn't been some confusion.

Charlotte was an empress, so she would have known a lot of the backstabbing and maneuvering that went unrecorded.

"So the most important thing for the Imperial Emperor is to maintain a relationship with Cernstadt that is neither too distant nor too close: it is his most important diplomatic contact, a potential enemy, and nevertheless his most important ally."

Cernstadt is important to the Empire. For better or worse.

"Aside from the fact that our approach to Bertus is dangerous for him. If Bertus were to remove Heinrich from the House of Cernstadt altogether and make him a member of the Imperial staff, it could be read as a gesture of the Empire's intent to swallow up the House of Schwarz, which would of course be viewed as interference in internal affairs."

"No, shouldn't you be happy when a powerful rising contender to the throne decides to abdicate on his own accord, even if you hate the empire?"

At my words, Charlotte shook her head.

"Reinhard, this way it's not just a gesture and a possibility, it's actually possible for Bertus to devour the Schwarz family through Heinrich."

"......what?"

"The right of succession is a sham, and even if Heinrich has renounced it, given the position he'll have once this war is over, he can still influence the royal succession. And Bertus could make Heinrich king of Cernstadt if he really wanted to. It's a chance for him to change the whole Schwarz family, which has been such a problem for him, by making Heinrich his own king. It's rather strange that he doesn't do that. Why wouldn't he do that if he could?"

"......Huh."

I'm not mistaking Cernstadt for interference in internal affairs.

It's actually interference.

If you can get Heinrich to disassociate himself from the Cernstadt family to eliminate the possibility of assassination, you can use him to get the Cernstadt family eaten by the Empire.

Charlotte thought about it and shook her head.

"Now that I think about it, this won't work, Heinrich will die because he's in that state."

"......You mean to tell me this is going to irritate the House of Cernstadt?"

"Yes, Louise von Schwarz, the current heir apparent, is no fool, quite the contrary, and if the Empire makes a decision like this, she'll quickly see what's about to happen, and it will only serve to further alienate Heinrich, not to mention put her hands on him."

What we do to deal with assassinations actually makes them more likely.

It would be even more dangerous to sever the ties between Heinrich and Cernstadt.

If Heinrich stays within Cernstadt's sphere of influence, the royal family feels threatened and murders him.

The Schwarzes murder Heinrich because they fear that if Heinrich is allowed to remain within the Empire's sphere of influence, the Empire will use Heinrich to swallow up the Schwarzes.

"Doomed to die....... Authorized."

No matter what you do, Heinrich will be killed.

The moderates can't avoid a future where Heinrich is killed.

"Do we have to kill the Schwarzes in the garrison in some way?"

"......I don't know about anyone else, but not Louise von Schwarz."

"Why......?"

"There will be more chaos, surely. He's the commander-in-chief, and he's got a very strong position in Cernstadt. What would an army do without its commander-in-chief? There's no one in Cernstadt who's a better commander than he is, and if you kill them, except Louise von Schwarz and Heinrich, there's no point, because Louise von Schwarz is going to kill Heinrich one day anyway."

It turns out that Charlotte was worried about the same things I was worried about.

It hurts too much to be a headache.

They're too important.

Heinrich and Louise von Schwarz are also important.

If it matters if one of them dies, and there's no way to solve the problem other than death, what the heck do you do?

"Let's get him."

"......?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what Charlotte was talking about.

"In the Allies, Heinrich is tied to too many political machinations. If an assassination were to occur, I believe it would be after the war, but....... If Heinrich is assassinated on the march, then every moment is dangerous, and I think the only way to preserve his life is to stay with us."

"...... also does."

It's not that we haven't thought about it.

"But there's no guarantee that Heinrich will join us."

"Sure. It's going to be hard for me to accept what's happened, for us, and for you."

It seems highly unlikely that Heinrich will come over to my side.

It's also clear that coercive or violent methods must be used.

"But off the top of my head, I can only think of....... I guess this is the only way to go."

With that, Charlotte metallurgized the rest of her sandwich.

Heinrich Possop.

I can try, but will Heinrich be convinced?

It's not about our power, it's about your safety.

There's no way Heinrich is going to buy that when the assassination attempt hasn't even happened.

Consider my case.

Bertus sneaks up on you and tells you that Charlotte and the rest of Edina's core faction are trying to get rid of you, and that you should join the Empire.

Do I believe it?

I don't think I'll ever believe it.

\* \* \*

Recruit Heinrich.

There doesn't seem to be any other way to do it at the moment.

After the meal, even though it was late, Charlotte and I had a cup of tea on the terrace of the royal castle.

I love climbing the minarets and looking down on Rajaq, but this terrace has the same panoramic view of Rajaq.

I don't know about you, but I think the view from a royal castle is better than a temple.

We need to think a bit more about how we want to include Heinrich.

"Cernstadt Wangara....... Nothing to do with me now, but they were a lot of talking and a lot of riding."

"From the sounds of it, that would have been especially true for the Empire......."

The position of First Empire and the Imperial Family, the rulers of all the empires.

The story of the Schwarz family's envy and jealousy of the empire seemed like a no-brainer to me.

It had the potential to become an empire, but the Gradias imperial family was too strong.

"I'm telling you this because....... Pardon me, but the fact that the House of Gradias has remained intact, and the Schwarzes have been unable to do more than mildly attempt to bring down the Empire, is largely due to the influence of the Darklands."

"I'm sure you did."

It's not exactly the same thing, but Bertus has said something similar in the past.

So when I unleashed terror on the ecliptic to rescue the demonic prisoners, Bertus was actually pleased, even though it cost him dearly.

He believes that this event will allow the empire to survive a little longer.

If I hadn't existed, if the gate hadn't happened.

At some point, there may have been a quasi-movement of revolutionary forces, or the empire may have split under Cernstadt's leadership.

One event so big that it consumed everything else in the world and reduced it to nothing.

"Do you know that there is an academy in Cernstadt similar to the Temple?"

"...... is it?"

That was another story I had never heard before. Cernstadt can't help but feel inferior to the Empire. It must also be envious of the Temple, a vital part of the Empire's business and the cradle of talent development and acquisition.

So instead of sending royalty to the temple, Cernstadt created a system benchmarked after the temple.

"I hear the education there is pretty good, but....... I don't know much about it, but they're trying to keep up with Temple."

Just as the Royal Class had no interest in the Orbis Class, they had no interest in the Cernstadt Academy trying to catch up to the Temple somehow.

It doesn't compare anyway, so why bother.

It must have felt like this.

"So Heinrich's admission to the Temple was quite a surprise for the Empire and for the Temple, because the Schwarzes of Cernstadt were sending royalty to the Temple, and it was like, 'Oh, my God.'"

"That's right."

There was an accident.

Therefore, it was sent to the temple like an outcast.

It was the first time I'd heard that he hadn't even gotten into the academy inside Cernstadt.

I'm aware of the situation.

But does Charlotte know?

"Hmm....... Reinhardt, you may not know this, and it may be rude of me to tell you this behind your back....... but there's an incident that seems to have forced Heinrich to come to the Temple."

"......You get the idea."

"...... is it?"

I didn't want to play dumb and then be surprised to hear it, so I gestured that I had a general idea of what Charlotte was trying to say.

Charlotte didn't specify the source of the information.

"I had a power awakening when I was very young, and that's when two of my Sun Yat-sen brothers died....... That's what I heard."

"Uh, that's probably what it was."

"Hmmm......."

Charlotte takes a sip of her tea.

"Anyway, an accident is an accident, and it was unavoidable....... I mean, Heinrich came to Temple in elementary school, so it was a long time ago......."

What is Charlotte trying to say?

"It was a very dangerous and big event, with the deaths of immediate royalty, but Heinrich should have been sent to the Temple. Was it really necessary for Heinrich to be sent away, almost like he was kicked out....... Now that I think about it."

"...... is it?"

"Yeah. Still, it was an accident. I mean, it was unintentional, but....... the Empire that hates you so much. They even sent him to the Temple, but he's royalty, so they can't execute him for an accident like that. They sent him to a faraway country, like they didn't even want to look at him. After that, they stopped caring. Well, they still don't, but even back then there was a perception that psychic powers were a sinister force......."

"Right."

Ominous power.

As a power of unknown origin and source, psychic powers are sometimes viewed as ominous, and perhaps even more so in the past.

"Don't you think that's a little bit more than a little bit of punishment?"

People died, even brothers. But at the end of the day, it's still an accident.

I wonder if Heinrich's punishment was a bit excessive.

He's still royalty.

"The thought of being overly hated....... I couldn't help but think."

Temples are schools attended by the children of powerful people, royalty, and nobility.

They come together, they are equalized, they are educated together.

But it is, after all, a school for the children of the powerful.

"You can get a sense of the political situation in different parts of the world by looking at the history of the students who come to Temple. Temple was sort of a clearinghouse for that information, to get a sense of what was going on in the continent."

"......No, really?"

"Is there any reason not to?"

Eventually, the Temple collects information on its students. Of course, it's limited to students from prestigious families, including powerful people and royalty.

"Well, it's not like we're following students around, but we're making inferences from the information that's on file. Temple has a whole department dedicated to that."

You've just learned one of the secrets of the temple that I didn't know.

It's not a specialized intelligence unit, but it's a lot of information, and Temple had no reason not to use it.

"That's how....... about Heinrich von Schwarz that I had been briefed on....... Well, it's speculative. There's something important."

"What is that?"

"Heinrich is hated by the royal family. A little too much."

"I did."

"Superpowers, aren't they usually awakened in a state of extreme distraction?"

"That's right......."

"I wonder what happened to Heinrich to awaken his powers. But even he can't remember what it was, he was too young."

Psychic powers are awakened by mental extremes.

Heinrich killed his brother.

The narrative states that he was hated by the Cernstadt royalty for the accident and banished to the temple.

What's behind it.

"I feel like I've been abused."

"......."

"The royals weren't hated because they were killed by the youngest, it's different."

Charlotte says calmly.

"I've always hated them."

Abused by his brothers, Heinrich von Schwarz suffered too much at a young age.

In it, he awakened Pyrokinesis and murdered his brothers.

A murder, but an accident nonetheless.

Psychic powers awakened after abuse.

And the reason for that abuse.

I wouldn't have taken the abuse for nothing.

"Heinrich von Schwarz may have been illegitimate."

Charlotte makes a terrifying inference.

"That explains why Heinrich is so hated by his brothers. It explains why, as you say, the Schwarzes in the garrison would want to kill Heinrich in this situation."

With all due respect to Heinrich.

Charlotte's cruel reasoning is another truth I don't know about this situation.

The margins of a filled-in story.

Soon, I couldn't help but think I was close to the right answer.

If so, Heinrich is unaware that he is illegitimate.

Episode 528.

It is only speculation that Heinrich may have been illegitimate.

But when you think of it that way, the loose ends of the chain of events are completely connected.

Why Heinrich was not sent to an academy inside Cernstadt.

Why it was necessary to kill Heinrich, who was gradually becoming a hero in this situation.

A rootless bastard is the hero of Cernstadt, and may even surpass Louise von Schwarz as the heir to the throne.

For pure-blooded royalty, that would be absolutely unacceptable.

"Maybe if this is true, Heinrich doesn't know about this."

We don't know if this is really true or not.

"Solenin, the current queen of Cernstadt, is a very unruly woman, with an obsession with manners, decency, and protocol. It's ridiculous, but it's something I or Bertus should learn from, though we haven't seen much of it."

The queen of an empire. But a queen with better manners and dignity than an empire.

But it's all a façade, and no one sees the Queen of Cernstadt as equal to or superior to the imperial royalty.

"But he's a bastard....... The mere thought of such a scandal would give me a seizure. No, it's not just creepy, it's something to hang yourself with a rope over."

"So....... rather than....... as his own child, is that it?"

"It would have been easier to kill him, but Constantin von Schwarz, King of Cernstadt, was known to be a big man, and he might have been a big man about the treatment of his illegitimate children, but he could have accepted them, but he couldn't love them, and I don't think he could have done anything about that."

When she's finished, Charlotte drinks the rest of her tea and exhales.

"It's all speculation, after all. Maybe they weren't really illegitimate or anything, maybe the royals loved their dead fourth and fifth children so much that they couldn't help but hate the youngest."

It's just presenting a possibility, a reasonable possibility, Charlotte says. It's just telling us what Temple assumed.

But isn't that a cruel possibility, too close to the truth?

Can Heinrich understand or accept this?

"That's as much as I can tell you, but I'm not sure how to convince Heinrich."

You are a bastard.

So you might be killed by your brothers. No, your brothers must kill you. They have to kill you before you can be considered a greater hero, so that there's no chance of the throne passing to a bastard.

A bastard who killed two pure-blooded royals.

I find it rather strange that I don't hate Heinrich.

He's even become so powerful that he's now considered a hero in Cernstadt.

I had templed him to stay out of sight, shoved him in a corner, and now I'm forced to treat him like a brother.

You're going to be crushed.

"Hmmm, if I go to Heinrich and tell him that you're a bastard and you're going to die if you don't get on my side, what's to stop him from turning around and roasting me?"

"That's right......."

Charlotte smiled wryly.

\* \* \*

The late-night consultation is over.

I didn't get the answer I was looking for, but I knew what I needed to do.

I was also able to deduce, to a certain extent, the facts about how the loose bits I had woven were woven together.

I ate my meal and drank my tea.

But for some reason, I was disappointed, and Charlotte and I were aesthetically pleased.

It's nothing personal, but it's been a while since I've had a conversation with Charlotte that felt like a conversation.

We sat on the terrace in a daze, not knowing what to do.

It needs to be said.

"......Want to go for a walk?"

"Huh? Ah. Yeah. Okay."

As if waiting for the words, Charlotte nodded vigorously.

\* \* \*

Charlotte and I left the royal castle and walked the plains outside of Rajak.

Along the way, I saw the city of Razak to my left and the refugee camp to my right.

As Charlotte had planned, there were occasional sightings of supposed vigilantes wandering around with torches.

The incorrigible.

The cruel Charlotte's plan to purge them and form a new vigilante group when the time comes.

The reason it's cruel isn't because Charlotte encourages them to be corrupt.

This is because the vigilante's corruption is a sin of their own choosing. Corrupt vigilantes who are later punished cannot escape the shackles of their sinful choices.

You've been taken advantage of, but you'll be judged without even knowing it.

Charlotte knows how humans behave in certain situations.

Because there are those who will crawl into the predicted quagmire without being told, and they will be replenished by others.

That's why this policy is cruel.

I'm not sure at what stage that got to.

We will no longer be bringing in survivors from the continent.

This means that Edina's population will never increase due to outside influx.

You only need to manage people who are already in Edina.

We've saved so many lives.

But that's just a drop in the bucket compared to the actual number of people who died.

That set off a chain of events that eventually led to something I don't even want to think about.

We walk together, Charlotte watching from a distance as the torches come and go in the refugee camp.

"How's the regent thing going, is it worth it?"

"I don't know if it's working or not, but I'm doing it, and now I have some idea of what's going on with Edina. Things are going to get better."

"Good."

It's only going to get better.

That sounded good, but it also sounded like a statement that things were so bad, they couldn't possibly get any worse.

Am I too twisted?

"Most of all, I'm glad the demons aren't complaining. If....... under normal circumstances, there would have been more of a backlash from the demons than the humans."

"Sure."

Even though the demons have no reason to live among humans, they obey because their king has ordered them to.

Reign of the Demon is both idealized and bizarre for this reason.

If a society is made up entirely of demons and not humans, the demon king can rule for life with no opposition.

Eleris told me that she was once an Archdemon, but her horns were broken and she was banished by her own son, the only demon who could resist her.

Demon.

And the Empress.

Charlotte, now my regent.

When we first met, I wonder if this future was meant to be.

"Charlotte."

"Yes."

"I don't remember ever being a demon prince."

Charlotte stops walking at my words and looks up at me.

"I was thrown into the world, knowing only that I was the son of the demon Valier."

Suddenly, the day I told her the story, Charlotte was staring at me wordlessly.

"When I met you, I didn't know who you were."

"......."

"I'm not going to tell you all the lies I told you, all the excuses I had to make."

Charlotte just stood there, listening to me.

"But....... You owe me an apology."

"......."

"I'm so sorry for all the lies I've told you."

I'm not sure how to make my apology sound sincere.

I don't think this is enough to forgive me for deceiving Charlotte.

However, I think we need to talk about it properly.

I don't think it's something that should be put off because you're busy, because you have too many other things to do.

Charlotte looks at me apologetically and smiles.

"Three times."

"Three times?"

"Once in the Demon Castle, once in the Palace of Spring, and once this time. Three times like that."

Charlotte looks at me.

The number of times I saved Charlotte.

It seemed to say that.

"At this point, I feel like the world hates me, and somehow I'm supposed to die, but you've saved me over and over again, and I wonder what will happen next. I wonder if there's something else I have to die for."

It was a cloudy night with no stars or moon.

"You're weird."

"......."

"You're supposed to hate me."

"Hate?"

"Yes."

Charlotte looks up at the night sky.

"You saved me time and time again, and I didn't trust you, even though I had no choice but to think so. You saved me, and you did it with the purest of intentions, and I didn't trust you and cursed you."

I thought it could be.

So many lies piled on top of each other to create a tower of misinformation that was more compelling than the truth.

So I was thinking it was inevitable.

I don't blame Charlotte.

"You had no choice but to do it."

Charlotte smiles bitterly at my words.

"You resent and curse me for not trusting you when you've saved and protected me so many times. If you had, it would have been unavoidable."

Resenting Charlotte for not knowing my heart.

Was that even possible for me?

"I did it because I had to, and you didn't resent it because you had to."

"The difference between ....... I think it's pretty big."

"You're the one who did what I couldn't, and then I feel a little weird when I realize that you still don't resent me one bit."

"What am I, I've never done anything for you, I've always been there for you, I've even let you down at a crucial moment, and yet I've come to your rescue like I'm supposed to......."

"I'm not sure."

"So now I feel distant from you."

"I'm not sure I can do anything for you, and I don't think I'll ever be able to repay you."

It's something Charlotte has to do for me.

What Charlotte must do for me, not the Regent's work.

There is no such thing.

I don't really have a wish list.

"Just, you know, be healthy and live well."

"I thought you'd say that."

Charlotte giggled, covering her mouth.

Maybe I should have said something more.

I need you, even if it's not exactly a regent's job. I want you to always be within my sight.

Maybe I should have said that.

Charlotte was the first life I saved when I arrived in this world.

Because of this, I realize that I have a different kind of attachment to Charlotte than I do to anyone else.

"There's something I want to do with you."

Charlotte says to me.

"What do you want to do?"

"Yeah, I can do that right now."

What do you want to do with me at this hour?

When I stared at her like I didn't know what she was talking about, she fumbled in her arms and pulled out something.

"Here, let's eat this."

It was a biscuit wrapped in a paper wrapper.

It symbolizes the first time we met.

I'm carrying this in my arms.

Someday, when we have this conversation, are we going to eat together?

"Good."

At my answer, Charlotte smiled wryly, then unwrapped the biscuit and snapped it in half, precisely.

That was the case then, too.

I broke the biscuit I'd given Charlotte to eat in half and handed it to myself.

I felt an odd sensation as I watched Charlotte hand me half of it, unable to keep it for herself, even at the moment the bone was served.

I wonder if that's what Charlotte was thinking when I handed her the biscuit.

He looked at me as if I had given him something he couldn't even eat in that moment.

Charlotte popped a halved biscuit into my mouth, then into her own.

You've been carrying biscuits around to give to me someday.

That's how much he wanted to talk to me, and he was always ready to talk.

It wasn't until long after Charlotte came to Edina that I was able to tell her the story of our first meeting.

We eat biscuits, leaning against each other, on a hill with a view of Rajak and the refugee camps.

Of course, it's not the same biscuit.

"It doesn't taste the same."

"That's just the way it is."

Charlotte and I nibble on biscuits.

Circumstances being what they are, they are objectively worse than the ones I ate back then. Of course, that was the high quality stuff the demon prince was carrying, and the biscuits available in Edina are a yawn compared to that.

The gourmet biscuits you ate when no matter what you ate, it had to be good.

A plain biscuit that you eat when you're not particularly hungry.

It can't be the same flavor.

Charlotte said that no matter what she ate, she didn't think she could eat anything better than those biscuits, so after that, she was okay with whatever she ate. She said she didn't have to choose what she ate anymore.

That's what happened on the ecliptic.

Although it doesn't taste the same.

At least we can eat biscuits together.

You can go around and around, and eventually, you can be together.

We don't resent each other anymore, and we don't hate each other.

I don't have to lie to Charlotte anymore.

"Reinhardt."

"Uh."

"When this is all over, what are you going to do?"

Charlotte asks, taking a bite out of her biscuit.

After it's all over. After the Gate debacle.

Until I survive the final fight, and things with Ellen are somehow resolved.

If I'm still alive by then.

What to do.

"I don't know."

I don't know if I'll even be around in the future, and it's too much to think about until later.

I'm not the kind of person who can think too far into the future without knowing for sure.

Heinrich is about to be assassinated, and we don't have any answers, and it's all over.

"War....... Probably, unavoidable."

"......I think so."

"Yeah, after everything is finalized. The continent will know we have a home in Edina at some point, I don't know when, but it will happen."

Charlotte is the regent.

It's a place to think about the future. And it's something I, as the king, must think about.

After the Gate is over, humanity will deal with the monsters left on the continent and lay the groundwork for rebuilding.

We can create our own paradise here, far away from the continent, breathing down our necks.

But they can't stay away from each other forever.

No matter when it happens, humanity and Edina are bound to collide.

Charlotte's point about war is not new. I've been thinking about it myself.

But there is a war to be fought.

The more humanity rebuilds, the better things get, the more humanity's vendetta to kill me, the cause of this, will want to be resolved.

If word spreads that the Devil has taken up residence in Edina, you'll have to fight off humanity's conquering forces.

If you think it's not going to happen in the short term, it will happen.

Charlotte taps me on the shoulder when I seem to be struggling.

I turned my head and Charlotte was looking at me, her head tilted at a slight angle.

"Do you want me to tell you something funny?"

"......what?"

"Because you're with me, you can claim to be the heir to the Gradias Empire."

What is he talking about?

"And you've got two holy relics, which means you can claim influence over the Order. Or, well, you could reform the Great Cult into the Holy Order, put Olivia Ranze in charge, and then absorb their power. It's possible."

"What are you talking about?"

It was a scary story.

"Of course the demons will follow your lead, not to mention you."

Charlotte looks at me.

"Reinhardt."

What are you trying to say.

It sent shivers down my spine.

"You could be the ruler of the whole world, not just an empire."

You are not the emperor of mankind, nor the king of demons.

Ruler of the world.

"You think the humans hate and loathe you, so they won't accept your rule?"

Charlotte smiled subtly, as if she knew without being told.

"People don't live as subjects of the Gradias Empire because they support the Empire."

"......."

"Rule is passive, whether it's House Gradias at the top or the demon they hate. They don't need convincing, and they never have."

Dominance is just that, dominance.

No need for crowd support.

"A ruler need only be strong. Strong enough that the lesser ones don't dare to try and overturn it, that's all. The way you protect the people of this Edina makes you a ruler, an oppressor of humanity disguised as oppression and terror."

Hatred of humanity.

If it's going to jump on me one day, I can jump on them first.

If it's a war that's going to happen, you'd rather face it head-on than fear it, or even consider invading it first, right?

"Bertus is....... What?"

At my words, Charlotte buries her head between her knees.

"They'll let me live....... I believe that."

Continental Emperor.

King of the world.

It's not that it wasn't on my radar.

Nor did he believe that the ruler of humanity had to be an empire.

But, Charlotte said, it's time to start thinking about that big topic.

"Just....... As it is, I think you're only thinking about what else you'll lose when it's all over, and you're afraid of that."

"......."

"Instead of losing something, you might gain something."

That was pretty far out of the scope of my thinking.

Charlotte looks at me.

"I just wanted to let you know that it's possible to have it all, to miss nothing, to feel that way."

After the gate, a war breaks out, and someone dies.

We lose someone in Edina.

It's not.

You can have everything in the world.

That's what Charlotte was saying.

Can there be a country where all the people hate the king?

Can such a thing be established?

Even if it can be established, should there be such a thing?

In terms of what's possible and what's not, it's probably possible.

If you make hate into fear, you can control it.

If my fear is greater than my hatred of me, I can keep humanity under my feet, no matter how much they hate me.

But can I afford it.

I can't do anything about this little island nation, so I leave it to Charlotte.

Do you have the slightest flicker of insanity to do such a crazy thing as be king of the world?

"......."

Is it okay to try to have it all because you don't want to lose any of it?

Episode 529.

Late at night.

Charlotte went into the bedroom, and I went into the bedroom.

Herriot had fallen asleep during his research, and was leaning back in bed with his book open.

I put the book back on the study table and carefully laid the sleeping Harriet down properly.

Herriot smiles wryly in his sleep, as if he felt my touch.

"Reinhardt....... Cat....... Iyi....... Joa......."

It's so cute, I want to bite it.

I lean back in bed and prepare to fall asleep.

So far today, I've given Airi the day off, so he's not coming.

King of the world.

It's not that I haven't thought about it, but I've never thought about it in depth.

That's something we don't know until we think about it.

The issue at hand is the assassination of Heinrich von Schwarz.

It's hard to intervene, and Charlotte said the best thing to do was to include Heinrich.

Method.

I have my own method that no one else knows about.

I stopped using it when the world started to conspire to screw me over in some way, but it's still a system feature.

I don't know when or how it's going to screw me over, and it's unreliable.

After a very long time, I'm using the retirement feature.

The assassination of Heinrich von Schwarz does not happen.

[Specify a date range].

Date range.

Sure. If we do this as a resignation, Heinrich will be free of assassination threats for the rest of his life, so we need to set a date, okay?

You can make it so there are no assassinations for a week. But the very next day, an assassination may occur.

It's a band-aid until you fix the real cause.

How about ten days?

[2,000 achievement points are required to trigger this event].

The required number of achievement points is 2,000.

The achievement is worth about 30,000 points, which is what you've earned since you last roamed the Sren Mountains.

You can.

I can guarantee Heinrich's safety for ten days. And maybe the next ten days.

But the march doesn't end in a month or two. It's meant to go beyond the year.

But if you keep putting it off, you'll just use up your achievement points.

We already know that we can't do much with retirement anyway.

It can't cause too many big events, and it can't avoid too many critical events. It's just built to be more of a secondary function.

You can't expect too much from a retirement in the first place.

If so, something else.

How about another long-forgotten system cheat.

[Scribe's Advice - 150 points].

It's not often that a scribe's advice has directly helped me. Throw me into a new case and I'm thrown.

They were usually both a help and a hindrance.

Seeing as how I'm still alive today, I guess it was helpful after all, even if I didn't use it often.

The roots of this whole story lie in my arrival at Eleris's shop on the advice of my first scribe, but I haven't written much since then. I didn't need to, and I often found it confusing.

And that it could be a trap, Kengigo.

At a time when you have to make the best choice in almost every situation, it's probably best to avoid scrivener's advice because of its potential pitfalls. It might just make your head spin.

So in Ellen's case, I didn't even look at the advice. I didn't even try to leave because I knew it would be pointless.

How about this.

Heinrich von Schwarz is assassinated, and what do I do?

I just wish it wasn't some bullshit that makes my head spin.

[Solid scribe's advice].

[Do nothing].

"......."

Again.

It was bullshit that only made my head hurt.

Do nothing.

I don't know if I should leave it alone, or if Heinrich is better off dead, or if my attempts at direct contact will only make things weirder.

What if I do nothing?

So what, you're saying it's better to let it die, or you're saying it's better to leave it alone?

If you're going to say it, say it!

The advice was direct, but the results were counterintuitive and made my head explode.

In this case, the vague advice was even more ridiculous.

You too?

[advice from an obscure scribe].

[Why is Heinrich von Schwarz still alive?]

What the hell is this?

Is it because Heinrich's very existence is strange?

My achievement score is 300 points.......

Now that's a lot, but it's still an achievement point.......

"After ......."

Headache.

Get some sleep.

"Mmmm goodnight....... Good night, lullaby......."

I wonder what our little paktong is dreaming about.

Am I dreaming that you're putting me to bed as a cat?

I finally gave in and patted him on the head a few times.

\* \* \*

Cernstadt military headquarters barracks.

Deep in the night, only three men remained in the command barracks, having bitten off all the other commanders and soldiers.

"Sister. I'm not sure this is right."

"What do you mean?"

"Are we sure we want that bastard in our army......."

Alfons von Schwarz echoed the words of his second and eldest son, German von Schwarz.

"I don't even want to look that bastard in the face, why do we have to command an army in the same room as that filthy bastard, and the way he's being treated these days makes me sick to my stomach."

"Didn't I tell you, sister, not to use that word?"

German and Alfons' faces hardened at Louise's words.

"I'm sorry."

"......Sorry."

"It's bad enough to even mention such a word, even in private. How many times have I told you that people like us shouldn't even utter such ominous words? What if someone overhears you?"

Bastard.

It would be a problem if anyone knew that Schwarz royalty had ever uttered the word bastard.

People will get the hint that you have an illegitimate child problem.

The brothers are too quick to pick up on words that become problematic the moment they are uttered. At Louise's words, Alphonse, the third of the brothers who had been silent, spoke up.

"Anyway, that....... I don't see why we need to incorporate the youngest one into our army, it'll only make him more prominent."

"Yes. I wonder if it wouldn't be better to leave them on the Temple side, away from our forces, and on the Allied side......."

Changing Heinrich von Schwarz's affiliation to Cernstadt County is risky.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't know, but the bastard's position is getting tighter and tighter.

My second and third judgments were that it could threaten my position.

But Louise von Schwarz shook her head.

"It's the same whether we come back as heroes or are treated like heroes. We're all part of the same system, the Alliance. No matter how far apart you are, as long as you're part of the same system, there's nothing to be gained by being far apart."

"......."

"......."

"We'll take what we can get. By bringing the youngest to our side, the High Command will be able to use Heinrich in future operations only with the consent of the Schwarz family. Don't you realize what that means?"

The youngest, who has become too influential to be shooed away with the word bastard.

"If you're useful, it doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is. Just think about after the war."

"If after......."

Louise von Schwarz's cold gaze shines.

"Do you think the empire will ever be an empire?"

"!"

"What, sister?"

The brothers' faces hardened at the taboo word.

"There will be an empire."

A smile tugged at Louise von Schwarz's lips.

"But there's no law that says the masters of the empire must always be the House of Gradias."

"But in this situation, Heinrich von Schwarz's being a student at Temple is only a testament to the power of the Empire."

"You're treated like an empire-builder."

"Heinrich must be honored. In this county of Cernstadt, you must raise a major in the name of the House of Schwarz."

"Why should I give up a major to the Empire when I can get one?"

"How long will you be content to live in the shadow of the First Reich?"

"Where is the law that says the House of Schwarz can't be the House of Schwarz?"

"Now that the Empire is weaker than ever, why shouldn't we think about what happens after it's all over, if they're thinking about it?"

"It takes a family like that to turn the Schwarzes into the Huangs." ....... Yes. Bastard."

The words "don't take it out" come from the mouth of Louise von Schwarz.

"If a bastard can help, so be it. I mean, is it time to put personal agendas on a board that even the bastard's bastard has to pick up and write on?"

At Louise's words, Alphonse and German's expressions changed.

In this situation, Louise von Schwarz is trying to bring down the Imperial House of Gradias after the war.

Cernstadt takes over.

Taking delivery of Heinrich von Schwarz's recruits is just the beginning.

"But my sister....... The military and the people's support for the youngest......."

"After the war is over....... might be too big for us to touch."

In the eyes of the two brothers, Louise von Schwarz reads the fear of an undetermined future.

As much as the brothers dislike Heinrich, they are afraid of him.

"You said you'd use it. Did you say you'd be with me all the way?"

Eldest daughter.

Louise von Schwarz shook her head as if to say not to worry.

"Epics about heroes are always written after they've laid their bodies on the cold ground."

Alfons and German held their breath as their eldest daughter's cold expression told them that everything was in the calculations.

\* \* \*

Saviolin Tana, in charge of the vanguard, sat on her horse and watched the scene unfold.

"I don't think this is an operational area."

Saviolin Tana and her troops were silent, taking in the sights around them from the high ground.

It's the job of the Saviolin Tana to wait for the next advance, check out the monstrous hordes, plants, and clusters in front of them, and if they can strike, they strike and kill.

Ellen had a similar role, but she was now deployed to another theater of operations.

So where Saviolin Tana is now, it's an undeveloped area that was never declared an Allied zone of operations, and no troops were ever sent there.

"......."

But what Savior Tana saw in the silence was the corpses of the monsters strewn across the field, as if someone had already swept them away.

The monsters here shouldn't have been slaughtered, but their carcasses were strewn about as if a wave had swept them away.

A few monsters were seen coming and going, but it is believed that they were brought in from other locations.

"Someone other than us....... We've already swept through this once......."

Saviolin Tana and the rest of the troop had a hunch that something very strange had happened.

"Returning to garrison. We'll need to do some more checking."

Though she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, Saviolin Tana could only guess at the source of the mysterious reinforcements.

Around the same time, the vanguard, led by Ellen, was facing the same sight.

Recon and color. And extermination when possible.

The original instructions were to retreat and bring in a larger force if the enemy outnumbered you, but since being able to tap into Rafelt's power, Ellen has been able to annihilate most of the enemies she encounters.

Even the troops were barely able to exert themselves.

Sweep with flames once, and slash with Voidblade at enemies that don't die from the flames.

I've yet to meet an enemy that didn't get killed by a Voidblade.

But once she broke through the limitations of only being able to fight in melee, Ellen was able to do something similar to a one-man army.

"......."

Ellen and her troops were looking at the remnants of a horde of monsters that had already been slain, just as Savior Tana's troops had seen.

Burned to death, dismembered by something, or blown to pieces.

The different modalities of death suggested that this was not a single actor, but multiple.

The monsters have already been organized by a mysterious force that cannot be identified but can use multiple classes of power.

"It looks like the monsters from all over the area have been swept away - not that they aren't there, but the numbers are extremely low, so I'm guessing they've been brought in from other places since then."

"......Yes."

After confirming that there were no monsters in the area, the troops who had scouted in all directions returned and told the same story.

The monsters in the area around the planned march route have been wiped out.

There are monsters, but they are believed to have emerged from other areas after the wipeout.

We have unidentified collaborators.

Ellen holds the necklace in her left hand and stares at the scene.

'Line....... Reinhard.......'

Ellen thought she knew who it was.

Ellen grabs hold of her fading mind.

Just thinking about the name makes my head spin with anger and hatred.

That's not a cursed name.

Every time she thought about the devil and Reinhardt, Ellen felt as if the negative emotions were eating away at her every cell in her body.

There were times when I lost my mind.

But it's not like you're going to pass out and collapse.

Instead of collapsing, Ellen's body is taken over by someone else, as if someone has taken control of her body for a moment.

It doesn't do anything weird.

She's just like Ellen, going through the motions, hunting monsters, and being controlled by the military.

It's just that it's not Ellen.

Someone is in control of my body.

The cycles weren't very frequent yet, but Ellen was secretly confident that they would become more frequent.

Clutching the necklace tightly in her left hand, Ellen looks out over the plain where the monsters were slaughtered.

"Let's go back."

Ellen turned the horse's head.

Some of us already had a hunch about the truth of this unknown situation.

Of course.

'Is there......?'

Ellen wondered inwardly if the black, fluffy creature would be waiting for her when she returned to the garrison.

The spirits that hate demons, do not hate nor dislike small beasts.

As such, it didn't make me feel like my head was going to explode just thinking about it.

Something that isn't a pain just to think about.

It couldn't be a bad thing to have such a thing.

Of course, when Ellen returned to the Royal Class garrison, the black kitten was nowhere to be found.

It was unnecessarily sad, and Ellen was sullen for the rest of the day in a different way.

\* \* \*

Upon returning to the garrison, Saviolin Tana shared the current situation with the General Command on a highly confidential basis.

The unknowns are paving the way.

Saviolin Tana did not add that it was believed to be a demonic force, for if it became known and spread through the garrison, it would only add to the chaos.

You don't want information to get out in a haphazard fashion, and you don't want to end up with terrified soldiers and commanders who think they're walking into a trap laid by the devil instead of accelerating their march.

If it becomes known that the Demon Army is cooperating, it will hinder the army's progress.

Keep it top secret, but if it's known, make sure it's known as if it's in the Allied interest.

After reporting to the General Headquarters about what was happening on the marching road, Saviolin Tana sought out someone.

Someone who can figure this out faster and more accurately than anyone else.

"Frontline reconnaissance......?"

"Yes, I need your power."

It was none other than Kono Lint, a teleportation powerhouse.

Episode 530.

Kono Lint's psychic abilities have mostly been used for life-saving purposes since the events of the Gate. While his powers have improved, he hasn't improved much as a person, and his personal combat skills are still not as good as those of a regular soldier.

But a superpower called spatial travel.

Kono Lint was able to move around without restriction, not only on his own, but also with someone else.

This doesn't necessarily mean you can't use Kono Lint's abilities for offense.

However, in order to kill the monster, there is a process that requires you to move "with" the monster, which has a mass of roughly 200 kilograms or less.

For example, by moving it to a very high altitude and then dropping it.

Of course, after suffering immensely from the barometric pressure, Kono Lint gave up on utilizing his powers offensively.

In the first place, Kono Lint is trying to capture a monster about the same size as himself, while Ellen Artorius or Heinrich wreak carnage.

As such, Kono Lint was tasked with rescuing survivors from the battlefield.

At this point, Lint's power was limited to pulling incapacitated soldiers out of large-scale combat situations and into rear areas.

It's more of a spell that can be used without casting, except for the ability to move through space.

Of course, you can't do anything close to intercontinental travel, but the number of uses covers the distance limitations.

Using continuous teleportation, Kono Lint can return to the Imperial Zodiacal Gradient in less than five minutes, which is already a long way away.

Scouts that can be deployed and retreated at any time, in any situation.

The instructions from Saviolin Tana are straightforward.

To see how many monsters along the marching path have been destroyed up to a certain point.

We've heard reports of unspecified forces opening up the Alliance's path of advance.

Since he's a psychic and doesn't need to cast, Kono Lint set off immediately.

-pot!

In less than a minute, Kono Lint was able to reach the point that Savior Tana and Ellen had reached.

"Unidentified forces......."

Kono Lint disappears once more, leaving a trail of slaughtered monsters in his wake.

I wonder how much it moved.

"......, eh?"

Not to mention the fact that you suddenly have to squint because your surroundings are overly bright.

-Pull!

"Ew, ew!"

I'm buried in a pile of snow.

Buried in a snowdrift, Kono Lint stood frozen, staring up at the sky.

"Ouch! It's cold!"

In the middle of what had become a snowfield, Kono Lint panicked and used spatial travel.

They don't have the ability to fly, but they can teleport through space.

You can't stop yourself from falling, but if you keep moving through the air, you can effectively float.

Of course, I don't use it much because the crash feels pretty awful.

In the air above it.

"What is this...... what is this.......?"

Kono Lint froze as he stared at the vast white expanse of land where he could see nothing but snow.

\* \* \*

"Eyes?"

"Yes, sir. It was incredibly snowy. Unnaturally so."

It's a fairly large area, but it's almost certainly well beyond the area of a single city.

Savioline Tana narrowed her eyes at Kono Lint's report.

Kono Lint already had a full picture of how much snow had fallen and on what scale.

"It's not the season for snow, so it must be man-made......."

"Yes, maybe......."

"What about the monsters?"

"There were some that were alive, but I think they got buried in the snow and were pretty much wiped out."

"......Yes."

Snow has fallen over a vast area.

Tana stares at the range Kono Lint has marked on the map.

There is a top-level magic called Blizzard.

A large-scale weather-altering spell that summons a blizzard over an area.

But no spell can be cast on that scale. Unless you're a legendary dragon, there's no spell that can summon a blizzard at this range to bury monsters in snow and kill them.

Is it magic, or is it something else.

An army can only march so fast, and by the time they arrive, the snow will have melted.

With a dramatically reduced number of monsters to deal with as you march forward, the road ahead is easy.

Reinhardt's forces are helping the Allies advance.

Not only have the monsters been physically cleared out, but they've also caused a massive, unexplained weather event to clear out the horde.

The march will definitely be easier and faster.

"Is this....... What's going on?"

In response to Konorint's question, Saviolin Tana shakes her head.

"It doesn't do any good."

"Oh....... of course."

Reinhardt's name is almost taboo in this world.

The Devil is helping the Allies.

That's for sure.

"......."

If it becomes known that the Demon is helping the Alliance advance, it will only cause chaos in the garrison.

To those who do not believe in the Demon's good intentions, this phenomenon is seen as a pathway into the unknown horrors the Demon has designed for the Alliance.

Some, like Saviolin Tana, know they don't have to fear such help from the devil.

But what if this massive weather event happens in your garrison?

Humanity's strongest and last army.

When this army is gone, humanity will perish.

If so, the Devil could destroy humanity at any time.

Tana knows she doesn't have to fear the devil.

However, we have seen that the Demon has a power that should be feared.

If the devil thinks otherwise, humanity will always be gone.

'I shouldn't be afraid....... I'm sure you are.......'

Saviolin Tana presses her eyes shut and lets out a deep sigh.

'I'm so afraid.......'

Humanity exists because of the mercy of the Devil.

However, most of humanity hates demons.

The few who knew that the moment the Demon's mercy ceased to exist would be the end of humanity, they could only fear him more and more.

\* \* \*

That's just the way cats are.

"One minute they're friendly, the next they're not. He'll disappear and reappear out of nowhere."

She explained.

A few days passed after the cat disappeared. Everyone was mourning.

Ellen wasn't the only one who was disappointed, as we all looked forward to seeing how the cat was doing when we got back to camp.

After getting a detailed picture of what was happening in the forward areas, the General Staff pushed back the march date by a few days.

But the horde of monsters had been all but slaughtered, so Ellen remained in the Royal Class garrison, with nothing to do.

The kitten that kept Royal Class buzzing for a day has scurried off somewhere.

Cats can disappear and appear out of nowhere.

It may be hiding somewhere in your luggage in your Royal Class garrison, or it may have moved on to another garrison.

The garrison is large, and finding a single black kitten can be a challenge.

It's ridiculous to go around looking for them like you own them when you've only had them for a day.

And she knows she's not in a position to do this to a single cat.

It's only one day.

It's ridiculous that I'm agonizing over a little beast I've only had for a day.

Do you like cute things?

Ellen thought to herself, but couldn't quite figure it out.

More importantly, I'm worried about the cat that went somewhere.

I don't think the little critters that can't jump up and down on a bed are going to be able to get around this garrison very well.

The thought of stepping on some blind foot sent shivers down my spine.

The blanket the cat had been sitting on in the restaurant awning was still there.

No one cleaned it up, hoping that the cat would come back and sit there at any moment, as Ellen did.

Ellen looks at the blanket and eats still.

"Do you want to see the cat?"

Christina, sitting across from me, asked.

My face says it all.

Ellen stares down at her plate of stew, muttering to herself.

Do you want to see it.

There's actually something else you want to see.

But just thinking about the name made my head spin.

I've taken over, so it should be fine.

That should be fine.

-chiying

"......."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, wait. I'm getting dizzy and can't......."

Ellen breathed through the tinnitus that threatened to knock her out of consciousness. After a few breaths with her left hand clutching the necklace, she regained some sense of calm.

Feeling split in your emotions.

I've never been able to get used to the strange pain of feeling hatred, anger, and attachment all at the same time, and the tug-of-war between them.

I try not to think about Reinhardt, even consciously.

It became a name that hurt Ellen physically, mentally, and spiritually.

I'd rather think of something else.

It's too small and insignificant.

It's better to think about something that doesn't seem to mean anything.

Because thinking about Reinhardt doesn't make it better.

Because it only hurts more.

"...... looks weird."

"What?"

"It's just, it's an animal."

I can't help but think it's weird.

"I'm worried."

On a battlefield where so many humans were in danger and actually dying, it felt strange to Ellen to be worried about a single animal, no matter how out of shape she was.

That night.

The image of the little cat sobbing, as if resonating with her own pain, was haunting.

It's an animal, but I don't think it's an animal.

How does it make sense to worry about an animal when you should be worrying about people first and foremost?

No, beyond worried.

It makes even less sense to be sad about it.

You didn't make a promise, and you don't know if she understood what you were saying. When you asked her to come back, you just said it, and there's no way she understood you.

It's weird to expect that from an animal.

"I'm worried too, where did we go with this little topic?"

Christina sighed heavily, as if she understood what Ellen was feeling.

Christina comforts Ellen, saying it's not that weird.

I can't run, and soon this garrison will be leaving, and I can't keep up with the march of this army with no one to look after me.

You can jump on any wagon, but if something goes wrong.

I know it's silly to worry about it, but I can't help it.

"By the way, I had a weird crush on Ellen."

"......."

"Do cats have eyes to recognize a warrior?"

"......No way."

"Is that so?"

Much to Ellen's chagrin, Royal Class was full of people talking about guests who came and went.

"By the way, Anna requested something weird for supply, didn't she?"

"Something weird......?"

"Yeah, I heard it's something that cats like, but I don't know what it is, and I'm not sure I want to put it on my research request distribution list. Maybe it's there, maybe it's not, but I've already sent a request and can't cancel it. Whoa......."

Gifted with dark magic, Anna is often sent into battle, but she spent quite a bit of time helping Christina with her alchemical experiments at the Temple.

That's why I still help Christina with her alchemy experiments when I have time.

But then she saw a cat the other day and added the item to her supply list.

It's the equivalent of military misconduct. It's never a good thing to do, even if it's not a big deal.

"......I don't think so."

Ellen even mumbled something like that.

"It's not the first time Anna has done something out of the ordinary. She's done it before....... Hmm."

Christina started to say something, then shut her mouth. Ellen thought she knew what Christina was about to say.

Something about the Magic Society. You tried to feed Reinhardt some kind of strange potion.

Ellen takes a deep breath and nibbles at the stew.

"Adelia's been pulling all-nighters, too, building cat houses and stuff. What does she do when she's not working? She doesn't seem to have any time to sleep these days."

"...... is it?"

"By the way, have you found anyone who's ever had a cat?"

"ah......."

Ellen is rather a sweetheart.

All of the royal classes were polarizing.

But then the cat disappears and is nowhere to be seen.

It's not a case of losing the cow and fixing the barn.

The cows aren't coming, and everyone is building barns.

-So it's better to be a dog than a cat?

-You're lucky you have a dog or cat. Are you going to cover up?

-Yes.

More students were upset than Ellen.

This is why you shouldn't have a cat, this is why dogs are better, and cute is still the best. Some say that dogs are cute enough.

Maybe it's sad that I can get so excited about one tiny thing in this dreary, stark place.

The reality behind it is that I can't find pleasure in anything else.

In the big story, there's despair and pain, and you never know who's going to die in the battle in front of you.

If you talk about heavy things, the mood will be heavy and you'll only hear doom and gloom.

So we're talking about the little things.

Cute, pathetic, and pitiful.

Something small that I know I can help and protect.

Because little beings can be taken care of with little effort.

It's easier to protect and feed a small animal than it is to save humanity.

That's why we're talking about small things.

In the midst of a rather cheerful conversation about a missing cat, Ellen realizes why it's the only thing people can talk about.

It's a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Stop thinking about things that are beyond your capabilities, and stop obsessing over small things.

Barely cute.

Are we paying attention to something that isn't even human.

If that's not defeatism, I don't know what is.

Ellen thinks she shouldn't. Other people might, but she shouldn't let her heart be captivated by such a small creature.

Because I need to do more.

You have bigger fish to fry than giving your heart to a small animal.

Because people have expectations of me.

Because there's work to be done.

It was just a weird thing that happened for one night. It remains a pretty exotic experience, but it doesn't have to be.

That's just the way cats are.

Something that comes out of nowhere and disappears just as quickly.

An animal with no loyalties and no feelings.

So when the fate of humanity is on the line, it's not your place to worry about a cat.

Ellen clears her throat and focuses her eyes.

"Not really, I don't mind if you don't come."

"That's a shame. I liked Ellen the best, though."

"What the heck, it's just an animal."

With that, Ellen scooped up a spoonful of stew.

-Uh-huh?

-Huh?! It's here!

-Where have you been!

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside.

"......? No way?"

Christina shakes her head at the commotion outside the tent.

-Delay!

Ellen jumped to her feet. There was a loud crash as the wooden chair she was sitting on gave way.

From afar.

The cat, who hadn't even walked yet, hopped like a bird.

The cat leapt like the wind and came all the way to the restaurant's awning, stopping in front of Ellen.

-Angel

"......."

Ellen stares down at the cat looking up at her.

Ellen cautiously squats down and looks at the cat.

"Really....... such an animal......."

Suddenly it's there, then it's gone.

Finally, it reappears.

Thinking it was a strange animal.

-Angel

Ellen held the cat in her arms.

I told him to come back.

I told him so, and he came back, albeit a few days later.

"Promise, kept."

-Angel

I wonder if it really understands me.

Now Ellen really didn't know what was what.

"You said you wouldn't mind if I didn't come."

"......."

At Christina's words, Ellen blushed a rare color.

This would be self-defeating.

That would be defeatism.

Even as she thought that, she couldn't help but hug the little cat tightly.

Episode 531.

The Allies advance again.

It was treated as a top secret by the General Headquarters that a group of presumed demonic troops were on the front lines of the march.

It was enough to say that this was also an allied endeavor.

By the time the Allies reached the location of the heavy snowfall, the snow that had covered the area had already melted.

"That's a little spooky."

"Sure."

"Can it be fall already......."

Soldiers passing through the area would only notice the slightly cooler temperatures, unaware that the area had been hit by a vast snowstorm.

The Allied troops, who had been moving slowly, were quickened by the sudden opening of the road. Hordes of monsters roamed the continent, but they were small enough to be dealt with by the Alliance's skirmishers alone.

The Allies advance, carrying an unidentified ally.

They soon crossed the border into Ryzeln, and saw that the small warp gate at the borderlands had already been destroyed.

After starting the march, we finally made it into the OP.

"In the assault on Sankerian, Cernstadt takes the right wing."

Louise von Schwarz's words are met with nods from Heinrich and other members of the Cernstadt royal family.

Heinrich von Schwarz was incorporated into the Cernstadt army.

\* \* \*

Sankerian, a city near the Riseln border.

It wasn't a big city, but it was one of the main strongholds with two medium-sized warp gates.

The area around Sankerian is naturally infested with monsters, as is the area around the Gate, so the Allied forces preparing for the operation were meeting in a garrison quite a distance from Sankerian.

Warp gates are the fountains of fire from which monsters pour forth.

To reach the gate, you must advance while pushing back the monsters that infest the area.

When it gets to a certain distance, it will fire an all-out assault on the warp gate, causing it to collapse.

But smashing the warp gate isn't the end of the story. You'll also need to destroy the monsters the gate has already spawned.

Previously, this would have been accomplished by a detachment commanded by Savior Tana herself, who would break through, destroy the warp gate, and then escape.

However, the warp gate itself has become increasingly powerful, and the number of monsters pouring out of it has become overwhelming.

Destroying it in one fell swoop is now impossible.

Of course, this doesn't mean that warp gate destruction is impossible if you keep doing what you've been doing.

But that puts Savior Tana, as well as Archmages and Master Class Knights, which are very valuable powers, at great risk.

Most of these people are irreplaceable at this point.

If Saviolin Tana or Ellen Artorius were to be killed in such an operation, it would be more than demoralizing; it could make future shortstop battles impossible.

That's why the army was sent in.

To offset the irreplaceable with the death of the replaceable.

"In this operation, we will destroy the monsters on the Alliance's right flank. After the first wave of monsters are destroyed with artillery support from the rear, and the army advances and succeeds in reaching the outskirts of Sankerian, a detachment led by Ellen Artorius and Saviolin Tana is to enter the city."

Ruiz explains the plan she received from the General Command Center.

"Heinrich. You will be at the head of our force, taking out the monsters before the vanguard can advance."

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich nodded, his face serious.

\* \* \*

It didn't matter what Heinrich's wishes were for his inclusion in the Cernstadt army.

Louise von Schwarz wanted to reorganize Heinrich's organization, and her rationale was clear.

Protection for immediate royalty.

The Empire had no reason to reject it, and they didn't exactly reject it.

Just denying it is already creating conflict.

Heinrich was also unable to appeal Louise von Schwarz's decision.

Your brothers will kill you.

I don't believe them.

But it's one thing to recognize it and quite another to not.

Moving into the Cernstadt command center and sharing the action with them, Heinrich felt like he was on his feet.

I can't quite put my finger on it, but for some reason, I've been living with this nagging feeling in the back of my head.

Up until now, the objective has been to advance the Allied forces.

But in the end, that's secondary.

Shortly before the Alliance's first warp gate destruction operation.

The garrison was buzzing with the tension of a unit preparing for a major battle.

It's not about hordes of monsters roaming the wilderness, it's about destroying the warp gates through which they pour.

If you start with the first mission and finish the mission by the last mission, the gate is over.

Heinrich looks out over the garrison with a mixture of fear, determination, and grit.

"Is there anything to worry about?"

"...... brother."

As Heinrich speaks nervously in front of the command barracks, his second brother, Alfons von Schwarz, approaches him with a smile.

-tuk-tuk

"With your powers, you'd wipe out monsters and everything. What are you worried about?"

"......Not exactly, there are plenty of monsters that don't burn."

"The others will take care of that. I don't know if I'll ever see you step up, let alone me or you."

Maybe I'm being too optimistic about the situation.

It's not a war to win, it's a war to survive.

Heinrich thought about it, but didn't say it out loud.

In Heinrich's opinion, his second brother wasn't taking the war very seriously.

Overconfidence in the power of the Allies.

He believed he would survive no matter what, as if it was a foregone conclusion.

So when you're done with the monsters, I'll just be the best man," I say with a hint of sarcasm.

There are plenty of people to die for.

The confidence in survival that comes from knowing that others will die for you.

Every time Heinrich looked at it, an unpleasant feeling rose in the pit of his stomach.

I didn't know my brothers very well.

But the side of the brothers I saw during my stay in the Cernstadt command barracks left much to be desired.

"The ability to simply sweep monsters away from their perch, that's a handy ability, isn't it?"

A smirk on Alfons' face as he drapes a hand over his shoulder.

I feel the mockery in his expression.

Because he's a superhero, he kills monsters and scores points without risk.

It was a clear disrespect, not because you're good, but because you're a superpower.

Seeing the sneer and contempt on his face, Heinrich nods.

Why do this.

Why this.

I wonder if he's deliberately saying things to upset me.

Heinrich is skeptical.

"That's right, brother."

"......?"

"Compared to Ellen or Lord Tana, I'm overly comfortable."

It wasn't the kind of thing that would provoke Heinrich, because that's what he was thinking in the first place.

Compared to those who had to fight, he was nothing more than a man who could slay monsters from a distance with his psychic powers. That's what Heinrich had always thought.

"......."

Alfons stares at Heinrich's face, who seems unmoved by the obvious sarcasm.

"Are you telling me you're a warrior or someone who can be compared to Savior Tana?"

"......It's not like that."

"My youngest....... is quite, quite an asshole, isn't he?"

"Asshole?"

"You've been hanging out with the Imperials and your arrogance is getting out of hand."

Even when you don't say it, they hear it.

Heinrich forgets what to say as he looks at Alfons, who takes his answer as sarcasm, even though he didn't mean it to be.

Brothers don't like themselves.

It's acceptable, but only to a point.

Heinrich could not help but realize now that his brothers hated him.

A childhood accident.

Ever since then, the brothers have looked at themselves as if they were bugs, and it's no different now, many years later.

Heinrich couldn't help but think so.

Heinrich saw a messenger rushing toward him.

"Breaking news!"

"......What is it?"

Alphonse asked as he approached the raggedly breathing messenger, "How did you get here in such a hurry?

"We have a report from our scouting unit that a tornado is currently developing in the area of our planned operation!"

"......tornado?"

Heinrich, as well as Alfons, could only shake their heads in disbelief.

\* \* \*

-currrrrr

Even though I was quite a distance away, the fierce wind was whistling past my ears.

A tornado of epic proportions, visible in the distance, was sucking up monsters everywhere it passed and shooting them into the sky.

-Kurung! Kureng!

It's not just the fierce winds.

-Flash!

Inside the tornado, lights flashed dozens of times a second.

If you are sucked into a tornado, you will be torn apart by the wind and burned by a lightning strike.

Those monsters who cannot withstand the wind and rise to the sky will fall to the ground and die.

Liana Herriot, and me, Olivia, and Airi.

The five of us were taking preemptive action against Sankerian, the Alliance's target for this operation.

The monsters will continue to pour out of the gate, but reducing their numbers ahead of time will make the Alliance's job a little easier.

If you summon a blizzard like you did last time, you'll end up hurting your allies.

So this time, I chose to summon a tornado to wipe out the Sankerian.

Sure, it's outside of Sankerian, but it's a very important place.

-knowwhat!

-Huh!

Olivia had summoned the Death Knights and was holding back the monsters that were swarming toward us to buy time while Riana worked the weather change.

You're in the middle of a swarm of monsters.

-Crack!

Slicing, dicing, and slicing through the monsters caught in the auror blades of blue mana.

To protect Riana until she completes her mission.

That was our role.

Herriot also uses magic to deal with swarms of monsters, and Airi uses sleep magic to put them to sleep, but her own combat skills are top-notch.

-Currrrr!

I can't tell you how much time I've spent dealing with these waves of monsters.

We could all see another large storm developing in the exact opposite direction of the tornado.

A tornado with two bolts of lightning.

"That's it!"

At Riana's shout, I take a step forward.

-Quack!

A magical shockwave is generated, and the monsters swarming around me are knocked back and engulfed in flames.

"We are returning! Rally!"

At that, Olivia, myself, and Airi swarm over to Harriet, who is standing next to Riana.

You don't have to kill all the monsters.

The tornado that Riana summoned will do the work for us.

"I'm coming!"

The power cartridges around Herriot's neck glow, and he begins to glow blue as blue energy lines form all over his body.

Not as much as Redina.

But Herriot has mastered the art of using magic with very little casting.

Mass teleport.

-Flash!

We're out of the zone of operations.

\* \* \*

"I wonder if we can manipulate the climate."

"......Yes."

Bertus nodded at Saviolin Tana's report.

Bertus, the supreme decision-maker of the Alliance, was also in garrison on the ecliptic, in anticipation of a very important operation.

The first maneuver.

That's why it's so important.

As the first step in a work on which the fate of mankind depends, the Emperor could only be sympathetic in this situation.

Bertus has already been briefed on the situation.

I'm guessing it's the same magic used by Herriot de Saint-Etienne and the Vampire Lords.

But this time it wasn't a blizzard, it was a report of a tornado.

Snow and tornadoes.

"It's not magic, it's Riana's superpowers......."

"I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility."

We don't know how it happened, but it's a weather event that's just too big.

We don't know if it's magic or superpowers.

However, a major weather event has hit Senkerian.

This is definitely good news.

The Alliance has no mages or psychics capable of wreaking havoc on that scale.

At the gate, monsters continue to appear.

But for now, the tornado is cleaning up the monsters.

Obviously, you can't march into a sanctuary, which would have been a living hell by now.

"When the tornadoes die down, we move in as fast as we can."

You can't always count on the devil's help. Therefore, Reinhardt's help should not be included in your operational expectations.

Somehow, though, Bertus had a hunch that this help would continue until the gate crisis was completely over.

'I don't know if I qualify for help.......'

Bertus covered his face with both hands and sighed heavily.

It's your first big operation, and a tornado is sweeping through the area slated for battle.

It's likely that your efforts to capture Senkerian will end up being pretty futile.

However, if one day the devil and the empire are destined to go to war with each other, what happens then?

After the Gate debacle, isn't this the end of the human race?

Bertus was already feeling the exact same kind of fear that Savior Tana felt.

"By the way, Ellen's status is....... ?"

"......."

At Bertus's question, Saviolin Tana's complexion turned a bit peculiar.

"Well, if you're asking about the status....... It's certainly not great, but I don't think it's getting any worse."

"......That's great, that necklace the Detomorian gave you is working?"

"I'm not sure about that, but......."

Saviolin Tana had a strange look on her face, as if she was embarrassed to say something.

"I recently got a cat from....... with a cat."

"......cat?"

"Yeah, I don't know what it is, but it definitely seems to be working."

Bertus couldn't understand what the hell Savior Tana was talking about.

"Your Majesty, by the way, is 'that weapon' available for this operation?"

"ah......."

Bertus shook his head, as if he knew what Saviolin Tana was talking about.

"Not yet, I'm afraid. The Archduke and Adelia are pushing as hard as they can, but it's not a stable environment, and they seem to be having a lot of trouble. I've heard that it'll be finished before the year is out, but....... I don't really know what the outlook is."

"I see......."

"It would be nice if it was done sooner rather than later......."

On one side of Bertus's desk was a document titled "Plan for the Creation of Strategic Weapons through the Application of Horsepower Automated Machinery Integration and the Optimization of Power Stones".

Episode 532.

It was two days later when the tornadoes swept through the neighborhoods of Sankerian and subsided.

Before the monsters could pour out again and fill the empty plain, the Allies had already prepared to march.

Following the end of the weather event, the Allied forces immediately marched into Cencherion.

It was futile.

Divided into three large formations, the Allies attacked the tornado-swept and overgrown town of Sankerian from the east, south, and west.

It wasn't just the monsters that the tornado shrank.

The entire city had been smashed to pieces, and all the facades and rubble of the buildings where the monsters might have been hiding had been swept away.

The Allies would only have to deal with new monsters emerging from cities that had already fallen, or powerful monsters that had survived tornadoes.

And there weren't many of those powerful monsters, and they were swept away like leaves in the wind by the master class of combatants at the forefront.

With three warp gates, Senkerian was never going to be a place with a small number of monsters.

However, they paled in comparison to the size of the Allied forces.

The massive weapons they had brought with them were set up, but they were unable to fire a single shot due to the rapidity with which they entered the city.

It didn't even need to be fired in the first place, as it was meant to be dropped amongst a large group of monsters and wreak havoc.

There was no point in firing on an already decimated group, and there was a greater risk of friendly fire.

The first Allied offensive was over in less than half a day.

A squad led by Ellen Artorius, with two medium-sized warp gates.

One of the large warp gates was destroyed by Saviolin Tana after she smashed through the barrier, ending the battle for Senkerian.

It was a deceptively easy capture.

Allied casualties were less than a hundred.

Casualties, not deaths.

This was because the number of monsters had been drastically reduced, allowing the best and brightest to enter the scene quickly and hit the warp gate.

-grunt

Ellen sheathed her Voidblade as she stared at the remains of the collapsed warp gate.

Of course, breaking down the gate isn't the end of the story. There's still the task of exterminating the surviving monsters, but they're few and far between.

"Operation is over. Thank you for your service."

"It's ......."

Ellen nodded in agreement.

The operation was successful.

Fewer casualties.

Ellen has some intuition as to whose help it was.

Ellen holds the necklace still and steadies her breathing.

When you get home, you'll be cuddling and petting your cat.

I'm going to say that everything worked out better than I expected.

I want it to be like this, and I want it to be like this for the rest of my life.

Of course, that's only possible if you have a cat in your garrison that can sneak away and come back.

\* \* \*

The Allies succeeded in capturing Senkerian.

The Allied Command knew that the timing of the massive natural disaster was no coincidence.

Much of the Allied command, with the exception of the Supreme Command, believed it was an imperial surplus.

It was deceptively easy, but I'd call it a triumph.

First win since starting.

Starting with this, repair all the small, medium, and large cities in Regeln, as well as the capital region, and the gate crisis will be over.

There's still a long way to go.

But there's no reason not to celebrate this first victory.

After clearing out the neighborhood of Sankerian, a banquet was held at the garrison.

There were very few casualties in a battle where a huge number of casualties were expected, so why shouldn't we celebrate that?

Not too much, but the emperor allowed a certain amount of drinking.

The garrison was filled with songs sung by soldiers wishing for a complete end to the war, peace, and the death of the demon.

It was only natural that such a banquet would be held within the Royal Class garrison.

Those who could, took a drink or two, while Lanyon Sessor drunkenly bounced his instrument.

Of course, I'm not that good, so even in my drunken stupor, my playing was inaccurate but fun.

-Ahhhhhh!

The Allies had fought many battles, but this was the first time they could claim a victory.

So it was no wonder that the students were drunk on their own sense of victory.

To keep their senses sharp, or perhaps because they don't think this is a true victory yet, some of them listened to the victory song without letting it dampen their spirits, at least for today.

The Allied lines are stirring.

Not everyone was drunk, of course, but everyone was enjoying the banquet in their own way.

A corner of the Royal Class Garrison ballroom.

-ehhhh

Some of the students were watching a black kitten waddle around on a pile of green leaves.

"This....... Is it okay?"

Ellen's worried gaze alternated between the purring cat and Anna de Guerna, who had brought the unidentified leaves.

"He's fine......."

-ehhh

The cat was curled up in a ball, sniffing the leaves as if he were drunk on something.

Disappearing into thin air, as they always do, the Black Cats sought out the Royal Class garrison after the occupation of Senkerian ended.

The Royal Class students had gotten used to the cat disappearing for a few days, then reappearing, then disappearing for a few days again.

Now everyone was thinking that if they disappeared for a week, they would come back at some point.

But this time, Anna de Gerna laid down some leaves and put the cat on top of them, scaring the cat away.

It's been like this ever since.

Wandering.

Scarlett, Christina, Adelia, and the rest of the Royal Class watched the cat curl up into a ball as if it were drunk.

It sounds like something dangerous, but Anna says it's not.

"Is this what you put on the supply list last time?"

"Yeah....... catnip."

I realized I'd put something weird in the supply list for an important alchemical reagent.

"Deals like drugs for cats......."

"!"

-En

Anna's words startled Ellen, who scooped up the cat purring on a catnip leaf and glared at Anna.

What have you done to my child?

I could read the thought in his eyes.

"Drugs......?"

"It's just a word, not a real drug."

"......really?"

The other senior nodded.

"Yeah, it's not bad for you, I know that."

"......."

-Enter

The cat was still slumped over, still purring. He was not fully awake, like he was drunk, but he certainly looked good, for better or worse.

Ellen nervously placed the black cat back on the pile of leaves.

-Yes

The cat began to curl up on the catnip leaves again.

Of course, only you know what the distraught cat is screaming inside.

\* \* \*

A banquet was also being held in the barracks area of the Cernstadt military headquarters.

A hearty meal is set on the table and the victory of the operation is celebrated.

"At this rate, it won't be long before the gate crisis is over, will it?"

"This is way too easy, I don't know why I haven't done this before."

"I don't know why we needed to organize such a large army if it was only going to be this much."

"When this war is over, every last one of those who fought will have gone down in history."

Heinrich listened as the commanders talked amongst themselves.

Alfons, Ruiz, and German were seated next to each other in an obviously formal setting, with Heinrich sitting next to German.

But Heinrich is clearly distant.

"Sister, how far away is the next operational area?"

"They said it's about a week away."

"That's pretty close."

"But it's only a small town. It should be a little easier than this operation. Apparently there's only one small gate, so a shortstop may be all that's needed."

German von Schwarz was talking to Louise with his back to her.

They're clearly turning away.

But Heinrich is not one to be ignored.

"Prince Heinrich doesn't drink, does he?"

One of the commanders, already looking a little drunk, asked from a distance.

"Oh....... I don't really enjoy it."

"Still, on a day like today, shouldn't you have a drink?"

"One drink, maybe......."

"To the Prince!"

He shouts, and the others raise their glasses to drink.

Heinrich reluctantly drank a little of the wine in his glass.

Heinrich doesn't know much about the structure of Cernstadt County.

She follows the orders of her commander, Louise von Schwarz, but she doesn't know the military structure, the hierarchy of commanders, or even their names.

But in the special circumstances of wartime, Heinrich von Schwarz's stature could never be lowered, as he always led from the front and swept away his enemies.

Whoever kills the most enemies has saved those who should have died fighting those monsters.

Regardless of what the royalty sitting on the sidelines think of him, Heinrich has the support of the overwhelming majority of his soldiers and commanders.

Heinrich could feel Alfons, German, and Ruiz's faces harden, though they didn't show it.

The rolling stone is getting bigger and bigger.

Heinrich now understood that it was inevitable that the embedded stone would feel threatened.

But why.

Why this.

I wonder if he thinks he's an eyesore.

"The youngest."

"......Yes, sister."

"You must be exhausted. Go inside and get some rest."

Why.

It's not a very pleasant banquet, but I wonder if they're kicking me out like I don't deserve to be sitting here.

Why do I hate the youngest prince's ode to dance so much?

Why.

I can't believe you hate me this much.

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich swallowed hard at the stirring in his chest and left the barracks where the banquet was being held.

The departing commanders sent words of encouragement to Heinrich von Schwarz, the hero of the Cernstadt army, telling him to make himself at home and rest.

In that nauseating scene of simultaneous praise and command, Heinrich had to get out.

Nightfall Garrison.

There's a banquet going on, and I'll be around for a few days in the name of relaxation, but I'll be leaving soon.

Soldiers could be seen eating and drinking in banquet halls and throughout the garrison.

It's not fun in a ballroom, it's suffocating.

I have a couple of days.

As he watched the soldiers carry food and drink, Heinrich moved toward them.

"Ouch, Prince!"

"Excuse me."

Heinrich took a bottle from a crate of wine that was being carried into the ballroom.

\* \* \*

Alcohol.

The first time I drank it was at Liana de Granz's mansion.

After hearing that Riana had been electrocuted for lying, he realized he had no control over his drinking.

Sure, things were a little weird back then for a lot of reasons.

With a bad first memory, Heinrich didn't bother looking for alcohol.

But I'm an adult now, and no one is going to judge me if I drink.

Of course, Heinrich can't drink alcohol after he reaches the age of majority, so it's his first drink since that day.

In his barracks, slumped in a chair and without a glass, Heinrich gulps down the wine.

Is the original sin of the past as great as this?

It's bound to be big.

You're still doing the best you can in your position.

It was a long time ago, a long time ago that I don't even remember.

The brothers still can't forgive themselves.

It's just a perpetual nuisance.

"Whoa......."

Heinrich can't tell the difference between the wines because alcohol is not his hobby.

However, there was a certain amount of off-flavors that made me realize that this wine was not a commodity.

The Empire still has money to spare, but not much, and the state of the wine in the command barracks indicated that.

Heinrich knows this was too easy.

It was strangely easy.

If we continue to defeat gates with such weird ease, we'll soon see a complete end to the gate crisis.

If so, then.

What happens next.

There are plenty of commanders and soldiers who overly heroize themselves.

Back in Cernstadt, the soldiers will talk about the youngest prince's greatness, and songs will be written about him.

Brothers who hate themselves will hear the youngest's song echoing through the homeland.

Your brothers will kill you.

"Hmph....... 흐......."

Heinrich now realized that the words weren't exactly empty.

I can see it from the side.

Seeing brothers who strangely dislike themselves made me realize that it might happen enough.

They're brothers, after all.

"......."

No matter how hard I tried to push it away, I couldn't help but let it creep in.

Heinrich doesn't know much about politics.

They don't know family.

That's why I don't know why I hate my family so much that I want to kill them.

If you don't know love, you don't know hate.

You can't remember something you've never eaten, so you can't hate it, right?

Heinrich is just frustrated.

Why do you hate me so much.

Are you really trying to kill me.

Heinrich gulps down the rest of his wine and rises from his seat.

If you don't know something, ask.

If you're not sure, ask someone who does.

Heinrich von Schwarz is courageous.

I don't know politics, so I need to find someone who does.

On a whim, Heinrich tries to find someone he hasn't seen in a long time.

Bertus de Gradias.

They're obviously going to stay in the garrison.

Episode 533.

The garrison was in the midst of a banquet, and naturally, so was the General Headquarters barracks, where Bertus was in charge.

Ellen Artorius was also invited to a banquet at the General Headquarters, but she declined, saying she would rather rest in her barracks. Of course, she was playing with her cat.

Heinrich clearly has the right to meet the emperor, who is presiding over the banquet.

Temple had already become a household name, but he was also a classmate of the Emperor and a very important part of the Alliance's power structure.

When Heinrich requested an audience, Bertus slipped out of the banquet hall and let Heinrich into the barracks he used when he came to the garrison.

"Have you been drinking? Well, it's the day, so of course you've been drinking......."

At Bertus' words, Heinrich nodded as he knelt before Bertus.

"Yes Your Majesty, a little......."

"Make yourself comfortable, there's only two of us in the yard anyway."

"......I think so."

"Sit."

Heinrich was replaced by Bertus in the authority seat.

The emperor is coming.

The emperor is the emperor, no matter how much damage is done to humanity.

Heinrich found it quite amazing that he could summon the Emperor with a word and sit down with him.

In that sense, the Temple days are even more curious.

Bertus uncorked the bottle of wine and poured it into the goblet in front of Heinrich, then poured himself a glass.

"It's a nice day, so I don't see any reason why you and I can't have a drink, and it looks like we already have one."

"......Thanks."

Heinrich took a sip of the wine the Emperor had poured for him and smiled bitterly.

It was a yawning wine, not unlike the wine that arrived at the Cernstadt military headquarters.

Is this all the emperor can drink now?

Bertus took a sip of his wine and let out a long sigh.

"It would be nice if it stayed that way."

"Sure."

Bertus's gaze, like a distant mountain view, was staring at nothing.

Just like today.

It would be nice if all future battles were like today.

But we all know we can't.

It wasn't a big city with a giant warp gate, which would have caused a different kind of damage.

The overly easy first operation may have caused the Allies to relax.

But Heinrich isn't in a position to worry about that.

Fight where you're told to fight. Other than that, I didn't pay much attention to the weird stuff.

It's presumptuous to go beyond what you can do.

Heinrich is a bit more on topic now than he used to be.

Of course, I did do something pretty presumptuous today: call the emperor.

"So, you didn't ask to see me because you haven't seen my face in a while."

"......."

"Do you have any questions?"

Bertus said so, wondering if Heinrich had come for something else, but Heinrich shook his head.

"There's a problem I'm not sure about....... I thought you might know."

"A problem?"

"What would you do if you were me?"

"Hmm?"

Bertus shook his head at the out-of-the-blue question.

"That's so abstract, I'm not sure what you're asking."

"So if you were me, in my situation, I'd say......."

I don't even dare mention the details because I'm cursing myself for even mentioning it.

So I could only say vague things.

Bertus is smart, he's the emperor, he knows politics.

I figured just thinking about it might give me an answer I didn't know.

"If you were in my situation right now....... What do you think is the best thing for me to do....... best option?"

His brothers hate him.

But his position will grow, and that has nothing to do with Heinrich's intentions.

This unintended revelation is about to explode, and you don't know what to do. All you know is that if you stay in Cernstadt County, or if you don't, you're in trouble.

This can only be answered by assuming that Bertus knows Heinrich's position and the inner workings of the Cernstadt royal family.

“나는 이런 거 모르고, 뭘 어떻게 하는 게 정답인지 모르겠어. 뭘 해도 문제일 것 같고, 무슨 선택을 해도 문제만 생길 것 같아. 그래서 이런 걸 잘 아는 사람은 내 주변에 떠오르는 건 너밖에 없으니까……. So......."

That's why I was so rude.

Heinrich added in a small voice.

"Well......."

Bertus rolls the red liquid around in his wine glass, pondering.

Bertus had already realized what Heinrich was asking.

"Your sister, who transferred you to the Cernstadt army....... You do realize what Louise von Schwarz's actions mean, don't you?"

"A little, very little."

"Yeah, I'm not going to be at the mercy of the General Command. No, I'd rather have something to hold onto, something to wield."

Heinrich knew that.

"It's ridiculous that we're already talking about after the war, but....... You are bound to become a very important person in Cernstadt or in the House of Schwarz in any case, it's a natural progression."

"......Yes."

"I don't know what you should do, first of all, because I don't know what you want. I don't know what you should do, but I think I have a pretty good idea of what's going to happen to you."

"What's going to happen to me....... happen to me?"

"Yeah."

Bertus stares at Heinrich and takes a sip of wine.

"Your brothers are probably trying to kill you, whether it's during the war or after the war."

Heinrich's eyes widened at Bertus' words.

Heinrich doesn't know who sent the letter, but he knows it wasn't Bertus.

But Bertus gives the same answer as the mysterious letter.

"Why on earth would....... What did I, what did I do so wrong? I'm......."

"Heinrich. Don't be angry, listen."

Bertus finishes his wine, blows out a hot breath, and stares at Heinrich.

"You are, possibly, illegitimate."

What Charlotte de Gradias knows, Bertus de Gradias knows.

Heinrich's eyes widened at the words, and he could only stare blankly into Bertus' eyes.

"Nonsense....... Nonsense....... lie. Don't lie."

Heinrich, therefore, had no choice but to deny Bertus's cruel suspicions with a quivering lip.

"I said it's a possibility, not a fact."

"Yeah, I mean, I didn't come to you to hear that nonsense......."

"You know that."

Bertus says with a stern look.

"If this is true, it explains why you were hated."

"......."

More than a little hatred, contempt, and disdain.

It's just a possibility, but if it's true, it makes a lot of sense and makes your situation make sense.

Heinrich could only stare blankly into his glass.

\* \* \*

Heinrich staggered out of the General Headquarters barracks.

Bastard.

A word I'd never thought of before in my life was stuck in my head and wouldn't go away.

Bertus said this is a possibility, not a fact.

But Heinrich felt like a puzzle was coming together in his head.

Why, as a child I don't remember, I awakened to a superpower that manifests itself in times of intense stress.

Why, in those early years his brothers died in the flames he created.

Why he had to go to the Temple and not the Royal Academy in Cernstadt at the age of eight.

Why, even now, I look at my youngest, who is becoming a war hero, as if he were an abomination, and I try to ignore and despise him.

It wasn't an accident, it was a childhood murder you didn't know about.

It's just that the idea of an illegitimate son becoming a key figure in the Schwarz family is so unpalatable, and even more so because he's a double-crosser.

If so, why.

I'd rather kill them when they cause such an accident.

Why bother saving it and banishing it to the temple.

The cold stares of my siblings and parents, the memories of my childhood that I don't even remember, came flooding back to me.

Maybe I wasn't hated after the accident, I was always hated.

No, it was the hatred of his brothers that made him a psychic.

I wonder if the root of my powers is the abuse of my siblings, dating back to a time I can't remember.

Staggering back to the Cernstadt barracks, Heinrich walks through the noisy Allied zone.

As he approached the Cernstadt military garrison, he could hear Heinrich calling out to him, saluting and cheering him on.

Normally he would have smiled and waved, but Heinrich didn't have the energy right now.

'Then....... What should I do?

If you are certain that you are an illegitimate child, it is likely that your brothers in the House of Schwarz are trying to kill you.

It's bound to happen after a war, and there's no guarantee it won't happen during a war.

"If you want me to protect you, I can do that.

Bertus said to Heinrich.

"But I'm bringing in a recruit from Louise von Schwarz, so she'll probably resent it, because I'm arbitrarily overturning something she's made clear she wants to do.

"Yeah......?

"They're probably going to be suspicious of my intentions, and rightfully so, because you're a war hero, and the symbolism of your existence is going to be just as big, if not bigger, than Ellen's, and they're going to say I'm trying to use you to do something nefarious, and that's what they're going to say even if I don't actually have that intention, and I'm going to give them the excuse that I'm interfering in their internal affairs.

You can be protected by the emperor.

But that puts a pretty big burden on the emperor's shoulders.

"And I'm pretty sure it's going to put your life in more danger.

'......Yes, I guess so.'

'That doesn't make it easy to stay in Cernstadt County. You're in constant danger....... 'But to remain in the Temple garrison of your own volition is to invite suspicion that you have ulterior motives....... 'Hmmm. That's complicated.'

Bastard.

If that's true, then Heinrich will die either way.

His brothers are trying to kill him.

You will die even if you are protected by the Emperor, and you will die if you remain in Cernstadt's army.

As long as he is part of this coalition, and as long as Heinrich's dance remains as it is, it is self-evident that one day his brothers will try to murder him.

'I then get....... What should I do?

"Heinrich.

"Uh.

"It's a no-brainer, right?

Bertus shrugs.

"To live, you must kill.

'.......'

"We're killing monsters because we want to live, what's the difference between that and this?

'.......'

'Of course, it would be chaos if all the Cernstadt royals died except for you, and I don't want that, because chaos in the Alliance would be almost as bad as your death.'

If Heinrich kills the royal family's enemies who want him dead in order to stay alive, it will cause great chaos in the alliance.

"But you have to do something to survive, no matter what it is.

Bertus said he couldn't help Heinrich save himself, but he could keep his mouth shut. That's what he said.

Even this army is a collection of humanity's will to live.

So, Heinrich has to do something if he wants to live.

You really are a bastard.

As the mysterious letter said, and as Bertus predicted.

Do my brothers really want to kill me.

Does that mean you have to kill your brothers to live?

I don't like being killed, and I don't like killing.

All I wanted was to be treated like a brother.

It's the way things are.

I don't think that's the only reason this should happen.

Heinrich walked aimlessly until he reached the barracks of the Cernstadt military headquarters.

The banquet was still in full swing, and there was a lot of chatter coming from inside the ballroom marquee.

I don't want to see the people in there. Whoever they are.

Heinrich went around the back of the barracks to his tent.

We don't know what we're going to do next.

I'm not sure what to do yet, so I'm not going to do anything.

In fact, I'm starting to think I might as well have been killed.

"......Where have you been?"

But at the back of the barracks, Heinrich heard a voice calling out to him, and he couldn't help but turn around.

"...... brother."

Eldest son and second in line to the throne of the House of Schwarz.

German von Schwarz. And his second son, Alfons von Schwarz.

They were talking outside the barracks, whether to get some air or to catch up.

Alphonse was a man of his word, but in the case of German von Schwarz, he treated him as if he were not there.

"I've been to....... to the barracks."

"......What have you been up to?"

German's question sounded like an interrogation.

Because it's illegitimate.

Is it because I'm an illegitimate child?

Is it because I'm a half-breed that I'm always being asked the hard questions.

Is he always looking at himself with that dry, hard look because he's the worst of the bunch and he has to admit that the worst of the bunch is his family.

Ignore one, despise the other.

"I went to visit a friend."

"When you say friend, who are you talking about?"

"Who else but the Emperor?"

Ivia and Bertus were the only ones who deserved to be called to the Temple garrison and the General Headquarters barracks.

At the casual mention of the word emperor, Alfons von Schwarz begins to chuckle.

"Wow, my little guy is amazing. You think you're friends with the emperor?"

Heinrich rolled his eyes at the blatant sarcasm.

"I don't think so, but His Majesty the Emperor seems to think so."

"......Huh."

Alfons's expression hardened at Heinrich's disapproving comment.

Just as I hadn't expected Heinrich, who was always a silent listener, to speak in this way.

"You're being arrogant, youngest."

German von Schwarz said.

"While you are an important power, you are by nature a member of the House of Schwarz. You claim to be a friend, but your decision to seek out the Emperor personally should be made after consultation with me or your sister."

This means reporting every single step.

When you're a member of the Schwarz family, every move you make can have political implications.

That's true in and of itself.

But is this the only time we're brothers?

And I'm on my way to find out if you're trying to kill me, and I'm wondering if I can talk to you about that.

"Do not act frivolously. Even on the best of days, you're royalty, and you're supposed to behave like it. If you don't want to create unnecessary misunderstandings, refrain from these things."

Misconception.

What a misunderstanding.

You're the one who's wary of your unthinking self.

German's cold words and Alfons' sneering demeanor.

As if they were done talking, they turned away from Heinrich altogether.

You've been drinking.

And Heinrich wanted to know.

Heinrich looks at his brothers with a stern expression.

"Brothers."

"There's nothing more to say. Listen......."

"Am I illegitimate?"

"!"

"What?"

He wanted to see if the possibilities he'd heard about were true.

Episode 534.

Am I a bastard?

After Heinrich's bombshell question, the brothers were silent for a long time, wide-eyed.

Then, German von Schwarz slowly approaches Heinrich and looks down at him through narrowed eyes.

"Where did you hear such an unbelievable story, did the emperor say that?"

If the source of the information was the Emperor, he would have gone straight to the Allied General Headquarters to argue.

Heinrich knew that what he was saying was a big deal, and that it wasn't the kind of thing you'd say inside the Cernstadt military garrison.

But the frustration and sadness was too much to bear without speaking up.

"The way my brothers treat me, I doubt that's the case."

"No, I can only suspect."

"Is it so wrong to ask for a warm word?"

"But no matter what I do. No matter what major I get, no matter what I do, you always treat me like this, so I don't know if I'm even your blood......."

-Bam!

Before he could finish, German von Schwarz caught Heinrich's blow.

"There's a time and a place for everything."

German's eyes burned with anger.

"Do you really think this is the right place to discuss such a topic?"

The barracks of the Cernstadt military command center, where a banquet is being held.

Bringing up the subject of illegitimacy when there might be an ear listening somewhere is a very dangerous and stupid thing to do.

Moreover, the mere fact that the youngest prince, who now enjoys enormous support within the Cernstadt military, would bring up the subject of illegitimacy would in itself send shockwaves through the military. Whether it is true or not.

"I guess they didn't teach you this in your pompous temple......?"

Heinrich looked up to meet German's furious gaze.

"A temple is a place where you mix with the common people and do math, so how the hell are you going to learn this stuff?"

"......what?"

"And you can't say no, can you?"

German's expression froze at the coldness in Heinrich's tone.

"Brother, I'll just tell you."

"......."

"I think you noticed it yourself anyway."

Alfons, watching from the back, approaches Heinrich in his usual languid manner.

Then he whispers in Heinrich's ear.

To be heard by no one else, only by Heinrich.

"You are the youngest. You are a bastard."

"......."

"So, I hope you're on topic now."

Heinrich looks at Alfons von Schwarz with a stern expression.

"We're not supposed to be talking as equals, do you understand how uncomfortable and unpleasant this has been for us?"

"Now you see?"

"If you're ugly, I hate you for being ugly."

"If you're good, we don't want you to be good."

"I mean, don't give me that disgusting look where you're like, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'"

"Fundamentally different. Different. We're not brothers in the first place."

"Bastard Heinrich. Do you know your subject now?"

"Huh? Look at your eyes, asshole, what else are you going to do with your powers?"

"......."

"Are you going to kill me, like Kane and Samuel?"

"......what?"

Two royals who died in an accident.

When Alfons mentioned it, Heinrich felt something break inside of him.

As he was about to cross the line, German grabbed Alfons.

"Alphonse, stop, you're drunk."

"No, it's the look in his eyes."

But as if Heinrich's judgment was already skewed, Alfons approached Heinrich again, despite his brother's protests.

"Go for it, you filthy bastard, go for it, you're going to eat three royals because two wasn't enough?"

-Bang!

"Billion!"

But Alfons couldn't say any more.

German wasn't alone in his behavior.

Louise von Schwarz strode out of nowhere and slapped Alfons on the cheek.

"Nu, Nu......."

Alphonse's eyes flashed with terror, and he began to back away, hesitantly.

"You're talking about things that shouldn't be talked about, in places that shouldn't be talked about, all three of you. You men of the House of Schwarz are doing this with no dignity or prestige."

German froze, just as Alfons had frozen in fear.

Louise's cool gaze.

The Swordmaster's intimidating presence took everyone's breath away.

Louise's words left everyone speechless. Even Alfons von Schwarz went white at her arrival.

But Heinrich was different.

Heinrich was looking straight at Louise von Schwarz.

"Do you have any dignity and prestige to protect for a bastard who is not even recognized by his brothers?"

"......what?"

Louise von Schwarz's brows narrowed at Heinrich's evil snarl.

"What do you mean, I don't have any body parts to protect?"

Alfons and German were horrified.

The rightful heir and eldest daughter of the royal family.

He was appalled to see Louise von Schwarz so openly disagreeing with him.

There's no dignity and honor to be had from a bastard.

Louise von Schwarz gives Heinrich a cold stare, as if to say that he hasn't been treated like royalty, but is expected to defend it when necessary.

"That's enough. There's no point in discussing this further. There will be a time, a day, a place to talk about this."

Louise tried to organize her thoughts, as if she didn't even want to talk about it.

"Is there ever a time for that?"

"......what?"

"I asked him if that time ever comes."

At Heinrich's words, Louise's expression turned even colder.

"Are you ever going to tell me that before this war is over, when I'm like this, like now, where everyone despises me as a bastard and doesn't even treat me like a human being. When are you going to tell me that, and when are you going to tell me that......."

"The youngest."

Louise, who interrupted Heinrich mid-sentence, grabbed him by the shoulders and said, "I'm sorry.

"Stop your bastardized behavior."

"......."

What a bastard wouldn't do.

The act of arguing with brothers near the command barracks over topics that should not be discussed.

Heinrich's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open at the thought of such a lowly thing, royalty or not.

It's a story that's bound to confuse everyone. I was telling a story in a place where I didn't want it to go viral, and where it could go viral if I got it wrong.

Only a bastard could do that.

The words pierced Heinrich's heart.

Louise looks back at Heinrich, who is frozen in place, as well as her other two brothers.

"Alcohol is good for you......."

Alcohol.

Something that doesn't usually happen, but did today.

"But it looks like it's bad for you, so don't eat it in the future."

With those words, Ruiz returned to the command barracks.

Neither German nor Alfons said anything more to Heinrich, and they returned to their barracks in silence.

Heinrich stood in place for a while, unable to move for long.

\* \* \*

Late at night, after the banquet.

Not all the troops were asleep. Even in the midst of a feast, monsters could still be lurking in the neighborhood of Sankerian, and some were tasked with staying awake in the dead of night to keep watch.

After a slightly ominous disturbance, silence descended on the area around the Cernstadt command center barracks.

But inside was a barracks that was still unlit.

"Sister, shouldn't you use your hands?"

"I don't know where he got the idea that he was a bastard, but you can't let that happen."

Alfons and German visited the barracks of their commander, Ruiz, in the middle of the night.

Louise was sitting on the cot listening to the story.

"The youngest might try to kill us."

"It's kind of weird that they don't."

"Now that they know, they're not going to think of us as brothers, and they're definitely going to try to do something."

"So, if you knew your youngest was going to do something extreme, why did you confirm it?"

"What? That....... that......."

"Why did you all create a crisis by not being able to say we're brothers, when you could have just said no to such a stupid question and that would have been the end of it?"

Under Ruiz's gaze, both Alfons and German were speechless.

"A crisis? Yes, a crisis. A crisis because I can't say a few nice words to a blood relative who has the power to annihilate entire armies with a wave of his hand. You despise him, you look down on him, you turn a blind eye to him, and now you're in this mess."

Both Alfons and German were at a loss for words.

"Is not your folly already a crisis for the House of Schwarz?"

"......."

"......."

Heinrich wouldn't have felt the same way if you'd treated him warmly.

But it's just pride.

Pride, not wanting to be treated like a bastardized child, and feelings of inferiority.

That ruined the whole situation.

Heinrich von Schwarz learned that he was illegitimate, and that the people he wanted to believe were his brothers were actually perceiving him differently.

The current state of affairs in Cernstadt is that there is no telling what Heinrich might do.

As commander-in-chief, commander-in-chief, and heir to Cernstadt, Louise von Schwarz must take responsibility for the shenanigans of her two foolish brothers.

"The source of the information seems to be the emperor?"

"......Yes, sister."

"He told me he was meeting with the Emperor in the barracks at the General Headquarters, and it pisses me off that he's friends with the Emperor......."

Alphonse was about to add a useless limb, but Louise's glare shut him up.

Louise von Schwarz doesn't know what the Emperor and Heinrich were talking about.

But Heinrich, who had come to see the Emperor, was impatient and asked if I was illegitimate.

That alone is enough to tell us what you talked to the emperor about without hearing it.

"I need to see the emperor."

Louise's stern expression had the air of someone who could chew the emperor to pieces.

But regardless of where the clue came from, it was German and Alfons' direct answer that caused the immediate problem.

"Don't do anything stupid until you talk to me."

"Yes."

"Yes, sister."

You have to use your hands.

Heinrich and the Schwarzes crossed an irreversible river.

Louise's plan to use Heinrich to elevate and exploit the Cernstadt forces, and to have the Schwarzes take the place of the Imperial House of Gradias before and after the war, was ruined.

"I don't even want to look at you. Get out of my sight, both of you."

"......."

"......."

After a brief toast, Louise stared after the brothers as they left.

'Emperor.......'

Bertus de Gradias.

Luiz had never imagined that he would feel the emperor's influence in this way, in this place.

Schism in the House of Schwarz.

Rather, they were caught in the emperor's crossfire.

To be more precise, he took advantage of the other two brothers' stupidity and Heinrich's frivolity.

If frivolity and stupidity can be predicted after illegitimacy, is there anything the Schwarz family hasn't figured out about the Empire?

She couldn't get it out of her mind.

\* \* \*

Heinrich was sitting on his barracks bed.

It was late at night, but I couldn't fall asleep.

There's no way I'm going to be able to sleep at night after hearing that.

Bastard.

When Bertus told me the story, I had to admit that it was a possibility, but I was in denial.

No way.

I couldn't help but wonder if that made sense.

But that nonsense turned out to be true.

Heinrich felt his breath catch in his throat as he saw the contempt and disdain he'd been hiding.

So far, so good.

So that's what it was.

That was where the rejection and hatred of his brothers, which even he found difficult to understand, came from.

"Hmph......."

Heinrich chuckled.

Yeah, a bastard killed two royals.

It's a good thing he was exiled to the Temple instead of being killed. It's clear that the Schwarzes are not without their faults.

Hate it, but where is the end of hating?

But now that he knows the truth, Heinrich realizes how much the brothers who weren't brothers had to put up with.

I'll assume that the dismissive and disdainful behavior was unavoidable, and I'm glad I did it.

But.

Your brothers will kill you.

I couldn't help but feel the reality of that message.

Bastard.

Bastardization is growing in prominence and may one day surpass the influence of Louise von Schwarz.

They're not going to let that happen forever, and when the time is right, they'll take care of themselves.

I don't know who sent it, and I don't know how they got it.

However, Heinrich and his brothers had a conversation that shouldn't have been shared.

Heinrich knew he was illegitimate.

The brothers told him that Heinrich was illegitimate.

So I have a hunch that we're in for a very different ride.

The brothers will try to kill Heinrich because they don't know what he will do.

If so, when?

It could be tonight, it could be tomorrow, it could be during an operation later. Even if you know the date, you don't know the method. It could be poisoning, it could be assassination, it could be disguised as death in action.

Should I stay put?

What if his brothers are trying to kill him?

As Bertus says.

To survive, you must kill.

He must kill his brothers because he knows they will try to kill him.

But is it worth it?

Even if it's just to survive.

Is it right to kill your brothers in order to survive a war for the fate of humanity?

Heinrich sits still in the darkness of the barracks.

This is an overly vulnerable place.

No matter how thick the tents are, they're easily cut by blades, and unlike Ellen's barracks, Heinrich's has no locks or defenses. As with most barracks, there's no room for complaining.

The safety of the barracks itself is meaningless when the enemy is a monster, not a human, in the first place. This isn't a war of assassins and spies.

This entire garrison is too good for nighttime guests. Monsters don't sneak up on you.

"Hey."

"......!"

Just like now.

"Who, who!"

A man in black robes, who hadn't been there until now, suddenly emerged from the center of the barracks.

Heinrich's eyes widened as he summoned a flame in his right hand.

How can they act so quickly?

No matter what, right now?

While Heinrich was torn between attack and flight, the man in the robe removed his hood.

Not an assassin.

"Don't worry, it's me."

"You....... Are you."

But something more than an assassin.

He was told not to peck, but instead of pecking, Heinrich felt like his heart was going to explode.

"La, la....... Reinhard......?"

"Did you get the letter?"

Heinrich's eyes widened at the sight of the demon.

"Come on, come on....... No way....... You?"

"Yeah, we're friends."

Reinhardt chuckles and shrugs.

"Isn't it?"

Somehow, nothing seems to have changed.

Heinrich thought about it.

"Mmm....... Ugh....... That's a goal."

But Reinhardt was a little off, like he was under the influence of alcohol.

Episode 535.

Heinrich stood frozen as Reinhardt entered his barracks.

Demons are a curse on humanity.

It's hard for Heinrich to believe that the Temple's Reinhardt and the world's most hated demon are one and the same, but it's not impossible.

Reinhardt is the devil.

And the devil is behind it all.

Knowing this, Heinrich was confused.

How is it that it is Reinhardt who is here, in front of me, at this moment, and who sent that letter?

"It's a thorn cushion."

As if he knew everything that was going on, Reinhardt blurted it out.

"We're not going to have a long conversation, so I'll keep it short."

"If you die here, it's a problem, and if you kill someone, it's a problem, and you know that, right?"

"Follow me."

"Just follow me, and I'll explain the rest of the issues."

"What happened so far."

"What are you going to do next."

"About what you can do."

We don't and can't have long conversations.

Heinrich could not help but freeze when he saw Reinhardt again, the man he thought he would never see.

How did he know he was going to die, where was he watching me, and where did he hear about my illegitimacy?

But Reinhardt showed up after Heinrich confirmed that he was illegitimate.

As if you've been waiting for this.

At the moment he realizes he has no place in the Alliance and is about to be killed, he shows up and offers his hand.

Let's leave the Alliance.

Heinrich didn't think he'd ever see Reinhardt again.

But I had envisioned that.

In the midst of so much death, so much despair that it's hard to call the Gate a tragedy.

Why the hell did they do this?

Did he really hate humans that much.

Even if the humans had destroyed your world, did it have to come to this?

I don't know you well, but from what I've seen of you, this is not who you are.

Was it all a mask and fake?

Was he hiding this vengeance under a mask?

But when Reinhard appeared in front of him, Heinrich couldn't ask him anything.

It never occurred to me that killing the demon would make me a hero to mankind.

I couldn't think of anything other than Reinhardt's topic.

Follow Reinhardt and you'll live.

Reinhardt's expression says everything happened for a reason.

In that look, Heinrich still doesn't know much about Reinhardt, but he does know one thing.

Reinhardt in Temple.

Reinhardt was a bully, but he wasn't evil.

I intuit that it was just the truth.

The gods were not wrong in their choice.

There was some reason, unknown to me, that this was bound to happen.

He had come to understand that his brothers wanted to kill him, and that one day they would.

So there's no place for you in Cernstadt County.

As Bertus says, even if you're in the General Command, you can't escape the influence of the Cernstadt Army.

As long as his origins as a member of the Schwarz family don't change, and the fact that he's an illegitimate child doesn't change.

Brothers will try to exclude themselves at some point.

It felt like an established fact to Heinrich now.

If you take the hand of the devil, you become a traitor to humanity.

Three people who somehow betrayed humanity and sided with the devil.

Olivia Ranze, Herriot de Saint-Ouen, Liana de Grants.

To those three names we add Heinrich von Schwarz.

Heinrich is well aware of the treatment of the Grand Duke of Saint-Thuan, who is more dedicated to this war than anyone else.

If you side with the Devil, and if you are found to have sided with the Devil, the House of Schwarz will be treated the same as the Grand Duchess of Saint-Thuan.

A family with a traitor among its members.

The prestige of the House of Schwarz will plummet.

Plural.

What better way to get back at the brothers who despised and ignored you for being a bastard?

Whatever they dream of, isn't the royal family's image being tarnished by the betrayal of an illegitimate son the surest revenge for the pampering and neglect Heinrich has received thus far?

"......."

Heinrich stares at Reinhardt, who remains silent, waiting for his answer.

Siding with the demon guarantees one's own survival, and can bring great humiliation to one's brothers. They value honor above life, and they despise their illegitimate children.

The political fallout from having such a traitor in the Schwarz family would be enormous.

It would be laughable to tell you the truth: Heinrich von Schwarz was actually illegitimate. You've been using it to your advantage.

"I'm not going to ask you to make a quick decision, because it's not something that can be rushed."

Reinhard leans against one of the barracks' pillars, arms folded, silent.

You don't know if they don't think you're going to attack them, or if they're confident they can handle it.

Reinhard gives Heinrich time to think about it.

I think it's right to follow the devil.

If Reinhardt has a reason to do this, and it makes sense.

If this happened through a chain of unavoidable events rather than malice.

Reinhardt is only trying to save Heinrich's life by entering a place where he is the enemy.

He's trying to save her even though they weren't that close.

If that goodwill is true, there's no reason not to play into the devil's hands.

If staying with the Alliance is only going to make him more dangerous, then he needs to do something else, somewhere else, and he might as well piss off the Schwarzes, who have turned their backs on him.

But.

A royal family is a royal family.

The people are the people.

The House of Schwarz and the Cernstadt army are the main pillars of the Alliance.

Like the Grand Duke of Saint-Antoine being blamed for the daughter he betrayed, never recognized for her devotion, and sentenced to death as punishment.

The wizards of the Duchy of St. Thuan were being treated the same way.

The sins of the monarch's family must be borne by the people.

If it became known that Heinrich had sided with the devil, not only would the Schwarzes be guilty, but the entire Cernstadt army.

Whatever happened to the Devil, it's a story for those in the know.

The Cairnstadt army will receive the same treatment as Archduke Saint-Thuan and his wizards.

This will lead to more than demoralization, it will lead to a split in the alliance. Even within Cernstadt's own ranks, there will be many who will feel a tremendous sense of betrayal.

Instead of being known for siding with the devil, you might be known for simply deserting.

Still, morale can't be helped.

Heinrich is the hero of the Cernstadt army.

Heroes, like Ellen, are valuable just for being.

There are some things you take on board.

Even if your brothers are trying to kill you, even if you're too short-sighted to do it.

You can't betray your people.

You can't leave people who believe in you, who find hope in you.

Heinrich doesn't ask Reinhardt much.

I had a lot of questions, but they became pointless.

Reinhardt came to his rescue.

So what choice would you make?

"You know, it's a lot different than it used to be."

"......."

"I'm not the flint you used to laugh at."

That sounds pretty arrogant, and Reinhardt smirks.

"Yeah, not so much anymore."

Heinrich can give Reinhardt back the words he used to laugh at him.

That much time has passed.

Instead of flint, you now have the superpower to burn volcanoes.

As powerful as he has become, some fear him and others find hope in him.

"So, I'm not so light on my ass anymore that I can do this or that just because you say so."

"Yeah, well, you've gotten pretty cocky."

Reinhardt, returning a stone-cold answer to a stone-cold answer, seemed to Heinrich no different than before.

"I can't go. I have to take care of my own business."

In response, Reinhardt holds still and stares into Heinrich's eyes.

"I said it doesn't matter if you die, it doesn't matter if you kill. Do you understand me correctly?"

"I understand."

Even if you get killed.

It's okay to kill.

You are responsible for your own work.

In the end, it all comes back to bite you in the ass.

No problem with being killed, no problem with killing.

If you follow the devil, you'll end up with a problem.

If everything is a problem, Heinrich just picks a problem.

"Yeah, well, if that's your choice, so be it."

The old Reinhardt would have used coercion when things didn't go his way.

"You're not the same person you used to be, are you?"

Heinrich chuckles, and Reinhardt smirks.

"Only you."

Reinhardt returned the favor.

Heinrich was surprised to see Reinhardt at this point, under these circumstances, but he had a question.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

"......Have you been drinking?"

Somehow, in the darkness, Reinhardt seems to be stirring, a little disoriented.

I had this weird feeling.

Reinhardt shakes his head at Heinrich's question.

"It's not alcohol, but....... Well, something like....... Whatever."

Reinhardt blinks, as if trying to regain his composure.

"Live, if you can."

With those words, Reinhardt disappeared into the darkness. How he disappeared, Heinrich could not tell.

"......."

As suddenly as he appeared, Reinhardt disappeared.

Suddenly, Heinrich realized what a ridiculous thing he had gotten himself into.

The devil has come for him.

I offered to help, and he declined.

Is this what happened in the real world?

Heinrich was stunned for a moment.

\* \* \*

A place far from any Allied garrison. Scouts don't come this far.

"How did it go?"

"I said I'll take care of it."

"Ummm....... What number?"

"I don't know."

Sarkegar narrowed his eyes at my words as we left the garrison.

I was high on catnip and frozen in the Royal Class garrison when Sarkegar reported that something had happened.

It was an indescribable feeling of hell.

It's good, it's good, it's weird.

I can't believe I'm about to get high on catnip. And why the hell did Anna, that crazy bitch, even request a supply run to this garrison?

Anyway.

The story has already surfaced, and things are about to take a turn for the worse.

And Heinrich declined my offer to join him.

I also thought about what I would do if he tried to attack me, but luckily that didn't happen.

Seeing it with his own eyes, Heinrich was transformed.

There was no longer the same arrogant, cocky, and cheap young prince of Cernstadt.

I don't know if it's inevitable that people change after something like this, or if there was some other trigger.

If it were just an arrogant choice, I would have used coercion.

Heinrich seemed to be thinking about people other than himself.

He seemed to think he had a role to play in the Alliance.

We don't know if Heinrich's choice is just a one-size-fits-all or something else.

But we'll be able to deal with what comes next.

Do nothing.

The scribe's advice was that even if I tried to help Heinrich, my actions would be meaningless because Heinrich would refuse.

"What would you like to do?"

I crossed my arms at Sarkegar's words.

If there was already a rift, it was tightened.

Now that Heinrich has confirmed that he is illegitimate, and the other siblings have recognized it, their fear of each other will soon manifest itself in aggression.

Heinrich may die, or he may end up killing him.

The fragmentation of the coalition is inevitable.

Was I right to force Heinrich to come with me?

Unknown.

But Heinrich was different.

It's a decision made by a different guy.

I've become a guy who can think about more than just surviving.

But will that difference ensure Heinrich's survival?

variable, but it's too small and not something that will eventually change the environment.

As long as Heinrich remains with the Allies, that variable can't prevent events from happening.

No, something else could happen, like Heinrich murdering his brothers, and that would create another problem.

If Heinrich survives and the other brothers are killed, the Allied chaos is on schedule.

Is it right to ignore that?

I understand the scribe's advice to do nothing.

It would have meant that Heinrich would refuse my help.

Then another piece of advice.

How did Heinrich survive?

That vague advice.

I don't know what that means yet.

What does that even mean?

"......For now."

The only thing you should avoid is extremes.

Heinrich refused to help, but I will continue to monitor the situation.

\* \* \*

Fourth day of the occupation of Senkerian.

The Allies were reorganizing for their next advance while simultaneously revising their plans for the next advance.

The word had already reached the high command that another weather event had occurred on the way to their next destination, and that the monsters had been all but eradicated.

Because of these things that most people don't know about, the Allies didn't have to devote troops to forward search, reconnaissance, and destruction as they had been doing.

This allowed for a significant amount of troop reserves.

The issue of combat fatigue is also critical to the military's ability to maintain combat power.

The cooperation of the Demon King was helping the Allies maintain their military strength in a significant way.

Among those beneficiaries were Saviolin Tana and Ellen Artorius, not to mention the psychics from the Temple.

Heinrich von Schwarz was also resting, as he hadn't been called into action since the capture of Sankt Gallien.

But for Heinrich von Schwarz, it was a break.

He learned the truth he didn't want to know: he was an illegitimate child.

And then I came face to face with someone who shouldn't be here.

As the brothers fell out, a frosty atmosphere ensued.

Still, Heinrich had tried to be as polite as possible to his brothers so far. While the brothers remained cold, disdainful, or sarcastic, there was no lack of conversation.

But the silence between the brothers was deadly.

Brothers know best.

That you're about to be killed.

It started with Louise von Schwarz.

Day five of the occupation of Senkerian.

With the march about to begin, Louise von Schwarz gathered her brothers together.

"The grounds around Sankerian are said to be 'secure,' but even a day like this will end when we start marching, so let's take a look around."

"......."

"I have a story to tell."

Heinrich nodded at Louise's words as she looked at him.

We talk about topics that are difficult to talk about.

Heinrich nodded, his expression grim.

\* \* \*

The neighborhood of Sankerian was definitely monster-free.

The city won't be rebuilt because there's no one to live in it, but the reduction in the number of warp gates is significant in and of itself.

Without any vassals or escorts, the brothers of the House of Schwarz rode on horseback to inspect the neighborhood of Sankerian.

It was a walk in the park, not a horse inspection.

It's not really about purpose. I'm just here to say what I can't say in a place where there are plenty of ears to hear it.

It's all talk.

Heinrich paints a picture in his head.

It's true that the other siblings can handle weapons, but that doesn't mean much to Heinrich.

The threat is Louise von Schwarz.

A genius with an overwhelming five voices, he is the head of the Royal Knights of Cernstadt.

Plus, I'm already a master class veteran.

Would you be able to handle it if she tried to kill you?

Heinrich knows that Louise von Schwarz is not afraid to jump into battle and swing her sword.

Having watched Ellen and Savior Tana battle time and time again, I know how intimidating a weapon Master Class can be.

Heinrich's physical capabilities are not very high.

If Louise von Schwarz draws her sword and tries to kill herself, she can do so without much trouble.

But after that.

How to explain the untimely death of Heinrich von Schwarz and how to deal with the resulting morale downturn.

No life is too important to be lost.

That's why he can't easily be touched by his brothers.

So it's highly unlikely that Louise will try to kill you while you're out for a walk.

The area around Senkerian has already been cleaned up.

The excuse that monsters appeared and attacked Heinrich and killed him is not going to work at all.

So Louise von Schwarz is out of luck.

A different place, a different way, maybe, but not today.

But Louise von Schwarz, who said she was going to have a conversation, didn't say a word, just drove the horse to the front.

Alfons and German hadn't said anything either, until their sister spoke first.

I wonder how long it went in silence.

"......?"

In front of an abandoned building, Louise dismounted.

"Get off."

A spacious building that may have been used as a warehouse for a farmhouse.

Heinrich and the other brothers were baffled as to why nothing had been discussed beforehand.

Heinrich's face hardened as he looked at the entrance to the dingy warehouse.

I thought not.

Are you willing to deal with the noise.

You really think of yourself as such a big threat.

Heinrich watches as the other brothers dismount from their horses with meaningful smiles.

"I thought I told you to get off."

Louise stares at Heinrich with a cold gaze.

"It's ......."

If a fight breaks out, where and how.

Feeling his heart pounding, Heinrich dismounted.

Was I right to follow Reinhardt?

I think about it, but it doesn't make sense anymore.

It's just plain stupid to regret the hand you didn't hold.

Do you have to kill to live.

If you're going to do it, you might as well get a head start.

You must defeat Louise von Schwarz before your other siblings.

Your opponent is behind you.

There's no time like the present to get your hands dirty.

Heinrich follows quietly behind, ready to use his abilities.

Because if you don't want to die, you have to kill.

"......?"

But once inside the warehouse, Heinrich couldn't help but freeze up.

There was a person in the warehouse.

"......!"

"This, this is......?"

Five people in all, bound and gagged.

Five people were tied up and kneeling in a warehouse.

Louise von Schwarz draws her sword.

"Alfons. Germanic."

Louise von Schwarz stares at them.

"Who they are. Do you recognize them?"

"Nu....... 누님."

"Sister, why are they here......."

Heinrich doesn't know who the kneeling, chained men are. But Alfons and German seem to know them.

Louise von Schwarz draws the sword at her hip.

He looks down with a cold gaze as the five bound men scream in terror.

-skuck!

A blue-enchanted sword sliced through the throat of one.

Heinrich could only stare frozen at the blood gushing from the severed neck.

"The youngest."

After decapitating one, Louise looks at Heinrich with a calm gaze.

Neither Heinrich, nor Alfons, nor German, has any idea what's going on.

"You are a bastard."

-skuck!

The second person's head falls off.

-Whoa, whoa, whoa!

In an instant, they saw two throats slit and blood pouring out of them, and they began to gag and cry like animals.

But Louise doesn't stop there.

Without looking at the dying, Louise looks at Heinrich.

The bastard is correct.

That's already been confirmed. Why go over that again?

"By the way, do you know whose illegitimate child you are?"

Louise says, bringing her sword down on the nape of the third's neck.

"Who......?"

"Sister......? What the hell are you talking about.......?"

Both Alphonse and German are puzzled by this.

A strange, unrecognizable sound.

Strange words out of context.

Heinrich was frozen.

"You are the youngest, you are illegitimate."

"Nu....... 누님......?"

Heinrich's lips turned blue.

"Not my father, my bastard."

-skuck!

After a fourth and fifth blow to the neck, Louise looks at Heinrich.

"You, my son."

Louise looks at German and Alfons.

"Yeah, you wouldn't have known, because I hid it on purpose. Because I had to hide it too....... Because it was a promise I made to my father....... that he wouldn't kill Heinrich, so I kept it a secret. I couldn't tell anyone, so Alfons, German, I was forced to bend to your will....... Yes, that's how it's been all along......."

Louise stares at her brothers with sad eyes.

"By the way."

"Crawl."

"Finish."

"You tried so hard to kill my son."

"You two."

The dead were assassins who had been assigned to kill Heinrich in these few days.

"I thought you guys would never do something like this, no matter how much I hated you, no matter how much I hated you, I thought you would never do something like this......."

Heinrich was frozen, and Alfons and Germann, who had learned the truth about their illegitimate son, were white in the face as they met their sister's cold gaze.

"I can only kill you if I kill the youngest....... No, Heinrich. If my son can live. I, I must do it now. I can't stand by and watch any longer."

"Sister, something is wrong. Something....... something."

"No, no, no. This is ridiculous! What....... What are you trying to do......!"

Louise von Schwarz.

"I have to admit, I've had to kill someone to protect someone."

Swordmaster approaches his brother.

"Even if they are my brothers in blood."

Heinrich stood frozen, watching the brutal execution.

Episode 536.

A few days ago.

Louise von Schwarz found the emperor.

It was to protest what was surely the final blow to the tense atmosphere between the Schwarz royals.

"Your Majesty, you seem to be taking an inordinate interest in the affairs of the House of Schwarz.

"It's happening in one of the Allied hubs, so I shouldn't be interested.

Imperial Emperor Bertus de Gradias.

Some emperors excel in wartime, others in peacetime.

Louise von Schwarz doesn't know which Emperor Bertus is more capable at any given time.

I wouldn't say the empire is alive and well, but it's still breathing.

The surviving imperial powers were able to band together and form a coalition.

"I'm sure you don't realize that the mere mention of the House of Gradias on such a sensitive subject is a grave insult to the Schwarz family.

The Empire is clearly the superior power, but Cernstadt is not to be trifled with.

If Cernstadt were to leave the Alliance right now, the Allies would lose about a third of their power. The importance of Cernstadt to the Alliance is enormous.

It is a grave diplomatic breach and a mistake for the Emperor to speak to the House of Schwarz and suggest that your youngest prince is illegitimate, even if he did so in private and not in public.

Under Louise von Schwarz's cold gaze, Bertus could only smile, as he always did.

"Why don't I know that it's better to stay put?

'.......'

Bastardization issues.

It's in your best interest to ignore it.

'If I stayed put, Heinrich would be assassinated by his ugly brothers, who couldn't get over their jealousy and inferiority complex, and I'd have the chance to use that as an opportunity to wipe out the Schwarzes, who had always been an eyesore and a nuisance to the Empire.

'It's going to be a lot of noise, but there's a cause at stake here, a war for the fate of humanity. The Alliance may falter, but it won't collapse, because we're fighting a war for a reason.

'We're trading Heinrich von Schwarz's life for the life of the Schwarz family, who clearly want to overthrow the Empire more than anyone. Wouldn't it be better for you to remain silent and let everything take care of itself?'

Louise's expression hardened even more at Bertus' harsh words, which didn't match his smiling face.

Silence would allow Cernstadt to fall by itself, and in the confusion, Bertus could capture and kill the Schwarzes in the name of the cause and then devour the entire Cernstadt army.

There will be tremendous pushback from the Cernstadt forces, but this war is for the greater good, not self-interest.

Bertus knows that the Alliance will be greatly disrupted, but not destroyed.

Cernstadt, which may be the biggest post-war contender, will fall on its own. There's no reason not to watch.

"What, are, you, saying, now?

'I didn't commit this diplomatic faux pas because I was up to no good, I did it because I didn't want to see my friend die....... and that was the only reason.

It was just a matter of letting it happen.

Bertus didn't have to say anything to Heinrich, who came to him.

Heinrich was an important power, but if he could trade the future of the empire for one life, he should do so.

But that's not what Bertus did.

Heinrich didn't give me a direct answer, but he did give me some truth.

Not all the truth, but some of the truth.

'Because I know now, on some level, that if you don't treat your friends well, terrible things happen.

Ruiz couldn't understand Bertus' unintelligible addition.

But if we leave it alone, Heinrich will be killed.

Louise gritted her teeth at that.

'You seem pretty confident that that's going to happen, do you think that kind of nonsense is going to happen?'

'Your two brothers are worse greats than you realize.'

A trust named Brother.

No, not even that.

Trust in humanity itself.

In a situation like this, with a fight on the horizon, he becomes jealous of his illegitimate son who is better than him and tries to assassinate him.

Louise couldn't understand how something so stupid and ridiculous could happen.

They have more rights than anyone else, so they should have more responsibilities than anyone else.

The belief that they wouldn't do something so irresponsible.

Louise von Schwarz doesn't think that's possible.

I don't think my brothers would be that stupid.

I'm not expecting much, but I don't think it's going to be much.

But it's already happened.

The other brothers began to insist on trying their hands first.

Alfons and German are serious about killing Heinrich or risking their own deaths.

Before, it was a matter of if, but now it's a matter of when.

And that was the beginning of the end for the emperor.

Bastard.

This wouldn't have happened if Heinrich hadn't listened.

But is it really possible that it didn't happen? Louise had seen the open disregard and contempt for Heinrich from afar and up close.

Even if this hadn't happened, it would have happened anyway.

In places you don't see, in places you don't recognize. Without even asking his consent.

I wonder if they're really going to try to kill Heinrich on their own terms.

I don't think they'd be that stupid, I don't think they'd be that stupid.

Can humans be that stupid?

Louise von Schwarz wanted to punch the Emperor in the face for irresponsibly dropping the bomb.

But the bomb was already there.

He just didn't want to admit it was a bomb.

'It's a little unfortunate that the commander of Cernstadt has come to see you like this.

"......Now, did you say you're sorry?

Louise's brow furrowed as she heard the words.

You think the emperor's power will ever be the same.

All of humanity's powers have become smaller, and emperors no longer have the power and authority they once did.

Do they have any illusions that they stand above everyone, as they did in the days after the Demon War, when the power of the empire soared.

'To save the life of the Commander's son, the Emperor of the Empire has the audacity to poke his nose into the domestic affairs of another nation, and you don't even bother to thank him. Isn't that something to be ashamed of?'

'......!

"Did they think I wouldn't know?

Bertus de Gradias.

The Emperor's words sent chills down Louise's spine.

Something that only three people in the Schwarz family know: the king, the current queen, and Louise.

The emperor knew it.

'The Commander was an early graduate of the Royal Academy of Cernstadt at the age of eighteen.'

'.......'

Royal Academy of Cernstadt.

A prodigy, she graduated early from even the Royal Academy.

That's how it's known in the world.

'Heinrich von Schwarz was born after I had traveled abroad for about a year on a graduation trip....... I don't think that's a coincidence.'

Louise squints and meets Bertus's gaze.

"Isn't that a dropout, not an early graduate?

Under Bertus's gaze, Luiz felt the pressure on his breath.

"Raphael Muller.

'......!

"Do you need further clarification?

The Emperor already knew the name Louise had buried in her mind long ago.

The name, apparently, was the name of someone she loved.

Already, long dead.

\* \* \*

'How the Schwarz family incorporated a supposedly illegitimate child into the royal family....... I don't understand this, King Constantine was a very flawed person in that regard, he wouldn't create an illegitimate child, Catherine the Great would have collapsed if she knew of the existence of an illegitimate child, but somehow Heinrich was accepted, not disposed of....... I don't understand. The Schwarz family I know is not like that.'

Louise looked at Bertus with a stony expression.

These are great men whose character would not allow them to have an illegitimate child, and if they did, they would deal with it, not incorporate it into the royal family.

But Heinrich was somehow incorporated into the royal family. Of course, we're starting with a result.

The much-hated youngest prince is probably a bastard, and if you're going to hate him so much, why keep him alive?

There are times when you have no choice but to keep them alive.

Louise von Schwarz never married, despite her advanced age.

He hasn't taken the throne yet, but it's very important for his heirs.

Still, I'm not married, and I don't think I ever will be.

And the Royal Academy in Cernstadt is very similar to a temple.

Training is mixed and tiered.

Bertus's comments are both politically and humanly disrespectful.

If you want to make it a problem, you can make it a problem.

But Louise couldn't say anything. That was proof in itself.

"I have a number of guesses in my head, but I'm not going to say them out loud, because any more than that would just annoy the commander.

'.......'

"That's the point.

Bertus puts down his teacup and looks at Louise von Schwarz, who is frozen in place.

"You can't keep everything.

You must select

Heinrich was made to realize that he was in danger, which led to an argument.

"You have to choose, before you lose everything by not choosing this or that.

Bertus had hastened what would one day happen.

So Louise von Schwarz has to choose something before she thinks everything is fine as it is, and then everything goes to shit.

'...... That Heinrich wanted to live. Is that really all there is to it?'

At Louise's question, Bertus smirked.

"I could have stayed put and not had to have this uncomfortable encounter, so why risk it?

I didn't want my friend to die.

Bertus didn't, even though he could have made a huge political gain at the expense of power.

At the risk of treading on Louise von Schwarz's toes, I gave Heinrich a hint.

So, what the heck was that for?

At Bertus' words, Louise could no longer believe that the Emperor had any sinister intentions.

If you want to protect your son, you must see blood.

Bertus said nothing more, as if he'd had enough of prying into the domestic affairs of another country.

\* \* \*

'Why.......'

"Why did you kill Raphael?

'Why on earth would.......'

"Why, did you have to do that?

That was a long time ago.

"You've lost your mind.

"You can't have dirty commoners in the royal family.

'I told him to mingle with the common people, do math, and understand their physiology. I didn't tell him to give them jung.

"Do you mean to tell me that with all your talents and gifts, you couldn't even discern that much?

'I have given you the punishment you deserve for coveting what you dare not have.

"Do you really think there's room for such a thing as personal affection on the way to becoming Queen of Cernstadt and laying the foundations of an empire that will one day surpass the House of Gradias?

'You were foolish, daughter.

'Yes, humans make mistakes. No one is perfect, so you made a mistake.

"So let's move on from this mistake.

"Erase, forget everything and start fresh.

The cruel words of her father, Constantin von Schwarz, left Louise stunned.

It was early love.

I could have called it immature, but I couldn't help but call it love.

Clumsy love bore clumsy fruit, and I paid a cruel price.

It was the first real emotion I'd ever felt outside of a world where everything was forced upon me like it was suffocating.

In the real world, where you're used to elegance and hypocrisy, honor and dignity, things you don't even want. It was the first thing he had of his own volition.

It was taken away.

It was trampled on.

"No.

It was a transaction.

'Don't take anything from me, no more.'

"What?

"If you try to take it, you'll lose me.

Trading for your life.

I can't take back what's already been taken, but I didn't want to take more.

That's why he threatened his parents with his life.

Don't try to take my children.

The king and queen couldn't give up the Schwarz family's best piece of history.

The child she gave birth to was disguised as her father's illegitimate son and incorporated into the royal family.

Very few people knew the truth, and that was true of the other royals as well as his firstborn son.

The end of a tangle of lies, deceit, and half-truths.

"......."

"Nu, Nu......."

Louise von Schwarz had killed her last two brothers with her own hands, and she looked into the eyes of her son, who stared back at her in horror.

-grunt

She sheathed her sword.

"Let's go back."

"Nuh-uh. What the....... What the hell are you talking about. I... I'm trying to get my brothers to......."

"Let's go back."

The brothers ended up trying to kill Heinrich several times without consulting him.

If Louise hadn't kept an eye on the situation, she could have lost her son with both eyes open.

If the Emperor had had other ideas, he would have used this to implicate the ringleaders, the two brothers, and himself in the destruction of the House of Schwarz.

We don't know what changed his mind, but the emperor had a change of heart.

I'm not bashing the Schwarzes, but I am telling Louise to get her act together or it might be too late.

The emperor told her that to protect something, you have to see blood.

Louise saw blood.

The price of killing flesh and blood was the protection of flesh and blood.

Louise grunts and walks toward the horse.

His blood-soaked fingertips were shaking violently, as if he were suffering from hydrocephalus.

Leaving Alfons and German abandoning their horses, Louise mounted her horse, and Heinrich, without his ice, followed suit at Louise's command.

I killed my brothers.

How to make this happen.

Louise is helpless to do anything about it.

Frozen, she doesn't know what to say to her youngest, who has just discovered that her oldest sister is actually her mother.

I had to make a choice, so I made a choice.

That was it.

-Hihihihi!

Riding their horses, they leave the abandoned warehouse and disappear.

Confusion and vagueness.

As the two emotional figures disappeared from the warehouse, the two Inyoungs appeared out of thin air.

"......."

"......."

Reinhardt and Herriot were there to hear the unbelievable story.

"This is....... What....... is?"

"......I don't know."

At Reinhardt's frozen words, Harriet shook her head.

Episode 537.

Heinrich refused to join them, but he wasn't about to let them die.

So as Sarkegar continued to report on the situation at the Cernstadt garrison, I kept an eye on the situation.

Sensing that this was going to happen, I followed behind them with Harriet.

I thought Louise von Schwarz was going to put her hands on Heinrich, but no.

Louise had killed her brothers in a fit of pique.

And the shocking truth: He was an illegitimate child, but not the king's illegitimate child, but Louise's illegitimate child.

Charlotte said.

At the mention of Heinrich's assassination, Louise von Schwarz said that there was no way she would do such a foolish thing.

The brothers conspire to assassinate Heinrich.

It wasn't a conspiracy of all the brothers, it was a conspiracy of two, or a conspiracy of three, or a conspiracy of two, or a conspiracy of three.

Louise von Schwarz had nothing to do with the original events in the first place.

He lost his son because he failed to calculate the folly of his brothers.

And whether he knew the truth of what happened or not, he was executed with the emperor's wrath.

In the original story, there's a story behind the events that happened too quickly for some reason or another that I don't understand.

That's just the way it was this time.

Charlotte's suspicion that Heinrich might be illegitimate.

And the truth that he was illegitimate, yes, but the illegitimate son of a princess, not a king and queen.

Something happened that didn't happen in the original, but Louise von Schwarz killed her brothers with her own hands instead of bystanders.

We don't know what event, what emotion, or what triggered it.

However, Heinrich survived.

Louise von Schwarz, who was supposed to be one of the main culprits, was actually the one who had to protect Heinrich.

From the way he looked after killing his brothers, it was clear that he was devastated that he had done it.

In the original, Louise doesn't get to choose her brothers, and she doesn't get to choose Heinrich.

Heinrich's death, and his own, were the result of his blind faith.

But for now, Louise has made her choice.

We don't know what excuses she, the commander of the Cernstadt army, will make for her brothers' deaths.

The dead two have a role to play, and it's going to cause problems, but it's better than having Ruiz or Heinrich dead.

I was told to be still.

I really just had to be still.

The world has changed, but I don't know exactly what has changed where or how.

Herriot and I left the abandoned warehouse area and ducked into the nearby woods.

"I don't know what happened, but....... Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I don't think we need to worry about that."

He nodded at my words.

We know who actually tried to kill Heinrich, and it was Louise.

There will be noise and problems, but Heinrich's life will no longer be in danger.

If Louise von Schwarz had been an actual beast, things would have been more complicated, but thankfully she wasn't.

But then I discovered a more complicated family history.

The obvious scribe's advice was to stay and watch, because the changed world would show you the changed ending.

I couldn't help but notice the vague scribe's advice.

"Yeah....... That Heinrich had been alive all this time....... It didn't really make sense......."

"That's....... What do you mean?"

"If Heinrich was really the king's illegitimate son, there was no need to accept him into the royal family."

A queen is not a great person to recognize an illegitimate child.

Charlotte speculated that King Cernstadt might have been forced to do so by his stubbornness.

There were even members of the royal family killed by Heinrich.

But all I did was banish it to the template.

It's strange that Heinrich is still alive in the first place.

"Louise von Schwarz tried to save Heinrich somehow....... to save Heinrich."

"......Yes."

We don't know how or why Louise von Schwarz gave birth to Heinrich and how the secret has been kept until now.

But even the other royals had no idea he was Louise's illegitimate son.

The only people who know are the king, queen, and Louise herself.

In past incidents, Louise would have begged.

Please don't kill me.

Kill them, but don't. Let them live outside of our gaze.

Maybe that's what the deal was.

The only reason the illegitimate daughter of Louise von Schwarz, who would have been better off dead, is still alive today is because she is one of the most accomplished women in the history of the Schwarz family.

Just as Ruiz somehow used his position and positioning to save Heinrich's life.

Heinrich's very existence may have been a gag on Ruiz in some way.

Heinrich's life may have been held hostage to control Louise's behavior.

The Heinrich would have been used by the current King of Cernstadt to hold and shake the first princess.

So you survived.

Because we don't know what the heir to the kingdom will do if Heinrich dies.

Why Heinrich survived.

If he was only the king's illegitimate son, he should have been dead long ago, so why is he still alive when it's a given?

It was because Heinrich had a use and need for it.

Heinrich was important to Louise.

Heinrich was useful to the royal family.

Had I realized that truth, I would have known that Louise von Schwarz could not have been the culprit, and I would have been able to solve the case more easily, or at least look the other way.

The scribe's advice was something like this.

And the scribe's advice has the potential to do both good and bad things.

The good news is that we got through the assassination of Heinrich without too much bloodshed.

If it's a bad thing, it's a bad thing, and other things that derive from it.

The possibility that one bad thing might lead to another bad thing.

"What....... What's going on?"

"Sure."

Bad things can happen at any time, and that's the battlefield.

Therefore, it was pointless to try to predict it.

\* \* \*

Heinrich had always thought that no matter what he said, his brothers would listen.

But that was true for me, too.

'There you are, youngest, have a seat.'

"There's no reason for brothers to gather, and since you're not in our army and we don't see each other, I've invited you to eat.

"When this is all over, will you return to Cernstadt?

"Well, that's a shame.

"You must be tired, go inside and get some rest.

In retrospect, she was just a man of few words.

I was no different from my brothers or myself in reading too much meaning into those words and feeling sorry for myself.

They just didn't know.

I don't know how to deal with someone I haven't seen in a long time, someone I can't help but have mixed feelings about.

I just couldn't think of anything else to say about it.

As a naturally blunt person, there's only so much you can say to a more complex mind.

I was just misunderstanding the smallest thing that could be said in such a complicated mind.

He was no different than any other brother.

In the end, Louise made another extreme choice, killing her brother with her own hands, rather than the other two brothers who were willing to go to the extreme.

"......."

"......."

Return to your garrison.

The pace was slow and there was no conversation between Heinrich and Ruiz.

Louise's complexion was pale from having killed her brothers with her own hands, and Heinrich's was no different, having seen the spectacle before his eyes and heard the shocking truth.

There's no conversation going on.

It's not a conversation, and nothing has been organized yet.

Someone with a lot to say.

Someone with a lot of questions to ask.

No one is able to say anything.

"I'm sorry. Everything. Everything."

Two horses walk in silence.

"It's all....... My fault."

In the end, Louise could barely get that apology out.

\* \* \*

The two princes of Cernstadt are dead. They were not publicly executed, but killed by Louise von Schwarz on her own initiative.

It wasn't legal, it wasn't procedural.

What Louise von Schwarz shared with the military was simple.

Missing.

The two princes also have their own factions.

But it doesn't hold a candle to Louise von Schwarz.

He may have deserted, but he may have faked his disappearance for the honor of the Schwarz family, and those in command knew there was more to the story than most people knew.

But Ruiz didn't explain anything.

As Emperor Bertus once said, it's a war for the greater good.

The disappearance or desertion of the two princes.

Or death.

It's a very big deal, but the commander-in-chief, Louise von Schwarz, is alive and well.

The gap between the two princes could be filled somehow, if only by reorganizing the chain of command.

In the end, the two irreplaceable beings survived and the two replaceable beings tried to kill the youngest because they feared their position would be jeopardized.

So the gap between the two lesser princes could easily be filled.

Emperor Bertus knows what happened, but he says nothing.

The Emperor is silent, and so is the High Command, who recognize that something is amiss.

The sudden disappearance of the two princes left the Cernstadt army in disarray, but not enough to start a schism.

He may have lost two legs, but he still had a head, so there was no fighting over who would be the next head.

The Allied forces leave Sankerian and begin to march toward their next location of operations.

The dust has settled, but the relationship can't be rebuilt.

Once a secret is told, it can't be taken back.

The assassination threat faded, and Heinrich realized he was his older sister's child.

"......."

"......."

It's not like they're on bad terms.

I killed my own brothers to protect my children, and I had to lie about it.

Louise von Schwarz killed her brother to protect her children.

We just don't know what to say to each other.

You don't know how to rebuild a relationship that was broken in the first place, and you don't know what bricks to lay.

Someone who has given birth, but never lived as a parent.

A person who was born, but never had parents.

No one knows what to say to rebuild this broken relationship from scratch.

Ruiz and Heinrich have not spoken since.

No personal conversations outside of work.

Not too long ago, it was just the usual greeting, but now it's gone.

I knew we could never be together, but somehow Heinrich and I seemed to have become less than each other.

At Louise's side was Heinrich, who led the troops on horseback without speaking.

Suddenly, Louise's entire body tensed as a voice penetrated her mind.

"I have a report for you, Commander.

"......what is it."

Telepathy.

Just as Heinrich receives communications from the General Headquarters telepathically from Ivia, the commanders of each unit receive the will of the General Headquarters telepathically in this way.

That's not to say there aren't messengers, communication magic, and the like, but telepathy is instantaneous and fast in that it requires no tools.

Of course, there were many high ranking officers who were quite uncomfortable with the unannounced nature of the telepaths, and many had their lieutenants listen to the telepaths instead of them.

Louise von Schwarz finds the telepathy quite distasteful.

Feeling like your turf is being invaded.

I had the bizarre feeling of seeing something that no one else could see.

But Ruiz isn't one to pass the buck.

'We've already destroyed the small warp gate on Lagirian, which was our next target, so the Alliance will continue to advance to Theta, rather than our next stop.

"Hmm....... Got it. Have fun."

"Aye, Commander.

Heinrich heard Louise talking to herself and realized that she was receiving telepathy.

Louise looks at Heinrich.

"The next area of operations has already been cleared, so we're moving on."

"I see......."

We don't have private conversations, but I felt compelled to have this dry one.

Heinrich watches as Louise sends word to her lieutenants about the army-wide dispatches. Heinrich watches as messengers ride to and from the marching troops on horseback to bring new operational changes to their respective commanders.

Louise sees an endless line of marchers.

It's nice to not have to fight to the death in your next zone of operations.

But isn't a longer march just another torture for the soldiers who will eventually have to walk that distance themselves?

Louise felt funny as she tried to figure out what was better.

Emperor, Bertus.

It was Bertus who told him directly that Heinrich would be killed if he didn't kill his brothers.

What if they had known that the youngest, Heinrich, was their illegitimate son?

"They would have wanted to kill him more.

Louise is not married.

If Louise von Schwarz were to die in this war, her eldest son, German von Schwarz, would be the next in line to the throne, not Louise, who still has no official children.

Deep down, you may have wanted Ruiz to die.

My suspicions are confirmed now that I know how foolish and short-sighted my brothers were.

If Louise von Schwarz were to die in battle, German would be the next in line to the Schwarz throne.

If that had happened, Alfons might have killed his brother out of jealousy that he had become the heir to the throne of Schwarz, something he never dreamed of doing.

Without Heinrich, Germanic might have tried to kill him, and then Alfons might have killed Germanic, and Alfons might have taken the throne of the House of Schwarz.

"......."

Louise laughed at herself for thinking that.

After killing my brothers with my own hands, the only reason to calculate their stupidity is to console myself that I killed them because they deserved it.

There are choices and there are consequences.

He killed his brothers because they tried to kill him.

Instead, the child survived.

Any other judgment is irrelevant.

I've never been able to tie the knot with a child.

It's not going to be okay as it is.

What happened, why it happened, and what was said. How you've resisted the urge to drop everything and run. How many times your life has been put on the scales.

How many days I've been forced to swallow my tears, thinking only of your well-being at the Temple.

Louise wanted to say all of that, but she couldn't because she knew it would end up being nothing more than an excuse for her failure to parent.

When the war is over.

Can we talk about it when it's all said and done?

When we've walked through the dark curtain of humanity's destiny, will we be able to tell the whole story?

Because this battlefield is too heavy to talk about sorrow and pain.

So, for now, this war story is all I can talk about.

"Youngest......."

Louise opened her mouth vaguely, but her tongue clamped down.

Is it right to call him the youngest?

But she can't call him her son. In the presence of watching eyes and listening ears, the eldest sister could not call the youngest her son, just as she could not bring up the subject of illegitimacy.

But Heinrich looks at Louise as if he understands.

"Yes, sister."

"......."

Things you know but can't say.

It was a look of full understanding. Louise bit her lip slightly, feeling miserable.

But this is a story about work, a story about war.

We can't let personal matters get in the way of saying what needs to be said.

"Do you think you are friendly with the Emperor Bertus?"

At the mention of the Emperor's name, Heinrich is silent for a moment.

"To be honest, I don't think....... I don't think we're close, but we've been in the same class at Temple, so I'm pretty sure that......."

"I see."

Had it not been for the words of the Emperor Bertus, he himself might have lost Heinrich for failing to calculate the folly of his brothers.

And the Emperor knew that Heinrich was his illegitimate son, and even the name of the man he had once loved.

But that's not what she's thinking about right now.

"The command in chief is hiding something."

Excessive rate of advance, extreme weather events, and preemptive clearing of an area of operations.

Bad things keep happening to the Allies.

Ellen Artorius, Saviolin Tana, and Shanapelle, imperial mages.

It's possible to achieve this speed if you're pulling out all the stops, but Luiz couldn't help but feel that the process was a bit rushed.

"What are they hiding. Do you know?"

At Louise's question, Heinrich stares at the marching path.

"......I don't know."

Just like Heinrich doesn't really know his mother.

Louise doesn't know her son very well.

However, we now know one.

"I see......."

Louise realized that her son was not a good liar.

Episode 538.

December.

It's winter.

The Alliance forces circled the outskirts of Riseln, starting with Senkerian, destroying the warp gates of the smaller cities one by one.

Small warp gates in small towns had been destroyed by demonic forces as if they were vanguards, and the Imperial General Command had passed them off as the work of the Imperial Vanguard.

Few knew that the Allies were being aided by the Devil.

It had to be top-secret because the confusion the Allies would feel if it became known could have been devastatingly divisive.

It was inevitable that large armies would overwinter. This war would continue beyond the year.

Seven small cities and three medium-sized cities.

So far, so good for the Alliance.

Bertus stood in front of the many military commanders gathered in the Allied General Headquarters, his map in front of him, his face stoic as he watched the operations board.

There's no way to characterize all the battles we've fought so far as small.

But now the Allies were facing the biggest battle of the many they had faced so far.

Large warp gateset.

One very large warp gate.

Small Warp Gate Seven.

Largest city in southern Rieseln.

Serandia.

This is the first time we've destroyed a very large warp gate.

The point is this.

The General Staff begins debriefing.

"Your Majesty, it has been determined that the successful capture of Serandia will significantly reduce the monster hordes in southern Ryzeln."

"I think we can solve the water supply problem locally by using the Lazier River near Serandia as a water source. If we can replace the transportation of water supplies with other supplies, the Allied forces will have an easier time surviving the winter."

"However, due to the nature of winter operations, significant losses of combat power are anticipated during the movement of the main force to Serandia. Furthermore, once the operation begins, retreat will be nearly impossible, so failure is expected to be irreversible and very heavy."

"You could spend the winter focusing on defending your garrison and then begin the campaign against Serandia. However, in this case, it's unclear if your forces will be able to get the supplies they need until spring. The monsters in Serandia will periodically raid the Alliance garrison areas where they spend the winter, and they will continue to be replenished, so there will be no loss of combat power for the enemy."

Bertus narrowed his eyes as he listened to his chief of staff's report.

Winter is the season when everything freezes, and that includes soldiers.

Winter marches are even more hellish than peacetime marches.

There will be soldiers whose frozen toes are actually falling off, not just falling off from exhaustion.

While the priests of the Crusaders can heal with holy magic, not everyone can benefit from it.

Due to the nature of large cities and the waves of monsters that surround them, the Alliance garrison is now set up in a location very far away from Serandia.

Just getting to the battlefield, Serandia, is the hard part.

You're marching in the cold, and the monsters are boiling over as you go.

This is not an environment where you can take a day off and fight with the battlefield just around the corner.

Your troops should be facing the most enemies when they are most exhausted.

In the winter, too.

'Unless there's another weather event on our way and the weather improves, which is not necessarily something you can count on.......'

You will march through the freezing cold to capture Serandia.

After all, you can expect to take a lot of damage in a raid.

And taking Serandia is not the end of the gate crisis.

There are still cities to destroy.

If you suffer an irreversible loss here, the next battle will be even harder.

If it gets harder and harder and we keep losing irreplaceable people.

Eventually, the last gate will not be destroyed, and humanity will lose all hope.

But what if we winter here, hold out until spring, and then attack Serandia?

The military is a huge resource hog.

We need to eat, and we need to eat something to keep us warm.

Then there's Serandia, where monsters pour out of a massive warp gate while you're stationed, albeit far away.

You'll be fighting a defensive battle all winter long, which means you'll lose resources as well as people.

At least if we succeed in capturing Serandia, we'll have enough water to last us through the winter. You'll also be able to cut down the nearby forests to help you survive the winter.

Will you bleed to death in a massive campaign to take down Serandia and then winter there?

You'll be holed up here until the day breaks, fighting a constant war of attrition, and then fighting when you're in better shape.

"We can't survive the winter here. We're going to Serandia."

You can't expect help to always be available.

But there was always help.

So Bertus had no choice but to turn to the forces of evil once again.

The frozen ground in the path of the Allies will thaw, and an anomaly called Warm Sunshine will appear.

The ruler of humanity is dependent on the Devil.

'If this gets to the point where I can no longer get help.......'

I don't have the confidence to not panic at that point.

Bertus self-helped.

\* \* \*

-cookie

-Cat!

-cookie

-Cat!

"......."

-Hello!

Ellen regained consciousness to a cry that seemed to call to her.

There was a black cat that had been there forever, pressing its front paws against his thighs.

He looked up at me with a pitying look in his eyes, almost as if he was worried.

Why do this.

Inside the tent, Ellen was sitting in a chair, and she realized that she had lost consciousness, albeit briefly.

I heard there was a meeting about the Serandia campaign.

But Ellen doesn't go to the meetings. She has a voice, and she doesn't take it lightly, but she's never been comfortable discussing issues where so many lives are at stake.

So I was debating whether to go or not.

But when you wake up, your cat, who hasn't been seen in days, is crying in front of you.

Ellen doesn't bother to lock her fortress barracks.

The Royal Class Garrison is heavily guarded, and no one in the garrison is rude enough to enter Ellen's barracks.

So I unlocked the barracks so the cat can come in whenever it wants.

So it comes and goes as it pleases.

-Angel

Ellen clutches the necklace with her left hand and strokes the pitifully crying cat's head with her right.

"I'm fine......."

Ellen now knows that putting her mind to something helps.

I feel like this little being is protecting me.

However, I still have frequent moments of unconsciousness.

"You'll be fine......."

The cat stared up at Ellen, unmoving.

To lose consciousness, to cease to exist.

It's scary, but Ellen has more important things ahead of her.

Serandia Campaign.

Extra-large warp gate.

The fight will get tougher and tougher.

'Reinhard.......'

And of course Ellen knows what the high command knows.

I'm sure Reinhardt will be helping out somewhere in the Serandia assault.

You've been helping, and you're going to help this fight in your own way.

Somewhere.

-Angel

Surely, you're watching yourself.

\* \* \*

Ellen's condition becomes more and more serious.

I knew she was periodically unconscious, and I'd seen her before, albeit in the form of a cat.

Losing consciousness is a bit different.

It's more like someone replacing consciousness.

Eyes as dark as the abyss stare at me. Eyes that I can't tell if they're looking at me or not.

They just stare at you with unfocused, blurry eyes.

I can't read anything but emptiness in those eyes.

It was more than creepy, it was horrifying.

Not only Ellen, but also the people in the Royal Class were feeling very intensely uncomfortable when Ellen was in such a state from time to time.

I don't know why cats help, but Ellen definitely seemed to be affected by it.

I can't quite make out the necklace Ellen is wearing, but I now realize that it serves a similar purpose.

If the condition goes beyond getting worse and becomes irreversible.

Will I now see nothing but Ellen with that vacant stare?

He visits the Royal Class Garrison from time to time to check on Ellen and the status of the Royal Class, but he can't be there all the time.

I'm the one who gets the marching orders, I'm the one who sometimes needs to sleep train Airi, and Charlotte handles Edina's stuff, but I'm the one who gets briefed on the important stuff.

A pet demon.

And just as Ellen is gearing up for a big battle, I'm no different.

For now, we'll focus on the big city, Serandia.

"They're probably marching, thinking we're going to help them."

Senate meeting with all of Edina's key people.

"It's going to be a war of attrition to get through the winter, so I think we're going to have to make that choice."

I nodded at Eleris' answer.

All-out war after a long march in the cold.

After a defensive battle in the freezing cold, it's all-out war in the spring.

Both shoulder a tremendous burden.

In the original game, it's not winter in the first place. It's winter in the other big city campaigns.

In that situation, the Allies take the path of least resistance.

But now she's awakened to a weather-changing ability that she didn't have in the original, and we're here to help.

They will therefore anticipate our help and choose to march.

The path of the Allies is protected by weather, not monsters this time.

That way, they can protect the allied forces from the bitter cold.

But the next problem.

"I guess we'll have to decide what to do when the Serandia attack starts."

Lerouen said.

Yeah, you have to decide that.

The warp gates we've been able to handle in the gate battles so far have been taken down by hitting them before the Alliance.

However, the locations with medium-sized warp gates were left in the hands of the Allies after a first strike wiped out the monsters.

We were tasked with being a vanguard unknown to the Allies, but we had no intention of being on their radar when the main operation began.

But this time, the scale of the operation is different.

One extra-large warp gate and three large warp gates.

There's a limit to how many monsters Riana's weather changes can handle, and even if she does wipe them out, they'll replenish at an alarming rate.

A preemptive strike can have a significant effect.

But if we left this operation in the hands of the Allies, we might succeed in taking Serandia, but we would suffer as many casualties as we would if we didn't fight ourselves.

If we participate, the number of casualties will be fewer, and the Allies will be able to maintain their strength.

It makes sense from a practical standpoint for us to get involved.

"But while we might be able to help in the immediate fight against Serandia, it would likely be a very big mistake in the long run."

"......Yes."

I had to agree with Galarsh.

Antirrhinus opens his mouth.

"Our army may be small, but we're sure to stand out on the battlefield, especially with the large-scale magic wielded by the Lords and Mages of the Clans here. The Thunderbolt that the Thunder King will use, the Divine Power and Tiamata that the Divine Cultist will use, and the Alsbringer that the Great One will use."

The power we use is overly powerful and will inevitably be noticed.

Sarkegaard, who is back in Razak for a meeting, also speaks up.

"Right now, the Allied General Command is aware of our help. The few personnel assigned to frontline reconnaissance missions are kept quiet, and those in the various military commands know that what's going on up front is an Imperial force. Of course, many are aware of suspicious ships, but they don't necessarily mention the Empire or the Alliance."

"But if we show up to this battle, the majority of the Allied forces, especially the common soldiers, will be aware of our involvement, and that could lead to unforeseen problems."

"Your Majesty, I think it's best that we don't show up for the Serandia assault."

Large-scale magic, meteor summoning.

No magic is known to man with such destructive power. The moment you use it, you will recognize the demonic forces at work.

The moment when a meteor rained down from a sky that had turned into a broken mirror and struck the temple was an unforgettable nightmare for those who saw it from the ecliptic. Rumors of its magical powers were not unknown.

Since the gate incident coincided with a meteor shower, the meteors streaking across the sky became a magical symbol of the return of the devil.

If Olivia summons Death Knights to sweep across the battlefield, the Alliance might be spooked by them and try to attack them.

Not to mention Alsbringer.

We would certainly help the Allies if we participated.

There's no point in helping Tina if she's only going to help in a small way, not as a force.

To help properly, many Allied troops will recognize the presence of the demonic forces. Our help could cause the operation to fail.

Seriously, if someone spots me killing a monster in the field and yells, "A demon! and someone screams, what Allied commander isn't going to take that as "a demon attacked the Allies in the middle of a massive air battle"?

Bertus is at a crossroads, faced with the decision to march through the winter in a war of attrition, or to march now at great cost.

I'm no different.

If we help attack Serandia, the Alliance will suffer less damage, but our presence may cause other problems.

If we don't help, we're condoning the deaths of countless people who wouldn't have to die if we did.

That includes the lives of countless people I know.

You'll survive just fine.

I shouldn't let that kind of thinking get in the way of my Serandia exploits.

There is no such thing as an absolutely right choice.

Every choice you make requires you to lose something in exchange for gaining something.

The whole time I've been here, no, the whole time I've been in this world, those have been the only choices I've made.

A choice to gain something and lose something.

We need to do that again.

Bertus and I are already allies, even though we haven't spoken.

But very few people understand that.

To most, I'm still a name of terror, and no one believes in the idea of the devil fighting alongside you.

It's just more confusing.

A demon who caused the Gate Crisis to wipe out humanity helps humanity?

They'll believe it because they're drunk with despair and have lost all sense of reason.

What if the other commanders of the Alliance realize that the Empire has been aided by the Devil all this time?

The end of the Serandia campaign may be the end of the Alliance.

"At some point, we're going to have to fight alongside the Allies, that's for sure."

At my words, everyone in the room goes silent and stares at me.

There will come a time when you'll have to get involved. That doesn't change.

And the gate situation becomes increasingly dangerous.

In the early days of the Gate Crisis, cities with these massive warp gates could be destroyed leisurely with just Saviolin Tana leading the charge. Now that the gates are more dangerous, that's not an option, which is why she's traveling with such a large force.

Serandia is dangerous, but the cities you'll encounter later will be even more dangerous than Serandia.

"Serandia only strikes first, we don't participate, we watch."

No matter who is dying, now is the time to watch them die.

Is it right to turn away from those who are dying right now in order to prevent more deaths?

I don't know.

However, just as Louise von Schwarz did, I make choices.

"And if I could, I'd like to be able to destroy a few warp gates, if not the big ones."

Preemptive strike.

If that's all you can do, you should do everything you can there.

Episode 539.

Serandia, the largest metropolis in southern Ryzeln.

Up until now, you've been using five separate armies to secure your march.

But for now, it's a preemptive strike to clear out the monsters at the center of what should be called the eye of the storm.

Load Vampire Five.

And the paladins of the Holy Order and the wizards and powerful demons of the Vampire Council.

Olivia, Harriet, Liana, Airi, and me.

The bulk of our army was under the cover of the Heriot's spread, looking down on Serandia from the heights.

Cities are shaped like the ecliptic.

A metropolis divided into north-south sections with the mighty Rajie River running through the center.

But the city was only a trace, and the area was already overrun by monsters.

Herriot mumbles in exasperation.

"The monsters......."

-Grrrrr!

-Kaahhhhh!

-OffOffOffOff!

Not only were there monsters the size of skyscrapers from my previous life roaming around, but at their feet were monsters of all shapes and sizes, swarming like a swarm of ants.

There were flying monsters that filled the sky with blackness, and there were monsters that stood out amongst the rest.

While not the last of the otherworldly dragons to be faced, a large dragon-like creature had already appeared.

Not only are the monsters more numerous, but they're also more powerful than ever.

As the gate crisis intensifies, the monsters behave as if they are guarding a warp gate.

The good news is that the boss monsters, as they should be called, don't produce more than a certain number of them.

I didn't see too many warp gates spitting out monsters from the high ground as they were saturated.

But if the monsters in the neighborhood are pushed back, they'll start churning out monsters again at an incredible rate.

Even with the best and brightest we've gathered.

-OffOffOffOff!

It's impossible to eradicate all of these monstrous creatures that seem to number in the hundreds of thousands.

It's a monstrous hell on earth.

It was almost like the world was black.

This is what you have to deal with.

And it's going to get more and more and more dangerous.

Despite being surrounded by non-humans and those accustomed to killing, no one seemed to be unnerved by this infernal map, and that included me.

"They've detected us."

We're in a place where Serandia is now in sight, even if it's on the outskirts.

So it's no surprise that there were monsters around us, and it's no surprise that there were monsters that could sense our cloak and recognize us.

"Let's get started."

At my command, the Lord Vampire and the clan's mages begin to chant their magic.

Riana, who had already been preparing, was also focusing her efforts.

Riana's abilities cannot be used offensively when a large army is engaged in an all-out war. She'll get wiped out.

Once again.

-Currrrrr!

In the distance, close to the horizon, a giant tornado erupts and begins to sweep the monsters away.

Waves of monsters rush toward us.

"All hands, battle formations!"

Olivia raises her magic sword, Tiamata, and calls out.

-Kurrrrrr

While the absolute numbers are small, Olivia can summon an army.

An army of the dead.

-Grrrrrr

Hundreds of Death Knights begin to crawl out of the ground in response to Olivia's use of Kier's Holy Power and Tiamata.

A single Death Knight was enough to overpower me, who was used to enchantments.

"Death, lead us."

The paladins of the Holy Order, as well as Olivia, begin to strengthen their own bodies and the bodies of the Death Knights she summons.

Monsters don't have strategies and tactics.

But the best strategy and tactics have always been to outnumber the enemy, to be stronger than the enemy.

Be many and be strong.

The numbers themselves are already a strategy and a tactic.

Such a number.

An overwhelming number of monsters begin to charge at us.

While the mages cast large-scale spells together and Riana creates extreme weather events, Olivia Ranze and the priests and Deathknights of the Holy Order protect them.

That's not all.

-Take care of yourself, Ugren.

-Grrr....... Human. Power up.

A priest riding on the shoulders of an ogre over five meters tall begins to chant holy magic, and the ogre's flesh glows with radiance.

The ogre's tendons, thicker than a human finger, begin to bulge up his forearm.

Humans, vampires, and demons.

-krrrr

The two Lycanslopes also have a shape.

-To the great ancestors, and to the devil!

-Grrrrrr!

The orcs, too, were covered in blue earwax.

They follow the galashi after the nana shallots. Same okra.

Galarsh didn't seem to like it, but he'd lived too long to have a racial identity.

Undead, demons, and humans.

A small army of only a few hundred men.

-knowwhat!

A horde of monsters and the strangest army in the world are about to collide.

The great iron rod the ogre wields glows with holy light.

-Bam!

The head of the giant monster that was charging the ogre is blown off, and the ogre roars.

-Goddamn!

-Ach, my ears are falling off!

Waves of monsters come crashing in, and the Death Knights, Olivia, and the demons defend the Wizard and Riana against them.

-Kwalung! Kwalung!

Despite the weather, Riana summoned a lightning storm from the sky, blasting away the monsters as they fell.

It's blocking it.

It's definitely holding up.

But as the monsters who can sense magic and see through it attack us first, the ones who can't sense it realize we're coming and soon begin to close in.

It was an exhilarating sight to behold, like waves rolling in to crash over us.

-Currrrrr!

Fireworks.

As he projected his magic at the oncoming monsters, the earth ignited and vast areas were engulfed in flames.

-knowwhat!

Small and medium-sized monsters that are not large enough to withstand the flames, or that are not naturally immune to them, will begin to die in the firestorm.

Nevertheless, the surviving monsters are pushed back and crushed by Olivia and the Death Knights.

The howls of monsters, the shouts of ogres, and the lore of Lycanthrope shake the land.

The swarms of flying monsters in the sky were also aware of us and darted at us.

"Suck!"

Blue lines of energy surge through Herriot's body, and space begins to warp around a point in the sky.

-chiyiying

Dozens of bizarre refractions of light appear, as if the world is warped.

After.

-Crackle!

A massive shockwave is unleashed, shaking the earth as well as the heavens above.

Shockwave.

The wings of the flying monsters shooting down toward us are torn off and their bodies explode.

A shockwave from the heavens tore apart or crashed a thousand monsters flying toward us.

Our individual power is worth a hundred bucks a day.

However, we're not one in a hundred, we're one in a thousand.

There are tons of them.

The third tornado unleashed by Riana begins to tear through the land.

Even though the tornado was in a faraway place, we could almost feel the earth-tearing winds.

Even this far away, the wind pressure was palpable, and the tornadoes were uprooting trees and screaming monsters.

Deathknights and demons crush enemies who get too close, whether it's with flames or thunderbolts.

Does this make sense?

How does it make sense that so many monsters appear, and even if you kill them, they keep appearing unless you break the warp gate.

I feel a vague sense of despair at the absurdity I've created.

Even if you kill it, it comes back.

The warp gate, once a boon to humans, becomes their most dangerous scourge.

The tragedy, or rather the absurdity, of my haphazard, half-assed thinking makes me realize what a shallow human being I am.

-Grrrrrr!

In the vague sight of waves of creatures crashing in.

I'm doing this to find salvation, but.

I know that one day this tragedy will end.

How many people will have to die, and how many will be sacrificed.

Who dies.

Who will survive.

-Crunch!

A lightning-breathing creature reduces one Death Knight to ash, and Olivia climbs on top of it, stomping on its feet and knees, and plunges her magic sword Tiamata into it as if it were an acrobat.

-Die, die and answer the call of the powers that be.

Olivia whispers a curse. A black flash of light from her blade pierces the creature's brain.

-Swoosh!

The lightning-breathing creature suddenly turns its head and begins spewing thunderbolts at the oncoming monsters.

-Crunch!

The Thunderbolt, which used to burn Deathknight, now burns monsters to death.

Olivia raises the Tiamata, and the darkness that pours from it takes hold of the bodies of the monsters that have died.

The decapitated and dismembered monsters are brought back to life by the demon's power and begin to run toward them in the opposite direction.

Bite, rip, tear.

The more enemies you kill, the more bodies you have, the more powerful you become.

The monsters that came at us in waves are now waves of the undead, rushing toward you.

Despair is replaced by desperation.

Olivia Ranze, with her demonic powers wrapped around her, was almost dominating this battlefield.

The tables were turned when the dead monsters woke up and started pushing on our side.

Instead of protecting the mages from the monsters, they start pushing the horde.

The power to raise the dead, including necromancy.

Class B's Anna de Guerna also joins the fray this way.

But Olivia manifests this power not through magic, but through the power of God.

The scale and impact was overwhelming.

But even then, it's only a small bulwark against the tsunami.

The longer we fight, the more the hordes of Serandia's monsters will eventually focus on this small disturbance, and the larger our fight becomes, the more the others will flock to us.

As the scale of the fight grows, so do our limits.

A few hundred men is not enough to fight a war against hundreds of thousands. Even if they were a force to be reckoned with, the enemy would be in the hundreds of thousands, and even then they would be constantly replenished.

But we're not here for a suicide mission.

We're buying time.

Time for Riana to summon Tornado.

And.

-Woof!

Archmage of Five.

And time for the vampires of the Vampire Council to complete their magic.

-Currrrr!

The magical storm shook the earth as if it were an earthquake.

I've never seen it before.

You don't know what happens when you hit this level of magic, this level of power.

When Akrich and Rukren manifested, I could see countless shooting stars pouring out of the torn void in the sky.

And now.

The magic of five ancient beings and the wizards they bred.

Summon Meteor Shower.

As if the fist of a god had struck the mirror that is the sky.

A blue sky, torn and fragmented, with a dull night sky.

The darkness of the void and the constellations and galaxies within it were projected.

And from there, rays of light begin to fall.

Even in the midst of a life-or-death battle, it was a surreal sight to behold.

Thousands of bundles of light, originating in the distant heavens.

As the meteor strikes the atmosphere, it plummets toward the earth, bathed in a white flame that can burn away the day, even in broad daylight.

Hundreds of beams of light, seemingly slow but actually faster than sound, continued to fall from the rift in the Void, descending toward the earth.

"This is......."

I don't want to bring about the end of the world in the name of stopping the gate.

This is what they mean when they say you burn thatch trying to get rid of bedbugs.

A large meteor was enough to make that anxiety overwhelm me.

Slowly but surely, the meteors plummeting to Earth were picking up speed.

It's not about being faster.

The closer you get, the more realistic the speed becomes.

Tornadoes rage on the ground and meteors rain down from the sky.

Crush the monster-infested hells with natural disasters.

A meteor strikes a distant land near the horizon.

-Flash!

With a flash, a massive explosion engulfed the area.

That was the beginning.

-blink!

-Currrrrrr!

With a roar that tore through the atmosphere, the meteor began to vaporize the neighborhood of Serandia.

I fervently hoped that those flashes would blow the warp gate away as well.

I could only pray at the same time that the meteor wouldn't destroy the world.

A meteor struck the world, and its impact sent flying creatures flying, torn apart, and crashing to the ground.

The monsters on the ground disappear with the crater.

But hopelessly, I couldn't erase all the monsters.

It fell over such a vast area that where the meteor didn't hit, there were still monsters, and they still outnumbered us.

-Koo-koo-koo-koo!

And hoping for a meteor to hit the warp gate was like hoping for good luck.

You can summon meteors, but you can't aim them.

The warp gate was affected by the meteor strike, but it did not shatter.

Due to the strength of the gate itself, the gate was able to withstand the impact of the meteorite impact blast.

We were hoping for a giant meteor to make a direct hit on the top of the warp gate, but that didn't happen.

But the point is, there were monsters everywhere, and they were clearly being slaughtered in a shower of meteors.

The number of monsters is shrinking dramatically, and it's an ongoing process.

But monsters are also pouring out of the warp gate.

I already knew that a meteor shower might kill the monsters, but a direct hit on the warp gate would be crossing my fingers.

"Herriot!"

"Yes!"

At my call, Herriot leapt through space and landed right next to me.

"Let's go."

I begin my descent into the meteor shower and stormy inferno.

Destroy the warp gate.

With my own hands.

By the time the Allies arrived, it would have been replenished to the point where monsters would be everywhere, if not at this level.

At this very moment, the monsters are dwindling dramatically.

The time for the elite few to get their hands dirty is now.

It doesn't know how far it can go, but it will destroy as much as it can and get away with it.

The rushers are me and Harriet de Saint-Ouen.

Only two.

-Crunch!

A storm of thunderbolts summoned by Riana was clearing a path for us as we raced toward Serandia.

Episode 540.

-▒▒▒▒!

An indescribable roar shakes the earth.

They couldn't even keep their balance on the shaking ground as the meteors fell, and that was true of the monsters with their feet on the ground.

The tornado was very far away, but it had skin-tearing winds.

Shockwaves, earthquakes, and storms from striking meteorites.

Just as the monsters couldn't move properly, I found myself in a similar situation.

The reason Herriot is with me is simple.

This was because any meteors that could directly harm us would be blown elsewhere by the portal Herriot had created in thin air.

And an escape, just in case.

-Grrrrrrrr!

But neither earthquakes, nor windstorms, nor shockwaves could affect the fleshy beasts.

-Bang! Kwalung!

A bolt of lightning from the sky struck the monster with the head of a lion and the body of a snake, but it only flinched a few times.

Herriot cast the exploit and detonated it in the creature's face, but it only flinched slightly.

Monsters that can't be killed by fire, thunderbolts, or magic.

As the situation escalates, there are more and more immune monsters.

-Woof!

The blue auror-wielding Alsbringer impales the giant snake's flesh and rips it apart.

It's not often that a monster is immune to a physical direct hit. Especially if it's an Auror Blade.

That's why melee is always the best way to fight, and a useful way to fight until the fight is over.

Once.

-Crack!

-POOF!

Twice.

-skuck!

Three times.

-knowwhat!

With one sweeping motion, I cut off the snake's waist, and the snake-like creature's fuselage snaps in half, like a tree snapping under the weight of my body.

Rampaging monsters disappear in meteor showers and their explosions, while flying monsters constantly crash to the ground.

Monsters struck by lightning are reduced to ash.

Nevertheless, the overflowing monsters scream and come to kill me and Herriot.

Herriot, who wears a barrier to protect himself from gusts of wind, runs with me.

-Flash!

Shockwaves, explosions, and flames caused by fireworks.

We try to break through the waves of monsters and destroy the warp gate.

I wouldn't call the original world a paradise.

In the original world, disastrous things happened everywhere, all the time.

But even if you can't call it a paradise, a world where you have to watch it all the time and everywhere is hell.

Putting this hell behind us and ending the Gate debacle doesn't mean paradise is here.

The world will never be the same.

Still.

Nevertheless.

I know I can't make paradise, but I'll at least lift you out of this hell.

-Currrrrr!

A giant creature, able to fly through the fierce gusts of wind, emerges and begins spitting flames at Herriot.

"Reinhardt!"

Herriot's barrier shields us from the flames' breath.

The flames were melting the area out of range of the barrier in no time, and they were burning and killing the monsters that were charging at us.

That's about it.

There are worse monsters out there.

And at some point, you have to fight the last monster.

-Currrrrrr!

I and Harriet watched, dumbfounded, as the earth rumbled and roared, as the monsters melted away beyond the breath of flame.

-Quack!

The breath of flame that seemed to scorch the ground beneath me and Herriot for all eternity ceased, and I watched as the creature that had cast a giant shadow over the land was struck by a meteor and fell, missing a wing.

Instead of a warp gate, the meteor hit a much larger monster, and the shockwave from the collision was a bonus.

-캬아아아아악!

-Koooooowwww

A slow falling monster crashes down, crushing hundreds of monsters.

Responding to disaster with disaster.

"It's not long now."

"Yes."

Herriot freezes the melted ground with his freezing spell, and we're off again.

The goal was not far off.

And soon enough, we found our first target.

-Currrr!

The monsters come out.

No, that's not coming out, that's pouring out.

Monsters were pouring out of the glowing warp gate, as if they were pouring in.

The spilled monsters became waves of flesh, rising and falling, most of them crushed to death before they could even stand up.

But out of the ever-flowing waves of monsters, something takes shape and rises, and as soon as it is born, it rushes toward us as if it recognizes an enemy.

Before we even reach the gate, the oozing flesh of the monsters is itself a wall we must breach.

Summon a meteor shower, spark a tornado, or create a lightning storm.

If we don't destroy the cursed warp gate, it won't be long before monstrosities overrun the entire area.

We need to break that.

Only by erasing it from the world can this curse be broken.

It's not going to be paradise.

Hell can be escaped.

Herriot's entire body begins to surge with blue energy.

Soon, the glowing blue power lines and the power cartridges glowing in Herriot's necklace were no longer blue, but white.

Only once.

You just need to clear the way for a moment.

It was just me and Harriet breaking down the gate.

The rest of us are only supposed to provide remote support, and that's the way it is.

Because we are enough.

Against the waves of flesh, Herriot focuses his magic on his fingertips.

It compresses and compresses and compresses horsepower to the limit, concentrating it into a single point and firing it in a single direction.

There's no such thing as a magic name.

An attack based solely on Herriot's understanding and control of mana, a concentrated burst of refined and compressed energy.

Honest disenchantment, that's all.

-Koo-koo-koo-koo-koo!

However, the blast of magic from Herriot's fingertips is a storm of energy in itself.

Even monsters with antimagic powers are consumed by the storm of power.

In an instant, the way opened and the warp gate that had been hit by it remained intact, enveloped in a red barrier.

Are you sure you can survive an energy storm of this magnitude?

I know that reinforced warp gates can't be broken by ranged sniping, but is it even possible with this much power, and if so, does a direct hit from a meteor do any good?

There's no such thing as time to despair.

If the first doesn't work, try the second, and if the second doesn't work, try the third and fourth.

It just tries until it breaks.

There's no such thing as time to waste.

I run instinctively toward the open road.

Run, run, run, toward the warp gate that spits out the monster once again, energizing the Alsbringer to its limits.

Stabbing the Alsbringer into the shields of the Warp Gate.

command.

"Department...... go!"

That's it, one.

\* \* \*

Outskirts of Serandia.

"This is....... What is......?"

Kono Lindt was speechless as he watched the scene unfold before him.

-Kuung

-Flash!

-currrrrr

Three tornadoes of incalculable proportions were swirling around Serandia, hundreds of thunderbolts were killing monsters every second, and meteors were raining down from the sky.

It was such a devastating sight that if anyone saw it, they would say the world had finally come to an end.

High in the air, his body pinned to the ground, Kono Lint watched the disaster of Serandia unfold in real time.

Kono Lint didn't come here on a reconnaissance mission.

You're in this place because you're arbitrary.

No explanation is given by the General Command for the bizarre things that are happening up ahead.

Kono Lint had scouted out some of the first strange situations, but since then, only a few units have been sent on frontline reconnaissance missions.

Some in the Alliance already knew something strange was going on, and Kono Lint was no exception, having seen it with his own eyes.

Something too big and inscrutable to be called an imperial power is helping.

Kono Lint was out scouting on his own, hoping to see what he could find before the Serandia assault.

The sky opens up and a meteor rains down.

Lightning strikes.

-Whoosh!

"Ugh!"

The wind was blowing in gusts that threatened to tear my ears off, even though I was anchored to the ground.

In a storm where he can barely keep his eyes open, Kono Lint tries to take in everything that comes into view.

On the ground, a battle was raging.

A tiny dot against a monster wave.

dots, but somehow they're hanging in there.

They pale in comparison to the Allied forces, but they are clearly fighting.

They're too far away to get a good look, and while they could approach at any time, Kono Lint doesn't dare.

Battles in the city's outskirts.

And downtown Serandia.

-Flash!

Konorint could clearly see one of the warp gates flash and crush.

Kono Lint clearly remembers.

The day the heavens opened.

From that day on, it was as if the world was cursed, and the whole disaster began.

The gate incident is said to have originated from the devil, and Kono Lint knows it.

But why was a spell used by the Devil's minions cast on Serandia, and one of the warp gates blown away?

With the gusts of wind making it hard to keep my eyes open, I couldn't really see who was fighting where.

But it's possible to guess from what's happening.

A meteor falls.

Lightning is summoned.

The magic of the Demon, and the psychic powers of Riana, who disappeared with the Demon.

'Reinhard......?'

Why are the people who allegedly caused the gate crisis so desperate to break it?

"Are you saying that Reinhardt was the one who broke through the Allied lines so far?

Conolint doesn't know what's behind it.

However, if it's a demonic force here.

If they are trying to destroy the warp gate, they could destroy humanity if they unleashed that power on the Alliance.

Is something that should be known not being known?

Is there a truth that people should know but don't?

Something is different.

There's a disconnect between what people think they know and the truth.

The moment Conor Lint had that thought.

"The rat is......."

"!"

Kono Lint squinted as he saw a gray-haired old man appear out of thin air.

"There you go."

"Holy......!

It was faster for the old man to reach out to Lint than for Kono Lint to use spatial travel.

\* \* \*

"Reinhardt, we have to get out of here!

'Just one more, just one more.......'

'It's time, they're all pulling out, we've done enough!'

'Still one....... There's still one....... And at least one.......'

"No!

One large warp gate.

Medium one.

Small two.

You could call it a miraculous major, and it was enough to give the Allies a significant boost.

Thank goodness for Herriot.

Otherwise, I could have gone on a rampage to break one more thing and done something irreversible.

The main body backed me up for the allotted time and returned to Edina, and I was about to make a stand when Harriet scowled at me and retreated.

Yes, I did post a miraculous major.

I tried to do something beyond my capabilities and was forced to retreat by Herriot's urging, and it's a good thing our forces were not harmed.

By the way.

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes at the familiar face hanging limply from the Vampire Clan mage's shoulder.

"......What is it?"

"We have a spy, and we've got him, great one."

Antirrhinus secures a strange piece of loot called a cono lint.

\* \* \*

Antirrhinus seized Conor Lint, who had been watching the situation.

How in the world did he spot and capture this guy in that situation?

At least Kono Lint has seen the scene.

You've probably gotten the idea that it's my faction that's in Serandia.

We don't know what Kono Lindt thought when he saw it.

But Kono Lint saw something he shouldn't have.

We can't send them back to the Allied lines as they are.

One wrong word from this guy and you've got a major disaster on your hands.

So.

"......."

"......."

I was back in Razak, watching Kono Lint, who had just woken up.

When he woke up, he was frozen with his mouth hanging open.

He doesn't say anything, just rolls his eyes.

"Bounce?"

"......!"

You're such an asshole.

Kono Lint is an ability, so he can run away if he wants to.

"It's nice to bounce, but do you know where you are?"

"Uh, that....... Yeah......."

What he doesn't know is that he's in Rajakra in the Edina Archipelago, the southernmost part of the continent.

At this rate, it would take years to spacewalk across the continent until you found an Alliance base.

You may think I'm a long time coming, but I'm not.

So I'm not all that unfamiliar with KonoLint.

This guy, on the other hand, was just rolling his eyes like he didn't know what was what.

"Because if you run away, you'll be lost and found as a skeleton, you know what I mean?"

"Uh....... Yeah."

"I'm not going to be rough with him, and I don't see why I should be. Let's talk, and after a few words, I'll send him on his way to the Allied lines."

Kono Lint could only pay lip service to the situation.

Episode 541.

We're not putting Kono Lint in jail.

Antony hadn't asked me to do it in the first place, I'd captured him, and I had no intention of treating him like a prisoner.

In the first place, Kono Lint wouldn't know where the Edina Archipelago was attached, and he wouldn't know anything about it from looking at the landscape.

Of course, that didn't mean it was an open space, just one bedroom in the master suite.

There was no conversation about how long it had been or how I was doing.

We're not in a position or relationship to have that conversation.

"So, you didn't come here on a reconnaissance mission, you just wanted to check things out on your own terms?"

"Uh, uh, uh....... Yeah......."

Konorint nodded slowly.

Even in Temple, the Ganodab triplets, who were all for Kono Lint, scared me a lot.

That hasn't changed now. It's gotten worse.

From school asshole to continent-spanning asshole....... I've become more than that, and if I'm not scared, that's weird. Because even if these guys aren't what they used to be, I've changed even more.

No matter what the circumstances, even being kidnapped, Kono Lint couldn't help but notice the haggardness in his complexion.

It's inevitable that the Allies will notice our presence.

I knew Sarkegar was watching, of course, and that the rumors hadn't spread beyond a certain point, even though I was in the Allied garrison myself.

Shanapels, imperial mages, and a handful of troops tasked with frontline reconnaissance.

That's about as close to the truth as you can get.

The rest of us might recognize that the Empire is hiding some kind of strength, or that it's hiding some kind of important information.

Kono Lint scouted Serandia on his own, without orders from higher-ups, and found us.

"Whatever you saw, it's true. We're trying to deal with the gate situation in our own way, that's all."

"......."

At my words, Konorint stares at me still.

"You're....... devil."

"Right."

I know this now, but when I nodded nonchalantly, Kono Lint's complexion grew even more haggard.

"You caused the Gate debacle....... caused the gate situation......?"

He looks at me, breathless.

What to say.

As it turns out, they're right.

There were many stories and misunderstandings, but in the end, Elise was the one who caused the gate.

It happened to save my life, so I can't say no.

"It turned out right, but it wasn't what I wanted, which is why I'm doing this."

"......."

"I don't want to go into details, and there's no point in doing so, but everything I've done, from when I entered the Temple to now, has been to stop this gate, even though it happened because of me. It's not what I wanted."

I wonder if he'll believe me.

I don't think Kono Lint would understand me if he saw me fight the monsters of the Gate for my life.

This guy lost his family too.

If you're focused on the fact that I caused the gate to happen, no matter how good a reason you had, then there's nothing to hate me for.

"Why did I make you....... Why....... trust you?"

Terrified, Kono Lint stutters, but manages to continue.

"The whole Gate thing was....... You caused it to get back at the humans....... You want the Gate Crisis to end, and so do we....... Maybe that's why you're helping the Alliance, so that when the Gate is over....... to wipe out the humans like you did in Serandia....... If....... Maybe that's what you're doing......."

Conor Lindt continues his suspicions about me.

Monsters attack humans and demons alike.

A gate event occurred to destroy humans.

But if humans perish, demons are next.

So maybe they're grudgingly helping the humans now, and once they've solved the gate situation, they're going to stab them in the back and wipe them out.

Actually, it's a pretty plausible assumption.

It's the same for demons and humans alike that the Gate situation needs to end. So help the Alliance. They're just using the humans until this whole situation is resolved.

"Oh, I like that idea."

"????"

When I suddenly complimented him, Konorint froze.

"I'll use that as an excuse later."

"Excuses. What......?"

There's a saying that goes something like this.

If the Alliance realizes that the Demon Army is helping the humans, they'll be confused, and they'll only work with them temporarily, knowing that they'll have to work against them later.

With that excuse, I'm tempted to go ahead and ally with the Allies.

I mean, at the point of joining forces with the devil, is the coalition going to splinter?

Why people need to convince the devil to cooperate.

It's a good reason to embrace it right now.

People made assumptions about my intentions, and that's what caused all the trouble.

So once again, there's no shortage of educated guesses.

Conor Lindt, who had no idea what I was talking about, stood frozen in place.

Kono Lint is in Razak for now, but he doesn't know where he is.

I was going to let it go.

But before we get to that, let's make sure we're not talking out of our asses.

"First of all, I don't want you to tell anyone that I'm clearing a path ahead of the Alliance or that I'm breaking down warp gates. You haven't seen anything."

"You want me to pretend I didn't see it?"

"Yeah. If word of this gets out, they'll think I'm doing this for some sort of ulterior motive, like you're picking up on now. There is no such thing. I just want the gate thing to be over. I don't have an agenda, I don't have a plan. I'm telling the truth when I say I didn't want the Gate to happen, and if you don't believe me, that's fine, and you have no reason to believe me, but the truth is, what can you do about it?"

The events leading up to the Gate debacle.

I could tell you about it. But there were too many moments that were overly wordy, rambling, and disjointed.

"Are you sure....... You didn't want this?"

"Yeah."

"So like I saw today....... This is how you're helping the Allies?"

"Yeah."

This guy saw it firsthand.

You've watched your armies battle it out in Serandia.

I ended up destroying a few warp gates, and watched as the monster desperately fought back.

Now that you've seen it with your own eyes, you can see the sincerity in my words.

"If this isn't....... If it's not what you did....... If it's not what you wanted....... Isn't it something people should know......?"

Kono Lindt looks at me and asks.

"People know....... and you know it's all because of you."

"Right."

"I know that, and....... I'm still not convinced."

"I suppose."

Some things are hard to believe when you see them.

If I'm kidnapped out of nowhere and told that I'm the cause of everything, that I didn't actually do anything wrong, will I believe it?

You'd be an idiot to believe it.

"Why did this happen and....... If it really wasn't your fault....... you're being unfair."

"Other people need to know the truth. If you're really....... If you're innocent. shouldn't you?"

"I don't think what you said was just....... I don't see why you need to make excuses for me, and I don't see why you need to make excuses for....... I don't see how convincing me is going to....... It's not like anything big is going to happen, so why tell me this......."

"Um, I don't know, whatever."

"Let's assume you're telling the truth. I still can't believe it."

"By the way, if what you say is true......."

"It's not your fault, but everyone says it's your fault....... Is that....... okay?"

Konorint asks.

"Is that okay?"

You can't say you're fine, even if you're dead.

Because it's not okay, in fact, it's not okay at all.

It's just that we recognize that it's unavoidable.

It's just not trying to do something about the inevitable.

"Then....... If you're innocent, people hate you for no reason, and......."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Meaningless?"

"If people know, it's more of a problem."

Knowledge is power.

If you know, it's your problem.

Those who don't know the truth hate and loathe me.

But what if you find out the truth?

They will not abandon their hatred of me, but they will hate Ellen and the imperial family.

I will hate everyone who kept this secret from me and blamed everything on me.

Nothing is gained except the spread of hate.

It's not that we don't want the truth to spread because we have some sort of heroism or noble purpose.

If it spreads, it will only divide and confuse everyone.

In truth, no one benefits. Only he does.

So I'm not going to tell Kono Lint what really happened.

Because finding out will only give you more people to hate.

I didn't want that.

I just want the gate debacle to end.

I'm past the point of wanting them to understand or believe me, but that's all I could say.

"The truth that will divide us all will only bring us all down."

"......."

"If that's the truth, I'd rather not know."

If it's a problem that can be overcome by my frustration, I'll be frustrated.

It's not okay, and I can't say it's okay at all.

But if it turns out to be just not good enough, so be it.

"So, pretend you didn't see it."

That the devil is fighting for the true end of the gate situation and wants nothing else.

It's a truth that will never be understood, and it's even worse when it is.

Sharing this responsibility among multiple people will only create more targets for hatred, and division will only lead to everyone's downfall.

Kono Lindt stares at me, still.

He was silent for a while.

You won't believe me. Because even though I've seen you fight, I need an end to the gate situation just as much as he does.

You can also accept that you're just temporarily helping the Allies, with the consequences to come later.

If anything, I think you're more credible.

To those who have lost something, my words ring hollow.

Even if you can trust me, it doesn't change the fact that I'm the cause of the gate.

"You....... I used to think you were a weirdo......."

Konorint smirks.

"He's even weirder than I thought."

The word "weird" now had a positive nuance to it that was a bit different from the weirdness of the past.

"Yeah, no one's going to believe you if you tell them you were running for your life in Serandia trying to break down a gate, and they're going to tell you that the war made your head hurt."

He laughs hysterically.

In his cat form, Kono Lint has made leaps and bounds in his abilities, but he's still a bit of an idiot.

I do.

If Kono Lint were to tell a story that no one would believe, it would be more than just strange to most people, it would be stomach-churning.

You're going to be told that you've made a thousand dollars and you're going to be told that you've made a bad joke and you've fallen asleep.

"So, does that mean you're going to continue to do this?"

"As far as I can."

We can't openly collaborate with the Allies, so here we are, out of sight, out of mind, and people are going to be suspicious, but we can't let them get away with it.

As long as you're doing something, you're going to do something.

Kono Lindt stares at me, still.

He nods, as if he understood me when I said he didn't see anything.

"Okay, then I'll send you to the Allied garrison......."

"Hey, you know what?"

"Uh."

"That....... Well......."

Kono Lindt shakes his head.

Also, I feel like I'm making a bit of a face.

"It's been a while since....... No, I don't think this is the time to talk about......."

What are you trying to say?

Kono Lint scratches his head and looks at me in confusion.

"Was that you?"

"......?"

What is "that".

What do you mean "was it you"?

It's only two words, and for a moment I couldn't figure out what he was talking about.

No, I think I know what it is, so I don't know more.

a.

No way.

Holy shit?

No.

You answered too late!

Before I could answer, I noticed the panicked look on his face!

"Gee, was that really you?!"

"Oh, no, no, no, no. What's that, what's that, what's that, I have no idea what that is. I have no idea."

This.

No way.

Should I kill it?

Episode 542.

We were talking about humanity and stuff when suddenly Kono Lint brought up the almost-fading memory of the pageant.

How long has this asshole been around?

I was even late in responding, which convinced him.

"It was you, you asshole!"

Kono Lint leaned back, his complexion haggard.

"Well, I thought you were a weirdo, but that's not the problem, you're an even weirder weirdo!"

"No, no, no, no, what's that, what's that, what's that, asshole, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!"

"You....... Why do you have such a hobby as......?"

"It's not a hobby! It's not!"

"Well, at least I know what you're talking about, so I guess that means you're right, right?!"

Dried.

I don't think it was intended, but it dried up nicely.

When did I start to suspect this asshole?

And why do I still remember it?

"Give me back my original, you son of a bitch!"

Kono Lint exclaimed, his face turning white.

"You crazy motherfucker, it was a cross-dressing contest in the first place!"

"I don't know, give it back, you crazy bastard!"

Why are we even talking about this?

I finished, summoning an Alsbringer in my right hand. Konorint's complexion turned white.

"......I knew you weren't supposed to know."

Why am I threatening now?

"I'm sorry. Die."

But Kono Lint was not intimidated at all by the sight of the Alsbringer in my hand.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on me. I'll tell the world you're cross-dressing."

"......."

Why.

Why.

This is what happens!

"I don't trust that any more than I trust your work today, you son of a bitch!"

Who the hell believes the devil won a cross-dressing contest?

I did, but no one believes me!

I should really kill him.

This won't work.

-Whoosh!

I swung Alsbringer and Kono Lint moved to the other side of the room.

"I swung it! I'm going to tell Ellen, you crazy pervert!"

"......."

I felt my blood run cold.

Too late.

You've already been caught.

Beyond Bertus, I've gotten to know this asshole.

"If you don't let me go safely, tomorrow you'll see the whole garrison singing a song about how the Devil is a cross-dressing pervert. You pervert."

I felt like my last shred of sanity had been blown away.

"......I'm a pervert?"

"Well, then you're a pervert. Yeah, if you're not a pervert, what are you?"

One could argue against Kono Lindt's statement.

I'll admit that I did some of the bullshit for a reason, and I was forced to do it.

After all, didn't I come full circle and go through all that bullshit to get to where I am today?

Yes.

I have to admit it.

"Yes, I'm a pervert."

"What......?"

Konorint's complexion turned even bluer at my nonchalant admission.

"Well, do you think that's all there is to it?"

"......?"

"You think my perversions are, like, that bad?"

My cold laugh stiffened Konorint's expression as he stood there, pinned to the wall, ready to flee.

"You."

"Early Admissions."

"First year."

"Initial."

"While eating dessert at a cafe with the kids......."

"I was once confessed to by a girl......."

"You know what?"

Konorint's complexion turns white at my words.

"......what?"

"And that girl, you haven't heard from her since, have you?"

I use Sarkegar's ring.

"That girl probably looks like....... Doesn't she look like this?"

"Uh....... Uhhhhhh?"

A moment of silence.

Honestly, we shouldn't even be having this conversation.

I know I don't have to.

But.

"This, this....... You son of a bitch!"

You've broken my spirit.

You too shall be broken.

\* \* \*

'Why did you do that to me....... Why did you do that to me......?'

"You said pervert, that's because I'm a pervert.

'I'm....... but I don't know if I'm eaten by anyone because of that memory......! I used to think that, and then I realized......!

'No way! You've been tricked, you bastard. We're done talking, now get your ass back to the Allied lines!

"You devil, no, worse than a devil!

"It doesn't matter because the devil is actually right, hahahahahahahaha!

'What did I do to you that was so wrong......! I will curse you for the rest of my life, Reinhardt!'

"Go for it! There's a lot more people doing that than you! Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha!

With his mental capacity reduced to zero, Conor Lint couldn't quite grasp the situation.

For some reason, Herriot meekly returned the limp Conor Lint to the Allied lines.

Of course, Herriot looked at Reinhardt, who had gone a little sour, and didn't seem to understand either.

\* \* \*

"......."

The sight of the vast Allied advance suddenly snapped Kono Lint back to reality.

As he listened to the sounds of the grass, the soldiers coming and going, and the troops preparing to march, Kono Lint wondered if he had even been with the demon all this time.

Everyone hates the devil.

Few would believe me if I told you that the devil is actually fighting the gate crisis harder than anyone else.

Kono Lint assumed that those in the upper echelons of the Empire, including Saviolin Tana, knew this truth.

That's probably a good thing. That's probably a good thing.

That's because a larger truth had sunk deep into Kono Lint's mind.

Female.

A lingering suspicion in the back of your mind has been proven true.

Transform there.

When Kono Lint realized that Reinhardt could shapeshift, he stood as still as a statue, his mouth agape.

Perverted.

I'm a pervert at the point of cross-dressing, but I can't believe I even did that.

What the hell were you doing, what were you thinking?

It's frightening because I don't know what kind of malicious intent they have.

Reinhardt didn't want any of it, because he didn't want to be used or used for anything.

Only to raise about.

Only to tease.

"Crazy...... asshole......!

Whether the Devil is good or evil, Kono Lint can no longer tell.

The devil is a pervert.

That's it.

Continuing on, Kono Lint returned to the Royal Class garrison, where he saw an armed Ellen.

"......."

I wonder if Ellen knows Reinhardt's truth.

ConoLint doesn't know until then.

But not that truth.

Conor Lint wonders if we know the "other" truth.

It probably won't know it's dead when it wakes up, Kono Lindt is sure.

"I'm....... Ellen."

"Yes."

Ellen looks at Konorint as he finishes singing.

Ellen Artorius has been feeling a little down lately, but now that she has something to occupy her mind, she's feeling a little more energized.

Do I really need to tell Ellen that Reinhardt is actually a cross-dressing pervert, and that he's a crazed pervert who makes fun of his classmates for cross-dressing?

I can't.

"No, I thought I had something to say, but I forgot."

"......?"

Ellen shakes her head and looks around as if that's enough.

"By the way, have you seen the cat?"

"Did you see the cat......?"

"I see."

Apparently looking for a cat, Ellen scurried away.

Cat.

Cat.......

"......."

Fortunately, Kono Lint never got to the point where he thought Reinhardt would turn into a beast.

\* \* \*

A few days later.

Ready, the Allied forces began their march.

It was more of a march than an advance. There was a long way to go, a long way to Serandia.

But like any other march, it's not a place to rest.

It's a way into the heart of the enemy, and from that heart comes a constant stream of monsters.

The march was already a battle in itself.

-Bang! Quack!

-Flash!

-Woof!

The entire army was in a state of readiness, not only for the battle, but also for the monsters that would flank the marching troops.

What awaited at the end of the march was not a rest, but an even bigger battle.

When an army is most tired, it must face its hardest fights.

The march through the enemy lines was a march and a battle, and the noise of battle was constant day and night.

The army had to move forward while fighting, and fight while sleeping.

The good news is that in the harsh winter, the weather doesn't freeze the soldiers.

A cool autumnal climate, if not midsummer, was optimal, though the fatigue of the march itself and the constant battles could not be overcome.

-Good thing the weather is nice.......

-What would have happened if it had snowed.......

-The heavens are helping us.

The closer we got to Serandia, our primary operational target, the more monsters we encountered.

"The Empire's fleet has already destroyed three warp gates - one large, one medium, and one small - in a preemptive strike. This should make the assault on Serandia a little easier."

The Major of the Demon Army had already checked the General Headquarters.

This lie would become an increasingly obvious lie. Those who do not know the truth will gradually come to recognize that there are forces aiding this war, and that they are the forces of the Devil.

It's playing with the devil's hand, and if it comes to light, it could split the coalition.

But the temptation was too sweet.

How much combat power can be preserved and how many people can survive in exchange for silence, a little lying, right now.

Everyone realizes that the Emperor Bertus and the leaders of the General Command are hiding an important truth, but no one wants to know it.

Whatever help you can get, it's making the war easier.

Louise von Schwarz, who holds a seat in the mobile command center, was one of those silent mouths.

\* \* \*

Does war really need music?

We don't know about music, but we can all agree that we need sound.

-dong-dong-dong-dong

There's something about the thunderous sound of a war drum that instinctively elevates humans.

They say there's a soul in the sound of a drum.

Drums are made from the skins of living things, so maybe that belief is justified.

We don't know if the sound truly has a soul, but it certainly has a role in stirring the human spirit to something.

On any other battlefield, this drumming would be unnecessary, but on this particular battlefield, it's even more necessary.

-Kiaaahhhh!

-Grrrrrr!

-keeeeeeeeeeee!

Only then will you be able to drown out the cries of the raging monsters in the tidal wave of monstrosities from below the hill.

Because we need to push the fear that comes from sound away with sound.

After a long, long march, the Allies finally reach the battlefield and look down on Serandia, the city they must capture and hold.

Already replenished, the monster stood in the craters left by meteors and tornadoes.

-Dong! dong! dong! dong!

The masters beat their drums to tear the grip.

As if drowning out the cries of the monsters would actually make them recede.

You drive back the fiery monsters and smash the warp gate.

Once you've accomplished this seemingly impossible task, it's not the end, but the next battle.

Doomed to be torn apart by the teeth and claws of a monster at any moment.

Next, and next, and next.

And then beyond.

The army of death that must go to the last battlefield must face its first despair.

No thinking required.

Despair is worthless.

Forget it.

You have to fight.

As if to say, don't think about anything but the fight now.

-Dong! dong! dong!

The drums anesthetize the soldiers.

At the sound of it, which colors the soul with rage, the soldiers' eyes are filled with despair, fear, and a premonition of death.

I feel a surge of anger.

There's no place to back down.

There is nothing but death behind, beside, and in front of you.

There is no place for humanity to retreat.

If yes, then forward.

If you're going to die anywhere, go down in a direction that's closer to everyone's survival and victory.

That's what this is all about.

If this or that kills you, take it.

To life rather than death.

In anger rather than sadness.

Rather than despair.

To madness.

Surrender yourself.

-Dong! dong! dong! dong!

The sound of the word drum.

And.

-Mighty, great, and virtuous, the five lords, grant us protection....... Keep us and protect us, and grant us all well-being and peace.......

There were countless soldiers calling out the names of the gods like madmen.

-To our enemies.......

The soldier's eyes glow eerily, drunk with fear and despair.

-to the enemies of humanity.......

In despair, in inscrutability, one can only seek the Absolutes.

-death.......

Good luck with that.

It's not just people who lose their minds and call on the name of God.

-May Allah protect us!

-Thump! Thump! Thump!

At the shouts of the Paladins of the War Gods, a reddish tide begins to pour from the heavens over the entire vast coalition.

God of war.

O god of war who chose the devil.

Make our steps light for today.

-Bang!

The drums of death, beaten by the masters of despair, make everyone surrender their souls.

The commanders of each army raise their swords.

You may be broken, but you won't fall.

-Warriors!

Broken.

-Charge!

You've been knocked down.

-Wow!

Fight.

To survive.

\* \* \*

Humanity pouring down the hill.

Monsters scorching the hills and streaking across the sky.

And the sky.

-rumbling

From the open sky, deathly flames begin to rain down.

Atop a giant crystal tower, bathed in red, a small girl reaches out to a wave of monsters.

Redina, standing on the arc crystal, says.

"We can do this."

-Crackle!

Hellfire rains down like thunderbolts on the waves of monsters.

"I can survive."

A little wizard was raining down disaster from the sky.

Episode 543.

Battle for Serandia.

While monsters breathe fire and lightning, humans pour thunder and flame from their fingertips.

In the killing fields where winter had long since receded, there was little difference between human life and monster life.

Flames, whether spewed by the monsters or the mages, crisscrossed the skies in massive explosions, while rear-mounted artillery crushed, burned, or froze the creatures to death.

-No!

With a single jerk of the monster's jaw, the bisected soldier died before he could even scream.

-Bam!

And it was only a matter of moments before a blunt hammer to the gills crushed the creature's skull.

-Bang!

Soon, the creature that lunged at the hammer wielder was met with a white glowing shield.

-Bang!

The paladin, who has been knocked back with a shield and then hit in the head with a hammer, looks around.

-Woof!

The white light from the paladin's body began to heal the wounds of the wounded soldiers lying around.

There's no point in licking your wounds.

Adriana could only watch as the soldier with the shoulder blades cut off by her divine power was bitten in the head by another creature that lunged at it, crushing it instantly.

"Suck!"

Paladins are the medics and assault troops of the battlefield.

In the most dangerous places on the battlefield, paladins are the ones who can heal the wounded who should be dead and make them run for their lives.

Aside from that, Paladins can heal wounded soldiers in the field, restoring them to combat strength.

However, it is the Paladin who has to watch the lives he saves disappear the most.

I feel even more despair because there is hope.

You can't save someone if you don't have the power to heal, so choke back tears at the sight of the wounded, but focus on the fight.

But the paladins have saved so many lives, only to watch them slip away.

I've watched lives slip away as I've fought and rescued people from the gate crisis.

Why I've never shed a tear.

The number of enemies I've had is uncountable.

But tears cannot reverse death.

Oyelowo can do nothing but remember those who are gone.

Only power.

Only fight.

Only this, a heavy, blunt hammer.

This hammer of judgment, which I switched to after I realized I was more comfortable crushing monsters than killing them with my sword.

This violence, this tearing and crushing of the enemy, is the only good, the only justice on this bloody battlefield.

-Bam!

"Hahahaha!"

-Bam!

Realizing that there is no such thing as justice beyond killing her enemies, Adriana wields the Hammer of Judgment.

Adriana is strong.

Though not a masterclass, Moonshine made him a superhuman, and he is even better than other superhumans at enhancing his body with divine power.

It's impossible to compare Adriana's abilities to those of a regular soldier.

But you can't protect everyone.

I've seen too many lives lost to save.

I've learned through countless battles that it's pointless to fight to protect.

I've been there, done that, fought for it, and put myself in harm's way.

But.

Still.

Adriana cannot turn away from the fallen.

Like when the junior who was hated by everyone was about to make a reckless move, you lent a helping hand, even though you knew you didn't have to.

Adriana hasn't changed.

Failed to change.

-Crack!

"!"

By the time she saw the bison-sized creature lunge at the fallen soldier, fangs gleaming, Adriana was already in the way of the creature's advance on the fallen soldier.

-Bang!

"Boom!"

Unable to bear the weight of the lunge, Adriana bounces off and rolls on the floor.

Fallen.

On the battlefield, if you fall out of position once, you may die before you can get back up.

Gasping at the shock that traveled through her shields, Adriana saw the creature lunge at her, gaping at her.

Exactly the nape of the neck.

Before I can get my stance right, I can't give my neck and miss my weapon.

Adriana reaches out with her right hand to the creature's gills.

-Carded!

"K......gh!"

-Crack! Krrrrr!

Your plate armor is crumpling badly.

-Woof, woof, woof!

"Off......h......."

The monster's teeth sink into Adriana's right arm, despite the protection of her armor.

Adriana is strong, but monsters can't predict her strength.

Some are woefully weak, but a simple bite can pierce even divinely protected armor and enchanted defenses.

At this rate, your arm will be torn off, and then your life.

"Ugh......!"

-Thump!

Even when you're on the ground and the monster's gills are crushing your arm in real time right in front of your face.

-Thump! Thump!

-Crack! Krrrrr!

Adriana strikes the creature in the head with the shield on her left arm.

The shield blade slashes at the creature's head, its red eyes glowing as if it won't let go, even in death.

A fight to see which arm breaks first, or the monster's head.

-Bam!

"Off....... Eek......!"

-Puck! Puck! Puck! Puck!

-to......x.......

One of the creature's heads was smashed off, and its body was left limp.

Adriana tries to open the gaping maw of the monster, which refuses to let go of her arm, even though she is dead.

There is not one enemy.

You need to get up.

If it can't get up, it dies.

Adriana desperately tries to open the monster's gills, which are now closed even more tightly because it's already dead.

There is no one to look out for you.

On the battlefield, everyone is on their own.

The soldier Adriana had saved was already bleeding from the nape of her neck, having been decapitated by another monster before she could throw herself down.

So many people fight alongside each other, but so few are willing to take their own lives. Very few, like Adriana, fight to protect others.

-Grrrrr!

And before she could pull her arm out of the creature's mouth, Adriana could see it charging across the battlefield.

It is approximately six meters in size.

Ordinary soldiers can't handle it.

They weren't coming to attack him, but with a single stomp of the creature's foot, dozens of soldiers were flying through the air, trampled and crushed.

You're confident in the monster's path.

"Ah....... Argh! Argh!"

You must somehow open the closed gills of the monster before you can get out of its path or deal with it.

It's too late.

Should I throw up my arms.

Because it's better to have your arm cut off than to die.

But how do you cut off your arm in this situation.

The monster had reached Adriana's nose.

And when Adriana finally gritted her teeth and tried to bring her elbow down with the shield blade that had crushed the monster's head.

-Digitize!

There was a spark in the air, similar to a thunderbolt, and something appeared.

What appeared as a spatial shift was a grayish metallic thing the size of a giant.

-Whoosh!

-Bam!

Adriana watched in disbelief as the giant's head exploded from the massive grayish-white metal.

"Golem......."

A giant iron golem appeared and began to trample and crush the monster.

-Golem!

-The Archduke's golem!

Just as Adriana's life was saved by the appearance of the golem, the other soldiers cheered as the giant golem began to fight alongside them on the battlefield.

Grand Duke of Saint-Thuan.

Though overshadowed by the betrayal of his youngest daughter, no one can deny the skill of the Archduke and the wizards of the Duchy of Saint-Tuan.

In fact, the Archduke, who had also participated in the Demon War, was using his golems to crush the monsters of the Gate.

-Bam!

-Woof!

Adriana sees the golems in action before her, and she jams her shield into the monster's gills, twisting them open.

"Ugh......!"

I could feel the bones in my right upper arm completely shattered.

-Woof!

Just as she can restore others, Adriana can restore her own body.

With her recovered arm, Adriana stands up, picking up the fallen hammer.

The golems of the duchy fight together.

The Iron Golem was battling a large group of monsters that were ravaging the battlefield as befits their size.

Adriana runs after the Iron Golem.

I recite it like a prayer as I run.

"Gods."

The young priestess says.

"Five Lords."

"With these tears."

"This fatigue."

"So many tears."

"So much fatigue."

"What exactly are you trying to accomplish?"

Drunk on monster and human blood, Adriana cries out in despair, but with her eyes alive.

For what a beautiful paradise the world we will create with our tears and blood.

Why do the gods want so much death and tears?

-Thump!

Amidst the piles of flesh of fallen and crushed monsters, Adriana slams her blood-soaked hammer to the ground and surveys the battlefield in a daze.

-Kang! Kaang!

A giant golem swept across the battlefield, terrifying to see, and suddenly the sky darkened and something plummeted to the ground.

-Kuung

"Drag......gon......?"

A monster with a pair of wings, a massive fuselage, and a lizard's head.

The mere impact of the creature, already three times the size of the massive Iron Golem, landing on the ground caused countless soldiers and monsters alike to stumble and fall.

The dragon was over six meters tall and looked down at the monster as if it were a toy.

The dragon opens its gaping maw at the Iron Golem.

-knowwhat!

-Currrrrr!

Searing flames erupt from the dragon's maw and rain down on the Iron Golem.

"ah......."

The golem of steel, which had seemed to pierce through the waves of monsters and crush them all, was burned to a crisp by a single breath of flame from an even greater monster, and turned to ash.

Strong monsters.

A human creation that is stronger than that.

But a bigger, stronger monster than that.

Humans are strong, but.

Anything can be a monster.

Adriana could not help but stiffen at the sight of the charred remains of the golem and the dragon that stood like a mountain before it.

Monsters don't despair, but humans do.

Adriana grabs the hammer with trembling hands.

Then, raise your shield.

I'm desperate, but I can't let myself fall.

Adriana runs toward the dragon, which opens its gaping maw at her with a shield over its entire body.

-Currrrrr!

As she watches the breath of fire that melted the Iron Golem pour down on her, Adriana anticipates the path of the flames and flings herself to the side.

A behemoth is a behemoth.

You may be too small to win.

But since it's small, it might be a little more immune to the beast's attacks.

It's ridiculous to talk about odds.

If every fight is a dice roll between survival and death.

It is the fate of a soldier in a war to be on the wrong side of death at some point, as long as he has to fight an immeasurable number of battles.

Nevertheless, Adriana runs from the earth-melting flames and eventually lands under the jaws of a giant dragon.

I know the flip side of death is bound to come out at some point.

You've made up your mind to fight.

Like extending a hand of salvation to those who would die only to live again.

Fighting a losing battle.

Foolishly, I decided to continue.

"Suck!"

Reaching the creature's head, Adriana leaps out from underneath it and climbs on top of it, using the horns that have sprouted from the dragon's head as handholds.

Even the head of the creature, which was larger than his own, breathed flames that melted iron, and he could feel the heat from it that no human could stand.

-Bam!

While holding the dragon's horns with her left hand, Adriana smashes the dragon's head with the hammer in her right hand.

-knowwhat!

I don't have to worry about whether it will work.

Even if you can't break it, someone will survive just by not letting it breathe flames.

If you die next, you won't die now.

That's it.

We can't do more than that, but if we can keep it for now, that's good enough.

-knowwhat!

To keep from falling off the wildly shaking dragon's head, Adriana grabs the horns with her left hand, while she slams the hammer down with her right.

-Bang, bang, bang!

Even a kendo spear won't fit through this thick leather.

Not even the most mundane magic will be able to harm this monster.

To kill the monster with the impenetrable hide, Adriana threw away her sword.

It is to slay monsters like this that I have forsaken my long-trained sword and taken up my hammer.

-Whoosh!

In a flurry of activity that threatens to blow away reason, Adriana raises the hammer.

-Bang!

Gods.

-Bang!

If everything is yours, what is at the end of the line?

Gods.

-Bam!

Five weeks.

-Bam!

I hate you.

-knowwhat!

The hammering of a god-hating priest continues as he attempts to crush a giant boulder named the Dragon.

The world may not belong to humans.

At the very least, it should belong to the living.

It shouldn't belong to these creatures of madness, who have nothing but destructive instincts.

You can't call that a world.

"Hhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Creatures beyond reason.

Toward the Beast of Destruction, where there is no such thing as Tao as a living thing.

Adriana's hammer, raised to the sky, glows with an intense white light.

Destroy the unreasonable.

Toward a beast, a machine where reason does not exist.

Adriana slams the hammer down with pure hatred.

-Bam!

Before the hammer could strike, a white bolt of lightning struck from the sky, piercing the dragon's head.

-knowwhat!

The dragon raises its head with a cacophonous terminus, but soon the behemoth collapses, its head falling with it.

-Kuung.......

"Ha ha....... Ha ha....... ha ha......."

Adriana lands just before the monster's head touches the ground and stares in disbelief at what she's done.

I don't understand what happened.

But the monster was killed by a hammer through the center of its head.

The monster fell to the paltry weapon, a toothpick compared to the behemoth.

"Ha ha....... Ha ha......."

Catching her breath, Adriana looks at herself as if she were looking at a miracle worker, and meets the gazes of many soldiers.

-Ooooo.......

-Five Lords.......

The soldiers pay their respects to the gods even in the midst of this harsh battle, knowing that Adriana is cloaked in white light, a sign of her divinity.

Miraculous.

It's nothing short of a miracle.

Adriana looks up at the battlefield sky in disbelief.

The fight isn't over because one giant monster is dead.

Miracles like this are not uncommon on the battlefield, and tragedies like this are immeasurable.

Unless we see an end to the war, these monsters will continue to appear.

Is there even an end to this fight, with so many of them?

A desperate battlefield of waves of monsters, flames, lightning, and cold.

I wonder if there is an exit from this hell where there is nothing but bloodshed everywhere.

Adriana smashes the dragon, but despairs.

It's hard not to despair when you see monsters of similar size, or even larger, coming your way.

How many more miracles do we need.

Does it ever end.

In her post-miracle despair, Adriana is devastated.

The end of this hell.

Anyone is welcome.

End this hell.

Because it's exhausting to kill, it's exhausting to die, and it's even more exhausting to watch someone die.

The end of the world.

An end to this pain, despair, and fear.

Import.

-Thump!

-Koo-koo-kung!

From afar.

Adriana watches as dozens of flashes cross the battlefield.

-skuck!

-Quizik!

Its dozens of beams of light cut, crushed, and smashed every monster it touched, flying past the soldiers as if they were flying across the battlefield.

It's not a flash.

A being with blue magic all over its body.

The superhuman of superhumans.

Here come the mighty men of humanity for a master class.

One of those rays, Adriana saw it brush past her as she ran across the battlefield.

Dozens of flashes as Adriana stepped on the carcass of a slain dragon.

One of those flashes.

"......Ellen."

Ellen Artorius.

He could swear he saw the impassive eyes of someone walking past him, glancing at him for a moment, then back at the road ahead.

-Whoosh!

It was a wild, sharp rush that felt like a gust of wind, even though it was just a human passing by.

Warrior, Ellen Artorius, leads a master class of shortstops through the battlefield.

Every monster in its path is blown up, shattered, sliced, and trampled into oblivion.

That eerily calm, sunken expression.

Adriana finds relief in that indifference.

The other soldiers are no different.

The expression of a warrior, not panicked, not scared, not sad, but not overly confident either.

People believe in the calmness of a warrior.

I trust that stoicism, that look of the inhuman warrior.

Because it's something beyond humanity, there's an uncanny trust that it can do what humans can't, and that trust becomes faith in the impossible things the warrior accomplishes.

A seemingly emotionless warrior.

The person who will bring an end to all this.

-Scourer!

Leaping high into the air, Ellen Artorius swings her sword once at a monster as large as a mountain.

-skuck!

With a single swipe of the dark shroud that stretches from the massive Voidblade, the mountainous creature collapses, spewing blood.

Adriana had to fight for her life against a monster smaller than that.

But as they say, one strike is all it takes to kill a beast, and for Ellen Artorius, it only took one.

-Currrrrr!

Then, a whip of flame from his cloak of sunlight scorches the earth, burning thousands of monsters to death in an instant.

A calm expression and a fierce force that is anything but.

Overwhelmingly uninspired.

The warrior advances through the waves of monsters.

Led by such warriors, superhumans cross the battlefield like beams of light.

Overwhelmingly strong.

Overwhelmingly favorable.

How could people not find hope in Ellen?

Adriana's miracle is a daily occurrence for Ellen.

The monster, which Adriana can only kill by a miracle, is stunned to death by Ellen's blow.

That's why they're called warriors.

Adriana feels it as she watches the warrior and the shortstop following him through the waves of monsters.

It may be hopeless.

Maybe they can do it.

If he's that strong, this war could be over.

That's why a warrior can't help but become a believer.

They will destroy the warp gate.

This will bring everything to an end.

To believe that they will end all times of sorrow and hatred.

"Whoa......."

Adriana picked up the hammer again.

Episode 544.

The role is to bird's eye view and support the massive barrage with magic where needed.

It's always been Redina's place, overlooking a huge battlefield, and she should use her own judgment to decide whether or not to support it.

The situation on the battlefield is always changing, so Redina must always use her own judgment.

It's always a decision.

To help or not to help.

Use your telescope magic to see and analyze the battlefield and help where it's needed most.

Helping where it's needed most means not helping in some places.

You need to determine which units are important and which are not.

Let some troops get wiped out and support more important places and more important troops.

Every minute, every second, she has to make the choice between saving someone's life and allowing someone to die.

And the basis for that judgment is intuition. It's not the kind of decision that can be made through meetings and reviews.

Sometimes her biggest fear is that she might be wrong, and she's never been wrong.

Arc Crystal's magic power is not infinite.

That's why there are so many situations where you have to turn someone away.

When she makes a choice to save someone but exclude someone else based on the needs of the battlefield, she can't help but think about the people who are dying because of her decision rather than the ones she saved.

-Currrrr!

As she unleashed dozens of Shockwaves on the swarm of flying monsters flying toward her rear base, neutralizing them, Redina could only watch in disbelief as soldiers were crushed to death by the wreckage of the falling flying monsters.

If we let them get close, the artillery will be neutralized, causing even more damage.

It's a choice, but it doesn't change the fact that the soldiers died because of Redina's magic.

"......."

You may be told that you're the wizard who killed the most monsters.

After all, she's probably the wizard who killed the most people.

Gritting her teeth, Redina looks out over the battlefield.

You have to see a lot of death.

\* \* \*

It was a battlefield of death and carnage.

Ludwig was bound to have a place in all that death and carnage.

-Pooh! Pow!

With blue mana covering his body, Ludwig was also slaying monsters.

There are many differences between now and when enchantments were just becoming available.

Due to the optimized hp from Moonshine, Ludwig optimized his hp buffs, as did the rest of the Royal Class.

Even if he didn't make it to the master class, Ludwig is definitely a superhuman.

-Bam!

Stabbing with swords, hitting with pommels, and kicking.

The lesser monsters were neutralized by Ludwig's gestures.

On a battlefield like this, Ludwig's talents are bound to shine.

"Hmph!"

-Scrub!

Don't burn out.

Ludwig had only one talent: physical strength, and he didn't neglect to cultivate it.

But Ludwig can't take on every monster.

-Crunch!

-Oh, help!

All around the battlefield, a frenzied noise of monstrous cries and human screams can be heard.

Of course, they're not the only ones fighting.

-Ah, ahh....... aaaaah.......

Some dropped their weapons and crawled on the ground in terror, having lost their minds.

-legs....... My legs are.......

There were those who were mortally wounded and slowly dying with no help for healing.

In a hell where people are dying at an alarming rate, Ludwig uses the spears and swords of the dead to fight off the waves of monsters.

Why this should happen.

Why this should happen.

Why should they have to die a horrible death.

Ludwig bitterly realizes that he cannot save the fallen, so he does the only thing he can do.

Kills a monster.

That's the only good left in the world. The other line is the one that caused this mess.

It would be the death of a demon.

However, Ludwig is no match for a terrifyingly powerful demon.

That's for the brave.

So kill the monsters.

Killing as many monsters as he can kill, as many monsters as he can face, is the only justice and good that Ludwig can do for himself.

Those who have fallen and groaned, those who have let go of their spirit, but those who still hold their weapons do not let go of their spirit, for they are all thinking like Ludwig.

Those who can't lay down their arms because they're too proud to go down as they are, fight against the disaster.

From afar.

Ludwig saw something leap out from between the waves of monsters.

-huii profit!

Something, a black sphere, flies down and lands in the middle of the soldiers.

-Woof!

It wasn't a bullet or a shell, it was a monster.

The creature curls into a ball and unfurls its scorpion-like body.

What should have been its face was merely a dark hole, with spindly tentacles running through it.

-kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

"Boom!"

The fierce, eerie tones emanating from the abyssal hole stunned the soldiers around him, and even Ludwig, who was still relatively far away.

Nearby soldiers began to collapse, blood pouring from their eyes, ears, and mouths at the mere sound of that cursed cry.

-Kaaaaaaaaaah!

"Ugh!"

Ludwig gritted his teeth in anguish that threatened to tear his head off.

Every monster is different.

Some breathe fire and lightning, while others attack the mind.

You never know what they're going to attack with, and some of them are just plain unreasonable.

Hunkered down and covering their ears, the screams of terror that seeped through the gaps didn't wake the soldiers, and neither did Ludwig.

-Quack! Quack!

The cowerers are trampled and crushed by the swarming monsters.

Thousands were about to be wiped out by this irrational attack, and Ludwig was no exception.

The moment.

-Kaaaaaaaah!

Someone, red hair flying wildly, began to run toward the center of the screams of terror.

Even as those who heard the screams nearby bled to death without exception, the redhead charged into the center of it, seemingly unaffected in the slightest by the screams of terror.

-POOF!

I plunged my sword into its gaping maw and twisted.

-Quazik! Quadruple!

In short order, the monster was dismantled and fell.

The girl who killed the monster comes running to Ludwig, covered in blue energy.

"Are you okay?"

"Scarlett......."

"Get up, we don't have time for this."

"Okay."

Ludwig rises to his feet, feeling the reverberations of the screams echoing through his head.

A talent named Immunity.

It makes no exception for monsters.

For some reason, the monsters' uncanny powers don't affect Scarlett at all.

No flames, no concussions, no mind-bending terror.

As long as it wasn't a direct attack, Scarlet was free from the power of all those monsters.

That's why Scarlett hunted down and killed monsters who wielded unreasonable power.

Without Scarlett, even Ludwig would have fallen flat on his face and died.

It saved Ludwig's life as well as the lives of many soldiers.

But we have to fight harder to avoid the next crisis.

Before Ludwig could get himself upright, Scarlett was already running into the middle of the battlefield.

What is the monster?

Scarlett's immunity keeps her safe from the monsters' uncanny powers, but it doesn't protect her from the physical force of their grasping, tearing, and biting.

-deaddead

The ground weeps.

"Earthquake?

And now there are monsters that cause earthquakes every now and then.

No.

-deaddeaddead!

As Ludwig watches the growing tumult of the earth, and the earth beginning to tremble in response to its echoes, he realizes that it is not caused by any special force.

When you don't know what you're up against, your instincts are your best friend.

Intuitive, immediate situational awareness and action.

When Ludwig realizes that the huge rumbling in the ground is not an earthquake, but something is coming from underground.

And when she saw that giant echo coming at Scarlett's feet.

"Scarlett! Dodge!"

"......!"

-Pow!

Ludwig watched as a worm with enormous, hideous gills erupted from the ground, devouring Scarlett, dozens of monsters, and dozens of soldiers.

Episode 545.

The earthquake was simply a vibration caused by a giant monster crawling through the ground.

And the giant monster burst forth, devouring vast swaths of land.

-Queueueue!

And so, no matter how fast, no matter how well prepared, the giant Worm, which had devoured the monsters, the soldiers, and Scarlett in an instant, howled with hundreds and thousands of barbed teeth bared from its gaping maw.

Scarlett was devoured.

"No!"

He can't let Scarlett, who just saved his life, die in vain.

I don't know how to deal with that giant monster.

Ludwig grabs his sword and runs toward the giant worm.

Unbeknownst to the other soldiers, Scarlet is capable of enchantment.

We don't know how long we'll last, but we'll be able to survive in the belly of that giant worm, a little longer than others.

Before that.

We need to dismantle that monster before Scarlett runs out of breath.

The sword in his right hand is a toothpick compared to that behemoth.

But he has no choice but to do it. Ludwig runs as a giant worm emerges from the ground, its massive head thrust toward the soldiers, who are horrified by the creature, and devours them.

We don't know how to trim it, but we'll trim it.

I run, determined to get Scarlett out of that gill if I can.

-Quueue!

Ludwig dodges, then stabs his sword at the creature's head.

-Bam!

"Cr......gh!"

It's obviously going in.

Swords don't always cut it.

But too much of a good thing can be overwhelming.

I could poke at it all day and still not break it down.

Can you save Scarlett from being trapped in the belly of this monster?

-Whoosh!

"Ugh!"

The monster raises its head, and Ludwig's body, still clinging to the sword embedded in his chest, floats into thin air.

This monster is shaking off a hanging human with a knife embedded in his body.

This in itself has saved countless lives, as the monster's movement has been contained.

But that's not enough.

A little more.

You'll need to slice and dice through this hide to get to the scarlet.

Ludwig's eyes fill with blood.

-Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

I can't do it, but I'll do it while I can.

Ludwig gritted his teeth and stabbed his sword through the air.

If it was a master class.

If only it were stronger.

Ludwig gritted his teeth and swung his sword to save Scarlett's life before it was snuffed out, but it wasn't enough.

The truth is always devastating.

What you can't do, you can't do.

-Woof!

"Boom!"

Guisu deliberately slams his head on the ground, shaking Ludwig off.

-Queueueue!

Then he roars at Ludwig, who has spun around.

It's like he's going to swallow the one bug that's been bothering him.

That moment when the monster's hideous gills spill out.

-Tuk-Tuk!

-Ke-e-e-e-e!

A huge spear of ice flew out of nowhere and stuck into the worm's gills, jerking it backward.

-Bang! Quack!

With that, a slew of offensive spells begin to fly out of nowhere, hitting the creature squarely in the gills.

It's a hopeless battle, but you're not alone.

Wizards, who have been watching the situation from the rear, provide magical support when a monster appears that requires urgent action.

-Queueueue!

The worm becomes a mop in real time.

Humans are not weak.

The power that humans have scraped together is not weak.

Humanity's last army is the strongest because it is the last.

And.

"Move over, Ludwig!"

Ludwig heard Delphine Izdra's voice above the screaming monsters.

When I turned around, there was Delphine, with a protest hanging from her one-handed bow.

Just as a sword is a toothpick in the face of that behemoth, so too is Delphine's arrow a toothpick.

But it's not just an arrow.

Having awakened to the rare power of Elementalism, Delphine Izadra's arrows are anything but ordinary.

-Woof!

Delphine's arrow, condensed with wind, emitted a grotesque wail.

A wind so condensed that space seems distorted, an arrow so imbued with elemental power, and the moment it is fired.

-Two bangs!

With an explosive roar, the arrow shot into the worm.

-Bam!

Ludwig watched, wide-eyed, as the shockwave created by the release of the enormous wind force compressed in the arrow ripped the monster's gills right off.

In the midst of the spray of flesh and monster blood, Ludwig saw Scarlett, her whole body covered in monster blood.

Alive.

Scarlett, who has been protected by a blue energy shield, falls to the front of the battlefield.

The other soldiers who were swallowed are already torn apart, but Scarlett is unharmed.

But he was unconscious.

An enchanted blue shield protected Scarlett, but it was fading.

Even more unfortunate, Scarlet landed not on the Allied side, where the soldiers were, but in the direction of the monsters, as if bouncing off them.

"No!"

Supporting fire from the mages and Delphine's power allows Scarlett to escape the creature's body, but at this rate, she will be torn apart by the onrushing monsters.

We were under siege.

Scarlett, unarmed and abandoned in the midst of the monsters, lay motionless as they swarmed her from all sides.

Ludwig runs.

"Ludwig! No!"

Delphine shrieked as she realized Ludwig was about to make a reckless lunge.

But Ludwig runs, pulling the dead soldier's spear from the ground.

You can't take on giant monsters, but you can kill what you can kill.

-Thump! Quack!

Ludwig opens the way, charging like a chariot with his human body.

Stabbing with spears, punching, and kicking.

Run toward the waves of monsters that are closing in on Scarlett.

Too many people die because of a momentary lapse in judgment, a moment of injustice, a moment of injustice.

Ludwig gritted his teeth, picked up the weapons of the dead, wielded them, discarded them when they broke, took up new ones, and charged.

Delphine thinks she can't stop Ludwig, too, and opens up with a barrage of flame, thunderbolts, and wind-laden arrows.

If Scarlett is swallowed by a wave of monsters, there is no next.

"Turn off......!"

The wizards' backup support is probably going to go elsewhere, so hoping for their help is like hoping for luck.

You can't hope for luck on a battlefield where there's more bad luck than good, so Ludwig runs through waves of monsters.

-Quack!

No matter how much Delphine pierces the monsters with her spirit-powered arrows, other monsters fill the void.

Stabbing, slicing, and dicing, Ludwig eventually reaches the fallen Scarlett and picks her up.

But there's more to it than just picking up Scarlett.

The only way to survive is to get out of this hellhole.

Obviously, you can't protect against every attack.

Ludwig's only free hand is his right, as Scarlett has been picked up.

-Puck! Kwazik!

-Queueueue!

-keeeeeeek!

"Eek......!"

Your pace is naturally slower than when you're alone, and you're not as free to attack.

Your mages are supporting elsewhere, and your soldiers can barely handle the monsters in front of them.

-Bang! Quack!

The only thing that helps is the arrow that Delphine shoots as she approaches to save Ludwig and Scarlett.

Without it, he would have been swept away by the monsters and buried with Scarlett.

Under supporting fire, Ludwig takes it one step at a time, kicking and stomping his way through the oncoming monsters, trying to stay out of their midst.

But in the end, Ludwig has a square.

And while some monsters are overly large, others are not, and they are bound to be less visible.

We're almost out of the wave of monsters.

Ludwig saw a small snake slithering toward him from the side too late.

Small snake.

Ludwig was a little late to the party, but that doesn't mean he didn't react.

"......!"

-Bam!

Just as the little snake was about to bite him, Ludwig grabbed it with his right hand.

Not the head, though, but something a little further away.

A snake will bite if it can't get a hold of your head.

"Oops!"

-Bam!

Just because it's small doesn't mean the attack is any less devastating.

The small snake's sharp teeth pierced through Ludwig's magical enhancements.

And.

"Eek!"

Ludwig couldn't help but groan at the intense foreign sensation of something pushing through the gaping wound and the burning pain of his nerves.

"Ludwig!"

Delphine's complexion turned blue as she watched from afar as Ludwig was bitten by the snake.

"Eek!"

-Woof!

Ludwig swung his right hand a few times like a whip at the door snake, and it soon slithered away, but the wounds from the bite were already evident.

"Off......aah!"

Even Ludwig screamed in agony at the pain of the teeth that dug into his grip and the venom that burrowed through them.

But you can't stop walking.

-Two bangs!

Once again, Delphine's arrows pierce the waves of monsters swarming toward Ludwig and Scarlett.

In the distance, Delphine watched Ludwig with an arrow in her hand.

-Run away!

Delphine's urgent cry.

Ludwig takes each step with his left hand, supporting Scarlett, while enduring the burning pain in his right hand.

The wound on his right hand and the disoriented Scarlett believing that once he got to the rear, things would work out.

-Kwazik! Bam!

Ludwig fights his way through the waves of monsters, trying to ignore the graying areas in real time.

The venom of the small snake was clearly having a devastating effect on Ludwig's body.

The arm is probably good.

Instead, we need to keep Scarlet alive.

If you fall here, if you collapse from the pain, Scarlett will die.

Ludwig gritted his teeth, stomping on the monsters with his feet rather than his uncooperative right hand, running toward the path cleared by Delphine's supporting fire, and soon he was out of the middle of the horde.

"Ludwig, are you okay?!"

The Delphin's primary role is to provide ranged support, including Elementalism, from the rear.

But when he saw that Ludwig and Scarlett were in danger, he went deep into the battlefield.

"I'm, I'm fine, I'll get Scarlett to....... faster than me"

"No! Your hand feels weird right now......!"

-Whoosh...

Delphi is too.

Too much.

We're in the deep end.

Suddenly, Ludwig and Delphine felt the sky darken.

The behemoth was already leaping toward them.

"Ludwig! Du......!"

But Ludwig wasn't the one the creature was after.

Leaping over Ludwig, he recognizes a more dangerous presence and attacks.

-Bam!

"Phew!"

Ludwig saw waves of monsters, a giant wolf with hundreds of eyes that leaped over his head and bit Delphine's shoulder blade.

The blue magic that enveloped Delphine's body was crushed, and the wolf's massive teeth sank in.

-No support!

"Del...... pin?"

Delphine's body is crushed by the wolf's teeth.

Ludwig could only watch in disbelief as the death took place in an instant.

-disconnect.......

Delphine Isadra, blood spurting from her mouth, speaks with only the shape of her mouth and the last of her strength.

No elemental power, no Ludwig, no nothing.

In the heat of the moment, I was unable to stop the rush of the great monster.

It was a moment.

It was only for a moment.

But it was a moment that took Delphine Izadra's life far too easily.

Episode 546.

Battlefield Rear Area.

"Your Highness, final checks have been completed."

"Finished this one too."

A place of relative tranquility, even in Hell, with monster cries, human screams, and battle cries and drums all around.

As Adelia debriefed him, Archduke Saint-Thuan looked at the massive array of mechanical devices strewn across the rear.

It's not just Adelia and the Grand Duke of Saint-Thuan.

The wizards of the Duchy of St. Thuan were also bustling about, examining the gigantic mechanical contraption.

"I'm nervous because I've never done a trial maneuver before......."

The Archduke stared stoically at the devices, which to the untrained eye looked like the remains of some great building.

"I think it's going to work."

At Adelia's words, the Archduke nodded in agreement.

Researching on the battlefield is too difficult.

The Archduke and Mages, who were supposed to be on actual operations, worked on this long project on less sleep after the decision was made to end the Alliance.

With Adelia, the girl who created the genius artifact that is the power cartridge.

A talent for magic crafting.

The Grand Duke's daughter also helped create the Power Cartridge, but in the end, the Power Cartridge would not have been created without Adelia.

Reinhard, a demon, gathered the children of the Temple Royal class to create an impossible object.

And less than a year later, things were made.

Moonshine and power cartridges.

It was a vital supply for the Allies at this time.

The arc crystal that Redina is using right now is also a modification of the power cartridge.

The Grand Duke of St. Thuan denied Reinhardt's idea.

But as the devil said, the two objects were made.

As if they knew the future.

Reinhardt knew exactly what the kids were capable of.

If so, other impossible things.

Now that we've made a small one, let's make a big one.

Something bigger than the world's largest man-made object.

Believing that it could be done, the Archduke hatched a plan.

The emperor approved, and the girl who designed the power cartridge cooperated fully.

The Archduke suggested that with a child who had created an impossible object, he could teach him the knowledge and skills of the duchy to accomplish another impossible feat.

And after a lot of trial and error, experimentation, and late nights, this is what we came up with.

"I hope this can continue to help you in the future......."

"I hope so, Your Majesty."

The Archduke was holding a blue orb, and Adelia was holding a red orb.

It is such a powerful weapon that it is not meant to be started by a single person.

Archduke Saint-Thuan, Chief Research Officer.

And Adelia, our lead researcher.

If they don't start together, this artifact doesn't work.

"Go live."

It's an artifact that hasn't even been maneuvered because it's only been inspected until the Serandia campaign begins.

No, I wonder if we can call this an artifact.

-currrrrr

Pieces of a giant organ begin to float into the air.

It wasn't even a building, it was a giant mountain that seemed to be standing up.

-Pajik!

Sparks fly, and the organs attach themselves one by one.

-Bam!

Everyone could only stare in disbelief as the behemoth meshed with a dull thud.

A mountain rises.

Soon enough, the giant parts, interlocking and interlocking with tons of dirt, form a cohesive whole.

A giant, mountain-like golem that supports itself on two massive legs.

A giant whose head is so tall that you can't even see it when you look up to tilt your head back.

Adelia stares at the enormity of the work and says nothing.

"Maneuver confirmed."

"We have a short maneuvering time, so we don't have time to waste. We're going in right away."

"Yes, Your Highness."

-Currrrrrr!

The blue energy core at the heart of the behemoth begins to glow.

-digging support!

The flesh of the Colossus fades from the ends of his limbs, as if fading away.

The flesh of a megalomaniac in the limelight doesn't disappear.

is to move it.

\* \* \*

Same rear region.

From the top of the Arc Crystal, Redina saw something like a giant mountain emerge from the middle of the monster waves in downtown Serandia.

Something appears, enveloped in a blue light.

She had heard that it was coming.

-Currrrrr!

A golem three times the size of the largest monster on this battlefield.

"Is that....... Titan ......?"

The final weapon of the Alliance, created by combining the technological prowess of the Duchy of Saint Thuan with the genius of Adelia.

Titan, the colossus.

Redina could hardly believe her eyes as she watched the behemoth travel through space, even if it was only for a short distance.

No, it's because of its size. In fact, the distance traveled by that behemoth in space is by no means short.

Because of its enormous size, the spatial movement is sequential rather than instantaneous, so it's like watching a behemoth that blends into the space slowly reveal itself.

-Kugugugung!

Redina watched, frozen, as the energy cannons that poured from the behemoth's grasp began to pulverize the monsters.

-Woof!

Any monsters that are not pulverized by the magic cannon are crushed by the colossus' steps and disappear.

-Kuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu

The Colossus turns and stares at the city of Serandia.

The Titan takes a step toward Serandia.

-Thump!

The kneeling Titan faces one of the warp gates spewing out the monsters, his fist raised high in the air and slamming downward.

With destructive, world-shattering physicality.

-Koooooowwww

Redina watched.

A warp gate, albeit a small one, breaks into pieces and disappears.

Redina gazed at the Titan's majesty through clenched teeth, as if she had found hope in despair.

Breakable.

Non-humans can also break warp gates.

Not yet.

"That's it! Kaier! Kaier!"

It's a battlefield where you shouldn't be laughing, but she's found hope, and she cried out, jumping for joy.

"The Titans have smashed the warp gate!"

Kaier was too deep in the heart of the Arc Crystal to see this.

"I can smash a warp gate with a Titan!"

I shouted to make him feel a little bit of this joy.

"Hey, aren't you going to answer me?!"

In the Arc Crystal, they spoke to each other as internal communicators, so it was impossible not to hear them.

The third time I called out, there was no answer.

Then, she realized that the arc crystal wasn't charging its energy balance.

"!"

As if on cue, Redina descended from the Arc Crystal Observatory and made her way to the core.

When the girl descended the tower and made her way to the Arc Crystal's core power source, she found Kaier lying on the ground.

"Ka....... Kaier......?"

Redina's complexion turned bright blue.

\* \* \*

The Titan's startup time was about seven minutes at most.

It takes a lot of horsepower to power a golem of that size, and the Titan was more of a rush job that could no longer be put off before the big battle.

As such, the amount of time the Titans were able to engage in direct combat was only a small fraction of the overall scale of the battle.

But 7 minutes.

The Allies' jaws dropped when they saw what the Titans could do in that time.

Even as the battle raged on, the Titan's majesty was a majestic sight to behold from anywhere on the battlefield.

Monster Waves.

A colossus that intercepts and crushes those waves.

Soldiers, commanders, knights, paladins, and even wizards.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of divinity in the giant Titan's presence.

The call of the priests is answered by the god of Mado, and the behemoth that seems to have descended upon the world tramples and crushes the monsters.

Perhaps one more god should be added to the five major deities.

If the sum total of magic is like that, then magic is the only god in the world.

Watching the great crusher trample and crush the inscrutable scourge, everyone could not help but feel a sense of divinity that had nothing to do with its substance.

-Whoosh!

The Titan slams his raised fist into the ground.

-Currrrrr!

As if a meteorite had fallen, the ground turned over and the Allied soldiers could see the monsters being buried and crushed.

But God's miracles don't last forever.

-Pajik!

After a seven-minute descent into the world, the miracle of Mado disappears in a blaze of blue light, just as it had appeared.

Seven minutes is a short time.

However, time is only as efficient as the beings who use it.

-Charge! Turn around, turn around, turn around!

Titan's seven minutes was enough time to blow a giant hole in the monster wave.

-Dong! dong! dong! dong!

Miracle-struck, the Allied forces began a renewed assault on Serandia.

Monsters have no fear, no morale, and no will.

However, as much as it doesn't make monsters weaker, it doesn't make them stronger either.

Only numbers and sizes.

They alone are the power of the monsters.

That number had dwindled to nothing.

So, the outcome was set in stone.

The Allies have captured Serandia.

\* \* \*

"The Battle of Serandia is over, Your Majesty."

"You made it through the day....... Good."

I was listening to Eleris' report from the Spires of Razak.

You can watch the battle, but there are monsters everywhere and the Alliance is in the middle of it.

I didn't know if I'd clumsily monitor my surroundings and provoke allies or monsters into a battle I didn't need to be in.

I decided not to engage in combat at this point since I had already struck the first blow.

So I stayed in Razak, with only Elise dispatched.

To be more precise, I didn't want to stand by and watch people die over and over again without being able to do anything about it.

You never know when you're going to have a bad day, and if you do, you're going to be out of control.

The Battle of Serandia is over.

With that, the Allies have accomplished one of their goals.

"We've also confirmed that the Titan was activated in this battle."

"How was it?"

"It was an indescribable sight to see ....... It was like the mountains were moving."

Colossal Titan.

There's also a Royal Class garrison and a sarkegar.

So I knew the Allies were working on a war machine project.

Titan is one of them.

It's a war that doesn't pay much attention to security, but magic is a secretive discipline to begin with, so digging up information isn't easy.

A collaboration between Adelia and the Archduke.

It's not that I didn't want to see it with my own eyes.

There was no such thing as a giant weapon in the original. This one ended up being created by a variable.

Arnaka, capital of the Principality of Saint Thuan.

And in the White Palace, Arnaria, almost all of the guards have been replaced by golems.

Herriot disappeared, and the Archduke worked with his daughter's friend, Adelia, to create a giant war machine called the Titan.

Different plots, different stories, and one of the offshoots will be Titan.

I can't even begin to fathom the amount of resources the Empire poured into making it.

"It has a very short maneuvering time, but if improved, it could play a significant role in future battles."

"I suppose."

It's a weapon fit for war.

We had already broken the warp gates with our preemptive strike, so there were relatively fewer gates and monsters for the Allies to deal with.

With the advent of the Titans, combat became even easier.

Compared to the original situation, the allies are stronger, and we were never there in the first place.

Therefore, dealing with the gate situation is an easier situation than the original.

The battles ahead will be harder, but they'll be better than the original.

But an unfathomable number is the same thing.

The fact that immeasurable numbers have survived does not change the fact that immeasurable numbers are dying.

I wonder if someone I know is dead.

Maybe something happened to someone that was irreversible.

"......."

The Allies are victorious.

However, I was afraid to find out the reality of the Allies.

I couldn't help but dread the news from Royal Class.

Episode 547.

All warp gates in Serandia, a large city south of Ryzeln, have been destroyed.

After all, all armies, even Titans, are actually decoys.

Ellen Artorius.

Saviolin Tana.

A force led by them alone would self-destruct in waves of monsters. With so many variables blocking magic, including spatial travel, it was becoming impossible to quickly deploy and escape through magic.

That's why you need others to draw attention to the monsters.

Those who are weaker and can be replenished by death are the bait.

Bait by a cruel dichotomy, they attract the attention of monsters that are more than even Ellen or Savior Tana can handle. They break through the loose monstrous encirclement and maneuver to destroy the warp gate.

In the end, it's the same as taking unimaginable risks with bait and switch or core troops.

Of course, destroying all the warp gates doesn't mean the battle is over.

The occupation of Serandia will not end until the monsters that are already here have been exterminated, and the surrounding lands have been secured.

There was no time to rest for Ellen and other individually powerful fighters.

Even after all of Serandia's warp gates were destroyed, they still had to leave to exterminate the monsters that were swarming around Serandia.

After an arduous march, a terrible battle was fought, and victory was won.

But those who had to fight the hardest battles still couldn't rest.

Throughout Serandia, there were still the cries of monsters and the smoke of burning corpses.

\* \* \*

Casualties are inevitable in war. But the Crusader Knights are the last of humanity's stretched forces.

During and after the battle, the clergy were busy tending to the wounded.

Those who possessed the power to heal wounds were not allowed to rest after battle, but were forced to tend to the wounded.

Like Adriana, the paladins could heal themselves as well as those who were injured.

However, not all wounds can be healed.

To heal someone whose life is in danger, you need a priest who can perform such a miracle, and there aren't many of them.

Just because you have the power to regenerate and heal, doesn't mean you have near-universal access to it.

The number of people dying in the clinics was staggering.

Before the priests could properly close the eyes of the dead, they were forced to turn their attention to other wounded soldiers, with no time to bemoan their lack of power.

"Ludwig!"

"......."

"This is....... What the hell is going on!"

The royalty started rolling in.

"Your arm is......!"

"......."

When Christina saw that Ludwig's right arm was bandaged where it should have been, she covered her mouth and began to freak out.

The snake's venom was deadly.

It gradually petrified Ludwig's arm.

Ludwig's treatment came too late, and he was forced to amputate his arm before the poison could spread further and endanger his life.

But that wasn't what mattered to Ludwig.

Someone who isn't here.

You don't know who won't make it back safely, but you know they won't.

Still, it was time to break the news to everyone.

"Delphine is....... is dead......."

"What......?"

Ludwig's words drowned out the crowd.

A moment of consternation.

And then silence.

"Oh....... No......."

"He died trying to protect me and Scarlett....... He's dead......."

Ludwig muttered to himself.

The snake's venom was deadly, so before finding a priest, Ludwig realized that if the venom spread from his arm to his neck, he would die.

That's why Ludwig cut off his arm.

With my own hands.

Cutting off his own arm, Ludwig carried the stunned Scarlet to the rear of the battlefield in search of the priests.

Not even avenging the monster that crushed Delphine Isadra to death.

I could only look away in tears as the creature devoured the crushed Delphine, then stalked across the battlefield.

He couldn't afford to lose Scarlet, so Ludwig retreated.

No, it ran away.

Scarlett was cowering in the corner of one of the tents, covering her face with both hands and sobbing incessantly.

-Because of me....... Because of me.......

The Royal Class students were also in tears as they watched Scarlett freak out, unable to breathe, and Ludwig, mesmerized.

Crying people.

And Ludwig, unable to cry, stood there, staring at the ground.

Scarlett shows up to save Ludwig from danger.

This put Scarlett in danger, and Delphine saved her.

Ludwig jumps in to rescue Scarlett, who has fallen in the middle of the battlefield.

Round and round and eventually.

Delphine, who had ventured too far in for support, was killed by the monster's attack.

I couldn't even touch it.

Weak.

That's it.

It was a weakness.

"It's all....... It's my fault for being weak......."

Ludwig mumbles something incoherent.

"I was weak....... I did everything wrong......."

Ludwig, who had lost his right arm, stared blankly into space.

\* \* \*

While there are certainly priests who can perform miracles that can reattach severed bodies, there are no priests who can perform miracles that can restore missing body parts.

Therefore, those who have been crippled by physical defects cannot be healed.

Ludwig has lost his right arm and can no longer fight.

You'll be forced to fight using only left-handed numbers, but it will be very different from what you're used to.

Just as so many died, so too did a staggering number of Temple alumni.

The 20,000 or so dead may not seem like much of a bleed compared to the overall Allied numbers, which were in the hundreds of thousands.

It's just a reminder of the battle ahead.

You just don't know how many more people will die in the ensuing battle.

Obviously, the unexpected help reduced the damage, but in the end, no one is going to die.

Just as there were deaths in the Temple, there were bound to be deaths among the very elite Royal Class, as when Ludwig lost his arm.

It was a battle of epic proportions.

Those whose bodies remained were fortunate. They could at least be buried.

The ones who never come back, no matter how much time passes.

Instead of waiting for them, I had to accept the fact that they were dead.

Therapeutic tents for the relatively important.

Redina's complexion was pale, and she stared down at the unconscious man from her bedside.

The teacher checks on Kaier.

The teacher, who had once taught classes at the Temple, including one on magical sensitization, looked at Redina and asked, puzzled.

"Didn't you know......?

'Yeah....... I had no idea.......'

'......Mr. Kaier must have been deliberately silent.'

'.......'

Redina could only stare blankly down at the pale-faced Kaier.

It was just after the battle, so the garrison had an air of victory and death, and this tent was no exception.

How much time has passed.

"ugh......."

"......."

Redina bit her lip as Kaier frowned, coming to his senses.

Kaier suddenly lost consciousness, and when he came to, he was dumbfounded that he had realized what was happening.

"Seo, you can't be....... Did I pass out?"

"Uh."

"Oh, no, no, no, I did the best I could....... I didn't do it because I wanted to....... I didn't do it because I wanted to......."

Kaier's face went white as he realized that Redina, who was always so quick to pamper and pat him on the back, was going to yell and throw a temper tantrum this time.

Because that's how it was for the most part.

And since he was unconscious during a very important battle, he wouldn't have been able to use the Arc Crystal properly.

In fact, after sending Kaier to the medical doctor, Redina had used up all the energy in her Arc Crystal and could no longer aid in the fight.

Naturally, I was speechless.

I don't know how many more people I could have saved if I hadn't fainted.

Kaier thought so too, feeling sorry for himself for passing out, and thinking that there was nothing he could do about Redina's temper tantrum.

Even Redina's expression was grim.

Not sure what to say, Kaier swallows hard.

"What, you didn't tell me?"

"......what?"

Redina was furious.

However, this time it was a little different.

"He says you're dying from overdoing it, Mr. Teacher."

"......."

That made Kaier's jaw drop.

But Redina stays still and looks at Kaier.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"......."

Their magic is enormous, and their healing speed is far beyond that of normal people.

But unless you have unlimited magic, there are limits, and using magic is a red herring that can be used up in an instant.

There were a few times when Kaier would collapse from exhaustion. But Redina hadn't realized that would be the cost of drawing life.

The chae-geun, bo-cham, and screaming behavior so far.

Little did Redina know that she was gnawing at Kai'er's life.

"So....... me....... Did you really want to make me that bad? You could have told me. No matter how bad I was, no matter how much I was being a bitch to you. If I knew you were doing that to me, would I....... Do you think I would have kept doing it the way I've been doing it? Why....... Why didn't you tell me?"

Redina's lips were trembling.

She didn't realize what she was doing wrong or what she was pushing until it was too late.

Kaier did not tell Ledina that he was dying.

What I didn't tell you is that I'm gnawing at my life for more horsepower, having drawn it to the limit.

Kaier stares at Redina in silence.

"You're not the only one who feels bad about people dying."

"......."

"If you know this, you won't be thinking about it in the heat of battle."

We only do it because we know that in exchange for a shortened lifespan, we can save someone else who deserves to die.

"It's just, it is what it is."

Clearly, Redina is troubled when she begins to think that what she's using might not just be mana, but magic that was forged from Kai'er's life.

Even now, some troops are being supported and others are being abandoned.

If the number of people killed in the aftermath of a spell is less than the number of people it can save, she believes it should be done.

Add to that Kai'er's life, and Redina has even more to give up.

Just as Redina screamed at Kaier because she cared about people's lives, Kaier didn't tell Redina what he needed to tell her because he cared about people's lives.

"I'm not going to die right away anyway."

I don't want you to hesitate.

With her lips pursed, Redina's eyes fill with tears.

"Bullshit......."

It's a hierarchy that is firmly out of whack.

They are absolute to each other, but they hate each other.

"If you die, I'll be useless. Save your life for ......."

"That would make the arc crystals obsolete."

Redina rolled her eyes at Kaier's self-deprecating comment.

"Why do horses do that?"

"Didn't you always say, you don't need me, you just need the power cartridge. I'm just a more efficient power cartridge."

Their relationship had been swallowed up by the hateful words.

Every word I said out of anger, resentment, and frustration became an indelible scar.

"It's nice when a lowly bastard who can't even manipulate magic can save a life, right?"

In the midst of Redina's tirade, Kai was not unharmed.

It couldn't be good.

Kaier's self-loathing was already at an all-time high.

Seeing Kaier like that, Redina's eyes fill with regret.

"I was....... I meant to. I meant to say....... I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't....... I've been bad. I've been wrong. I've been bad. I've been too hard on you. I'm sorry....... I'll apologize. So don't say that....... Don't push yourself....... I'm sorry....... I'm sorry I was so....... Oh, brother....... I'm sorry......."

"Shut up."

"......."

"Let's keep doing what we're doing."

Anything in between.

No matter what they think of each other.

"Like I said, I'm not dying right now."

Now, there's no turning back.

Episode 548.

Bertus travels back and forth between the ecliptic and Allied positions.

But this was a special case, and Bertus watched the battle from start to finish.

Despite the pleas of his vassals that he should return to the ecliptic because of the danger, Bertus watched.

I saw monsters sweeping the battlefield, tons of magic, falling monsters and humans.

"6 minutes and 47 seconds......."

And the Titan's first maneuver.

Archduke Saint-Antoine, the head of research, and Adelia, who had been virtually instrumental in the Titan's design, stood before Bertus.

Neither of them had yet heard the news of what had happened to their classmates.

"This whole war has been a very short period of time, and it's amazing how the tide can turn in such a short amount of time....... I wonder if that's what war is all about."

"......."

"I'll try to extend the maneuvering time a bit more, Your Majesty......."

Adelia said in a fidgety, creeping voice in front of Bertus.

"I'm not criticizing you. That was great. No, it was great. If you're running Titan too long and it's causing catastrophic permanent damage, that's more of a problem. I'd rather see it run for such a short time."

"Well, is that......."

"We can't afford to build another Titan, and if it's destroyed, there will be no next one."

It was an empire-building project.

Even at the height of the Empire's power, such an enormous investment of resources would never have been authorized for such a weapon of war.

This was a war for the fate of humanity, and no matter how successful they were, they could no longer afford to delegate power to a mage barely twenty years old.

As far as magical materials go, the Empire can no longer afford to build golems that are even half the size of the Titans that currently exist.

This means that if you run a Titan long enough that it is permanently destroyed, you can't recreate it.

Adelia couldn't help but feel depressed at Bertus' words, thinking that she could have saved more lives if she'd had more time to maneuver.

Materials are more important than people.

Titans are not human.

However, if you have to trade a Titan for an Allied division, you have to do it.

Weapons of war are more important than people.

So when Bertus said that it was more important to keep the Titans alive to the end of this war than to keep them alive long enough to save lives, there was a brutal logic to his words that was both grimly realistic and undeniably cruel.

Bertus looks away from Adelia and toward the Grand Duke of Saint-Antoine.

"What about the corruption rate?"

"There was approximately 14 percent external frame damage."

Bertus narrowed his eyes at that.

"That much?"

It was only up and running for a little under 7 minutes.

No matter how intense the short battle, Bertus couldn't help but feel a bitter taste in his mouth at how damaged the Titan was.

"We designed the Titan to have an inner armor and an outer armor. The Titan is wearing a core frame with an outer layer of armor. As long as the inner frame is intact, the outer frame can take any amount of damage and self-repair. You can think of it as wearing a self-repairing sheet metal armor."

"I'm glad to hear that ...... is being repaired."

It's a golem designed for the long haul, not a one-off, and it's so damned big that it risks collapsing on itself.

Bertus breathes a sigh of relief when I tell him that the Titan's exoskeleton is practically a buffer zone and repairs itself.

If it's a full-blown weapon project and you're only going to use it a few times, it's not going to hold up.

"Anyway, I wish you both the best of luck in your future endeavors to maintain and improve Titan."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Yes, Niet!"

Listening to their answers, Bertus sat back in his chair.

"The Archduke would like to speak with me for a moment."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Adelia returned home, and only Archduke Saint-Thuan remained in Bertus's barracks.

I hear the cries of monsters in the distance.

The occupation of Serandia was not over. The army would need another four days to properly rest.

Clear the perimeter, secure it, and set up a garrison.

Long marches and battles never come to an end.

"......."

"......."

Bertus was silent for a moment, listening to the sounds outside.

The Grand Duke of St. Thuan was silent.

"Archduke, do you think the Titans would have been better off with Herriot?"

"......."

"What do you think?"

At the sudden mention of his youngest daughter, the Archduke stares at the Emperor in silence.

He wasn't smiling, and his expression wasn't all that stern.

Herriot de Saint-Ouen.

It's as sensitive a topic as the Devil, and certainly more so for the Archduke.

The Archduke has a lot to live with for what his youngest daughter did.

Just as the Emperor doesn't seem particularly outraged or reprimanded, the Archduke doesn't show any emotion at the mention.

The Archduke was never a very expressive person, but after his daughter disappeared with the demon, he became even less so.

The Emperor's Question.

Titans.

And the existence of the youngest daughter.

"I don't know."

That was all the Archduke had to say.

"Because I don't know what you mean by 'better made' - if you're talking about longer maneuvering times, or more weapons, or a stiffer inner and outer skeleton, or something like that, then I suppose that's possible, but if, as you say, a Titan breaks after a long run, I don't know if that's what you'd call well made."

Bertus laughed at the Archduke's words.

"I see, maybe we don't need to improve Titan."

"I can't help it if you think it's an excuse for a technician who didn't make it right."

"Not at all, I don't see why I would."

Bertus crosses his arms and leans back.

"The reason I'm bothering to tell you this is because I'm not going to give you a medal when I could just give you a picture of it."

The emperor gives a short tongue-lashing.

"I can give it to Adelia, but I can't give it to the Grand Duke. Or any of the duchy's wizards."

"I am aware, Your Majesty."

Sins committed.

I don't know if it should be called a sin, but people think it is.

Adelia didn't create Titan alone, but it will be her own.

Everyone knows that the Grand Duke and the Duchy of St. Thuan have been involved, but they will see it as a gift of technology to pay for their sins.

The Archduke was neither sorry nor angry. He had no interest in such things in the first place.

"There's no point in talking about this now, because we'll have to wait until the war is over before we can talk about the balls and talk about the awards, but I just wanted to tell you that when you can't even get a medal for something like this, people are going to be horrified to know that one of the keys to this weapon is in the hands of an archduke."

"I see."

Bertus stares blankly at the ceiling of the tent at the Archduke's nonchalant response.

"Scared people do strange things, and if you use them well, and draw them in, you can create an empire....... If people know there's a killer living next door, they're going to flock to the house and set it on fire."

"Like we invaded Darklands, whether or not they attacked humanity."

"Whether your neighbor is a murderer or not, isn't it possible that he could start a fire?"

"Likewise."

"Whether the Grand Duke is a collaborator of the Devil or not, people can set fire to his tents, to the Duchy of Saint-Thuan."

"The Alliance saw the Titans crush the monster today, and we know that one of the keys is in the hands of the Archduke."

"Archduke."

"Watch out for scared people."

"I'm sorry that's all I can say."

The terrified.

Those who looked upon the archduke in awe became afraid of him.

In the raids, terrified humans drove their loved ones into the cult and slaughtered them.

He hates the Archduke because he doesn't know where the Devil is, and he doesn't know where his youngest daughter, who followed him, is.

For all the afterthoughts, the Archduke had no reason or inclination to explain.

So far, the Archduke has been a great help in the war. And today, the Archduke was a decisive help.

But the weight of that help is so great that it makes people fear the archduke.

Titans.

It will be afraid of what will happen if it tries to step on the Allies.

The Archduke might have other ideas.

People who are frightened themselves may say and do strange things out of fear.

The emperor was warning against it.

There are no prizes.

They're just a bunch of sinners.

"You may return to your duchy if you wish."

"I guess we'll have to leave the keys to the Titan behind."

"......Yes, I'm afraid I can't help you with that."

The Emperor cannot reward the Archduke, but he can give him a chance.

A chance to back out of this war.

No one recognizes the honor of an archduke anyway.

It will even become dangerous. So, the more you march, the more you give those who should be feared, despised, or hated a chance to step aside.

On the contrary, the allies will be pleased.

The archduke who created the dangerous weapon is abdicating himself.

It would weaken their power, but it would also mean that the Titan's achievements would be stolen by other wizards who would open their eyes to the vision of the Duchy of Saint-Tuan.

Material and intellectual gains are secondary in the face of death.

You've risked your life, you can't take honor, you've made history, and now you can go home.

This is a huge concession for an emperor who needs to be more moderate with his power.

The archduke didn't think long.

"Your Majesty, I know that many people hate me."

"I know there are a lot of people who are afraid of me."

"There must have been a lot of anger, hatred, and disdain behind their words, and I never refuted them, responded to them, or offered any clarification."

"But I didn't do it because I admit I'm guilty."

Archduke Saint-Antoine looks at Emperor Bertus.

"I'm not in it for the payback, and I've never thought of it that way."

"......."

Many speak of the Archduke's mistakes, sins, and misdeeds.

But just because you didn't refute him doesn't mean he admitted guilt.

There is not the slightest guilt in my heart, the Archduke says confidently.

"Unjustified hatred and reprimands for sin cannot influence my decision in the slightest; honor is something that exists within me, and I am the only one who can judge its impairment."

"So, Your Majesty, no matter what delusions they may have to hate and fear me, I am only acting out of honor and conviction. Just as I didn't go to war because they wanted me to pay for the sins of my youngest daughter, and I didn't create the Titans."

"I'm only doing it because I believe it's the right thing to do."

"So unless the purpose of the war is wrong, I and my soldiers will stay put."

"That's been my family's teaching for generations, and I just follow it, not always, but I follow it."

Walk the straight and narrow.

The Emperor stares at Archduke Saint-Thuan, who says that he has made up his mind that he has no intention of being swayed by the words and principles of the world.

I'd call it arrogant.

No matter what the world says, it's not wrong and it's not a sin unless you recognize it as wrong.

Follow the path you believe is right, no matter what the world demands, not the path someone tells you to take.

It's a family tradition.

This war is right.

So he stays put, because he has no fault or guilt in his heart.

Because it's right.

Shiloh.

No matter how the world sees you, no matter how you judge your behavior. Isn't that exactly the same attitude as that of Herriot de Saint-Etienne, who followed Reinhardt?

"If that's what you decide, I'm all for it, but I can't promise you that I'll be able to protect the Archduke and his soldiers."

"No problem, Your Majesty."

The Emperor's words didn't seem to bother the Archduke, as if it was his own business.

Bertus gave the Archduke a chance. But he blew it.

He's made a decision based on his convictions, and even if it brings him down, he's made a choice. Bertus realizes that no matter what happens, the Archduke will not blame him.

"Well, I guess that wraps it up for now, thank you for your continued support."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

An Archduke's business is an Archduke's business.

If you can't do your own thing, you're the one who's going to die blaming yourself for your lack of ability.

Or should I say, a man of conviction and pride.

To the man who deserved to be called a loner, the emperor no longer offered any other options. They wouldn't listen.

It's an aristocratic attitude.

Bertus realized how long it had been since he'd seen it.

"Finally."

"......."

Seeing the Archduke about to retreat, Bertus called out to him one last time.

"Do you mind if I make one more excuse?"

"Yes."

Bertus wanted to ask.

"Does the Archduke think he has raised his daughter wrong?"

Someone who doesn't mix public opinion with their own judgment.

Bertus wondered what the Archduke thought of his missing daughter.

The Grand Duke said he felt no guilt.

You think your daughter's sins are her sins, not yours.

Does she really think her daughter hasn't sinned.

Bertus wondered about that.

"......."

The Archduke was silent for a moment, his back to me.

After a moment of silence, the Archduke opens his mouth in a calm tone.

"I may have raised it wrong."

The words startled Bertus slightly. He hadn't expected the Archduke to say that.

"By the way, it's not the wrong size."

However, the Archduke's next words were even more surprising.

"Ha, ha, ha....... Hahahaha......."

It's not something to say in front of the emperor. It's a sensitive statement that can cause a lot of political problems. It's like saying the daughter of the devil is right.

What the Archduke told his daughter was not the truth.

That if I were to be reborn, if I were to go back to that moment, I would make the same choices and regret them as I did the day the heavens opened.

I can only take his word for it.

I am convinced that my daughter could not have been raised to be a person who could say such things.

"Actually....... I think so too."

Bertus chuckled at the bombshell, and agreed with the Archduke.

Episode 549.

Fourth day after the occupation of Serandia.

I can only say that the Allied garrison was bizarre, with a mixture of elation and jubilation at victory and despair and sorrow at death.

Praise for victory and mourning for the dead were intermingled.

The Allies had to stop, not just to get through the winter, but to clean up the aftermath of the battle.

If the bodies were somehow recovered, they had to be identified and transferred to the appropriate military for proper burial.

Delphine Izadra's body was not among them.

In the first place, it was always going to be a battle to find more bodies than not.

-Diverse

And the best of the Alliance, including Ellen, Saviorin Tana, and Heinrich, who hadn't been able to rest properly after the battle and had left to secure the safety of nearby Serandia, were finally able to return.

"Rest, Heinrich. The Allies will winter in Serandia."

Louise von Schwarz also made it to the master class, so it's only fitting that she's back after slaying some monsters.

"My sister....... I'm going to see my friends for a while and then....... for a while?"

At Heinrich's words, Louise stops and looks at him.

Friends.

You want to make sure your friends are safe in this war.

Confirming someone's death would be overwhelming enough on its own.

"Some things are better left unknown......."

But before she could continue, Louise was interrupted.

I was wondering if I was being too childish.

Whatever happened, you'd know anyway.

Better late than never.

"Yeah, you'll have to see for yourself. You have plenty of time, you can stay there for a few days."

"......Thank you."

Death is everywhere, and even if you're in the Cernstadt military headquarters, you still have to face it.

"But my sister is....... don't you?"

At Heinrich's hesitant question, Louise shook her head.

"As a commander, you have to do what you have to do."

Although she wasn't physically in combat, Ruiz had a lot of work and people to take care of.

Now that I had killed two brothers with my own hands, I had more work to do.

Louise sits on her horse and looks out over Serandia and its environs, seeing nothing but dead bodies everywhere.

Huge, inexplicable pits all over the place.

Look carefully at the crater.

The things everyone knows are weird, but no one asks the high command.

What are those traces?

The vast traces of destruction that were already there when the Allies arrived, and at whose hands.

"......."

Louise returns to the Cernstadt military garrison with the Templars.

\* \* \*

Some were visibly dead.

Delfin Izadra, a sophomore, died.

Kadina Ein, freshman, A-10, is dead.

But even if someone didn't visibly confirm death, someone who didn't return for a long time was dead.

That was the case for junior Ard de Gritis.

Ard, who had dueled Reinhardt, now a demon, did not return until several days after the battle.

The third graders, including Adriana and Redina, who had been waiting for their long-lost classmate, were devastated to learn that Ard had died.

-He'll come back! He might be in another garrison! Why do you think he's dead? He might not be!

-Rudina....... Please.......

Tears poured down Redina's cheeks as she hated the world, and Adriana let out a stifled groan and cried as she held Redina close.

Unable to accept Ard's heart, Adriana once left the Temple.

She couldn't accept it, but to Adriana, Ard was a dear friend and comrade-in-arms.

I couldn't help but mourn its death.

The Royal Class is a small group, and most of them are fairly skilled fighters, so there were no more casualties or missing persons.

It was inevitable that there would be casualties in the lower grades.

The first years had already lost three to this war, and with the death of Kadina Ein in this battle, they now had the lowest number of all the grades.

Since the Royal Class is a small group, it was inevitable that someone's death would be more devastating.

The funeral was organized by teachers and priests.

The bodies of Delphine Izadra and Ard de Grytis were never found, except for Cadina Ein.

Ludwig knew the moment he saw her die that he would never find Delphine's body.

Finding Delphine's body, torn to shreds, would be even more horrifying.

Delphine had awakened a rare power, the only power in the world, the power of Elementalism, and it was a death so bizarre it was almost comical.

As such, no one was safe on this battlefield.

Some were weeping over the death of someone else, and others were feeling some strange sense of fate that one day they too might have to meet that end.

Ludwig, bandaged where his right arm used to be, stares blankly at the funeral.

Scarlett, too, was slumped over, tears streaming down her face as she watched the bodiless funeral.

-Yuck! Yuck! Yuck! Yuck!

Christina and Louis Ankton were comforting Scarlett, who was gasping for air, barely able to breathe.

Scarlett is almost as miserable as Ludwig.

Scarlett saved Ludwig, but Ludwig lost his arm when he jumped in to save himself from being knocked out, and eventually Delphine lost her life as well.

Scarlett couldn't help but feel that it was all her fault.

The guilt had gotten the better of Scarlett, and she'd gone so far as to choke herself in her dorm room that Ellen had to jump in and restrain her.

Just like that.

Someone is dead and unable to fight.

Others have been irreparably injured and are no longer able to fight.

Ludwig was the latter.

Ludwig, who had lost his arm, stared blankly at the empty funeral.

Delfin Izadra.

Along with Lanyon Sessor, he was Ludwig's first friend.

Lanion Sesor stared at the bodyless funeral with blank eyes.

Everyone is precious, but I couldn't help but call them especially precious.

Ludwig spent the most time with Delphine and Lanyon.

We traveled together, we argued, but at the end of the day, they were the most important people in my life.

We lost one of them.

Weak.

You lost because you were weak.

Ludwig and Scarlett would have died in that battle without Delphine.

Someone had to die trying to save each other.

Ludwig looks out over the crowd of people watching the funeral in a daze.

Heinrich von Schwarz, who had been transferred to the Cernstadt army, was also present at the funeral, looking on with a stern expression.

Heinrich could have saved Scarlett's life by blasting her from the waist down as soon as the giant monster appeared. If Scarlett had fallen in the middle of the monsters, he could have destroyed the area and pulled her out.

No, I would have blown up the mind-controlling monster with a wave of my hand.

You don't need to be a psychic.

Even the best wizards can do this.

This happened because we were in a vacuum where the wizards stopped supporting us.

You can't blame the wizards. They weren't there to support them, so they had to be saved by people elsewhere.

It doesn't have to be magic.

If it were Ellen, she would have cut them down with her holy sword.

You don't have to be a warrior with a holy sword.

Even if it was just a master class.

If only I could have put an auror on my sword, if only I could have resisted a little longer.

It's not the fault of those who didn't help.

Someone died and got hurt trying to save you, and it's all your fault.

Because it's weak.

Weakness is a sin.

In a battlefield where violence is the only good thing, the inability to wield that violence means that the amount of violence you can wield is so meager that it may not even protect what you already have.

So it's a sin.

It's all my fault.

Ludwig looks at his right arm, which is empty.

Weakness is a sin.

Weaker.

"......."

Without his right arm, Ludwig can still power up, but he can't do everything he's seen, learned, and experienced in the same way.

You lost because you were weak, you're weaker, and you're going to lose more.

In fact, it may be impossible to participate at all.

Is this it?

To save my friend, I risked the misery of running away and ignoring his death.

Does it get any more miserable than that?

I tried, but I couldn't help it.

I'm done here.

Because I lost my arm.

And that's it.

No.

Is it really?

Suddenly.

Ludwig remembers something he heard a long time ago.

"I'm going to lose, but I'm going to do my best" is like a ready-made excuse for defeat: "But I tried, so I'll do better next time." Isn't that just giving your defeated self an escape hatch?

The culprit in all of this.

The days when you thought he was just a hard worker.

A time when you could even say you respected it.

The day I asked him to teach me because I thought I was at a disadvantage in a tournament, he said.

Ludwig doesn't know if the demon was hiding his power or not.

Revenge for all of this is not yours. The world is full of people who are better than you.

The only thing he was allowed to do was kill the monster, and he couldn't even do that, so he lost Delphine and his right arm.

The Devil is a hateful creature, and if he could, he would wish for a chance to avenge himself, but he doesn't.

Hate the devil.

But those words.

There's a lot of truth in the saying, "Don't make excuses that set you up for defeat.

You've lost your arm, that's it.

I am the limit.

I can't do that anymore.

That doesn't make anything better.

Trust even when you don't get results.

It's about fighting to win, even when you lose.

You said it would make things a little better.

You can't go wrong with that, no matter who the devil is.

I don't have a right arm.

I still have my left arm.

We've lost Delphine, but if we give up here, we'll lose someone else, and we'll have to face another round of helplessness.

Ludwig looks away from the funeral and rises from his seat.

He turned to the armory and grabbed his sword with his left hand.

It was an unfamiliar sensation.

Without his right arm, he is unbalanced.

You may or may not be able to fight with only your left arm.

'Yes.......'

You don't need to say you'll try.

"Reinhardt.

Ludwig clumsily grips the sharpened sword and points it at the air.

At some point, I got back into that mindset.

Me.

For me.

What I can do is.

That's it.

I was back to living in the mindset of a loser.

Weakened in mind, weakened in practice.

In the face of so much despair and fear, Ludwig regressed to his old mindset of wanting only small satisfactions.

That's why it was weak.

I know you can't be as strong as your mind, but a small mind can only give you so much power.

If so, make it bigger.

Not like this.

Be a little more ambitious, even if the outcome is predetermined.

You can't do everything, but you should think you can.

The culprit behind all of this.

All these expressions of sadness, hate, and despair.

I let go of all the ideas I'd given up on because I thought it was Ellen's role.

He's lost his right arm and only has his left, but Ludwig is determined.

You're no match for the devil.

You can't reach him now that he's in the sky.

As they say, make resolutions for victory, not excuses for defeat, and that's impossible with excuses prepared for defeat.

No, it's not even a defeat.

They don't think they can fight, so it's an excuse to run away.

Let go of those excuses, let go of that cowardice, let go of that resignation.

'I am.......'

In the words of the devil.

"No.

Recalling the teachings of the devil.

"I.

Ludwig vows to himself.

"I'm killing you.

\* \* \*

The moment Ludwig turned away from the funeral, gripped his sword with his left hand, and vowed not to give up.

Ellen sat dazed in her barracks.

Ellen was the last to hear about the deaths of her classmates and predecessors. She would be the last to return.

The command called the battle a major victory.

A huge win, too.

The Serandia assault ended with less damage than expected, as the Titans were completed in time.

If future battles are like this, we could see a complete end to the gate crisis.

But behind the triumphs, there were horrors. Ellen couldn't figure out what a victory was.

"......."

Someone is going to die, and these funerals will happen after every battle.

I'm glad I died less, that's for sure.

But it was clear that someone was dying, and it had to be someone Ellen knew.

Unable to bear to watch the funeral, Ellen went into the barracks.

It's not because I'm afraid of sensing the death of my classmates and predecessors.

"Only me......."

Ellen covers her face with both hands, muttering to herself.

After watching and witnessing so many deaths, and facing the news of those she knew who were now dead, Ellen could only break down.

"If it weren't for me....... If it wasn't for me....... but......."

It should have been dead.

He should have been killed by Radia Schmidt in the blizzardy castle of Epeeax.

Due to my over-exuberance, I reached the master class on the spot.

So I survived.

So this is what happened.

If he had been killed on the spot, he would never have pursued Reinhardt's truth, and after revealing him to be the Devil, things got twisted and tangled, and the Gate Crisis erupted.

If he had died in the castle of Epirus, the truth would not have been revealed, and there would have been no misunderstanding.

I was guilty of not trusting Reinhardt.

So it was a sin to not die where you were supposed to die.

If you're dead in the water in EpiPax.

If only you hadn't gone to the temple in the first place.

If I didn't love Reinhardt.

If you were indifferent from the beginning and didn't care until the end.

Or, if he'd said anything about trusting Reinhardt.

It was too good to be true, but there were others who believed.

The son of a demon who died fighting his brother.

It was hard to believe him, but I wish I had.

This would not have happened.

All of this sadness and tragedy comes from them, and they don't even realize that they are the cause.

Scarlett strangled herself at the thought of blaming herself for all of Delphine's deaths and Ludwig's injuries, and Ellen restrained her.

I stopped myself from choking on my own tortured breath.

But as she watched, Ellen realized that she was suffering from an even more self-destructive impulse than Scarlett.

The guilt is so great that it eventually reaches Ellen's mind.

Like me.

I wish I'd never been born.

If you weren't born, none of this would have happened in the first place, so maybe it's your fault for existing.

"If it were only me....... If only I wasn't....... shouldn't have been......."

Ellen eventually urged Scarlett to stop, but she was left alone in the barracks with a constant stream of self-deprecation.

No demons, no warriors, no emperors, no empresses.

Everyone thinks they're the one who turned back the hourglass of doom.

As the war raged, the self-pity only intensified.

\* \* \*

I wonder if this is what it feels like to be hit in the head with a hammer.

"That's ridiculous."

I couldn't help but freeze up at Sarkegar's report.

"......Are you sure you're not looking at the wrong thing?"

"...... Your Highness, we can't afford to pass this information around."

The Royal Class situation, as told to me by Sarkozy.

Ard, who got into a fight with me at the beginning of the semester, is missing.

Disappearance is death.

And first-year Kadina Ein is dead.

Delfin Izdra has died.

Ludwig lost his right arm.

I was dreading hearing about Royal Class, but I couldn't resist checking it out.

Delphine should have survived to the end.

Ludwig dies at the end, but he doesn't lose his arm.

I froze when I heard the news.

The death of someone.

And fatal, irreversible injuries.

I knew that the variable made it impossible to know who was going to die or live.

But you realize it in the form of someone's death and catastrophic injury.

Is this what could happen to Ludwig?

Delphine is dead.

Does this mean that Ludwig can die in battle at any time?

Or does Ludwig have no role at all anymore?

Is that okay?

Is this what happened to Ludwig because I have an Alsbringer?

I didn't take it away.

But in the end, Alsbringer chose me.

That's why Ludwig lost his arm.

The guy who was supposed to be the protagonist ended up in the back of the story, unable to fight anymore.

I've taken too much from him.

Episode 550.

Delfin Izadra.

I wouldn't say we were close, but we were classmates and after the desert island mission, he kept flirting with me.

The guy who should have survived to the end, and one of the two main heroines, is dead.

So vainly.

Unable to fight anymore, Ludwig is likely to stay away from fighting.

If this means that Ludwig, who was supposed to die in the original, survives a non-battle ending, I wonder if that's a good thing.

Now that I've taken on Ludwig's role, I think he deserves to live.

We don't know what Ludwig's vacancy will look like, and we don't know if he'll lose his role in the war.

Or maybe they're still trying to fight.

But in that case, Ludwig will most likely die.

It would be foolish to lose your right arm and try to fight with your left.

I hope he doesn't dream of such a thing, but there's no telling how reality will roll now.

I heard a shocking revelation from the Royal Class side, and after all, I couldn't be the only one.

Harriet, Liana, and Charlotte.

When they heard the news of the royal class, they couldn't help but make faces.

Charlotte cried for a long time when she heard of Delphine's death and Ludwig's injury. To her, they were classmates in the same B class, and she would never be able to hear the story as if it were someone else's.

Harriet couldn't hold back her tears, and Riana was speechless.

But there's no point in mourning.

We eventually had to take the next step, and there was too much work to be done to stop.

Tears should be swallowed inwardly.

I tried not to consciously think about the Royal Class thing, and didn't mention it.

Not mentioning it doesn't make it go away, but no one talked about it, even though we had agreed not to mention it to each other.

\* \* \*

The Allies will winter in Serandia.

If it's a climate problem, we can fix it, but Riana's powers are mind-eating.

We can't always help the Allies, so it was okay for them to winter in Serandia.

It's not just the weather; you've just faced a major battle, and you'll need time to repair and refurbish your army.

We won't be able to forget someone's death this winter, but I hope we can get through it.

"The Allies will be inactive for a while, so we won't be either."

The time of year is winter.

If the Allies don't move, there's not much reason for us to move.

We're at war, or should I say, we're in a war, but eventually there will be a few months off.

The Allies would have time to reorganize, improving their Titans in preparation for the next advance, and trying to deal with the shock, horror, and grief of so many deaths.

"Great One, is it not necessary to have a countermeasure against the Titans?"

"......Countermeasures?"

"Yes."

Antirrhinus said.

"You are the only one who has seen the Titan in person, but I have heard that he is the size of a mountain and can crush hundreds of monsters with a single step. Is there any reason to believe that step will not be directed at us?"

"They don't know where we are in the first place. Even if they did, do you really think a Titan would cross the ocean to get here?"

I don't know if the Titan is big enough to walk across the ocean, but I don't think it will.

"There's always a what if, right?"

"Hmmm......."

For now, we're helping the Allies, but we don't know when war will break out.

Let's say a Titan and I are fighting.

Me fighting a golem as big as a mountain.

I'm getting shy just thinking about it.

Come to think of it, I think there was a game like that.

"We don't think it's a bad idea to have a weapon similar to the Titan either......."

I sighed at Antony's words.

I see where this guy is coming from.

"You don't just want to have a Titan or something, do you?"

"......Hmm, isn't that interesting, a giant golem that never existed in the world."

and.

The look on that old man's face, like, "I've been caught," makes me think there's something in there.

Is this a joke?

I mean, this old guy is not a kid, and he's saying this with the mindset of approaching some kind of toy?

Has dementia finally set in?

I had a sneaking suspicion, but is it true?

"Hey, Harriet, do you think we could build something like a Titan?"

"If you have the plans and the materials, there's nothing you can't build. But you don't have the plans, and even if you did, you don't have the materials."

"That's a part of Titan that already exists......."

"Shut up, old man, I'm not building a Titan, and I'm not going to steal it."

"That's too bad......."

Antirhynchus was getting a lot of frustrated looks from the wrong places.

"If you pull some bullshit about how you've suddenly stolen control of Titan, I'm going to make you feel what it's like to be decapitated by a holy sword for real this time, so don't you dare."

Antrianus chuckled at my harshness and nodded in understanding.

I don't know what that old man is going to do, and I'm not at all comfortable with it.

"But, Your Majesty. Antrianus' words about the need for a countermeasure against the Titans seem reasonable."

Antirrhinus's futile rantings eventually reached Sarkhegar, who returned to Edina.

"Why the hell would you fight something like that? It's just a bunch of unintelligent monsters, and we see it and we charge at it. We have intelligence and we can think. If there's a Titan in front of you, you run. Why would you even think about fighting it?"

"But what if the Titans come across the ocean and end up here? We can't abandon this place."

"What's wrong with your sister!"

"No, am I wrong, you're right."

Eventually, even Olivia sighed heavily with worry.

I mean, we know we're going to clash with the empire later on, but why is everyone taking it like it's a foregone conclusion?

But.......

Right?

Let's say the war breaks out, and you've solved the uptime problem.

Let's say a Titan crosses the continent and raids Edina.

Then what?

Titans are supposed to have as much defense as they do offense in the first place, right?

I can't make mountains out of molehills, and neither can anyone else here.

Should I smash it with a meteor?

My thoughts were shifting toward the need to have a Titan plan.

"If we assume that ...... can't travel through space, then the Titan can't even get here."

It wasn't me who came up with the answer, it was Charlotte.

"......? Why can't you come?"

"I haven't seen it, but I hear the Titan is big."

"Uh, a lot."

"I don't think a chunk that big can cross the ocean properly, and you'll be lucky if it doesn't get swept away by the currents. Don't take the ocean too seriously."

"......, right?"

"And we have mermaids."

"What's a mermaid got to do with a Titan?"

"Mermaids can manipulate ocean currents."

"......? Really?"

"......Didn't you know?"

This is the first I've heard of this today.

Charlotte seemed surprised that I didn't know.

"I heard the mermaids had a lot to do with the smooth sailing from Edina to Port Mokna so far. I don't know what they did with the weather, but they manipulated the currents to help us sail."

Since I don't encounter mermaids in person very often, I assumed that they would bring me fish, but apparently not.

Charlotte's so concerned with ruling Edina that she seems to have learned something I didn't. The demons recognize her as a demon, so she's probably treated as an equal to me.

Mermaids....... They weren't just pretty girls.

It was like a succubus or something.

Excellent.

I picked the right person.

Of course, I wonder if it's just me not knowing what I need to know.

"Anyway, if the Titan tries to cross the ocean and attack us, the mermaids will capture it and it won't be able to get here by spatial travel in the first place."

Antirrhynchus was obviously thinking about capturing the Titans, and Sarkegar and Olivia were relieved to hear that they weren't going to be attacked.

"Anyway, we'll just have to reorganize until the Allies leave, which isn't going to happen yet, but we also have to think about what we'll do if they run out of food......."

The Allied forces will have to operate large groups for very long periods of time, so there is a possibility of food shortages.

I'm not sure how much we can do about it if that happens.

While the Alliance takes time to reorganize, we need to find something to do.

"Reinhard, we need to augment our forces."

"Power up?"

Olivia said.

"Replenishment, not augmentation. We used up a lot of Deathknight in the Serandia campaign, too."

Death Knight.

Olivia, who has access to Kier's Holy Power, can summon Deathknights, and they were a big part of our last Serandia preemptive attack.

"I thought you could summon that thing at any time?"

"......what."

and.

I haven't seen that look on your face in a long time.

A genuinely pitiful look.

"You can replenish your Death Knights, of course. Or summon Deathknights at will. But it's all about the base, isn't it?"

"Bass?"

"So, is it stronger to make Deathknight from Reinhardt, or is it stronger to make Deathknight from that kid over there?"

"......Can we not talk bullshit?"

"Let's start with the results: that wimpy kid can't even be a Death Knight. You're going to get a skeleton, white and skimpy, but cute."

The sound was eerie to hear, and Herriot's eyes widened.

Death Knight with me as an ingredient.

Death Knight based on Heriot.

I don't like to think about it, but the result is probably obvious.

"Before the Cult came under our control, some people chose to become Death Knights themselves, and that's what we've seen before."

"......, yes, you did."

In fact, a number of Deathknights had joined them as they brought in the cultists.

Integrating them into the Cult was not without its headaches.

Pagans did a lot of crazy things that were unacceptable to society.

I did all sorts of things to get rid of that noise.

The Death Knights were then purged in large numbers.

Not only is it ominous from the outside, but many of them have been around too long to change their mindset.

"So the Death Knights I summon are either completely devoid of self or dead."

They are literally undead and have no sentience beyond listening to commands.

The conscious Death Knights were purged, and the unconscious, almost machine-like beings were the Death Knights Olivia summoned.

The power of corruption, and the Deathknights who answer its call.

"Anyway, Death Knight doesn't come out of the ground. No, it comes out of the ground, but if you've spent ten gigs today, it's done. It's gone."

"So you're saying you need to replenish?"

"Of course, and of course I like making powerful Death Knights."

Olivia crosses her arms and shakes her head.

"Of course, I can't say that Kieran's powers are exactly impossible to use to create a Death Knight, but it's better to have a good base."

My sister.

I'm starting to sound like an evil warlock.

"So you need good ingredients?"

I don't know if it's the right word, but if it's not an ingredient, what is it?

It's just a little creepy that it's a corpse.

"You mean you're going to use the people who died in this Serandia raid to make....... You're trying to make Death Knight out of......."

Harriet looks at Olivia in disbelief.

And the expressions on the others' faces weren't much different from Herriot's.

Even Antirrhinus stares at Olivia with his mouth hanging open, so that's saying something.

It's a matter of being surprised and feeling like, "What a stroke of genius!

Many have died. And the great and the good are dead.

If you make Deathknights out of their corpses, it's a no-brainer that they'll make excellent Deathknights.

But isn't that a little cruel, regardless of whether it's possible or not?

"Hmm, I was thinking about that, but it's probably going to be difficult."

Well, at least they did it if they could.......

"First of all, it's crazy to have a ritual to make Death Knight in the middle of a burning Allied camp, and we probably can't bury that many bodies, so we'll inevitably cremate them, what do you say, Mr. Sarkegar?"

Sarkegar didn't react to being called uncle. Like, whatever.

By the way, Sarkeghar, you look like a lady, not an old man.

Why is my sister always twisted like this?

"We actually do. Most people are buried by cremation. Occasionally, bodies are repatriated to the ecliptic for burial, but it's rare."

Olivia nodded at Sarkegar's affirmation.

"How do you raise a burnt-out bone dust that's gone? You'd have to force it to do something, and I'm not sure what, and it'd be weak, and I don't trust myself to do it in a place where the Crusaders have a permanent presence, let alone the Alliance, without getting my head blown off."

"That's right......."

A place where people mourn the dead, and the dead rise as Death Knights?

And is there anyone who does that?

It's like an ad asking you to kill me.

The environment of the Allied garrison, where you have no choice but to use makeup, and the fact that there are so many people that making Death Knight might lead to a goal.

You can't do that in Serandia because of that.

"So you have a place in mind?"

Aside from whether or not you can do it, where the hell are you going to get the ingredients?

Olivia giggles at my question.

"Imperial Mausoleum."

What?

What did I just hear?

"There are a lot of war heroes and greats lying there, like Nanda Ginda. Let's get some of them up and use them."

"What?! What the hell are you talking about!"

Charlotte paled and jumped to her feet.

"No, who's going to raise up a useless, weak imperial prince or a good emperor, let alone a helpful one?"

"Well, still! Still, that's not....... That's what......!"

Charlotte's face was turning a deep shade of blue as she couldn't take it anymore.

"Heh......."

This is that.......

To wit.

Hyeonchungwon Park robbery....... That's what you're talking about, right?

It's not a bomb, but it's worse than that....... Such.......

To Charlotte's consternation, Olivia shrugged.

"No, it's the end of the world, so what's the big deal about being a great man or a hero? They'll be happy to hear it. Where's the glory in dying and saving humanity? They'll thank me for it."

"Crazy...... year......."

Herriot shook his head in disgust.

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It's not just royalty that's buried in imperial mausoleums.

Those whose accomplishments merit burial alongside royalty are also buried there. Those who are buried in the Imperial Mausoleum as non-royalty are greatly honored, as the Empire recognizes their merit.

As such, they will inevitably be heroes or great figures in history.

In conclusion, Olivia's idea of stealing to replenish your Death Knight is the best option from a practical standpoint.

Assuming it works, it's a much better place than Serandia and other battlegrounds.

Allied garrisons are virtually impossible to replenish with Death Knights, and the Imperial Mausoleum is just a matter of averting your eyes.

Sure enough, Charlotte turned blue in the face and shivered.

"If I had to....... I can't help it, but......."

As long as it's an end in itself, Charlotte wants to scream no, but she doesn't think she has the right to, so she sits back.

"But can the remains properly become Death Knight?"

"I haven't done a lot of this shit myself, so I don't know what's going to happen. But the point is, there are a lot of heroes who haven't been buried long."

Olivia giggles.

Sister.......

My sister is scared these days.

"In the immediate future, there will be heroes who earned merit during the Gate incident and whose bodies were properly recovered and put into the imperial mausoleum, and even before that, there was the Demon War, and those who were killed in the Demon War who showed a hint or something will be laid to rest in the imperial mausoleum."

"ah......."

"Right....... do......."

Charlotte nods, looking miserable.

It's a time when heroes abound.

So when Olivia said the imperial mausoleum would be overflowing with remains that could be used to make Death Knight, it had to be true.

Many sacrifices have been made, and will continue to be made until this war is over.

The living are dying.

Does that justify taking advantage of someone's death?

Unknown.

I can't be sure that this cheating won't lead to another cheating.

However, it doesn't change the fact that it's necessary.

No one could deny Olivia's statement that the living were dying, and there was nothing to hide.

\* \* \*

Should we call what we're doing grave robbing?

Grave robbing is essentially the looting of items buried with a corpse. But we don't care about those items, we care about the remains themselves. Morally, this is worse than grave robbing.

Winter.

Just as the Allies were rebuilding, we planned to do the same for ourselves, powering up the remains of the Imperial Mausoleum with Deathknight.

To do that, of course, we have to leave Edina and go to the ecliptic.

There are three members in total.

Olivia Ranze, who will have to raise Deathknight herself. And Herriot de Saint-Ouen, who will help with transportation and escape in case of emergency.

Plus me, in case of a physical emergency.

Airi would be helpful, and Charlotte would be even more helpful, but I didn't want to bring her along. Charlotte would be a sight for sore eyes, and Airi is a demon, so she's limited in what she can do.

"Chet, it's been a while since you and Reinhardt went on a date, and you're catching up."

Olivia glared at Harriet as she prepared to cast.

"How are you going to get to the ecliptic without me in the first place?"

"Why don't you just let us go and pick us up in a couple of months?"

"......Is that really going to take that long?"

"You never know what's going to happen, and I thought the Allies were taking a day off anyway, and I was going to take a day off with Reinhardt."

We'll do this and that until spring," Olivia smirked at me.

What are you talking about, man?

"You wouldn't say that if you looked at the zodiac right now."

"Hmmm....... Is it that bad?"

"Well, it's not that easy to say, but....... Well, I know it when I see it."

If you really want to rest, you're better off in Edina, and the ecliptic is not the place to do it.

The zodiacal gradient of our memories is intact, but the gloomy atmosphere that pervades the city has turned it into an ashen city.

I'm on my way to get a strong undead in the first place.

"Don't say anything stupid when you're supposed to be careful not to get punished, sister."

"Technically, I'm being awakened by the power of God, so why should I be punished? A blessing is a blessing."

"Why is this ...... technically correct?"

Herriot doesn't want to argue, so he continues casting.

Right.

Kieran's power is the power of the gods, and he shouldn't be punished for raising a few undead with his power, but isn't that a blessing in itself?

I'm starting to get a little dizzy.

"I'll be there."

Blue energy lines began to surge from Herriot's body, and soon, with a flash, we left Edina.

\* \* \*

An alley in the ecliptic gradient.

Arriving there by mass teleportation, Olivia held her nose upon arrival.

"......What the hell, what's that smell?"

Even the squeamish Harriet was gagging upon arrival.

An indescribable, nauseating odor filled the alley, a mixture of fishy, rotten, and unidentifiable odors.

Even if it was an alleyway, it was more than adequate.

This is even in the winter, when the odors subside with the temperature.

"Let's get out of here."

"Ew, I think I'm going to throw up....... Ugh......."

"No, really, don't throw up."

"If I throw up, catch it with your hand......."

"I see you're bullshitting, so I guess it's tolerable. Let's go."

If it's bullshit, it's tolerable because you can afford it.

I couldn't wait to get out of there because I was just as disgusted by the unidentifiable smell of the place.

-Woof!

By the way.

A 'real' sound came from behind me.

"......?"

"...... is this guy for real?"

Olivia stared blankly at Harriet, who had her hands on the wall.

-Woo, woo....... Oof!

No, you're trying to stop that from coming up.

"Don't! Don't hold it in, just throw up!"

If you think about it, Olivia is from the Street.

But our paktong is a real princess, and she's not one to put up with this.

\* \* \*

"......."

"Arguing."

"Ha, ha, ha, don't do it, seriously!"

At Olivia's words, Harriet broke down and burst into tears.

I've seen a lot of bad things with my little princess, but now I'm about to see her throw up in an alleyway.

Harriet's eyes were welling up with tears.

Still, Olivia was worried, and when Olivia patted her back a few times, Harriet's eyes widened as she said she felt amazingly well.

"Don't make light of the power of the Holy Cultist."

"......That's not your power, that's God's power, why are you acting like you're so awesome?"

"If that power is manifested through my body, that's my power, why is it God's power?"

"Reinhard, the gods are all crazy, giving this guy power, aren't they?"

Herriot looks at me as if to ask for my approval.

"Meh, sorry......."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Oh, no, what....... Just......."

Before I knew it, I was apologizing.

Ugh! If the gods are weird, it's because I'm weird!

Olivia did, Herriot did, and now it feels like blasphemy is a passive.

Olivia is like, "The gods aren't awesome, I am. And Harriet is like, "The gods are crazy.

Anyway, I made it out of the alley and onto the street.

In the first place, we were wearing robes, and there was nothing for a passerby to recognize or do because Herriot had cast a spell on us.

You've arrived in the Wenster District, south of the ecliptic.

It's more like a temple than an imperial castle.

"Wouldn't it be nice to have something to drink?"

"......."

Still, my darling, in the old days you would have cried and fussed all day about how you looked like an embarrassment to others.

You say you're having a hard time with a douchebag, but that's what you get.

The gloom hovering over the streets was palpable, but I tried to buy Harriet a drink so she could at least rinse her mouth.

"......Holy shit, what's three silver dollars for a bucket of water?"

Not only were there fewer places to buy, but the cost of living was murderous.

It's barely water.

The price of water in the ecliptic is going crazy right now, to the point where you have to get three silver coins for a bucket of water.

Harriet rinsed her mouth with water, a guilty look on her face.

"I don't need to see anything else."

Olivia clucked her tongue briefly as she recognized the reality of the ecliptic in the price of a bottle of water.

I walk the streets, watching the people walking up and down the streets, the people who are obviously hungry even if they pretend not to be.

There is death on the battlefield, but there is a death here called hunger.

It's winter.

Luckily, we didn't see it with our own eyes, but there will be people who are homeless and have nowhere else to go, freezing to death in alleys.

"At least we're better off here, because the situation is worse in the refugee neighborhoods on the outskirts."

An ecliptic that has lost its ability to support itself due to overly dense population.

But an empire with a huge army.

In the meantime, the marginalized are dying.

"Why are there so many people over there, are they rationing?"

-Line up! Line up! Line up!

I followed Olivia's lead and found myself in the middle of a plaza with a crowd of people.

I thought it was food rationing, but it wasn't.

"I'm a recruiter."

It was Herriot who realized what it was.

Controlling the bustling crowd from their high perches were guards, and above them, men dressed as Imperial officers chattered eagerly.

The sound was drowned out by the shouts of the crowd.

"In the military, at least they don't starve."

Olivia said in a low voice with a bitter smile.

If I'm going to die of starvation, I'd rather join the military. It's the same thing to be killed by a monster or starve to death.

It's not about some grand cause, mission, or commitment to humanity.

When you're a soldier, at least you don't starve.

The depleted generals were being replenished this way, and it wasn't that unexpected.

Supplies that are thrown into battle with no training in martial arts, ragged armor, and a spear.

They will be constantly replenished, dying of starvation.

"If we do what we're supposed to do, the war will end early, and that will be good for them in the long run. Let's get where we're supposed to go, and not get distracted."

Hearing Olivia's words, Harriet and I follow suit.

It was a very optimistic, yet eerily sobering statement.

That was the current reality.

"My sister....... That's a little scary."

"I could cry all the way to the bank if it would end all of this, but it won't, will it?"

"......."

I don't cry because tears don't solve anything.

Just as I have changed, just as Riana has changed, just as Olivia has changed.

\* \* \*

The Imperial Mausoleum also contains the graves of great men and heroes who have accomplished great things alongside their predecessors.

We were fully informed by Charlotte about that before we left.

Even if we say we don't care about the remains of royalty, Charlotte has aided and abetted the violation of our ancestors' mausoleums and the use of evil powers there.

Charlotte had a very tough decision to make.

We were crossing the bridge that connects the southern and northern parts of the ecliptic.

To the north, I could see Emperor Emperatos on a hill, and to the south, the temple of Asrai.

The vast refugee camps on the outskirts of the ecliptic were not visible from the center of the city. Better to be invisible than to see it, as it would only depress me.

"If the horsepower train is down, it must be bad in more ways than one."

"I suppose so."

We were traveling on foot, as resources, including magic stones, were so scarce that magic trains, the main mode of transportation in the ecliptic, were not operational except for military and administrative needs.

The construction and operation of the Titans consumed most of the Empire's resources, and we were reminded of this by the stationary horsepower train on the ecliptic.

How are they dealing with the monsters that occasionally attack the refugees?

It's better to be invisible than to think about it.

Olivia gazes at the distant Yellow Star and mutters.

"Heroes have ranks too....... Well, that should be obvious."

Naturally, not all meritorious people can enter the imperial mausoleum.

Only a small percentage of war heroes are given the honor of entering the Imperial Mausoleum. Usually, this honor is bestowed upon those who have died, and even now there are only a few who have already been confirmed while alive.

Anyway.

Not all heroes are in the Imperial Mausoleum.

"I don't think you have to be an imperial mausoleum, just a cemetery in the northern part of the ecliptic, though......."

According to Charlotte, the cemeteries in the northern ecliptic are also buried with revolutionary majors.

This makes sense, because if every hero entered the Imperial Mausoleum, it would be a mess.

The honor of entering the same tomb as royalty is certainly not a privilege for everyone.

Naturally, national cemeteries are larger than imperial mausoleums and have more people buried there.

Demon Wars and the Gate Crisis.

The men who died in those two wars, and who made great majors, are more likely to be found in national cemeteries than in imperial mausoleums.

Technically, those whose remains have not yet decayed or are likely to return are there.

"It's probably easier to get into the National Cemetery on the outskirts than it is to infiltrate the Imperial Palace, so I think we should go there first."

Olivia shrugged at Harriet's comment.

"What do you mean, we're both going."

"I thought it would say something like ......."

Herriot sighed.

"We've got to use what we can. Do you know, maybe one of the famous warriors will wake up?"

The Five Heroes.

Lagan Artorius.

Ragnar Olfy.

Seizaria.

Mullern.

Shaded.

The tomb of the five, apparently, is in the imperial mausoleum.

"You have to assume that the body is there, and that you can get it up."

"I'll go, though I'm not sure how much help my undead warriors will be."

Of course, that's assuming someone left a body behind.

Charlotte was clear about this.

Lagan Artorius's tomb is in the Imperial Mausoleum, but there is no body in it.

There is no Lagan Artorius, who fought the demon and was destroyed, and no body of the demon Valier.

There is no body of Lagan Artorius.

So it can't even be revived.

But in the other four cases, the bodies were recovered.

There are also what we can only call incomplete remains, but they were recovered.

So, aside from the tomb of Lagan Artorius, the bodies of the other four heroes are definitely in the Imperial Mausoleum.

"Lagan Artorius is out of the question, but for the others, I have to go, just in case."

Olivia looks at me as if she knows that, too.

"Can we call this revenge? Reinhardt."

In other words, I'm bringing back the undead to fight those who helped kill my father.

"It's either helpful or it's not. Why bother with all the fancy words?"

"You know, sometimes it's like you have no emotions at all, especially around here."

I guess that's to be expected since they're not actually parents.

If I were a real Valerie, I'd hate Ellen, and this wouldn't have happened.

But I didn't say that.

There's no such thing as love or attachment to ancestral Bali. We've never actually had a conversation.

However, there is such a thing as a guilty pleasure.

We were hoping to avoid a gate situation in Bali.

However, I ended up causing a gate situation.

Valerie's hopes were forever ruined because of me.

A certain guilt and responsibility that comes from that.

That's how I feel about my ancestor Balie.

However, the emotions were not small.

Episode 552.

The Imperial Mausoleum is located inside the Imperial Castle.

Infiltrating the Imperial City is almost identical in difficulty to infiltrating the Temple.

Of course, it's harder to infiltrate the Yellow Star now that the temple is nearly empty, but the conditions for getting in are the same.

There has to be something about authorization, and there can't be unauthorized entry.

Obviously, you can't use magic to enter, including teleportation.

The warp gate in the Palace of Spring does not have a starter artifact, and even if it did, the gate is already broken and you cannot enter through it.

Sarkhegar was able to turn into a bird and fly in and out of the temple, but I can't turn into a bird. Technically, I can transform, but I can't flap my wings.

Even if it did, it would be useless for me to go in alone. I can wield the corruptive power of Tiamata, but I can't wield it as freely as Olivia can.

Charlotte laid out a number of ways we could break into the city, but all of them involved significant risk or were far from perfect.

It's even weirder if Charlotte knows how to break into the imperial castle in the first place.

Most of the Empire's elite, including Shanapelle, are away.

If you somehow managed to infiltrate the imperial city, you might be able to sneak away or escape if you were discovered.

It's bad enough if the story of the demon's reappearance spreads across the zodiac, but it's worse if it reaches the Alliance.

People are afraid of me.

While breaking down the gate, the mere thought of the Yellow City falling to a demonic assault sends the Allies into a panic.

Anyway, I'm here to do something bold, and I'm hoping to make as little noise as possible.

Well, it's not up to me to infiltrate the Imperial Palace, but.......

We're not going to get into that just yet.

So let's start with the National Cemetery, which is a little safer than the Yellow Castle, nestled in the rolling hills of the northern ecliptic.

It's an honored place to be for those who have done great things.

Heroes aren't the only ones who enter the Imperial Mausoleum.

"That's huge."

We were standing in a field with the national cemetery in the distance, one of many roads in the northern part of the ecliptic.

It's more like a park than a cemetery. Not surprising, given the large scale of the site.

It has survived despite being outside the ecliptic because it is not worth destroying for the monsters.

Because monsters aren't interested in corpses.

"There's someone coming in and out unexpectedly."

"It's bound to happen."

There were troops at the massive entrance, and quite a few people coming and going.

It could be the bereaved. It could be those who came to comfort the fallen.

No matter how busy life is, there are bound to be condolences. In fact, in times like these, there may be more than usual.

Those who honor, remember, and grieve the death of someone.

We came to take the bodies from them.

Anyone can give a condolence, anyone can be there.

There is a history and there are gatekeepers, but you don't need a special status to get in.

That's why we were able to walk into the national cemetery uninhibited. Just like everyone else walks in and out of national cemeteries without being stopped.

It's more like a giant park than a cemetery.

The imperial mausoleum is obviously reserved for royalty, and this one is open to civilians.

I also wonder what the point of having a national cemetery so close to a giant park is for people who don't have much to live for.

It's a good thing the foundation of the ecliptic hasn't crumbled to the point of open theft.

Because it was a space, everyone who came and went was calm, regardless of color.

Upon entering, there were no rows of graves, but rather an outline with several spaces marked for memorialization.

Olivia crosses her arms, looking at the map.

"It's compartmentalized. It looks like the cemetery has expanded to the east, and it looks like it's for the dead."

Different merits have different areas you can enter.

Some are buried in open-air cemeteries, while others are thought to have temples and catacombs for those of great merit.

"The first stop would be the graveyard of the fallen, and the second would be the catacombs in the center."

I guess we're weird people if we don't get punished.......

People are walking around mourning, looking depressed, and we're thinking about stealing.

No, it's worse than stealing.

"There are quite a few people, and the day is still light. We'll wait until nightfall to act."

It's still broad daylight, although a lot of time has passed since we arrived at the ecliptic.

"I've got time to kill, let's go over there."

Olivia scratched her head as she looked at where I pointed, and so did Harriet.

The place I pointed to in the outline is not a different place.

Lead-free cemeteries.

My heart is heavy just looking at it, but Charlotte told me.

"...... should be there.

EpinHauser.

And Loyar.

I was told that their graves are here.

\* \* \*

The day the gates opened.

Effinghauser and Loyard and Roussinil and Sarkegard came to my rescue.

Effinghauser and Loyard are dead, Roussinil and Sarkegard are captured.

Their bodies would not have been laid to rest in this national cemetery in the first place.

We don't know how he managed it, but somehow he was buried in the National Cemetery's unmarked gravesite.

Both are traitors to humanity for siding with the Devil, so they can't have tombs with their names on them.

The fact that they were laid to rest in a national cemetery, albeit an unrelated one, was a sign of the Gradias Empire's regret and apology.

That doesn't bring you back from the dead, though.

Olivia and Harriet know that Dr. Effinghauser died fighting to save me, and they know about Loyaar's existence.

Effinghauser and Loyard, whose identities are known, but who cannot have tombstones with their names on them, become the owners of an unmarked graveyard.

"......."

The nameless tombstones were spread out around the memorial tower.

I don't know which of these many tombstones belong to Loyard and which to Effinghauser.

Neither Harriet nor Olivia seemed to budge.

I'm afraid of what's going to come out of my mouth.

Fearful imaginings.

We have a job to do, so we can't help but think in terms of that.

They think I might try to resurrect Loyard and Effinghauser as Death Knights.

"Reinhardt....... Probably won't have a consciousness or a self when he returns......."

"......."

"Being a Death Knight while alive is not the same as raising the dead."

Eppinhauser, the Swordmaster.

Loyard, who was supposedly even better than that.

Obviously, it would help to make it Death Knight.

But that's probably not all there is to it.

"Why would I do that?"

Call me selfish, but I can't help it.

"I don't want to turn anyone I know into that."

I am here to make supplies for war.

And I'm not about to do something horrible like take people who are important to me with me.

That doesn't make it any less awful to build something like that as a stranger.

No, it's more horribly selfish to think that it's okay to make someone you care about, but not someone else.

It's a terrible thought, but consumables need to be made into something that can be treated as consumable. And these are the ones I don't consider expendable.

They were sacrificed for me.

Let's give them a break.

Calling them back does not inhabit their souls. No, it would be a terrible thing to do.

I can't really say how much of a difference it is to capitalize on the deaths of people who didn't matter to me versus those who did.

But I guess we can't help but play favorites.

What would Loyard have wanted?

Sometimes it seemed like they wanted to rebuild the world, sometimes they didn't.

He didn't seem very loyal to me, but in the end, he was as loyal as Sarkegar.

Everyone in the Rotary Club is dead, too.

After losing everything, Loyar died to protect me, the last person left standing.

I don't know much about Loyar.

This is especially true at EpinHauser.

"I'm still not sure."

"What......?"

"Why Dr. Effinghauser died trying to save me."

My cooperation with Dr. Effinghauser's plan to save me had nothing to do with the Black Order.

In fact, most of the Order's remaining core forces have been wiped out in their attempts to kill me. The remnants that escaped are probably not worth bothering with, so the Black Order is effectively dead.

EpinHauser believed in me.

I don't know what it believed, but it believed in me, so I tried to save it.

"Back in the day, do you remember when I fought those Orbis class guys?"

"Yes......."

Rilka Aaron, and her fight with Oscar de Gradias.

This led to the closure of the Orbis class.

"In the disciplinary committee, Mr. Effinghauser said that."

"What do you mean?"

"They say I'm the most brilliant person in the history of Temple."

I thought he was just lying to protect me.

How could I be called that when Ellen was there, I asked after the disciplinary committee was over, and Effinghauser said with a straight face that he really thought so.

"I know what I'm capable of, and no matter how much I think about it, I don't think I'm that good. So it was kind of embarrassing."

What did Effinghauser see in me?

"But now that I think about it, I can't say that Dr. Epinhauser was wrong."

Neither Harriet nor Olivia had a response to my question.

I don't know if it's comparable to Ellen or not.

At this point, I'm probably one of the few people who can stand up to Ellen.

If I could beat Ellen, then Effinghauser would be right.

I don't know why it died to protect me, or what it saw in me.

I have no intention of bringing him back with Deathknight, and even if I did, he wouldn't be able to talk to me, so I'll never know.

I liked Mr. Effinghauser from the start, who was blunt and uninterested in his students, rather than the sweet and affectionate Mr. Mustang of Class B.

But I was wrong.

Effinghauser was not a teacher who didn't care about his students.

I still don't know EpinHauser.

"Let's go."

However, I think he knew me.

Episode 553.

After exiting the unmarked graveyard, we had to wait out the night.

When night falls, we will curse the land, and with the power of corruption, we will raise the dead to serve as our army.

I'm going to make an exception for Loyard and Effinghauser, and there's nothing I can say to rationalize it.

That's what we're going to do, so that's what we're going to do.

By the way.

The unthinkable happened.

There are many mourners.

In particular, there are too many people wearing military uniforms.

And in real time.

While it's not strange to see men in military uniforms on the ecliptic, it's certainly strange to see them in large numbers in a national cemetery.

Everyone looks like they've been away and come back.

Soon, he had the look of a man in a Union garrison.

They're soldiers, and they're back.

"Did they get a group vacation because the occupation of Serandia is over?"

"I think so......."

The Allies are going to hold their breath until they fly through the winter.

So, while not everyone could return to the ecliptic, it was clear that some were privileged to do so.

While there are many places that would be the first stop for those who have long since left the ecliptic, this national cemetery would hold the gravestones of the soldiers, knights, and mages who fought in the Gate Crisis.

It's only natural, then, that Allied officials would visit this national cemetery.

The original Serandia campaign didn't take place in the winter, and the Allies chose to hold out while the rest of the world faced winter.

So the war of attrition to protect your base continues.

However, with Serandia now pacified, the Alliance is well on its way to ensuring the safety of nearby garrisons.

It's a relatively safe environment, so the entire army won't be able to return, but high-ranking and specialized people may be able to spend the winter in the ecliptic or back in their home countries. It depends on the person, of course.

So with the monsters of Serandia's neighborhoods eradicated, the area should be fairly safe. That's why there are soldiers returning via mass teleportation to the ecliptic.

A national cemetery is very likely to be on the itinerary for returnees. It's where their comrades-in-arms are laid to rest, and many will want to visit, both in groups and individually.

Some people get a vacation because the march has been long.

Naturally, common soldiers will not be able to return to the ecliptic without some sort of extraordinary event. It's not a warp gate, and traveling via mass teleportation is not a right of passage.

So.

High ranking members of the military, high ranking Imperial commanders, or nobles.

A high-ranking knight, cleric, or wizard.

And it's a privilege reserved for royalty.

\* \* \*

Cognitive dissonance magic is not a one-size-fits-all. Good knights and high-level mages can see through magic without even casting it. This is true of invisibility, and all other types of stealth-based magic.

There is no such thing as a trick that can fool anyone, although it can be highly sophisticated.

Even superpowers have something rare: dual resistance. I'm one of them.

So, there's no magic trick to pull the wool over everyone's eyes.

Sure, Herriot could cast high-level stealth-based magic, but a clumsy cast could give away his movements.

While the people who walk into a national park one after the other may be completely oblivious to the magic, there may be others who can see through our cognitive dissonance.

I can camouflage myself into something close to a shapeshifter, but Olivia or Herriot can't.

We may be able to shield ourselves from the gaze of unspecified military officials coming in now, but we don't know when they'll catch us.

We're not in a bad place, but we're getting there.

"Let's get out of here, I don't want to get into trouble with one of the imperial wizards while we're here."

"Yeah, I guess I should."

You need to get out before the more dangerous people get to the national cemetery.

Originally, there was no such thing as a vacation for the Allies.

It was clear from the crowds entering the national cemetery that this victory meant a great deal to the Allies.

You can see this in the leaderboard.

There are also a significant number of non-commanders. This suggests that the Alliance is currently giving a wide range of furloughs.

Honestly, you can't help it, you've just raised your major.

\* \* \*

I don't know if I'd call it an escape, but me, Olivia, and Harriet made it out of the national cemetery before we got caught by the powers that be.

In a secluded park nearby, on a half-broken bench, Olivia sat in a daze.

-pot!

"I checked, and the Allied forces are still returning from the square in front of the Imperial Palace. I think they're using mass teleportation."

So said Herriot, who quickly scouted the Allied return via short-range space travel.

"The Allies are pretty solidly excited about this victory, aren't they?"

Olivia crossed her arms and clicked her tongue at the bad timing.

Victory.

Yes, there were irreparable deaths, but it was never a defeat.

No, that's the kind of victory that requires a break.

"For morale, I guess, because it was a big sacrifice."

The situation has stabilized, and the military will be taking a long break. Those who wish to return to the ecliptic will be allowed to do so now, like a free ticket. Of course, it will take a long time to reintroduce them to the battlefield, and they won't be returning in overwhelming numbers.

"But this will only make the regular soldiers who don't make it back more....... depressed......."

Herriot wasn't sure if this was a good idea, and seemed to wonder if it was a morale booster, regardless of how disruptive it was to our operations.

I wonder if they feel deprived if only high-ranking people can rest on the ecliptic.

Olivia smirked at Harriet's nervous reaction.

"Do you think there are many people who have a place to come back to? Even if you let them go, most of them wouldn't want to. Didn't you see? This place can't even get a decent fucking meal. If the ecliptic is like this, what about the other cities that still exist?"

"Oh....... I see......."

Not everyone's home is in the ecliptic.

Those who join the military out of fear of starvation may be afraid to leave.

Many common soldiers may feel more at home in a garrison with food and shelter than in their hellish homeworlds across the Zodiac or the Alliance.

The battlefield is cozier.

The reality for the Allied forces is that most of them will not be able to enjoy their vacations because they have nothing to go back to.

So there would be a very small number of people who would actually return to the ecliptic, and that's why it's possible for even very low ranking soldiers to return to the ecliptic.

"That's the problem, by the way, I don't know who's going to be in that cemetery and when."

I'm not sure there will be any master classes or archmages among them, let alone a full-time staff.

"If we try it once and we get caught or something, there won't be a second time, because the guards will be on high alert. Of course, we could just kill them all and go ahead with the ritual, but that's not something you'd allow in the first place, Reinhardt."

"Sis....... Then what's the point of making a Death Knight......."

"I'm not going to do it anyway, because once the Allies start marching again, we won't have time to bother with it, and by then we'll be busy too......."

"Damn, I wish I'd come a day earlier......."

It happens, and I can't help it, but it's going to get worse.

If you're making Death Knight to make people die less, and you're making Death Knight because you want to make Death Knight, and you're killing all the people in the national cemetery to make Death Knight, it's not a bad thing or not, it's just a reversal of behavior.

"Well, first of all, no one's going to come to pay their respects at night, so it's going to be a lot less crowded, but there's a what if, and you have to realize that the combat power of the entire zodiac has been raised considerably in this situation, so if there's a disturbance....... You know?"

"......Yes."

The higher-ups aren't just powerful, they're also likely to be Knights of Shanapelle or Imperial Mages.

If there's an inevitable fight, something ridiculous might happen. You might be able to escape via Heriot, but there's always a what if.

There probably aren't that many people in the national cemetery at night anyway.

However, there may be a few who are dangerously powerful or able to tap into our consciousness.

I'd rather wait until after winter and when people are falling off the ecliptic.

National cemeteries are very large.

If there's even one or two people in that vast area, and Olivia starts creating Deathknights through ritual, someone's going to see them come out of the ground or coffin lids.......

"Let's change the order."

"Order?"

"More eyes on the national cemetery. There's one place that's not going to change much, right?"

A place most of the public can't even enter.

"The imperial mausoleum. Let's rob it from there."

It's probably a pretty deserted place, even now with the military out on mass leave.

So even if you do get robbed, it's only a matter of time before it's discovered.

We will visit the imperial mausoleum first, and then return here.

\* \* \*

I'm unilaterally helping Bertus, but I never asked for his permission to do so.

It's a big step over the line to begin with. I don't know what else to say to Bertus, even if he really wants to kill me after this.

It's no different than a national cemetery or an imperial mausoleum. Bertus would bite his tongue and die on the spot if he were to suggest that the bodies and remains there be brought back to life as Deathknights and used for power.

Since it's a one-way street, let's do some one-way looting.

I thought the national cemetery would be a little easier, but the circumstances made it a little trickier. More eyes means more risk of being spotted, and more chance of those eyes belonging to the wrong people.

First the Imperial Mausoleum, then the National Cemetery.

Secure the Death Knights and flee.

"Okay, now I have to do something called infiltrating the planet Huangshan......."

We were now north of the ecliptic, so to the south we could see the imposing walls of the great planet Emperatos.

It's a fortified place, both physically and magically.

A magical barrier on the same level as a temple.

What's even more impressive is that when the barrier is fully operational, it can stop quite a few meteors.

And a binding that prevents demons from entering. Sarkegar and I can pass through after transformation, but Airi cannot.

Of course, Charlotte, a half-demon, was just fine, so I'm guessing that in some cases it's just temporarily turned off, or that it doesn't matter internally.

Charlotte shared a few ways to do this.

First, how to use underground waterways.

"They say there's a way to get to the sewers on the palace side via the aqueducts....... The Empire isn't stupid, the aqueducts are naturally guarded against human passage, and I don't know if I can dispel it, but if I could, I'd probably be able to get in there, at least not in plain sight."

There is an opening.

But it's there, and it's not going to be anything out of the ordinary.

Charlotte said the floodgates would be impenetrable, let alone alarmed.

If you can break through, you can enter the city without being seen. You just don't know if you can or not.

If Charlotte knew how anyone could sneak into the palace in the first place, she was in a position to prevent that from happening because she's royalty, so it doesn't make sense for her to know how to sneak into the palace in the first place.

"I suppose we could sneak into the wagons that carry tributes and other goods that go into the palace, but....... Of course, we'd have to avoid being spotted at the checkpoints, and we'd have to disguise or buy the wagon once we got there, so we wouldn't be the only ones in trouble."

"I guess so......."

Herriot sighed.

"I'm the only one with access to the Imperial Palace, so I'm going to stab someone in the back and steal their ID or whatever, and then I'm going to get in, and there's no point in me getting in in the first place......."

How to get the real deal.

How to disguise your ID.

How to use waterways.

There are ways to disguise someone's username, but that's not possible now that they no longer have connections to the imperial family.

Obviously, you can't tell Bertus to open the gate because you're going to rob the imperial mausoleum.

"It's either him or me, or we're going to have to go underground to the part of the planet that's beneath Neptune, and then we're going to have to dig it out and blast it upwards, but of course that's going to touch the crystals, so we're going to need magical protection."

No matter how versatile Herriot is, it's too much to ask for it to be able to handle on its own.

It's not all magic.

In the first place, all the methods Charlotte knows are prepared methods.

Charlotte tries as hard as she can, but in the end, she can't tell you how to get in.

"What the hell, how was I supposed to get into the palace if I couldn't do this or that?"

Olivia pursed her lips.

"It's not that you can't, it's that you can, but it's risky."

At the end of the day, it's a matter of possibility, not a matter of never.

But it's risky.

And it's best to be stealthy.

"It's a big deal after all, maybe not a day ago, but it's a big deal now."

There is no guarantee that we will die, but there is also no guarantee that we will be able to escape.

There's a reason for this, and it's a good one.

You've been caught trying to steal or break into an imperial mausoleum at the wrong time, so it's bullshit to say that you had some sort of circumstance.

We're really going to do something bad, and persuasion is pointless.

"You can't get in there with magic, can you?"

"You don't know how to ......, but yeah. Realistically."

It is not possible to teleport into the planet.

There are many ways to do this, but in the end, there is one that is the safest for now.

"Let's use our superpowers."

If magic doesn't work, superpowers.

"Superpowers......? No way......?"

"Yeah, didn't we run into each other not too long ago?"

Conolint is required.

"I don't know if he's here by now, but....... There's a meeting place. Let's go there. He might be there."

"Promise? Lint's supposed to help you with this? When? Did you go to the Allied camp, bird? Did you have time for that?"

At my words, Harriet shook her head in disbelief.

"No? I didn't promise her anything."

"What? Then who did you promise?"

"Sarkegarang."

At my words, Olivia and Harriet's expressions turned sour.

You didn't have time to talk to Kono Lint?

I promised the person I was going to bring.

Against your will, of course.

"and......."

"Some things never change for us Reinhards......."

Neither Olivia nor Harriet could hide their displeasure.

\* \* \*

The meeting was at a place that was once the headquarters of a Rotary Club.

It was an underground aqueduct under the Bronzegate Bridge.

"You crazy bastard, what do you want me to do?"

There was Conor Lint, who had obviously been captured, held captive by Antirrhinus.

And Sarkegar, a new face, but obviously disguised as a female Allied soldier, was also present.

"There's something I need you to help me with."

You or me.

Now the scale is much different than it used to be.

As I put my arm around his shoulders, his complexion turned a deep shade of blue.

"Get your hands off my, my body, you pervert!"

Of course.

He was annoyed, but in a different sense than before.

"?"

"......?"

And none of them had any idea what the word pervert meant.

\* \* \*

"My, why should I help you!"

Kono Lint's multifaceted, terrified voice echoed through the sewers.

There's no Rotary Club, the refugees are in camps, the beggars under the bridge are gone, so if he shouted, if it rang out, no one would hear him.

"Because you're the only one who can help me in this situation."

"......is that the attitude of a person asking for help?"

No, you're right.

There's no way to stop psychic powers unless you're one of the truly special few, and infiltrating the ecliptic is a piece of cake for Kono Lint, and he can let others in.

"No, didn't you listen to me in the first place? What are you saying you can't help me after coming all this way?"

"I would not have come of my own accord....... but I wouldn't have come if I'd known it was going to be like this!"

"What? Then what did you think happened......."

I suddenly had a clearer picture of Sarkhegar at Antony's side.

Sarkegar disguised as a female Allied soldier.

Somehow atypical.

And a pretty girl.

"......Am I right?"

Did this asshole get caught in this pattern again?

"No! No! No matter what you think......!"

-Kurrrrrr

"Uh, what is it?"

Konorint's complexion went white as Sarkegar changed from the form of an Allied soldier to that of Count Argon Ponteus, a form he had once often assumed.

This is the second time you've seen this.

The transformed Sarkegar chuckles.

"It was easy, Your Majesty. I asked them to help me, and they followed without asking."

A poor pretty girl who appears to have been conscripted at an age when she shouldn't know anything about fighting.

You can't learn from Kono Lint without breaking his heart.

He looks puzzled and mumbles something.

"Fooled again....... Fooled again......."

"......Some things never change for you either."

It was Herriot who said that, not the other me.

"No! I'm the kind of person who helps anyone who asks me for help! Never! Never! That's not what I do....... Woman....... Fuck......."

Kono Lint cried out, his face falling.

"Yeah! I know, and now all these girls that come into my life are going to be assholes like you, uh, fuck, I'm not falling for it anymore!"

He eventually broke down in frustration.

If you think about it.

He's arguably the biggest victim of my misdeeds.

"...... Does this happen to you often? What does he mean?"

"Really?"

Naturally, the sound was bizarre, and Olivia and Herriot scratched their heads.

"Well, I don't need to know that!"

I glared at Konorint as if I would kill him if he said any more.

Episode 554.

In the Allied camp, Cono Lint was captured by Sarkegar and dragged to the Allied outskirts where Antirrhinus was waiting.

After being dragged there, he must have mass-teleported all the way here under Antony's hypnosis.

He didn't know any English.

If he didn't run away, it was because he knew Antirrhinus. He was kidnapped by Antony the other day.

So, it's not a good face, but it's a face.

Honestly, ConoLint can get away with anything.

But in the end, despite my panic, he didn't run away.

"So what, what do you want from me?"

I haven't explained all the details, but Kono Lint knows that I'm trying to deal with the gate situation in my own way.

It's basically a good guy.

Honestly, I don't think he's attracted to her, but he's probably trying to help her because he can't help but notice that she's asking for help.

Of course, what....... I'd be lying if I said it wasn't because she's a woman.

"What could I possibly want from you?"

"My superpower?"

"Yeah, because you're trying to get into a hard-to-reach place."

Conor Lindt is an idiot.

However, it's not that serious of an idiot.

The fact that I've found you at this time of year, with archmages hanging around the ecliptic, can only mean that you're trying to get into places that magic can't.

"Temple? What are you going to do in Temple...... when Ellen is in the garrison?"

I was a serious fool.

They don't even notice.

Uh.

Not that it's my place to say.

I know I'm an asshole!

Kono Lindt shakes his head, not even noticing Olivia's expression turn sour in an instant.

"Why would I go into a temple, I'm going somewhere else."

"Where else? No way......."

His face went white as he finally realized what I was trying to get into.

"The Imperial Palace? I don't know what you're doing there, but you're trying to drag me in! What are you trying to make me do? I won't do it! I'm going back!"

He immediately tried to uproot the arms of Sarkhegar and Antirrhinus.

"Mr. Lindt. We don't need your voluntary cooperation."

Antirrhinus looks at Konorint, smiles, and says, "I'm sorry.

No, you're going to say something else!

"Yes....... Yes?"

"If I break Mr. Lint's brain and turn him into a puppet that only listens to me, he'll be broken as a human being, but he'll be great as a tool......."

"Don't talk nonsense! I'm not doing it! I'm not doing it!"

I'm just asking for a little help, I don't plan on using him forever!

But Antirrhinus had no intention of stopping.

"Even if Mr. Lint were to escape our grasp, where else would he go but this ecliptic gradient and the Alliance garrison? The entire world has become uninhabitable, and while he may be able to escape for now, I'm sure I'll be able to find him one day. Oh, I suppose I could cast a tracking spell now."

"Heh, heh, heh......! Help me, Grandpa!"

"I didn't say kill, just nudge, just touch the brain......."

"Oh, stop it, you're making me cry!"

Technically, Antirrhinus is evil, but he's not evil in the sense that he likes to harass and frighten his opponents more than he likes to kill.

Kono Lint rolled his eyes and his complexion began to turn purple.

I had no intention of threatening, but Antony's threats were unexpectedly effective.

Right.

Even if we could get out of here, we're limited in where we can go, and we can always find Kono Lint if we grit our teeth and look for it. Unless you live as a wild man in the wilderness, that is.

There's no point in running away because it'll come back to get you.

That seemed to break Conor Lint's will to escape.

"No....... I wasn't trying to scare you. I was just being a gentleman....... for help, never mind what that old man said."

"There's nothing gentlemanly about the subject who seduced me with his beauty!"

"I have nothing to say about that, but......."

I never had Sarkozy seduce Kono Lint with a beauty queen, but I did write something like that once upon a time, so I have nothing to say about it.

"Anyway, help us out, we need to get into the palace. All you have to do is let us in and bring us back out at the appointed time."

"Why should I do that, it's a felony, they'll hang you if they catch you, it's treason!"

Well.

What to say.

Is this what happens when you try to be nice and help?

"I guess I shouldn't have asked for help after all."

"Yeah, whatever you do, I'll keep my mouth shut. I'm not gonna help you......."

"Do it."

I looked at Konorint and said briefly.

"Just do it, asshole. Do you think I'm easy?"

"It's going to end up like this......."

Kono Lint grew sullen and muttered to himself.

Also.

Being king is more of a command than a favor.

"Do as you're told, and if you get caught, use my name! I did it because you told me to! They said they'd kill me if I didn't, so I did it! You don't think they'd kill me like this?"

But.......

If Antirrhinus is bad.

Doesn't that make me an asshole?

\* \* \*

Eventually, Conor Lint decided that my coercion and Antrian's threats had made it useless for him to run away, and he began to follow me.

Sarkhegar and Antirrhinus were sent back.

Rob the Imperial Mausoleum, then the National Cemetery.

The crew grew by one person to include myself, Olivia, Herriot, and Kono Lint.

Antirhynchus unwittingly kidnapped Kono Lint in the last Serandia preemptive strike, and now we have his help, so technically Antirhynchus has a hand in this one.......

Of course, it's more coercion than help.

Herriot and Kono Lint weren't very close, and to be fair, I wasn't close either.

But right now, Kono Lint is in the company of three of the Empire's most prominent war criminals.

"Well, by the way....... even if you're wearing a hoodie, you can't just walk around like this....... Are you okay?"

All three of us have our faces on a lot of wanted flyers and such.

They were worried about flipping the entire ecliptic if they got caught.

"I've got cognitive dissonance and noise canceling on, and sure, there might be some wizards who can see through it, but I'm not worried about that. There aren't that many people who go out of their way to do that."

"I see......."

The crowd is a shield in itself.

It might seem a little weird to walk around in a hoodie in a place like the National Cemetery, but there are plenty of people like that here.

You can't be suspicious of everyone on the street.

Kono Lindt looks at Olivia, who walks away, this time wordlessly.

"My sister is....... Olivia Ranze....... Right?"

"...... You know me?"

"It's weird not to know."

She was a weird person to not know at Temple because she was at Temple, and she's a weird person to not know now because she's now. In fact, Olivia was a frequent visitor to our dorm, so Kono Lint must have known her.

He can't help but be scared, even though he knows we're not doing the evil things the world has made us out to be. I can't help but feel bad for this guy because he's walking around with them like he's one of them.

"So, what do you think you're doing in the palace anyway? You can't be....... Bertus......."

"I don't think so."

"Right, because there's no reason to do such a thing....... But then what are you doing in the imperial palace......?"

To say or not to say.

Harriet looked depressed, and Olivia shrugged as if to say, "I'll take care of it.

I shouldn't have to tell you.

When they hear what we're about to do, they'll be horrified.

And you're going to feel guilty knowing that you helped make that happen.

It feels weird to say, and it feels weird not to say.

I feel like it's better to just use it, or I feel like he has a right to know. I don't know.

"It ends up helping the war effort, which is something a lot of people don't understand or accept."

I hand the choice over to Conor Lint.

"Would you rather live in ignorance? Or would you rather know something that's not worth knowing?"

At my words, Konorint stares at me from under his hood.

He should be able to figure out that you're not doing anything mundane by breaking into the palace.

How many steps you took.

"I don't want to be taken advantage of without knowing anything."

It may seem like it hasn't changed, but in the end, Kono Lint was changed by the war.

"What I do is....... know what I'm doing."

Right.

Then you should know.

"I will enter the Imperial Mausoleum and reanimate the remains of the war heroes there as Death Knights."

"You crazy......!"

"Yeah, I knew it."

I quickly put words in Conor Lint's mouth.

\* \* \*

Just as we were all stunned when we first heard Olivia's proposal, so was Conor Lindt's initial reaction.

But he screamed once, and then didn't say anything for a while.

It's probably not too far off from what I and Harriet are thinking.

They're dead anyway.

They can't come back, and what we use is just a trace of them already gone.

If that's the case, then if we can save the lives of the people who live with those traces, we should do it, and I wonder if that's such a bad thing.

You're probably thinking about that.

But still, just as I am determined not to make Effinghauser and Loyard into Death Knights. There is a contradiction, after all.

"Do you think this is....... correct?"

It seemed to me that Kono Lint was not a yes or no, but a question. Herriot hadn't come to a conclusion either, so he was speechless.

And I didn't have anything to say either.

I wondered if it wasn't hypocrisy, it wasn't evil, it was just a terrible thing.

"This is right."

But it wasn't me, it was Olivia.

"It's a time-honored tradition, passed down through generations of humans, that this kind of contradictory behavior is the result of wanting peace."

Olivia giggled, covering her mouth as if she were laughing at something.

You're probably laughing at the world.

But since it's Olivia who's making Death Knight, she's probably laughing at herself the hardest.

"I think this is right, and if I'm wrong later, it's all my fault, so let's call it a day."

Olivia said she would take the blame, but we could never see it that way.

"We're almost there."

The walls of the imperial city of Emperatos were closing in.

\* \* \*

Near the west side of Huangsheng, we entered a side street off the beaten path.

I wouldn't say it was odorless, but it wasn't as bad as the first place we walked into.

We don't have the same blueprints for the Yellow Castle, but Herriot had a schematic that Charlotte had drawn.

"Charlotte, does she know how to draw?"

Olivia's mouth dropped open in disbelief as she stared at the overly well-drawn map of Huang Sheng.

Clearly, Charlotte had negative thoughts about painting. We had talked about it at the Palace of Spring.

Of course, this has nothing to do with painting, but Charlotte drew the outline as accurately as if she were drawing with a ruler.

I know a lot of things I shouldn't know, and I can do a lot of things I shouldn't know.

......What it means to be royalty.

When I think about it, there's something fundamentally and solidly wrong with me being king.

It's no wonder you're not good at it!

Kono Lint frowned at the mention of the missing princess, but it was no secret that I had taken her with me to her burning in the first place.

As Olivia said, it was very detailed for a rough drawing.

Central Palace Tetra.

Each seasonal palace located in the East, West, South, and North.

Not only that, but the area around the imperial mausoleum, our target, was detailed with each palace's annexes and their locations, and even the location of the palace guards' barracks on the tram line.

"Is this....... Charlotte drew this?"

"Yes."

"So does Charlotte know?"

"Right."

Kono Lint stood frozen, trying to imagine what the Empress must have been thinking as she drew this outline.

Right.

You asked me to draw you a map because you're going to rob your ancestors' graves.

I didn't actually ask her to draw it, but she did.

Charlotte....... I wonder what kind of mood she was in when she drew this. Harriet looks up at the winter sky through the alleyway.

"I think we should move at night."

With the passage of time and the short days, it was getting dark.

"The Imperial Mausoleum, according to Charlotte, is closed at all times, with two guards at the gate at all times. Of course, the guards guard the gate, but they can't enter the mausoleum. It's not supposed to be open all the time."

"So once you get in, it's just empty on the inside?"

"That's right. It's always closed, except of course for the management staff who come in periodically for maintenance, and the change of management is once a week, and that's tomorrow, not today."

That's good news.

"The lock works with magic, not a key, and I suspect the mage in charge of the mausoleum knows how to open it. I'll have to try to dispel the enchantment on the door first, and see if that's possible or not."

"What if I can't?"

"It gets a little complicated from there. If we want to go quietly, we'll either have to find out the opening spell from the mausoleum's caretaker, or sneak in with him when the mausoleum opens tomorrow, which means we'll be doing the job twice, and that's not without risk."

Even if I did manage to get inside the palace, it wasn't easy to get inside the mausoleum.

"Of course, the protective magic on the mausoleum itself is unlikely to be very powerful. Not necessarily the door, but the windows or the ceiling. Reinhardt. There's also the brute force of you cutting through with your Auror blade. I'll disarm the alarm, and I'll use noise canceling, and it'll be easier to disarm that than the lock on the door, so we don't necessarily have to wait until tomorrow."

It's a late-night stunt, and it's not coming back, so you can get away with it.

Herriot's point that it's easier to defeat an alarm on the building itself than it is to unlock a door made sense.

Sure, it's a little annoying that it's easier to break through a wall or window than it is to open a door.

But I guess that's true of any house when you think about it.

If it's not possible to enter quietly, it will do so loudly, even if it leaves some traces.

Herriot looks to Kono Lint, who now has the most important role, but somehow the easiest.

"Lindt, what you need to do is get the three of us beyond those walls, and I'll use all of my stealth and camouflage spells. I don't know how long it will take to work inside the palace, but all magic related to spatial travel is blocked. ......."

"Wait, wait, wait."

When Herriot went on to explain something, Kono Lint interrupted him.

"I'm....... So all I have to do is let you guys in and let you guys out?"

"Yes."

"No....... From the sounds of it....... If I let you guys into that....... cemetery if I let you into that....... comfortable, don't you think?"

"......."

"......."

"I suppose so."

Harriet and I were silent, and Olivia nodded as Kono Lindt spoke in wonder.

You're right.

It's much simpler and easier when Kono Lint helps us from start to finish instead of just letting us into the palace.

"Yes, but Lint, putting too much pressure on you would be....... and that's not a pretty sight to behold."

I can't help but notice the hesitation in Herriot's voice.

Kono Lint is an outsider, brought in by oppression and intimidation.

But when he's asked to help break into the mausoleum, he's not just an accomplice, he's a key player. He even gets to see the Death Knights resurrected.

That's pretty much all that Cono Lint does.

It's funny how we try not to overreach on a topic we've been forced into, but it might be traumatizing for Kono Lint to see his former heroes wake up as Death Knights.

Originally, we were only going to ask them to let us in and out.

But he shakes his head.

"If you're going to do it anyway, there's no difference between doing more and doing less."

"......."

"I don't know if this is the right thing to do."

He sees me.

"But regardless of whether it's right or not, if....... If I'm going to play a role in this, I'm not going to fudge it, because we're in this together anyway."

Just as ConoLint can't fully affirm this, it can't fully deny it either.

So if I was going to play a role, I felt like I'd rather watch the whole thing than help out and then realize later that I didn't really know what I was doing.

Conor Lindt sees Herriot.

"Don't make me a coward."

"......Sorry, that was rude."

She apologized if she thought it was rude to leave him out of something important.

"Oh, no, not necessarily....... What......."

He blurted out that he hadn't expected her to apologize.

Ransack the Imperial Mausoleum to reanimate the remains of heroes as Death Knights.

"You do realize this is a felony that will go down in history, right?"

Konorint smirks at my comment.

"If you're going to do that, you're going to have to have a history."

"......Yes."

Everyone grows.

Because it's clear that it's not of their own volition, but of other people and circumstances.

In the end, I couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

Episode 555.

Kono Lint was able to move three of us at once, including himself.

"Okay, we can go together at once."

It's a short distance, but with Kono Lint and I holding hands, he triggers his ability and we're all on the move in one fell swoop.

"How many people?"

Herriot asked, since this was his first experience with non-magical teleportation.

"It's not the number, it's the weight. I don't know exactly, but maybe a little more than 200 kilograms, not counting me, and it can't be too bulky. No matter how light it is, you can't move something that's just gigantic."

It's more about mass and volume than numbers, he added.

Apparently, if the three of us weigh more than 200 kilograms combined, we can't move it.

"Somehow, it seems like a good thing......."

Herriot gave a subtle smile. Come to think of it, she's a cerebral person, not a physical person.

Olivia said cheerfully, puffing out her chest as she watched Harriet breathe a sigh of relief.

"You're still young, and when you get older, you're going to be all flabby from lack of exercise, so be prepared."

Of course, Olivia, who is very active and is actually a melee specialist, and now a near-necromancer, is far from lacking in exercise.

So after all.......

He's awesome in so many ways.......

"Well, on the subject of old muscle pigs."

"What?! I'm not old, I'm not a pig, where's the pig in all this fat, you little rat!"

"You're not going to get old, you're always going to be five years older than me no matter what. I mean, you're a little saggy even now."

"I'm not sagging! I'm not saggy! I'm physically younger than you! You have a curved back and a tortoiseshell neck because you're always digging in the corner of the room!"

"What? No, I didn't burn my neck!"

As Olivia and Harriet bicker, Kono Lint looks at me.

"Those two....... Are they always like that?"

"Even in places like ......."

"Ah."

We haven't infiltrated the palace yet, and it's a deserted alley, so I don't mind if you two get roasted.

It was no different here, a fight to the death.

Shame on you.

I'm a terrible housekeeper.

No, it's kind of dickish when you say family, but it's not like that. It's more like, you know, country management or something....... Uh.......

"It's not night yet, let them fight."

"Well, do you think......."

-You bent, you little turtle, you must have bent your spine!

-What are you, an old muscle pig!

-I'm not old! I'm not old! I'm still in my prime! I'm not a pig!

-You said that three years ago, so you're old!

-Ach! I'm going to kill you!

So if you don't do it, you lose.

\* \* \*

With Kono Lint's full cooperation, it's like having a high pass to the mausoleum, not to mention the infiltration phase.

He's even more of a cheat than Sarkhegar when it comes to stealth.

I don't know if Kono Lint's combat power was as high as Klippmann's, but even if it was as high as Erich's, history would be changed.

The fact that Kono Lint has no combat talent and sucks at it is like a balance patch.

Of course, that's what I did, and if Kono Lint ever reaches my level of combat power, there's no stopping him from becoming emperor.

Somehow, he's so powerful that I've forced him to have a bunch of shortcomings.

With the help of KonoLint, we crossed the Yellow Wall.

The location is just inside the outer walls of the Imperial City, in the shadows and out of sight of anyone.

There might be guards on the walls, but there were no people on the ground.

"It's so easy, it's making me sick."

Herriot doesn't know how long it will take him to interpret and analyze the rings of Jupiter and figure out how to cross them, or even if it's possible.

But I felt like I couldn't do it with my superpowers.

"Okay, next location is there."

"Okay."

Blind spots, places where you wouldn't know an intruder was there.

Not that we weren't likely to be spotted, but the four of us were cautious, clinging to Kono Lint as we moved slowly toward the group, even though we were wrapped in magic for camouflage and concealment.

In the center is a tetra.

To the north is the Palace of Spring, where Charlotte lived.

To the west is the Winter Palace, where Bertus lived.

There is nothing to do in the two palaces, winter and spring, which are now empty.

To the south are government buildings, including the Palace of Autumn.

To the west is the area where the royal family resides, including the Summer Palace.

Our goal is the imperial residence to the west, and the temple with the imperial mausoleum further back.

You can use continuous teleportation to move as fast as you can, and the Imperial Palace is a large area to begin with.

You can pretend to be an imperial official and move about casually, but don't be too bold.

-pot!

With the power of Kono Lint, we moved slowly and carefully, sometimes in small increments, taking advantage of every angle of the field of view, including building rooftops.

In my experience, Cono Lint's capabilities are nothing short of fraudulent.

If I hadn't done the balance patch, the gate situation might have ended with Kono Lint single-handedly.

Soon we arrived at a gap in the garden's flowerbeds where the imperial mausoleum was faintly visible.

It was a huge temple, and just as Herriot had said, two guards stood at the front door.

To get in the front door, you had to secure the opening spell and hypnotize or subdue the guards.

Otherwise, I'd have to disarm the building's own alarm spell, muffle the noise with noise canceling, and enter the building from a blind spot.

But as long as you have Kono Lint, you don't need all that planning.

"We're going right inside."

"Uh."

-pot!

We went straight to the inside of the temple, where the imperial mausoleum is located.

\* \* \*

Unsurprisingly, the inside of the temple, which houses the imperial mausoleum, was deserted.

But there was a light inside.

All four of us crouch down and look around, just in case. There's an elongated window that allows everyone to see into the temple where the mausoleum is located.

At the front of the temple's great chapel stood a massive statue of the five gods, and in the center of the statue was a wide, massive, straight staircase leading down to the basement.

I wasn't expecting anything overly ornate, but the chapel had a solemn feel with gray textures throughout.

You'd think a temple in an imperial mausoleum would be almost as crude as this.

But rather than an ornate tomb, this monotonous feeling was more solemn.

In this sense, the Empire was not so much about splendor per se, as it was about the solemnity of the Central Palace Tetra.

As far as pomp goes, the Temple has the edge. Of course, Temple is, after all, an academy owned by the Empire.

"Let's go down."

Keeping our posture low so that no one could see us through the window, we entered the stairwell.

Now we don't have to worry about anyone seeing us from the outside.

Mausoleums have no people inside because no one enters them unless something special happens.

But as we descended into the overly serene basement of the imperial temple, we couldn't help but hold our breath.

Rather than worrying about the possibility of someone being there, it was definitely because of what we were about to do.

The basement was lit, too.

After descending a long circular staircase, we entered a basement with high ceilings.

Like the above ground, the catacombs were grayish throughout.

A place of solemnity and antiquity rather than glamor.

Catacombs.

It wasn't the dreary, spooky space commonly referred to as the Catacomb.

I didn't see the grave as soon as I went down.

Upon arriving at the giant hollow, we were greeted by four corridors that branched out in all directions from the center of the hollow.

At the entrance to each corridor were stone carvings with different patterns.

"...... Those things, by the way. They're not gargoyles, are they?"

I was referring to the guardsman-like statues in the catacombs below.

"I don't feel particularly magical, and I would have told you if I had detected a gargoyle in the first place."

"Really? You'd think they'd have a grave guardian or something, wouldn't you?"

At Olivia's question, Harriet gave a short sigh.

"If there were intruders in the imperial mausoleum in the first place, it would mean that the imperial castle itself had been breached, so there was no need to build it. Of course, this is how we got in."

"Hmm, technically, yes."

"And you wouldn't expect someone who succeeded in infiltrating the imperial palace in the first place to be in the mausoleum. They'd go somewhere else."

"I guess that's true, too. But we walked into a place where no one expected us to be, right?"

"Sort of."

Places that are relatively unguarded.

It would be impossible to anticipate the crazy things we do.

If you want money, you'll rob an imperial vault or a treasure trove; if you want assassination, you don't need to come here; if you want information, you don't need to come here, where there is nothing but the silence of the dead.

Technically, it's the one place in the imperial palace that has no value to anyone except the royal family.

So we're the freaky thieves who came to the easiest place to rob, the place that wouldn't turn up any dust.

Of course, we're here to rob the remains of those who have no value, but are an integral part of human history.

A place with no value but tons of symbolism.

At the four crossroads of the Imperial Mausoleum, Herriot examines the orientation and symbolism.

"The north would be the graveyard of the imperial family, the west would be the graveyard of those who made great academic achievements, the east would be the artists, and the south would be the graveyard of those who founded the martial arts."

We don't need people with brains, inspiration, or noble origins.

You'll need the remains of warriors who have accomplished feats worthy of war heroes.

Konorint grabbed my arm to see if I was nervous.

What the fuck is wrong with you?

"Whatever."

"...... nothing, scary stuff."

Olivia's scary, and Harriet's a different person, but I saw her and Olivia get into a harsh exchange earlier, and I know she's still mean, so that's why I'm holding on to you.

But technically, shouldn't you be scared of me the most?

Oh, right.

I see you're still stuck on.......

People change, and then they don't.

By the way.

Technically, you should be scared of me the most in this room.......

What.

That's it.

Shit.

"Why are you scared? We're here to do something even scarier."

"Well, yeah, but......!"

Konorint shouted under his breath, even though no one was listening.

But the lowering of voices was something we all talked about.

Unnecessary pacing and talking will also lower your breathing.

I think it's more because it's a graveyard than because I don't want to be found out.

There was something ridiculous about coming to awaken someone's spirit and then having to lower your voice so as not to disturb the silence of the tomb.

"Let's go."

Herriot led the way, and we followed.

This is an imperial mausoleum, so it's no surprise that it's not a sprawling, maze-like structure.

After walking some distance down the hallway, the space expanded again and we found ourselves in the Mausoleum of the Heroes.

An open space appeared, followed by a straight, elongated room and then a staircase leading further down.

"The mausoleum is the first floor from here, and I'm told there are five more floors underground, but I'm told it's only the fourth floor that's actually filled in."

A graveyard for some of the greatest heroes in human history.

It was pretty intuitive.

A sarcophagus buried in the ground, with only the lid visible, and a tombstone symbolizing the holy arc in front of it. On the tombstone was a slab with a one-word inscription summarizing his life's work and a biography.

And the back of that tombstone.

"Until the gargoyle....... There it is......."

Behind each grave was a statue of a hero, carved in the likeness of that hero in life.

Sometimes they were stoic, sometimes they were solemn, sometimes they were dynamic, holding and wielding weapons.

If the statues were different, it was because they were made at different times.

[Langkruten, Lord of the Frostbite, is laid to rest here].

I'm not interested in Imperial history, but there was definitely history in the Temple integration course.

As such, I could see the familiar names of heroes from the history of the Empire dotted among these graves. Of course, that doesn't mean I'm going to go into detail.

"All the big boys are here."

Olivia chuckled as she saw the names of the heroes buried, the inscriptions on the statues and tombstones, names she recognized almost immediately.

The number of tombs on a floor is roughly forty.

The tomb is said to be five stories underground, but is actually filled to four stories, so there are probably over a hundred tombs in total.

This number is either small or large.

It's an unknown.

"Maybe....... The Warriors and the post-Gate heroes are on the fourth floor of the basement, or so I've heard."

"It's not going to happen for all of them, the ones that are too old are likely not going to happen."

"You mean we have to go underground?"

"Right."

I don't know if this type of burial causes the remains to decay or not, but it's unlikely that older remains would be meaningful.

A body that hasn't been dead for long.

How many Death Knights can we resurrect from these graves in total?

If it can be resurrected, and the stronger it is, the stronger the Death Knight, the more powerful it is.

We followed the stairs down to the basement, down to the basement, down to the basement.

Passing by statues and tombstones of heroes, we reached the fourth level of the underground.

Upon arrival, we could see that the structure of the tomb was different than before.

"So those five are treated differently?"

Olivia said.

"I see."

Herriot nodded.

Up until now, tombstones and statues have flanked the wall on either side as you descend the stairs.

But as soon as we descended the stairs, we could see the five statues and tombs in front of us.

And the center of it.

There was a gargoyle holding Alsbringer high in the air.

Similar yet different faces.

[Savior of mankind, seeker of justice, champion of Als].

[the one, the only, the eternal warrior].

[Lagan Artorius].

[May he rest in peace].

In the center stood the statue of Ragan Artorius, flanked by the statues of his companions, two on each side.

Wizard, Mullern.

Priest, Seizaria.

Ranger, Ragnar Olfy.

Magic Swordsman, Shadows.

Having accomplished the greatest feat in the history of mankind - slaying a demon - the five were given the most special place in this imperial mausoleum, the Hall of Heroes.

At the far end of the front was the grave of a group of warriors, but there were still graves on either side.

"Chronologically, ....... There are two graves that have been added since the Gate incident."

Harriet glanced back down the hall. I saw the names, too, but I didn't recognize them.

I don't know, but from the Empire's point of view, they must have died with a major to get in here.

"You mean to bring Ragan Artorius and his band of warriors back to....... with the Death Knight......?"

Kono Lint looks at me, his face pale, as if to ask if he should. All other things aside, Ragan Artorius is Ellen's brother, so it shouldn't be done.

It's like, "You're not doing this, are you?

But then again, I'm the devil's son, right?

"I know what you're thinking, but there are no remains of Lagan Artorius."

"Why?"

"There were no bodies left, anyway."

I can't help but say that because I don't realize that neither the Devil nor the body of Lagan Artorius has been destroyed in the Nihil.

What if.

If Ragan Artorius' ashes were here, I'd be in favor or against Deathknighting them.

I think Olivia would have said yes, and Harriet would have said no.

I.

Honestly, I'm not sure.

Just as I chose not to bring back Loyard and Effinghauser, I don't think I would have made Lagan Artorius look like that.

But if the remains were there, I wonder if unleashing the Death Knight of Lagan Artorius on his murdered father would have been some kind of vicious and satisfying revenge.

Although I have no intention of doing so.

"We don't have time for rambling. We're going to do a ritual, though I'm not sure how many of them will happen."

-Snarl

Olivia summons Tiamata, a magic sword, in her right hand.

There's no time for sentimentality, and no need to worry about the ashes of the non-existent Lagan Artorius.

Bringing back some of the greatest heroes in human history.

It's just a shell, but it's going to be a powerful shell.

Kono Lint narrowed his eyes at Tiamata, the black energy of corruption rising in him.

"Okay....... Let's get started."

Olivia smiles wickedly.

In the hands of the villains of the century, the desecration of the heroes of the century begins.

\* \* \*

The time is night.

But there is no one to enter the mausoleum, and it is so deeply buried that our rituals cannot be noticed from the outside.

Someone from the outside might be able to detect it, but she had that part covered. It was clear from his reassurances that he had a plan.

Olivia was mumbling something in the center of the tomb, four levels underground, with her magic sword Tiamata stuck in the floor.

And the ghostly energy from Tiamata was trickling out and permeating each tomb.

Even as I pretended, I could feel the ominous energy being infused.

Me, Herriot, and Kono Lint watched the ritual from our perch at the head of the stairs to the third floor.

"By the way, I thought my sister was a priestess of Tuan....... What the hell is going on, and what is that sword......."

Kono Lint doesn't speak English, so I have no idea how Olivia Ranze is able to wield such evil power.

"Tiamataya."

"Tiamata? Tiamata is a holy relic, right? That....... Not sinister."

"Long story short, the gods and demigods are actually the same thing."

"......What's that?"

"So that's Tiamata."

"Oh, no, come on, explain it to me, what are you talking about!"

"......I'll tell you."

When he realized I was being a little too cursory, he grabbed Kono Lint and walked me through it.

Misconceptions about the gods and goddesses and the changing nature of holy objects.

The ritual was long enough that Herriot had time to explain it to Kono Lint.

Of course, even when I explained it to him calmly, it was still hard for him to understand or accept.

"Nonsense......."

"People have been thinking all wrong all this time."

"Hey, that's weird. There's no such thing as a demon, but that....... It doesn't make sense for a demon to have powers....... That's....... That kind of power....... Divine power? Not like black magic or something......?"

"Think of it this way, Lint, the gods may not be who we think they are at all. They may not even be the Five Great Gods in the first place. They're just names given to them by mortals."

"Nor....... No......."

Kono Lint doesn't have a strong belief in gods.

But no one denies the attributes of the gods as beings.

There are the Five Great Gods, and there's this thing called demonology.

In fact, it's not even that, and even the belief in the five great gods is just a name given to some absolute power, and even the name of the five great gods can be wrong.

In fact, I learned that in Lizaira, the vampires originated from the gods.

The gods are unknowable, and that includes me.

Even I don't know if there is such a thing as will, and if so, when and how it manifests itself.

So maybe discussing the gods is worthless.

It's just that power exists and it manifests.

-Woof

Kono Lint stared blankly at Tiamata, who oozed ominous darkness.

I don't need to be told that it's ridiculous or that it's impossible.

It's actually happening, so it's possible.

Because what you see is what you get.

"Nonsense......."

Pure divine power.

Its power is manifested in its opposite.

Olivia didn't move, just mumbled something to make sure she was paying attention.

For a very long time.

It's been about two hours since Olivia began her ritual.

"ugh....... 읍......."

Kono Lindt started to yawn, then shut his mouth as if he didn't think this was a good time to yawn.

Or maybe just a little yawn. I think I'm going to get one.

"...... normally takes this long?"

He shakes his head.

"Well, that's what rituals are for."

I've never made a Death Knight myself, and I've never seen Olivia make one.

But Olivia was on a mission to purify the fallen Tiamata.

"Hmmm....... If it's going to take this long, I don't mind here, but it might be a little tough in a national cemetery......."

Herriot said.

"......Yes."

I didn't expect it to be easy, but if it takes too long, you may need to drastically revise your plans.

It's out of sight, out of mind. In a national cemetery, we don't know who will see what we do, when or where.

Even if it's nighttime, it's pretty embarrassing to be seen by someone.

-No.

But in the distance, Olivia must have heard our conversation, because she shook her head.

-It doesn't normally take this long.

-Pak!

Olivia narrowed her eyes and plucked the tiara from the stone floor of the cemetery.

"Are we done?"

Has he already been Deathknighted and has he been absorbed into the sword, or has he been summoned back?

Olivia shook her head as we walked down the stairs.

"I'm not done, I haven't even started."

"......what?"

"It's not responding at all, no matter how much divine power I pour into it."

Olivia stares at the silent graves.

"Did they do something to it? Purified with pure divine power, blessed, or whatever......."

Olivia hummed and crossed her arms.

"I'm not sure, but......."

"Could it be that too much time has passed since his death?"

At Harriet's question, Olivia shook her head.

"I've heard stories of the ...... pagans making Death Knight out of ashes, and even if it's all rotted away, my divine power is enough to scrape together the traces and force it to rise."

Olivia has a lot of power.

It's almost enough power to make it work, but it doesn't.

Herriot gets a puzzled look on his face.

"Are we prepared for this? I didn't hear that from Charlotte."

"I mean, no matter how much he doesn't like the two of us, he's not going to lead Reinhardt astray."

Charlotte is royalty, so she should have some idea of royal funeral customs.

If I were preparing for undeadization, I would have made that clear.

"Maybe he didn't tell me because it was too basic? That's possible. Or maybe I have too much faith in my abilities. Hmmm....... But honestly, I'm pretty confident I can raise makeup bone dust....... This is the Empire, after all. Maybe there's a special way to do it that I don't know about......."

It fails.

Corpses in the Hall of Heroes could not be revived.

"Well, we're special people, so I guess we can do that, and it's not like this is the end of the world anyway, we can go somewhere else, right?"

Harriet comforted Olivia, who was looking downcast.

Harriet is right. There are tons of graves in the national cemetery.

It's a shame we couldn't revive the Heroes of the Mausoleum, but we won't be stuck here much longer.

"Da, where else....... somewhere else?"

Kono Lint was fed up with being told that we had the following in store for our misbehavior.

"Yeah, you don't have to come with us this time, although we'd love to have your help."

"Oh, no....... What....... What to do......."

You don't need Kono Lint this time. Of course, there's no one better to help you escape than Kono Lint, but this isn't an imperial palace or a temple, so Herriot can do it.

Kono Lint seemed to be debating whether or not to go through with this again.

We may have tried something and failed, but we didn't rob an imperial mausoleum.

If you don't have to do something bad together, why do it?

I was about to say that, because I don't think it's a bad idea to get out of this.

"It's weird to say the least."

Olivia said.

"What is it?"

Olivia bit her lip at my words.

"That's weird."

I don't know if it's hard to accept that I've failed, but there's certainly no one with Olivia's divine powers.

However, if the empire does something special and you're prepared to deal with it, I guess you can't help it.

"Weird, this."

Olivia suddenly walks off somewhere.

Toward the grave.

"What, what are you doing?"

Herriot paled at the sight of Olivia standing in front of the grave.

Olivia squatted down in front of the sarcophagus and gripped its lid with both hands.

A tendon sprouted on Olivia's forehead.

"Eat!"

-GGGGGGG!

The lid of a giant sarcophagus, immovable to a normal person, begins to open with the sound of scraping stone.

No, what are you doing?

"Aah! Tea!"

-Giggle!

The sound of scraping stone rang out, and Olivia forced the closed sarcophagus open.

"Yeah....... I knew it."

A wry smile tugged at Olivia's lips as she looked down at the sarcophagus.

Suddenly, Olivia, who has opened the lid of the closed coffin, looks back in our direction.

"Empty."

"......what?"

"?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

I walked over to Olivia's side to see what she was talking about, and I couldn't help but freeze.

The inside of the sarcophagus was empty.

Nothing.

Conor Lint and Harriet stumbled over, frozen when they saw the coffin was empty.

Maybe it's a case of Lagan Artorius.

[Ludena Yan].

[Rest in peace, the great hero who stood alone against the darkness of the Darklands and protected tens of thousands].

I don't know who it is.

But if there's an expression for sleeping here, then the ashes should be here.

Despite the three of us being mesmerized, Olivia started opening other coffin lids.

-GGGGGGG!

-Thump!

"Here."

-Thump!

"Here."

-Thump!

"Hmm."

-Thump!

Olivia's expression hardened as she opened the other five sarcophagi in a flash.

"It's all empty."

Olivia didn't fail.

In the first place, there were no remains.

Episode 556.

"They're all empty."

The second floor of the Hall of Heroes.

Olivia and I opened the other sarcophagi to find that the remains were gone.

There were so many sarcophagi that I couldn't open them all, but I was pretty sure they were all empty without checking.

Not only was Herriot missing, but Kono Lint was too.

"This is....... I think......."

Harriet stares at me, still.

"......If we could think of it, so could someone else."

"Yes......."

Raise the undead heroes of the past and use them for power. Olivia's idea was unusual and grotesque, but it came from a human mind.

Who says we can't say what we think of others?

"Well, by the way....... Someone, like us, came in here like this and....... revived the body and walked out?"

Conor Lindt was frozen.

"It's weird that you're not freaking out after all this, and frankly, I wouldn't have gotten in here so easily if I wasn't capable of it......."

If the mausoleum had been robbed long ago, there should have been a big fuss.

Kono Lint's statement that we may not get caught is true, but others must have left a trail.

"Where is the evidence that it has to be some other faction doing this?"

"......?"

This is stupid.

"If it was the imperial family, of course there wouldn't be a fuss. Who the hell knows?"

The imperial family reanimates the remains of the mausoleum as undead.

It's a horrifying thought, but it's not something that can't happen.

Only the Imperials can confirm that.

"This is ridiculous. The Empire would do such a thing, Bertus?"

We were going to do everything we could to survive the war, to win the war, and we were going to use every means at our disposal.

So Bertus can make that choice.

"Not for sure. We haven't figured out the Empire's use of the undead yet."

The empire may have had other reasons, and they may not have had anything to do with undeadization.

It's just a guess because the body is missing.

Olivia says with a stern look.

"We should go to the national cemetery."

We don't know what happened in the imperial mausoleum.

But there's no use for it here anymore.

"This might not be the end of it."

Olivia's eyes narrowed as if she were imagining something sinister.

\* \* \*

The sarcophagi in the Hall of Heroes were all empty.

In a way, we were planning a felony and stumbled upon a bizarre case.

We are under no obligation to investigate this case.

But we need to figure out what happened.

The most likely candidate is the Empire.

But Olivia wanted to go one step further, and she knew it wouldn't be the end of the story.

Kono Lint didn't mind not having to accompany him to the national cemetery when his work at the mausoleum was done.

But he followed us, demanding to know what was going on in this strange business.

It didn't exactly follow, but rather led with its spatial movement.

We made a quick exit from the imperial palace and traveled with Kono Lint to the national cemetery where the night fell.

It was night, so the cemetery was naturally deserted, and mourners would have no reason to be in this location at this time of night.

That's why the vast cemeteries were empty, but the temples were lit.

The resident priests, administrators, and guards will remain.

A graveyard area for those who were not able to enter the Hall of Heroes, but made their mark.

We've reached the outskirts of the cemetery, out of sight of the temple's lights.

"What the hell is going on here......?"

Konorint looked at Olivia, whose face had hardened into a cold mask of fear.

"I won't know until I see it."

In the darkness, Olivia begins to scan the graves, headstone by headstone.

A graveyard of warriors.

None of the names are familiar, but Olivia walks past them one by one, staring at the headstones.

"What are you trying to see?"

"Date."

When Harriet asked, Olivia answered simply: "I don't know.

Olivia scanned the tombstones wordlessly, and soon she was standing in front of a grave.

Maybe they were trying to find a more recent grave.

"I'm going to start working, cover me up."

"Is ...... okay?"

"I'm not going to do this on a large scale. If it's just one, it's hard to get caught."

Since we're going to be doing something different than the original plan of a massive undead resurrection, it's easy to hide.

No one comes and goes, but it can't hurt to be careful.

Herriot casts stealth and other concealment spells, while Olivia rests her hand on the tombstone and begins to channel the holy power of Corruption.

Konorint stares at me with a look of fear.

"You can't possibly....... that this place might be all empty....... that it might all be empty?"

If not only the mausoleums of heroes, but also the graves of fallen soldiers in the national cemetery are all empty.

What happens then, and how do I deal with it?

His lips were quivering.

"I don't know, I'm not sure about anything until I see it for myself."

"......."

At my words, Kono Lindt shook his head.

How much time has passed.

-Woof!

The flat green grass behind the headstone began to stir.

If the area is shaking, it means something is trying to come out of the ground.

We're good here.

Because that's what it means to have something to revive.

"Ugh, ugh......!"

Kono Lindt's complexion turned blue and he began to tremble.

-Woof! Cringe!

-Swoosh!

Soon, the grass stirred, and a skeletal hand emerged from the earth.

Resurrection of the dead.

To be more precise, it's resurrecting from the dead.

Konorint averted his gaze from the sight, and I watched the half-resurrection crawl out of the ground, arms outstretched.

-Grrr

We could see it crawling out of the ground with a chilling rumble.

A rotting corpse buried in the ground rose, shrouded in a black aura of corruption.

It wasn't completely decayed yet, so there was still some flesh attached to it, which made it all the more gruesome to look at.

Kono Lint didn't dare look at him, and Harriet covered her mouth to keep from feeling nauseous.

Olivia stares at the still, reanimated corpse.

"Ugh....... But the bodies are still here....... still there, right?"

"I guess so."

At Herriot's words, Olivia could only give a knowing nod.

Olivia stares at the skeleton, which has come to life and stares back at her with blank eyes.

Only the decaying flesh had been resurrected, without the spirit.

"I need to get a few more spheres up."

After staring at the reanimated skeleton for a long time, Olivia only added briefly, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to help you.

\* \* \*

One by one, Olivia reanimated the bodies, not in a grand ritual, but as if she were burglarizing them in the dead of night.

Five phrases in total.

This was a very small number in the grand scheme of this cemetery.

"Say something, if you know something, I know something. If you don't know, say you don't know......."

Harriet muttered to herself uneasily as she watched Olivia, who hadn't said a word, just revived the corpse and stared at it.

The reanimated remains could only stare after us.

"Go back."

Olivia didn't respond to Harriet's comment, but spoke briefly.

-Grrr

And the ashes began to burrow back into the ground from which they had sprung.

"Put this back. I don't want you to find out what you've been digging up."

"What?"

"Go ahead, do it, I'll explain in a minute."

At best, Olivia returns them to their graves.

Herriot watched, nervously, as they crawled out of the ground and dug their way back into their graves.

Herriot telekinetically buries the dirt and grass and glues the torn grass back together.

I can't say it's obvious, but it's enough to fool the eye that it's been dug out. Olivia finally looks at me.

"I've searched five warriors' graves and have not been able to create a single Death Knight. What could this be?"

Olivia says she's tried and failed five times to make Death Knight.

These are the graves of the majors, the warriors among them.

It's not a wizard or anything.

I should be able to make a Death Knight or two, but they all failed.

"It's like the bodies were all switched."

It's not like an imperial mausoleum.

The body is there, but it's possible that someone other than the grave's owner is buried there.

\* \* \*

The undead Olivia had raised went back to their graves.

I had to revive it, but I put it back to rest.

"All the graves I've caused are after the Gate, and after the Alliance."

Olivia was reviving the body by looking at the date, not the name.

"They're relatively recent burials. According to Mr. Sarkegar, the Allies are cremating most of the bodies, but the ones buried in this national cemetery after the Allies left, they were important enough that they had to be shipped back to the ecliptic for burial, not cremation. You know what I mean?"

"......, you know."

"It doesn't make sense that they couldn't make Deathknight out of five of those bodies, all of which were laid to rest in a warrior's tomb."

The body of a man of such importance that even the Allies, who cremate most corpses, must repatriate him to the ecliptic for burial. Such a man's power in life was not insignificant.

Since the body had just been buried, it would have been a perfect candidate for Death Knight.

But in Olivia's eyes, it was subpar.

Sure, maybe a phrase or two.

But it happened five times in a row.

"The bottom line is simple: you can't make Death Knight in a national cemetery by raising any corpse."

Olivia concludes coldly.

"The Empire is really making Death Knight? The Empire has....... who can wield demonic power like my sister....... like your sister?"

Olivia shakes her head at Konorint's words.

"We don't have to assume they're Death Knights, but if they're trying to get hold of the bodies of people who were powerful in life, we can assume that they're building something like that or experimenting with it, even if they're not Death Knights, and it doesn't have to be Kieran's power to create undead with Death Knight-like powers, because that's what black magic is, right?"

"ah......."

The process is different, but the result will be similar.

You don't need to know about demonic powers to create undead. There are similarities between black magic and the powers of Kier.

If we make Deathknights with the holy power of corruption, the Empire can make them with black magic.

"It might not be the Death Knights, as I said, and it's possible they're doing something other than actually creating the undead. But the Empire can't be uninvolved. This place and the Imperial Mausoleum are both under Imperial control, so hoping it's a third party and not the Empire is a bit optimistic."

Olivia's conclusion is that empire will never be irrelevant to this situation, and I agree.

The Empire may be creating the undead from the bodies of those who have died for humanity, or they may be doing something more.

It's just that the Empire did what we're trying to do first, and to say it's evil is to lie down and spit in the wind.

It's just shocking.

"That said, the move to repatriate the body to the ecliptic is more likely to be a ruse designed to steal it and do something else with it along the way."

"......I guess so."

It's a disguised procedure for establishing important majors and burying fallen warriors in the Zodiacal National Cemetery.

Bury someone else's body and use the actual body for something else.

Repatriating a body to the ecliptic is already an excuse in itself.

"But we've never seen the Empire field an army of undead."

"That's right....... I've never seen or heard of an army like that."

Kono Lint and Herriot said.

"You're saving it. For later."

Just as it's obvious when we fight alongside the Allies, it's obvious when the Allies start fielding battalions of Death Knights. There's going to be pandemonium.

It's an army you can't use unless you're really cornered. Olivia looks at me.

"If that happens, you have a plausible excuse. There are only so many things you can say and get away with, like the Empire is the Devil's army."

"......I guess so."

Let's say the Empire really does need to field a Death Knight army.

We tell them it's a demon army that has nothing to do with us, and that's that. The Alliance will panic, but it's better than admitting that they have a Death Knight army on their hands.

Because, as Olivia said, it's a continental reality right now that if you say that everything bad that happens in the world is my fault, most people will believe it.

The empire is stockpiling power.

You'll have to draw on the power you've stored up by raising the bodies of the fallen, but only at the very last possible moment.

Now that he had the excuse of being a demon, Bertus chose to reanimate the bodies of dead heroes.

Of course, this didn't happen in the original, because there was no universal excuse for a new demon, and even if there had been, it wouldn't have been used until the end.

We have no reason or right to blame him. If Bertus hadn't done it, we would have.

But Kono-Lindt couldn't help but wonder if it was shocking that the Empire would do such a thing with their own hands.

What is evil when we do it is evil when the empire does it.

"Unbelievable......."

For a while, he just mumbled incoherently.

Well, at least it would make some sense if a defined enemy did this.

In this case, it's technically a betrayal.

Isn't it possible that while we're calling them heroes for dying for humanity, behind the scenes we're reanimating them as the undead, creating an army of the dead for emergencies?

In my case, I don't care if it's known.

I'm a demon, and it's only when it's known that a demon creates an army of the dead that bad guys do bad things.

In fact, I was about to do the same thing against Bertus' wishes.

It's human nature that when a bad guy does something bad, it's ironic, but it's human nature.

I'm kind of like that, but I'm not an empire at all.

But if it became known that you were doing this, your empire would be torn apart.

"I think Bertus is taking an overly risky gamble."

I had no choice but to say so.

A risky gamble.

However, it's a gamble.

"By the way, you can't replenish your Death Knight at....... I'm afraid."

Herriot sighed with a complicated expression.

Bringing dead heroes back to life and using them as an army doesn't seem like the right thing to do.

I'm glad we don't have to do it ourselves, but I'm sure it's already happening in the hands of others.

This is both a good thing and a bad thing.

According to Herriot, we failed to replenish the Death Knight, and he had a very nasty suspicion.

Olivia shrugged at Harriet's comment.

"No? There's still one more to go?"

Huh?

What does that mean?

"What's left?"

"There was one more place I was going to go. I'm going to go there."

Olivia puts her hand firmly on Konorint's shoulder.

"Lindt, can you help me one last time?"

"Is that ......?"

"Are you going to help me?"

"Yeah, sure!"

Sadly, our Mr. Lint was not one to turn down an offer like this.

"Where are you going?"

Olivia's eyes narrowed at my question.

"If this is the work of the Empire, then the places that aren't part of it should still be intact, right?"

"What?"

"Oh....... No way......."

I didn't understand, and Harriet looked at me like she knew what she was talking about.

"The tomb of a saint."

Tomb of the Saints.

The tombs of the saints overseen by the Crusader Knights and the Great High Priestesses were, naturally, beyond the reach of Imperial influence.

In Charlotte's case, she still assumed we were going to rob the Hall of Heroes, and even if Bertus was actually making Death Knight, she wouldn't touch the remains of royalty.

But the tombs of the saints.

I can't comment directly, but I think it's pretty obvious what's in there.

"No, he, he....... Can I?"

Olivia's stepfather.

Former leader of the Crusader Knights and a man who died at my hands.

Someone who died a villain by my standards, but was said to have died honorably while fighting a demon.

Surely the grave of Leviathan is there?

"I'm going to make up for not being able to do it when she was alive."

Olivia smiled, and we were dazed by her smile.

Episode 557.

The Tomb of the Saints is located in the basement of Crusader Headquarters.

And, as with most Allied forces, the Crusader Knights and the Five Great Houses were fully committed to this war.

As a result, the Crusader headquarters was operating with minimal staff.

Naturally, there are no palace or temple-level barriers at Crusader HQ.

It's not like I'm undead, so I can't get in and out.

As such, infiltrating the Crusaders' headquarters should be relatively easy compared to the Imperial Palace or Temple.

There are only a handful of people, and we're going to a place that's obviously off the beaten path: the tombs of the saints.

It's an easy place to infiltrate in the first place, and with Kono Lint's help, it was deceptively easy to make it to the Cemetery of the Saints.

"Damn, I really don't know what's right anymore."

When you're forced to help us do what we're trying to do, you're probably wondering if it's worth it.

But when he realized that the Empire was doing this by hitting him, it seemed to Kono Lint that all of his value judgments about good and evil became irrelevant.

He who is first to do evil is first.

That's why Kono Lint decided to help us for the third time to finally create Deathknight in the Tomb of the Saints.

"It's not as big as the imperial mausoleum, but this place is huge."

Tomb of the Saints.

The cemetery, located in the basement of the Crusader Knights, was not as massive as the imperial mausoleum, but it was ancient and solemn.

The overall atmosphere is not that of an imperial mausoleum.

At regular intervals, the walls of the huge communal hall were embossed with the holy symbols of the deities the dead saints worshipped, along with their names and biographies.

Like a morgue.

Within those walls are the remains of dead saints.

It's more like an ossuary with a coffin than an urn.

The coffins in the wall totaled more than ten stories in length.

However, the gap was quite wide, so the coffin at the head of the peak was almost seven meters up.

The tombs of the great saints, in particular, had their tombstones set in the ground, not against the wall, and their coffins buried behind them.

"The Crusader Order doesn't have a long history, so there aren't many saints' remains."

"You mean there will be more tombs in the great hall of each of the Five Great Patriarchs' headquarters?"

"Yes, but it's pointless, since all the other capitals would have been destroyed except for the Great Temple of Als in the ecliptic."

The Crusader Knights were created for the Great Demon War, and their history is not very long. As such, the remains of the saints were likely to be found in other crusades.

"Still, given its short history, most of the saints who enter the Mausoleum are chosen for their military accomplishments, not their theological ones, so I think we'll get more Death Knights from this side, so we won't need to go to the Great Battle of Als."

Those who died in the Demon War.

Those who died in the Gate debacle.

After all, a major is an accomplishment, so the saints of the Crusader Order will most likely be priests or paladins.

The absolute number of saints, at least, will be the remains of those who served their purpose in creating Death Knight.

"Keep the door closed. If anyone comes in and sees you, you'll be in trouble."

"Yes."

The great entrance to the catacombs. Herriot is in charge of blocking the door.

"Reinhard, can you check it out, because I'm in a bit of a bind without a body this time."

"Yes."

I turn to the common wall and place my hand on the opening of a sealed sarcophagus in the wall.

It's a sarcophagus that doesn't even have a handle, because once you shove it into the wall, there's no reason to open it again.

Without this body, things get a lot more complicated.

-Snap! Puck!

I smash the sarcophagus against the wall with my bare hands and check inside.

"I have."

"Okay, so you're saying that the Crusaders never joined in on this undead fun."

I was surprised that no one was surprised that I was able to break down a stone wall with my bare hands. Kono Lint wasn't surprised either.

Anyway.

This is when it became clear that the Empire was responsible for the evaporation of the bodies. If the entire Alliance was involved, the tombs of the saints would be empty.

What's happening now is imperial dictate.

Eventually, this time, I realized that the body was still intact.

-Bam!

Olivia stands in the center and strikes with her magic sword Tiamata.

"Okay, let's get real."

-Woof!

The power of corruption begins to trickle out of the blade.

There will be no failures this time.

\* \* \*

Olivia said it wasn't supposed to take that long in the first place.

It only took me so long because I didn't realize there were no bodies in the imperial mausoleum.

Still, it wasn't a quick fix.

About 30 minutes into Olivia's ritual.

-thump

There was a dull thud, like something hitting the wall.

"ugh....... ugh......."

Kono Lint flinched and slithered toward me.

Yeah, it's a cringe-worthy moment.

The strange echoes continue from the walls of the Cemetery of the Saints, as if something has begun this time.

The sound of hitting something.

-Hududuk

A gray dust of stone dust rose from the walls, echoing from the ceiling of the communal room.

Statues and symbols of the gods shake.

-Thump! Thump!

The banging on the wall starts to get louder and louder.

The slow vibration gets faster and faster.

-Thump! thump! Thump! Puck!

And then there's the sarcophagus, the square tombstone embedded in the wall, whose lid is beginning to crack.

-Bang!

Then one of the lids bursts open with a cloud of dust and something crawls out of the wall.

The bones of a saint crawl out from within the walls, the bones of a saint who has passed into eternity.

-Grrr

With gaping eye sockets and pitch blackness all around him, he slips out of the cramped room and falls to the floor.

-Thump!

His skeletal body crashes to the ground, then slowly picks himself up.

A corpse rose to life, and a bony saint stood over it, his entire body radiating a white-hot energy.

-grrrr

Growling in a strange voice, the skeleton wakes up and slowly walks to Olivia's side.

The creeping energy from his body soon becomes a cloak of darkness, enveloping the skeleton from head to toe.

A skeleton shrouded in darkness.

The ultimate undead.

The Saint, resurrected as Deathknight, kneels before Olivia.

"Okay......."

-thump

-Thump!

The sound of awakened beings pounding on the sarcophagus filled the cavity, like birds trying to break free of their eggs.

\* \* \*

The ceremony lasted an hour and a half.

Seventy-five phrases in all.

The Death Knights, now called the Seventy-Five, have risen.

There were definitely things that didn't happen.

However, the remains of saints who had been Deathknighted by the power of corruption were clearly before our eyes.

The underground cavity was sprinkled with stone dust from the broken sarcophagi.

With Herriot's noise-canceling in place, there were no priests who sensed something was amiss and came here.

I don't want to do a restore or anything.

We're leaving, and we're not coming back.

The Crusaders will be up in arms when they find out that the Tomb of the Saints has been nearly destroyed, but it's none of our business because they've already accomplished their goal.

This will not be enough.

But getting enough Death Knights is impossible in the first place. There is no such thing as enough power in this war.

The Death Knights are basically skeletons.

Wounds sustained in life, or parts missing, were rebuilt with the divine power of the Corruption.

-grrrr

The Death Knight has no living self, only an eerie, low rumble.

It's just a shell.

Olivia approaches one of the many Death Knights.

All of us, watching the spectacle in silence.

One of the seventy-five Death Knights. Behind it was the tomb of Leviathan Lance.

Olivia places her hand on the bony cheek of the Death Knight, who is bleeding with a common corruption.

"That's a lot of yelling."

The corners of Olivia's mouth twitched upward in an eerie way, and we watched in disbelief.

Deathknight, which is just a shell anyway, is not a Leviathan.

It's just that it was once a Leveraged Rancher.

Nearly immortal, he was killed by the magic sword Tiamata, which I stabbed into him.

He was brought back from the dead by the magic sword Tiamata, now in the hands of his daughter.

Olivia watched with a sickening grin as a pallid tear-like smoke drifted from the Death Knight's gaping eye sockets.

\* \* \*

When she said she needed to replenish her Death Knight, Olivia must have been thinking of resurrecting Leviathan.

The rising Deathknights smoked out the Reconciliation Blade, and we exited the Tomb of the Saints.

"Is this....... done?"

"I suppose we could go to Als's place of worship, but I don't think it would mean much, just a bunch of old bones."

Olivia shook her head at Kono Lint's question, as if she didn't need to work extra just to get a Death Knight or two.

We're done with the ecliptic.

"......Can I go now?"

"What do you want me to do, take you to the Allied positions?"

"No, I can walk back by myself."

I got mixed up with the wrong guy, and now I'm being forced to help him do something I'll never do in my life.

But Kono Lint left us with bigger questions than the gruesome process of making Death Knight.

Suspicion that the Empire itself might be doing this, or worse.

It would have been impossible to tell what was what.

"Just in case, don't bother trying to figure out how this works."

"......."

Apparently, Kono Lindt had no answer to my question.

"Even if your abilities are optimized for infiltration, it's not worth the risk, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"......I guess so."

This is the kind of thing you're not supposed to know about.

If he tries to figure out what's going on on his own and gets caught by the Empire, something even stranger might happen.

"Anyway, good work."

Without Kono Lint, things would have been a lot more complicated, but it was easy and fast.

I couldn't be happier that I got the job done quickly, cleanly, and without running into any harsh people.

Kono Lint is silent for a moment, then cautiously opens his mouth.

Like you're about to say something you don't know whether or not to say, but you end up saying it anyway.

"The kids in my class are talking about....... do you know?"

"Roughly."

"......."

Those who died in this battle, and Ludwig, who was crippled.

It tells them you're spying on the Allies, but there's no reason to pretend otherwise. You know you're gathering information on the Allies in the first place.

Seeing that sadness, Kono Lint may have felt compelled to use his unholy power to prevent anyone else from dying in this war.

But it's complicated to know if it's right to capitalize on the deaths of people killed in war, and even if it's right for the empire to do it.

You create a Death Knight to prevent someone from dying, but you create a Death Knight out of someone who is already dead.

"All you need to know is ......."

Kono-Lindt didn't mince words about his sadness and grief.

We didn't really talk about it either.

It's just a sad, horrible, cruel thing to talk about.

It's time to go home.

However, Kono Lint doesn't turn away, but looks at me with a grim look on his face as if he's realized something.

"Hey. By the way, you....... I have a feeling you're going to call me whenever you need me in the future like this....... Am I mistaken?"

"Good to know."

"I don't like you, you bastard, I'm with the Allies!"

"Weren't we already in the same boat?"

You're already an accomplice! You can't get out of it!

His complexion is starting to turn white at my insistence.

"Get lost! I won't even look at you when you ask for help from now on, you asshole! I'm not fooled! I'm not fooled anymore!"

-pot!

Kono Lint scowled and teleported away. At his rate, he'd be able to get to the Allied strongholds a long way from here in no time.

If Kono Lint ever loses its humanity, it will be because of me.

"......Will we ever need Lint again?"

Herriot shakes his head.

"Well, that's a mystery. And then you put it there and it obviously falls into the same pattern. Unconditionally."

"Oh, no. I'll still suspect it's Mr. Sarkegar."

Olivia shook her head, as if Kono Lint could be that stupid.

"Well, I assume they'd follow you even if they knew it was Sarkegar?"

"Ah."

"Ah."

He's so despondent, he might follow me later, thinking that if he can be a pretty girl, it's okay.

She's so used to this that she's probably starting to think that maybe it's okay!

Sorry, Lint.

I think I broke you.

"By the way, wouldn't it be a good idea to see what they're doing in the Empire?"

"Yeah, I don't think it's dangerous for us, but I think we should know what we're doing."

Herriot and Olivia have a point.

I told Kono Lindt not to investigate, but our situation is a little different.

I don't need to, and don't intend to, put an anchor on what the Empire does.

But you have to know what you're doing.

"We'll figure that one out later."

Sarkegar and I are here, so do some intelligence gathering and you'll see what I'm talking about.

Right now, tomorrow, the Crusader HQ is going to be in a frenzy.

We're done with the ecliptic.

"Come to think of it, I have an idea......."

Olivia is trying to secure the Death Knight from a tomb in the basement of Crusader HQ. I thought of a possible candidate spot.

"Don't you think there's a graveyard or something like that in Demon Castle?"

That's the Demon King.

Like the imperial palace, the demon castle might have tombs of past heroes and high-ranking demons.

"Why did you send that to us....... Oh, right, you said you don't remember anything."

Herriot's reaction was like, why would the devil ask us that?

"It's worth a look."

"......But Reinhard. You said I was doing something weird, and you ended up thinking the same thing as me."

Right?

If you think about it, Olivia brought both of them back as Death Knights, but I'm a worse asshole, right?

If you're looking to capitalize on something, why not bring back ancient demons as the undead?

Then I had an asshole thought.

Finally, we headed to the demon castle in Darklands.

However, there was no such thing as a tomb of all-time demons in the Demon Castle.

but I don't know if it was already destroyed or if there was never a tomb in the first place.

Fortunately or unfortunately, in the end, we were unable to secure the Death Knight from the Demon Castle.

Episode 558.

We went to the Demon King Castle with some expectations, but we came away empty-handed.

Still, we have seventy-five Death Knights, which Olivia says are superlative.

These Death Knights are much more powerful than the previous ones.

While not the war heroes of the Empire, the heroes of the Crusade who have been elevated to sainthood are by no means inferior.

Upon returning to Edina, we shared our operations with the Senate and others who needed to know.

"The mausoleum is empty?"

"Uh, not all of them are empty. The cemeteries in the Hall of Heroes seemed to be mostly empty."

Charlotte's reaction was unsurprisingly the most alarming.

Charlotte's jaw dropped at the thought of the Empire doing what we were about to do.

"What the hell are you trying to do......?"

"I'll use that force when I think I've reached my limit, but I don't know when that will be."

It's a very powerful army, but one that is bound to have some side effects.

Unless the situation is desperate enough to warrant such a side effect, Bertus will not bring out his army.

It would be nice to not have to deal with such an army until the end.

A cornered mouse will bite a cat, but a cornered humanity will do anything.

Even if it means spitting in the face of conventional ethics and morality.

You have to do something to survive, and this is probably one of those things.

\* \* \*

I thought it would take a few days, but surprisingly it was all done in a day.

This was partly due to circumstances we didn't anticipate, and partly due to the help of Kono Lint.

After catching up, me, Harriet, and Olivia had a late dinner.

Herriot finished his meal quickly and excused himself to go see Lucinil.

Apparently, Herriot was going to spend the rest of the winter learning from Lucinil about her visions of dealing with spirits.

"You should go get some rest, too."

"I'd like to stay with you a little longer, since we don't have to do this often, can't you?"

Olivia shakes her head, "No, no, no.

You can't help but look cute, even if you're pretending to be cute.

Sometimes I think I'll get used to it, and sometimes I can't get used to it at all.

"Well, sure."

"Do you want to go up there? You know, where you hang out."

I thought about going for a walk, but Olivia seemed to have a place she wanted to go.

\* \* \*

Olivia and I climbed the spire with hot tea in our cups.

I often look down on Edina from this spot. Even now, if I don't have anything better to do, I'll spend some time idling. Of course, given the time of year, that's rarely the case.

-Whoosh!

It's winter, and it's high up, so there's a cold wind at the top of the spire.

"Ugh, that's cold."

We're not really affected by the cold, but it was still cold.

Olivia sipped the tea in her cup and shivered.

"It's going to be pretty when it snows, isn't it?"

Olivia says, looking out over the wintry nighttime landscape of Lazak.

"It's just going to make it more crowded, and I don't think they should come."

"Is that so?"

If it snows, the frozen ground will only make life more difficult for people.

Olivia gives me a coy look.

"......."

"No, I'm just curious that you would think of something like that."

"......."

Right.

Instead of thinking about how beautiful the landscape will be when it snows, I think about how people's lives will change when it snows.

At what point did you lose the emotion and start thinking about the practicalities?

I'm not a man fit for a king, and I've actually let go of that job, but I can't change the way I think.

"You were originally an Archdemon, so is that what you think?"

"......?"

"That's weird."

Olivia sits down next to me and leans her head on my shoulder.

"Now that I think about it, you had a lot to hide in your Temple days."

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

"I'm not looking for an apology, I'm just saying....... I did."

"......."

It was a time when everything was a lie.

That lie made the situation, the relationship, and the world this way.

"I think you're the real you from your Temple days."

"......."

"So, Reinhard, who has become a demon, is somehow fake."

Olivia looks up at me shyly.

"There's no such thing as a secret, and if anything, you feel fake without it."

"Anything."

"Like you're trying to force it somehow."

"Trying to force yourself into clothes that don't fit, and it looks like you're doing it."

"You're a demon, this is what you're supposed to look like."

"I'm not sure."

"I think you should have just been Reinhardt."

"Bad temper."

"Harsh words."

"Violent."

"When someone asks you for help, you make a face and say you can't help them, but you end up helping everyone."

"I think that Reinhardt is who you are."

"I guess it would have been better to live like that, to stay the way I was and not have anything happen to me."

"Like now."

"You who think only of what hurts, and try to endure it somehow......."

"Sad."

The nature of being a demon.

Olivia seemed to realize that it and I didn't go together at all.

I wore a mask in the temple, and this must be my real self now.

In a way, Olivia is right when she says that everything in the moment of living under a false name must be fake, and everything in the moment of returning to a true name must be real.

But who I am in the temple is who I am, and who I am now is a fake, a forced imitation of who I am.

I can't be a demon or a king.

But I'm forcing myself to do it because I have to.

He said exactly what I usually think.

Everything feels overwhelming as you try to force yourself into clothes that don't fit.

It wasn't without thought, but it's a little more like me in the temple.

"Maybe."

Olivia smirks at my simple answer.

"I sounded like a crazy person today, didn't I?"

"......I think the problem is that you think it's not normal."

"What?"

Olivia's eyes widened.

No, it's not!

You're always a crazy bitch!

If you don't know that, that's even crazier! That's even crazier!

Then again, I'm probably an asshole for suggesting we go to Demon Castle.......

"Chet, you're only mean to me, and you're mean to that kid, and you're mean to Charlotte, and you're mean to Ellen, and you know they're always so nice and forgiving, and you're only mean to me, and you're mean to me. Do you feel sorry for me? Do you want to tell me everything that's been building up? Do you want to tell me?"

"......I did something wrong."

"But you know what?"

Olivia wraps her arms around my waist.

"I don't really hate that stuff, do I?"

"Why, why, why......."

"I think you're actually the most comfortable with me. I actually kind of like it."

I've come to accept that a little roughhousing is just part of being friendly.

"Maybe not actually, but it makes me feel a little better to think about it."

"...... Uh, what do you want me to do with the pros and cons?"

I don't know what to say as I watch his face go from sullen to cheerful to depressed again.

"I'm trying. I don't want you to feel bad."

"......."

Olivia has a lot to be sorry for.

I even try not to feel sorry for myself when I know I should.

Olivia said she would stand by me even if the world abandoned me, and she has.

The world may not have abandoned me, but it didn't change the fact that Olivia was by my side forever.

"Actually, is it a little weird to feel sorry for you after all the times you've saved my life?"

"You saved me, too."

"That's that, and this is this."

Isn't that what you're supposed to say when it's the other way around?

When Olivia found out I was a demon, she used her position and influence to try and save my life, even if it meant pulling a fast one, and apparently it worked.

Of course, there are some things that Olivia did that made me realize I was a demon.

The question of why the devil would kill Leviathan and let himself escape.

Now that that's out of the way, they can't help but trust me more after realizing I'm the devil.

In the case of Ellen and Charlotte, they felt betrayed, while Olivia was the opposite.

"Knowing that I was the reason you didn't get to go to the Miss Temple contest was kind of nice, now that I think about it."

"No, I mean, how do you go to the Miss Temple contest when your life is on the line?"

In the end, we didn't get to see Ellen in the dress, but the circumstances were different in the first place.

If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't be able to save Olivia and Adriana from going to the Miss Temple contest.

"You came to me anyway, that's all that matters."

Olivia hugs my waist harder.

"Now that I think about it, you couldn't have beaten my stepfather back then, Reinhard, you weren't exactly hiding your strength or anything."

"I did."

My people, of course, know that I wasn't hiding some kind of power in the temple.

I was truly incompetent. Most of my power and skill came from the Temple.

Olivia didn't see how I fought.

"How did you win?"

"I used a magic sword."

It was a monster that could survive a storm of flames and lightning and regenerate after its heart was pierced.

If it weren't for Tiamata, there would be no way to kill Revere Lance.

"Well, using that wouldn't have made me a match for you."

That's a valid point.

I shouldn't have been able to beat Leverier Lance. Of course, there was a lot of help, including situational conditions, and I wasn't the only one fighting.

But even with a magic sword in hand, Leviathan Rancher was no match for me.

"Well, whatever."

Blah, blah, blah, blah.

There was nothing else to say.

In the end, I went up against a foe I couldn't match, and I won.

It was reckless, but we did it anyway.

I risked my life to save Olivia and Adriana. At my words, Olivia sighs heavily.

"You're a weird kid."

"Only my sister would do it."

"Yeah, I'm letting you get away with being so mean to me because you did something to me."

So you're trying, Olivia said, and hugged me harder.

Perhaps the subject of Leviathan shouldn't come up between us; after all, I did kill Olivia's stepfather.

But this is a unique situation.

Olivia couldn't help but hate her stepfather.

He even went so far as to resurrect their bodies with Death Knight.

"No matter how you slice it, my stepdad and you are bad blood, right?"

"That guy has been screwing me over from start to finish. ......"

"Unbelievable?"

Crusader Knight Commander Reverie Ranze.

He was removed from his position as leader of the Crusaders because of the truth I revealed.

Then he tried to play puppet master with Olivia, saying it was a millennium and all, and he died at my hands.

And now he must rise as Death Knight and fight for us.

I wonder if there is such a thing as bad blood.

This is the kind of thing I wouldn't say if Leviathan came back from the dead and held a knife to my throat.

I don't care what he's done wrong, he's not just taking advantage of a man's life, he's taking advantage of his death.

"But what's ridiculous is that all of this wouldn't have happened if I hadn't touched her."

"I guess so?"

Olivia's bad blood with Levereer Ranché is all thanks to her.

Twice to save Olivia.

Once due to Olivia's request.

It's a funny and eerie coincidence.

Obviously, Levereer Lance was not a good father, and if he had been, he wouldn't have died at my hands in the first place, and I wouldn't have turned Olivia into Deathknight.

Olivia was forced to be a good girl, forced to live up to expectations.

He lived a life where it was normal to sacrifice yourself for others.

Of course, Olivia is not that person anymore.

What was once called the Saint of Eredian ended up being a twisted and tangled mess of events.

I became selfish, abrasive, abusive, and even asked to do horrible things with impunity.

"My dad wanted something called the Millennial Empire. You know?"

"Yes, because they were going to make the Crusader Knights an entirely independent faction."

"I didn't want to do that shit, I hated it. Why would you make me do that when you're God and Nabal and I don't even care?"

Olivia stares out over the landscape of Razak.

"Funny thing is, now that my father is dead and the world is falling apart, I've become the head of something called the Divine Cult, which combines the ideas of the five great gods and demonology."

"......."

"It's funny to me sometimes that I'm doing something I didn't want to do, something my father tried to force me to do, something I refused to do, and now I'm doing it of my own volition."

"You don't want to?"

"I don't know if I hate it, but it's not very good, is it?"

Olivia looks at me.

"It's like you're playing the devil."

You don't like it, but you have to do it.

It's not forced.

Neither Olivia nor I really want to do it, but we do it because we have to.

You're just trying to force yourself into clothes that don't fit.

"I wonder if we'll end up going to war with the Empire, and we'll end up becoming the masters of the Five Great Houses, either by destroying them or by absorbing them. I wonder about that sometimes."

It won't be called the Millennial Empire.

But what Revere Lance wanted Olivia to do.

Somehow, Olivia was getting closer and closer to it.

Is it really possible to plant a new faith in this land?

Olivia Ranze, who rules them all.

It's not as if Olivia doesn't have the potential to be the first superstar of that world.

"How happy would my father be if he were alive to see this?"

Olivia says.

It was a terrible joke, told in a tone of voice that didn't have the slightest hint of sincerity.

"Stop talking crazy......."

"Why, aren't you like the stereotypical kid who doesn't understand his parents and doesn't listen to them when they're alive and only comes to his senses after they're dead?"

"So please stop......."

I don't know about anything else, but you're never a filial sister!

Just because Leviathan Lance was a trashy stepfather doesn't mean you're a filial piety! If anything, you're worse now!

"Whatever."

Olivia puts her arm around me.

"It's windy."

The wind was as cold as the horse.

December.

Now, it's going to get colder.

\* \* \*

No amount of power is ever enough.

But with the first round of reinforcements complete, we began to hunker down for the next Allied advance.

Olivia seemed to be working with the priests and paladins of the Holy Order on ways to enhance the Death Knights already created, or to permanently undead the monsters.

Charlotte was still serving as regent and attending to Edina's affairs, while Harriet was doing her usual magical research, sometimes alone and sometimes with Lucinil.

And I didn't really have anything to do in Edina anymore, except for image training with iris.

Charlotte already knew more about Edina than I did, so she was already my perfect backward compatibility, and I became a nuisance.

So I arrived at the Allied garrison to do the next thing I needed to do.

-Angel

Black cat.

What changed and how.

What's going on.

I'm going to check it out with my own eyes.

Episode 559.

You could stay a kitten forever, but that would be unnatural.

I don't want the onlookers to wonder, "Why isn't this kid growing up?

So over time, it was growing a little bit each time it appeared.

"You're alive, boy."

I also recognized the guards guarding the Royal Class garrison.

"I don't know where you've been sneaking around and following me."

Definitely.

We can't do this until the war is over.

Despite what the guards say, this army is not in a fixed location, and there are constant battles in which many soldiers die.

But a cat that survives and reappears is actually pretty suspicious.

It's been a while since the end of the Occupation of Serandia.

Not surprisingly, the mood in the Royal Class garrison was much dampened.

Three people were killed in the last battle, and the Royal Class has a big hole to fill, especially in low numbers.

Delfin Izadra.

He was a good, nice guy, just like Ludwig was.

According to Sarkegar's report, Scarlett and Ludwig were in trouble and he died trying to save them, putting himself in danger.

While any death would be unfortunate, Delphine's death was bound to be pretty devastating.

Arguably, it's the death of the most characterized character in the original.

Elementalism is a very powerful force, and yet it's sobering to realize that you can lose your life in an instant, and no one is exempt from that.

Even if I saw in a preview a future where I would be killed after a fight with Ellen. If I let go and wait for death in the next battle, I will die.

Changing the future is easy.

It's just hard to change it to the future you want.

I'll have to check on Ellen, but for now, I'm going to wander around the Royal Class garrison.

The first classmate I met in the garrison was Klippmann.

"......."

Even in royal class, there are those who are cat-crazy and those who are not.

Ludwig, Klippmann, and Ledina were not interested at all. Or, to be more precise, they looked away.

I just don't have the heart or the time to give a damn about the little beast.

But now Cliffman was staring down at the cat he'd been ignoring.

"......was alive."

Then he leaned down and patted my head once.

Somehow, I realized there was a lot of meaning in that relieved gesture.

He then walked away without another word.

More important people should have survived, not these little beasts, but they didn't seem to think so.

\* \* \*

When I'm in cat form, I tend to be a doublethinker.

It's a cat, not me.

So when someone pets me, I think they're petting the cat, not me.

If I don't think that way, I can't stand the idea of people, young and old, touching me.

I'm borrowing the cat look, but I like to think it's the cat that's cute, not me.

Of course.

Doublethink, as usual, is just platitudes.

Just something....... If I don't at least think about it, I'm going to lose my mind with self-pity.

According to Conor Lindt, I am a pervert.

It's the worst kind of pervert, the kind that turns into a beast.

Of course, it's not just the guys who were my classmates in the Royal Class Garrison.

There were seniors and juniors. They were happy to see me (the cat) after a long absence, even if the mood was somber.

Honestly, the worst part of being a cat is not being petted or having someone touch your paw constantly.

"You're hungry, eat this."

-.......

It keeps trying to feed me something.

I'm not actually a beast!

I don't want to heat up milk or anything!

Do you guys know the humiliation of putting your head down on a plate and eating something?

Real cats don't think about that stuff, but I do!

"Aren't you hungry?"

-Angel

I don't know if it's a new thing, but there are some guys in the restaurant tents who give you what they've been eating.

Painful.

I actually ate it with my eyes closed a few times, lest I be labeled as having an advanced taste in wildlife.

It's hard being a beast and having to do beastly things.

In a generally subdued mood, I wandered around the Royal Class garrison.

-She said?

-You never know when you're going to need it, so keep it charged up as much as possible. It's not even half full yet.

-We're going to be here until winter is over anyway, so what's the rush?

In the distance, I could see Redina and Kaier arguing.

What's different about what we've seen so far is that things seem to be reversed somehow.

I'd seen Redina snapping at Kaiir all the time over the arc crystal charging issue, and I knew they had a very bad relationship.

-It's not like we don't have monsters, and you're the one who told me to keep them charged because you never know when you'll need them.

-No, I mean, how many times do you tell me I'm wrong? Come on, really....... You're telling me I did everything wrong.......

-How many times have I told you that you're not doing anything wrong to me. Why don't you get it?

-I know....... I know, but there's no need to be so urgent. You don't understand what I'm saying.

But for now, it was a weird situation where Kai was doing his own thing and Redina was stopping him.

-I'm doing it because I can, I'm not always pushing myself, leave me alone.

-A.......

Eventually, a red-eyed Redina cried, and Kaier left her alone and walked off somewhere.

"That asshole is doing it again."

A sound next to me made me turn my head, and there was Kono Lint, arms crossed, tongue in cheek.

He looked down at me and lifted it up.

"Where have you been hiding and now you show up?"

...... You're not talking to Reinhardt, are you?

He didn't realize I was turning into a beast, did he?

Even if I did, I honestly don't think it would make much difference.

The only way to find out is for Reinhard the Pervert to become Reinhard the Crazy Pervert.

Kono Lint glares at me.

Like you're thinking about something.

He's an idiot.

You're an idiot.

"To ......."

After saying something unintelligible, he put me back down.

After walking away for a while, he looks back at me.

-Angel

Let's just shake our heads.

-...... to this.

He did it one more time and then walked away.

When I try to see it and it's not there, I'm an idiot.

\* \* \*

Of course, I've always been interested in cats, but not as much as I used to be.

Some of us are relieved that these little beasts are still alive, but in the end, we can't help but think about the ones that are gone.

Barracks and mess halls aren't the only things you'll find in a Royal Class garrison, of course.

-Ka-ching!

"Can we try ...... one more time?"

"It's ......."

I'm watching Ludwig pick up his fallen sword in the open-air training grounds of the Royal Class Garrison.

His opponent was Scarlett.

Ludwig smiles sheepishly and grips his sword with his left arm.

"Sorry, I'm not used to it."

"......."

Ludwig was practicing his left-handed sword.

I didn't think he'd give up easily, but he's trying to make a breakthrough with only his left arm.

Scarlett looks at Ludwig as if she's going to cry.

"Ludwig, I can always help you more, I can always do more, but......."

"Even if you only have one arm, you can still enchant."

Ludwig was not wrong. Even in his current state, Ludwig would still have a level of combat prowess that no ordinary soldier could match. A superhuman is a superhuman, even if he's missing an arm.

But thanks to Moonshine, Delphine had also been elevated to superhuman status.

Such a delphin is dead.

In a battlefield and fight where everyone is dying, Ludwig would have a high probability of dying if he went into battle in that condition.

It's suicidal.

"Ludwig, I will fight to the death for Ludwig. Because of me....... Because of me, Ludwig, Delphine......."

"No, no."

Scarlett started to cry, but Ludwig shook his head firmly.

"No, it's not your fault."

"......."

"It's my fault, it's all my fault for being weak."

That's a strange thing to say.

If Delphine's death wasn't Scarlett's fault, it shouldn't be Ludwig's either.

But Ludwig blames himself for everything.

Pathological levels of self-loathing.

I wonder if Ludwig has come to suffer from that too.

"I'm sorry, I know this is a lot to ask of Scarlett, I didn't think of that. I'm sorry......."

"Oh, no, that's fine."

"I'll do it alone, it's not a fight that requires sword skills anyway, and killing monsters doesn't require skill."

You said being able to hold a weapon with your left hand is important, not skill.

Convinced that it was selfish of him to ask Scarlett, to whom he is indebted, to watch his swordsmanship, Ludwig begins to enchant himself, holding the sword in his left hand.

Scarlett offers to help, but Ludwig declines, saying he thinks Scarlett would be better off with personal training.

Scarlett finally left the theater with a tear in the corner of her eye.

Responsibilities.

Guilt.

The relationship between sharing something like that was sad and unfortunate from afar.

Ludwig wasn't the only one on the stage.

There were many other seniors and juniors who were also engaged in dueling, training to strengthen their powers, and so on.

I look at Ludwig as I sit in the corner of the room.

"Suck!"

-Woof!

Train with weighted strikes, including kicks as well as swords in the left hand.

It's superhuman training, so the scarecrows aren't just any scarecrows, they're special scarecrows built to withstand powerful blows and physical force.

-Puff! Thump!

"Poof!"

-Hair!

Ludwig, however, is unable to keep his balance and falls when he tries to kick, and is struck in the head by a ricocheted sword as he swings.

Ludwig was right-handed.

But in the end, a sword is more likely to be used with both hands, especially when fighting monsters.

I lost my dominant hand, and two-handed swordplay became impossible.

Losing an arm is not math.

So it's not that half the combat power is gone, it's that most of it is gone.

I watched as Ludwig, who had virtually lost everything, tried to make do with his left hand, with what was left of it.

-Thump!

There's a loud bang, and it's not just the scarecrow that Ludwig hits.

But the other seniors were all looking at Ludwig with a bit of annoyance.

Perhaps it was the eeriness of the sight of Ludwig, crippled and wounded, sweating profusely, yet still able to do so.

Ludwig is basically sincere.

I knew that from the beginning of my enrollment.

However, I wonder if you can call it sincerity to lose an arm and still beat a scarecrow to fight more.

That's not sincerity, that's insanity.

Ludwig was superhuman and beyond the category of ordinary human.

But in the end, it's a cart missing a wheel.

-Thump!

"Boom!"

I couldn't even get my balance right and would fall over, and of course my sword was terrible.

While someone's desperate efforts can be admirable to watch, Ludwig's were merely hopeless.

It's just trying to do something it can't do.

You'll be able to fight even if you don't have arms, and if you don't have legs, you'll be able to fight with prosthetic limbs.

But when it's not humans you're up against, but monsters, you'll inevitably die if you're missing something in your arsenal, even if you're fighting at full strength.

If Ludwig was a wizard, he might have been a psychic.

But when you're fighting one-armed, you're just trying to find a place to die.

So seniors, juniors, classmates.

Seeing Ludwig like that, I couldn't help but get a little nervous.

Right now, the Allies are raising the dead as Death Knights. But that doesn't mean you have to fight Ludwig.

That's just an obsession.

Obsession with doing one more thing.

It's just, it's anchored in evil.

Ludwig didn't scream in pain or throw his sword away.

I didn't fall to my knees and scream about why things weren't working, or say things that made me hate the world.

-Thump!

-Puck!

-Ka-ching!

He loses his balance, falls over, picks up weapons that have been knocked away, and relentlessly beats on the scarecrow despite not even being able to properly power up his attacks.

Just as there is no shaking, no despair, no pain.

You're just beating a scarecrow to a pulp.

Never giving up is a characteristic of Ludwig, and it's a setting I've given him.

But I couldn't help but feel eerie about Ludwig's refusal to give up, even when he should have.

At this point, you should give up.

You will die in the next battle.

Ludwig thought the world was supposed to give him what he wanted, but the world took his arm.

Ludwig is no longer the main character.

So I should give up now because there will be no next time, but I don't.

I'd rather see Ludwig give up and go back to the back of the story.

I hope you're not running for your life.

But nothing seemed to stop Ludwig.

There seemed to be nothing I could do to stop that insane obsession, that need to do something.

As humans, there are times when we have to give up.

I realize with my own eyes how dehumanizing Ludwig's characteristic of not giving up was.

There was nothing sublime about Ludwig.

It's ugly and hopeless.

The sun was starting to set as the exhausted seniors were slowly leaving.

"Ludwig."

Someone who was still on the stage approached Ludwig, who was drenched in sweat, even in this cold weather.

"......Yes."

"I don't know what day it is, but that's enough."

"......?"

"You can't fight more."

It was Klippmann with a serious look on his face.

He came to me because he couldn't stand to see me in this mess anymore.

"Go back to the ecliptic, you've got your majors, you're good enough."

Ludwig shakes his head at Klippmann's words.

"No, I can do more."

"No. I can't."

Klippmann stands before Ludwig with his sword in its scabbard.

"If you don't know why not, I'll tell you now."

As if to dare him, Klippmann positions himself as Ludwig is enveloped in blue magic.

Ludwig looks only at Cliff and nods.

"You want to duel ......? Then you'll have to enchant......."

"You don't need to use it."

Cliffman has no weapons.

"I don't need that much to deal with one asshole."

"......."

Rather than watch Ludwig run to his certain death, Klippmann seems to want him to wake up and get off this battlefield.

Episode 560.

Ludwig wasn't angry or outraged by Klippmann's call of an asshole. He wasn't that kind of guy in the first place.

But we stuck to our guns.

-Puck!

-Thump!

-Bam!

It was painful to watch.

Klippmann played Ludwig without any real enchantments.

Ludwig had blue magic all over him, but he couldn't even touch Klippmann.

Without an arm, Ludwig's superhuman agility and strength were hindered.

First of all, I couldn't even run properly. I was off-balance, and my runs were clumsy.

Without a weapon, Klippmann used Ludwig's strength against him, knocking him down, pinning him down, and stomping on his legs.

Ludwig's unoccupied right side.

Attack only weaknesses.

Without even an enchantment, Klippmann literally toyed with Ludwig.

Ludwig's left-handed sword was untouchable by Klippmann's.

Rather, as if the sword itself were Ludwig's penalty, Klippmann used the trajectory of Ludwig's sword to catch, kick, and subdue Ludwig.

It's almost as if using a weapon is a weakness.

"You were always strong, but....... I think you've gotten stronger, Cliffman."

Ludwig rose to his feet, propping himself up with his left arm, and smiled weakly. Klippmann was neither laughing nor angry.

"You know it's not."

"......."

"You're weak, badly."

Ludwig had no answer to Klippmann's point.

If Ludwig had been in his original state, he wouldn't have been able to overpower Kliffman like this, not even with a magical enhancement.

"There are people who train with just their left hand, just their right hand, and become masters of their weapons that way. It's not like there weren't one-armed swordsmen, and I'm sure there were some in the master class."

Kliffman says.

"But you've got two months at most, three months at most, and there's no way you're going to get there in that time. It's not going to happen."

You have to adapt to a different body, a different fight.

If Ludwig keeps this up for another 20 years, it could be a master class in one-handed monster slaughter.

But we're running out of time.

To think that in two months we'll be able to fight as we are is neither arrogance nor conceit, it's just the delusion of an overly optimistic fool.

"I have to do something. I can't give up like this. Even if I die, if I can save at least one person from dying because of me......."

"I thought you said Delphine wouldn't have died without you, didn't you?"

"......."

Ludwig's eyes widened at Klippmann's rant.

It's amazing how Cliff, a man who can't deal with people, can say such harsh things.

Too many deaths changed everyone.

And Cliff was no exception.

"Would it be rude if I told you that you overreached to save Scarlett, and that's why Delphine died trying to save your overreaching self?"

"No offense, it's true."

Ludwig nodded meekly at Klippmann's rant.

Ludwig himself is probably the one who thinks the most about what Klippmann said.

That's why I was kicking myself.

Ludwig was not outraged by Klippmann's words.

Nod your head in agreement.

"That's right, I killed Delphine, it's all my fault, my weakness......."

"If you know it's wrong, don't make it worse."

"Yeah. So I need to find something I can do with this body......."

"That's more wrong."

Cliffman shakes his head.

"If you die trying to do something, you're going to think that at least you tried, so there's no shame in that?"

"Don't you think about how the people left behind feel?"

"You know what it's like to be left behind, and how do you think it's going to make other people feel if you die fighting over a topic like this?"

"Ludwig. You seem to be thinking of beating the scarecrow until this winter is over, but don't."

"The best thing you can do is get back to the ecliptic."

"Stop acting like you're going to die right now. Go back to where there's no fighting."

It's not that I don't understand Cliff's feelings when he says this to Ludwig.

Doing nothing is helping.

If you die, you're just making everyone else suffer more.

"You're caring, you're nice, you don't say mean things to people, you know?"

As if he knows what Ludwig is thinking, Klippmann walks over, puts his hand on Ludwig's shoulder, and looks him in the eye.

Consideration.

Goodness.

"Now you have to consider us."

"......."

"You're having a very bad effect on the entire Royal Class garrison."

An obsession with fighting that borders on insanity.

The one-armed man, gritting his teeth, stumbling, falling, and still trying to get up and do something.

They don't see human greatness in it.

You're looking at a one-armed man flailing in despair.

People look at Ludwig now and despair.

"You're not looking out for us, you're not looking out for the people. You're looking out for us by going back to the ecliptic. You're looking out for us by staying alive. You're looking out for us by staying alive. That you're safe, that you're in a safe place. Go back."

Real caring.

It probably never occurred to Ludwig that he was being a nuisance to people.

I didn't realize how much I was ruining the mood and making people feel like they were about to die.

Ludwig doesn't give up.

But Ludwig is basically a good guy and tries to be considerate.

You shouldn't be here.

That's caring.

So give up.

"......."

Ludwig couldn't deny Klippmann's words.

\* \* \*

Klippmann left, verbally abusing Ludwig.

Ludwig was the only one in the dimly lit hall.

Like Klippmann's words, Ludwig's actions had a dark shadow of death about them.

Ludwig's mortality was literally palpable, so aside from feeling sorry for him, people couldn't help but think that he was going to die soon.

It's to everyone's detriment.

If his work only affected himself, Ludwig would be stubborn.

But Ludwig realized that his stubbornness was hurting others, too, thanks to Klippmann's words.

Ludwig stood there for a moment, saying nothing, then hung his sword in the armory and left the theater.

It was unknown whether Ludwig would break his stubbornness and meekly return to the ecliptic, or whether he would fight on nonetheless.

But it was clear that he was thinking about how his actions would be perceived by others as he rushed to his death, and how those left behind would feel if he actually died.

\* \* \*

After watching Ludwig, I continued to wander around the Royal Class garrison.

"Ah, there you are."

When Adriana saw me, she squatted down and stroked my hair.

"I'm glad you're okay."

Adriana smiled slightly, but there was a deep sadness beneath her smile.

The death of Ard de Gritis.

Ard and Adriana's relationship was a strange one, one in which they were friends and not friends, but whether they were friends or not, the fact remained that they were comrades in arms on the battlefield.

It's only natural that Adriana would mourn his death.

Ard bumped into me at first, but after we apologized, there was no grudge left.

I even thought he was a good guy after all.

Adriana petted me a few times and then headed off somewhere.

Of course, just because someone is dead and gone doesn't mean you have to cry every day.

It's impossible to be upset and sad every minute of every day. You'll still be able to laugh, you'll still be able to have fun, you'll still be able to talk, you'll still be able to sing.

But even if you don't cry every day, the shade builds up.

I saw the indelible shade of sadness creeping into everyone's complexion, and it was thick on Adriana's.

\* \* \*

Ellen wasn't in the garrison in the first place, and when I went into her barracks, I couldn't find her. Somehow, I'd been killing all day and she wasn't there.

I'm curious about Ellen's condition, but I'm here to gather information and get the full picture of the Royal Class garrison.

So, seeing that Ellen's barracks was empty, I continued to wander around.

For now, the most important thing is the context of the Empire's reanimation of the dead.

First, what happened to the bodies in the imperial mausoleum.

And what happened to the switched bodies in the national cemetery.

And what happens to the bodies of the fallen.

If you're actually doing something like that, or experimenting, is it because there's a secret room somewhere in the Allied garrison where you're doing it.

I'm making some educated guesses, but I don't have any visual confirmation.

In the case of the Titan, which Adelia and the Archduke were developing, we already had information. We don't know the details of the technology or methods, but the fact that they were building a giant weapon was not top secret.

Rather, it would have been a secret that such a weapon was in the works and would have been a huge morale booster once completed.

Indeed, many soldiers who saw the Titan's majesty must have felt that there was hope for the war as they watched the behemoth crush their enemies.

But reanimating a corpse is supposed to be top secret, so neither Sarkega nor I had any information about it.

The scary thing is.

The dead of the Royal Class, I wonder if they too will be resurrected as Death Knights.

In the case of Ard and Delphine, the bodies were never found.

In the case of first-year Kadina Ein, there was a body.

We don't know what the funeral arrangements were. However, it may have been stolen and Deathknighted in some way.

What happens when a dead friend realizes they've become a Death Knight.

And one more scary guess.

Turning someone undead is likely to involve black magic, unless you're using Kieran's powers.

B-6, Anna De Guerna.

A guy who has a talent for black magic and actually raises dead monsters to fight on the battlefield.

I saw that his tent was empty.

The time is night.

It was late at night and he hadn't returned.

\* \* \*

At this point, we're not sure if Anna is actually involved in that work or not.

But it doesn't matter how talented you are, if you're working on such an important and secretive project with a wizard who's only 20 years old.

The Magical Research Society, creators of the Power Cartridge and Moonshine.

Anna's ability to do this has already been confirmed, as she helped Christina create Moonshine.

And in the first place, it's hard to call twenty-year-olds children, even if Adelia's knowledge of the Archduke and the Duchy of Saint-Thuan was crucial to the creation of the Titans.

Temple sophomores are special even within the Royal Class because of this.

An internal club of sophomores, albeit with one junior, had already created two history-making artifacts in their time as students.

I even made a Titan out of it.

There are demons, and even warriors.

Second-year Royal Class graduates are now treated as a very special breed in the Temple's long history.

So the likelihood that Anna de Guerna, with her black magic talents, is involved in some covert project the Empire is working on right now....... should be considered high.

I got KonoLint to cooperate with me in creating Deathknight by saying I had no choice.

There's nothing stopping the empire from making that offer to Anna.

They may even ask Anna to resurrect the bodies of the dead because they have no other choice. Anna isn't even the only warlock available, as the Temple has a warlock curriculum and warlocks.

I look at Anna's tent, which is empty.

Where did it go.

Is it coming back?

Anna's tent was open, so I went in and looked around, but of course, there was nothing there to really inform me.

-Apple

I also misplaced the catnip scent in the tent and got stunned for about 30 minutes.

\* \* \*

Sickness.

Anna's tent was a minefield in a different sense for me.

I'm clearly gifted with poison resistance, so why doesn't it work on catnip?

Narrowly escaping the catnip leaves, he escaped Anna's tent.

If it's late at night and she hasn't come back, I wonder if she's going to spend the night in a lab or something.

As I stagger out of Anna's tent, I hear the distant clink of armor.

-Well done, warrior.

-...... four.

In the distance, Ellen was returning to the Royal Class garrison.

Apparently, he'd been on a mission all night.

-Angel

"ah......."

Ellen's steps quickened a little as she heard a distant cry.

Ellen looked at me in front of Anna's barracks and remembered something she'd forgotten.

He's been busy as hell, and judging by the amount of work he's had to do even now that the Serandia neighborhood has quieted down, he's not going to have time to care or think about anything.

As she approached in her armor, Ellen squatted down to touch me and flinched.

Ellen looks at her gloves.

There was a gross, dried bloodstain.

I wonder if they've been slaying monsters.

-sigh

He carefully removes his gloves and gently tickles the tip of my nose.

I don't really care if I don't take it off, but he seemed worried that it would affect me.

The gloves come off, revealing Ellen's still slender, white hands.

He touched the tip of my nose with his hand a few times.

"Goodbye......."

Ellen started to speak, but her mouth fell open.

I wonder if they think that saying goodbye is a word that doesn't fit the reality of this place.

I could tell that Ellen was in so much pain that she had to choose what she said to the animals.

"You've grown a lot."

-Angel

Ellen pats me a few times, then looks toward her tent.

"It must be cold. Let's go inside."

-Angel

White steam was coming out of Ellen's mouth. There was no denying it was cold.

Ellen led the way, and I followed.

I wasn't going to look up information about Anna today anyway.

Like everyone else, there was an indelible shade on Ellen's face.

What's going on with the spirits?

The more she was pushed, the harder it would be for Ellen to endure.

At least there wouldn't be any major fights this winter, so there would be relatively fewer deaths.

Once inside the tent, Ellen removed her armor and headed for the bathroom.

No, instead of walking away, he looks back in my direction.

"wash......."

-Hello!

"......You still don't like it."

Ellen headed for the bathroom alone, not wanting to be pushed.

According to doublethink, I'm not Reinhardt, I'm a cat, so I don't mind going in with him!

If it's not, it's not!

In the bright light of the tent, it was clear that whatever monster they had captured had left a trail of gory blood on Ellen's gloves and armor.

No, you weren't up against a single monster, you were up against a group of monsters.

Even as the garrison held its breath, people like Ellen and Saviolin Tana would have no time to rest.

I sat on the cot and waited for Ellen to come out of the wash.

By the way.

I always feel this way whenever I see something like this.......

Let's say everything works out later.

I don't know if we should call it reconciliation or whatever.

Anyway, let's say you're done.

If Ellen then realizes that this cat is me.

Isn't this just killing itself?

Honestly, I don't think I have anything to say about that.

This is the perversion of perversions, right?

I thought about it and ended up laughing.

I don't know what's going to happen, and I'm worried about getting caught.

I don't mind being caught doing this a million times if it all works out.

I was yawning like a cat in the middle of all this, when Ellen came back.

Ellen had changed into comfortable clothes and was wearing slippers.

The only time Ellen will ever be comfortable is when she's back in this barracks.

Normally, I'd be wrapped up in all that fancy armor.

It's frustrating.

No, it's not the armor that's stuffy, it's something else.

Ellen sat down on the cot for a moment, then pulled me onto her lap.

Then he starts scratching his back.

It smells good.

I don't know if it's more because I'm a cat, but.......

Uh.......

It's kinda weird, but it's a good, kinda weird feeling.......

It's a real death penalty if you get caught with this......?

Even in casual clothes, the unknown amulet around Ellen's neck continued to dangle.

I wonder if that amulet is protecting Ellen.

Or is she just holding on because she's strong, because she's special.

I don't know.

But Ellen is still here.

Sitting me on her lap, Ellen looks down at me.

"I'd forgotten about that."

-Angel

I wonder if they've completely forgotten that they used to keep these cats in their barracks and pet them.

It's not that I forgot, it's just that I didn't have time to think about it.

It's too much to worry about, and she'll have a lot of work to do after this battle is over.

So when she saw me in my cat form, Ellen looked like she had just realized something she had long forgotten.

Ellen puts me on her lap, and this time she scoops me up and looks me in the eye.

Ellen shakes her head.

"Should I feel sorry for you?"

-Angel

"I feel weird."

-Angel

"If you think I'm glad you're okay....... I don't think you should."

There were battles in which too many men died to rejoice in the survival of a single cat, and there were casualties even in the royal class.

How much pressure and responsibility is Ellen feeling?

"I think there are some people in the world....... who shouldn't have been born."

Ellen picks me up and holds me still.

"I think there are some people who would have been lucky not to be born."

I can't believe you're even thinking about that.

We blame ourselves for all of this, and we wish it had never happened. We wish we never existed in the first place.

So did Ellen and so did I.

We end up thinking the same thing.

"If I were as small as you....... if I were as small as you."

Because it has such a huge impact on the world that it's a terrible, terrible thing.

Still, it had to be fixed.

Ellen seemed to come to admire the insignificance.

If you were insignificant, you couldn't have had more than an insignificant impact, so you think you wouldn't have caused this.

"If I were a nobody....... would have been nice."

Ellen's words.

"Then....... would have been nice."

It sounded awfully sad.

Episode 561.

For a moment in her sleep, Ellen seemed carefree. She didn't seem troubled or worried.

But even that was short-lived, as I began to break out in a cold sweat.

It will give you nightmares.

I would be intentionally nightmares by Airi, but Ellen would be unintentionally nightmares.

Whether it's the spirits trying to consume you, or the countless deaths you've seen, or the guilt you feel.

"ugh......."

I pitied the sweat that broke out on Ellen's forehead, but I wasn't Airi.

I couldn't do anything but curl up a little closer to Ellen, who was having a nightmare.

To my surprise, just by doing so, Ellen snuggled up to me in her sleep and soon began to breathe evenly.

Is this animal therapy....... What is that......?

Of course, some.......

The.

It's too close.

Well.......

Uh.

Yes, it did.

\* \* \*

The next day.

Blurry-eyed, Ellen sat up.

"......."

-Angel

Ellen looks down at me.

It's an eerie sight, but I've gotten used to it.

The eyes were empty. It looked like something had taken over its consciousness, and it moved more like a machine than a person.

Ellen looks at me lazily for about three seconds, then looks away and stands up. Something other than Ellen is moving her body.

It's not that the conversation isn't happening.

I know he actually goes on missions like that and always comes back in one piece.

Bleary-eyed, Ellen went into the bathroom, washed up, and came out, ready to put on her inner armor and activate the armor cradle.

-Crack! Crack!

The seams of the armor connect on their own, and Ellen is dressed in a gorgeous warrior's armor.

The Cloak of the Sun and the Sword of the Moon were summoned to his shoulders and waist.

Ellen left the tent without looking back at me.

This happens over and over again, and eventually, when Ellen's consciousness lasts less and less time, she disappears.

I can't do anything.

Forcing the spirits out of Ellen's body is not something I can do.

Lucinyl is the only one who can do that right now. Not only that, but all the other Lord Vampires must be present.

And Lucinil and the other Lord Vampires of the Senate will not perform the ritual, no matter how much I ask them to. Antirrhinus, in particular, will refuse or sabotage it.

Even if you can pull it off, someone has to deal with that huge collection of spirits.

It doesn't matter if you enter the body of someone who hates you or someone who loves you.

It doesn't change the fact that Ellen is the only one in the world who can handle it.

At some point, you're going to have to risk it all and do something at the end of the day.

Hoping to save Ellen then.

I watched the back of something that looked like Ellen leave the barracks without a single word of greeting.

\* \* \*

Ellen left the Royal Class garrison first thing in the morning.

In that state, Ellen is a machine, but she's not harming anyone or causing damage. Most people don't even realize that anything has changed.

In the first place, Ellen is soft-spoken and does what she's told, so unless you know her well, you don't know what's wrong.

I don't know if it's Ellen I'll have to fight one day, or something that's taken over her body.

In the previewed future, I lose to Ellen, and she commits suicide over my corpse.

We don't know if she's really Ellen or if the demons have taken over her body.

I've been practicing image training so that I don't lose when that moment comes, but I keep losing.

If you can win once in real life for the price of dying a million times in your dreams, that's good enough, but you never know until it happens.

No matter who's in control of Ellen's body right now, she's doing what needs to be done, and I'm no different.

I saw that Ellen's condition was slowly deteriorating, though not to the point of being critical.

I headed back to Anna's tent, but it was still empty.

I could tell right away if he hadn't returned or if he'd slipped in late and left early in the morning.

The inside of the tent was no different than what we saw yesterday.

Anna didn't come back yesterday.

The nature of magical research and experimentation often requires all-nighters, and professional researchers even sleep in their labs.

And just like yesterday, the Royal Class students who see me talk about cats and don't realize that I'm wondering where Anna is.

And, I hate to say this, but it's weird on Ellen's part to say things like this, like she's talking to me.

When they saw me, they didn't say anything, they just petted me or talked amongst themselves.

There are inevitable limitations to gathering information in the form of a beast.

That is, it's impossible to detect.

Since it's impossible to ask questions, I can only gather information from human-to-human conversations.

Goro.

If it was a human, you could just ask her where she went, and it would be solved, but since it's a cat, you have no idea where she's going or what she's doing unless she comes up in people's conversations.

And the problem.

"When is this guy back again?"

"He's grown up, too."

-Angel

People come up to me and talk about their cats, but they don't talk about anything I'm curious about.

Even if you do overhear something, it's frustrating to be hovering around the millennium mark, waiting for the topic of Anna to come up.

Should I just call this a conorint?

He might know where Anna went.

By the way.

I don't even want to tell you that the cat in the Royal Class garrison was actually Reinhardt.

That....... I realize that it doesn't really matter if Kono Lint finds out anymore, because I've technically told him something he shouldn't have known, so what difference does it make if he knows more?

I don't need to hear any more of your weirdo shit here.

You don't even have to reveal that you're a cat, you can just go back to being beautiful as usual....... or something along those lines, just make sure you somehow run into him outside the Royal Class garrison.

You're right, there's only one woman in your life who's going to be like this, and it's either Sarkozy or me, so you know the drill.

However, Cono Lint is a non-combatant in the first place, so his usefulness is always in play.

Because they can move anywhere at a moment's notice, cono lint are actually the hardest to find.

And if you tell them not to find out what's going on, and then call them back, they're just as bad.

No, but he's not really trying to figure this out on his own, is he? He could get himself into a lot of trouble.

It's clear that Anna hasn't returned to the garrison.

But that doesn't tell us if Anna is really involved in this or not.

Sarkeghar is also gathering information, so even if I'm wrong, he might have something.

For now, the limits were clear on my end and I was only in the Royal Class garrison.

Sarkhegar, looking at the entire Allied garrison, might have gotten something different.

\* \* \*

Specified time, scheduled meeting point.

Returning to my human form, I met up with Sarkegar in a secluded spot in the supply depot area of the Allied garrison.

"It's hard to gather information."

"...... also does."

It's not that easy to get information about Titan, but in this case, it's the kind of research or experimentation that should never be publicized.

So it was going to have a different level of security than Titan.

"Basically, wizards have a habit of not wanting to let anyone know what they're working on, so security is tighter than in other places."

"Habit?"

"Yeah, it's kind of like a dog burying a bone."

Sarkozy's quote was funny in this context, too.

Wizards have a pathological aversion to revealing their work to others, which is why they tend to be obsessively security conscious.

If it's more of a habit, it's something you do even if it's research that's not necessarily a secret.

"Also, wizards tend to encrypt the document itself. This is true for collaborative research, and even more so for individual research."

"......What a bunch of tired people."

"We found that each garrison of wizards had a large amount of classified documents, but very few of them could be understood."

"You're saying that the classified documents may have nothing to do with this?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Wizards' security obsession and encryption is the stumbling block right now.

In the case of Titan, it was a very large project that was extremely difficult to hide. In the first place, each part of Titan was huge, and the transportation itself required a huge amount of manpower.

"What about finding a place where they're doing research or experimenting?"

"As I said, the garrisons of each mage group are often much more tightly guarded than the Royal Class garrisons."

With so many candidates, and most of them hard to get into, it's hard to know where to go. The Alliance is a moving army. Still, even within this garrison, it's a testament to the Wizards' obsession with security that they've organized areas with strict access control.

The Imperial Mages' garrison would be difficult for Sarkega to infiltrate, and even if he could, it would be even more difficult to obtain conclusive evidence.

In other words, Sarkegaard hasn't really figured anything out yet.

"Hmmm....... Well, in this case, it's not much different from Titan, but......."

"If that's really what's going on, you'd need a huge area that would be hard to hide."

It's an experiment on thousands of bodies. While the size of the output may not be comparable to Titan, the scale of the experiment itself should be comparable to the Titan project.

Highly secure experiments.

But an environment with too many eyes on it.

I wonder where the hell the Allies are doing that experiment.

I couldn't figure it out.

If Anna is part of the experiment, you can find out where the research is by simply following her. However, she doesn't stay at the research site or return to the Royal Class garrison.

"I guess we'll just have to keep looking. Keep investigating, but don't do anything too risky. I'll do the same."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegar nodded, then turned into a black cat and disappeared into the distance.

Something.

Is it really that complicated?

I think you're missing something very simple.

Yeah, it was a weird feeling.

Episode 562.

Wizards are basically smart people.

No, smart is not enough, geniuses become wizards.

I found it funny that the behavior was similar.

He's obsessive about encryption and security because he's afraid his research will be stolen. It's probably because it happens all the time.

Of course, the places where the wizards actually do their experiments and research are heavily secured and numerous, so it would take time to break into every single one of them.

Eventually I returned to the Royal Class garrison, wondering if I really needed to call on Kono Lint.

The best I could do was walk around and see if I could pick something up.

So, like yesterday, I was bound to run into some royalty.

"Huh? You're back, where have you been?"

She's got a bunch of stuff in her arms, and she wants to pet me, but she's stomping her feet because she has too much on her hands.

The core developer of Titan, who is sure to play a bigger role in this war than anyone else, remains fierce.

I'm sure Adelia will be busy this winter maintaining and improving Titan.

Some people, like Adelia, are actually getting busier on these days off.

Adelia has a talent for summoning magic, but she's essentially a non-combatant. She'd be more useful in combat if she could apply her magiccrafting skills.

Adelia eventually exited the Royal Class garrison with her hands full, glaring at me as if she had somewhere else to go.

There's no point in chasing after Adelia, since all she'll be doing for the rest of the year will be Titan-related.

As I walked around the tents, I focused on listening for sounds from inside.

-Ludwig, it's not like there's nothing you can do back in the ecliptic.

From one of the tents came the voice of Mr. Mustang, whom I hadn't heard in a very long time.

I wonder if we're talking.

I sat down near the tent and focused on the voices.

-You've got a lot of experience with monsters, so you could be an instructor at a cadet academy, and you're a pretty good magical enhancer, so you could help teach magical enhancement classes to moonshine drinkers. That's meaningful enough, no. It's very important. You know that.

-Ne.......

Klippmann had some harsh words for Ludwig yesterday, telling him to go to the back. He told him to stop acting like an asshole and spoiling the mood.

But that's probably because you don't want Ludwig to die after all. I told him that if you really cared about people in this situation, you'd be gone from here.

But Mr. Mustang is different.

-You don't have to be in combat and killing monsters to do something meaningful in war. The logisticians, the drill instructors, the recruiters, the people in the ecliptic, their hard work and support is what makes the coalition move the way it does. Who would think what they do isn't important?

-Yes, they're important, of course....... I'm not ignoring them, I'm not saying I don't think they're necessary.......

He seemed to be trying to lull Ludwig with nice words, to convince him that there was a lot they could do in the rear and that their work was no less important than the work on the battlefield.

There's never anything Ludwig can't do.

As Mr. Mustang says, Ludwig has a lot of experience dealing with monsters. Not just in this war, but ever since the Gate debacle, Ludwig has been fighting monsters for nearly three years now.

After all, he's a veteran.

Monsters are unpredictable, but Ludwig has seen that unpredictability over and over again, so he can pass it on to recruits and others unfamiliar with fighting them.

You could be an instructor, teach enchantment, or even work for the Zodiac Guard.

In a vast evacuation zone, it only takes one small monster to kill people.

Ludwig's role in the Allied army, with its hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of powerful monsters to face, would be small, but in the rear, Ludwig would be able to trample those lesser monsters to death with his bare hands.

-Go back to the ecliptic, there's a lot you can do there too.

I can't see the expressions on Dr. Mustang's and Ludwig's faces, but I can sense the despair in Ludwig's silence.

The sadness and guilt that comes from not being able to fight anymore, but rather knowing that your presence is demoralizing people.

I couldn't help but think that was harsh.

In the end, Ludwig lost his arm and Delphine died.

But it definitely saved Scarlett's life.

Everyone knows this, but they don't want Ludwig to die, so they try to force him back, even though he now wants to fight more.

I don't know which is correct.

Is it right to let him keep fighting, even if it means risking death?

I don't know if it's fair to treat them like dirt and force them to go backwards.

-Ludwig, there's no need to rush into a decision. The Allies are going to be in Serandia for a long time, and it would be a good idea to return to the ecliptic to clear your head and think things through.

Don't make a decision right away, but take your time.

-......I'll think about it.

Ludwig wants to stay on the battlefield, but no one but himself wants that.

\* \* \*

Kliffman's rant, and Mr. Mustang's persuasion.

I watched from a distance as Ludwig emerged from Mr. Mustang's tent with a calm expression on his face.

What's next for Ludwig?

It might be better if he just left the fight altogether.

He's a reckless fellow, and if we leave him here, he'll be dead in the next fight. I agree with Mr. Mustang that there's something to be said for going back to the rear and staying there as a trainee or recruit or whatever.

Is the original protagonist going out like this?

Leaving Ludwig's desolate backside behind, I wandered around the Royal Class garrison some more.

Ellen is gone, and Anna hasn't returned.

If all else fails, I'll call Kono Lint again, but he's not in the garrison either.

Just like that.

I've been walking around and picking up stories.

-TsudamTsudam

Somehow, after a while, I found myself sitting on Adriana's lap, her hand tickling my chin.

"Want some?"

-Pet.

As Adriana takes a bite of the jerky she's torn into thin strips.......

I wonder if this is just a beast now.......

For some reason, I'm starting to feel more comfortable with this one.......

No, I mean, this whole being cuddly just for being alive thing doesn't make sense, does it?

I honestly don't know who I'm supposed to be saving or what I'm supposed to be majoring in, but I'm treated like a big deal just for walking around, not getting killed, and keeping up with the Allies.

How comfortable do these animals have it? As long as they're cute, of course.

She's got me on her lap, playing with me, as does everyone in the room, but Adriana looks troubled.

It's not a cheerful expression by any means.

Adriana was sitting on a crate near the Royal Class Garrison's training grounds.

Next to the crate was the large hammer and shield that Adriana had been wielding, hanging at an angle.

Adriana, who used to wield a sword, is using a shield and hammer in this battle.

Superhumans have an abnormal amount of strength compared to normal humans, so the weight of the weapon itself shouldn't be an issue.

There are a number of people who have switched their primary weapons from swords to hammers, axe spears, or other heavy weapons such as large two-handed swords or yamados as a result of fighting monsters, and Adriana was one of them.

The hammer Adriana wields is a weapon that a normal person would have to use both hands to hold, much less a strong person.

Adriana fights with this in one hand.

Block with a shield, smash with a hammer.

I'm sure Ludwig could handle a weapon like that with one hand.

Whether or not Ludwig is used to that kind of fighting, it's his grim demeanor that makes it seem like he's going to die.

Everyone's trying to stop him from becoming a moth to the flame.

Anyway, Adriana was taking a break from practicing her fighting skills in the training center when she spotted me.

"It's quiet......."

Adriana looks out over the deserted rehearsal hall, muttering to herself.

The stage isn't empty, but it's also not crowded. There aren't that many people in Royal Class in the first place.

"Adriana......."

"Ah, Redina."

At the sound of a voice next to me, I turned my head, and there was Redina.

Redina sat down next to Adriana, looking depressed, and wordlessly wrapped her arms around Adriana's waist.

As if on cue, Adriana opened her arms and wrapped them around Redina's shoulders.

Redina burrowed into Adriana's arms.

"......."

"......."

Ard de Gritis is dead.

Just as sophomores are devastated by the death of a classmate, so are juniors.

They didn't say anything, just held each other still.

I know it's hard enough to bring something up.

Redina cries in Adriana's arms, breathless, and Adriana pats Redina's shoulder, wide-eyed.

It had become a place where tears could come at any time.

And it's only going to get worse.

"I don't know what to do......."

"Kaier Il....... are you talking about?"

"......Yes."

Kaier.

And Redina.

Yesterday I saw them getting into an argument or something.

However, the behavior seemed to have changed a bit from what we were seeing.

Adriana seemed to know what was going on.

"If you thought it was......."

"Did you apologize to ......?"

"I said....... I don't know, you don't seem to want to listen to me at all....... You say you're not doing it for me....... That's all you say......."

"Is he really in danger of his life?"

Listening to the back-and-forth between the two, I couldn't help but realize what was going on.

While charging the Arc Crystal, Kaier would occasionally try to charge it beyond his limits. It was draining his life force.

In battle, if not in peacetime, there's often a sense of urgency. Even when he knew he couldn't afford it, Kaier would charge up until he was exhausted.

Even Redina was often yelling at me to charge until I collapsed.

But she didn't realize it was draining Kai'er's life force, and Kai didn't tell her, because if she did, it would be a waste.

The attitude was that if it meant sacrificing a little bit of longevity, a little bit of life, it was worth it to help where the magic was needed right now.

Redina had no intention of urging Kaiir on or brushing him off any further.

But Kaier isn't sweating for Redina in the first place, so it doesn't matter what she says.

If Kaier dies, the Arc Crystal becomes useless.

Then she won't be able to cast her magic like she does now.

Of course, Redina isn't crying in Adriana's arms like that because she's afraid she'll be useless.

"I don't know what to do....... I don't know......."

Can they do something called an apology and reconciliation?

If we reconcile, will anything change?

Kai is not trying too hard for her, so her apologies and encouragement mean nothing to him. So even if they reconcile, Kai will still be pushy when pushy comes to shove.

You're not going to die right away, so it's okay.

If you push yourself for a while, you won't die right away, that's a fact.

But how long that will be is anyone's guess.

War takes someone's life.

And it continues to gnaw at the survivors.

\* \* \*

Redina returned from talking to Adriana with the grass dead, and Adriana took me off her lap and focused on training alone.

I left the training grounds and wandered around the Royal Class garrison again.

Maybe it was the winter, maybe it was the atmosphere, but it was a lonely, deserted place. It wasn't very warm, so it was better to rest in the warm barracks, so I didn't have to go outside unless I had a mission.

Anna hasn't returned, and neither has Ellen.

I'd rather wait for Kono Lint to come back than be stuck here with Anna, who might come back at any moment.

I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm going to use my Kono Lint Chance again, and I'm in the most likely place he'll be if he returns to the garrison.

Restaurant marquee.

It's inevitable that people will flock here to eat during lunch.

Adriana in training, Ludwig in training, students gathered in the cafeteria tent for lunch.

And I waited for Kono Lint to appear among the students, as this dining hall marquee has always been my seat.

By the way.

It was a little weird.

Never mind the bowl of milk in front of me.

It's one thing to not have Anna and Ellen.

Kono Lint didn't show up at the dining hall tent, either, so we'll assume he was on another mission.

I was watching a group of Class B guys eat at a round table.

B-3 Scarlet

B-10 Lanyon Sesor

B-11 Ludwig

There are only three B-class people in the cafeteria from sophomore year.

Only three people showed up for lunch.

There are two deaths in class B.

Ashur at B-4 and Delfin Izadra at B-9.

We know that the Detomorian is on the ecliptic.

Charlotte, of course, can't be here.

Telepathic, B-9, Ivia lives her life at the General Headquarters.

It was then that I realized what I was missing.

I was so focused on looking for Anna that I didn't realize who else was out there.

Aside from Anna, who can't be here, there are two others who have been wandering around the garrison for the past two days and I haven't seen them at all.

B-5, Christina

B-2, Louis Ankton

Neither of them, like Anna, can remember ever seeing each other.

I was so focused on Anna de Guerna that I didn't even realize the others were out of sight.

Well, Anna does.

What are the other two, and why aren't they there?

-Ludwig, what are you going to do?

Listening to Lanyon Sesor's cautious questions.

Finally, I realized what I was missing.

If Ludwig were to make a backward return, he would be returning to the ecliptic, which is obviously where Ludwig would be.

-Wouldn't it be better to go back to the template?

Temples.

-Once....... Just to give it some thought.

With permission, some of the students will be able to return to the Temple to stay.

I had completely forgotten about the soldiers on vacation until I saw them on the ecliptic.

I hadn't thought of something so simple.

If the Imperials wanted to conduct secret research on something, they wouldn't be doing it in a snowy Allied garrison in the first place.

The temple is as good as empty right now.

But the Temple has been a cradle of learning and research, and even has a university.

Facilities should be more than enough.

Rather, there is no reason to do so here, as there is tremendous risk in conducting such research in an Allied garrison.

Inevitably, we had assumed that since we were developing Titan on-site, we would also be experimenting with the undead here.

If you want to do secret, covert research, you should do it in the temple, not here.

If Anna were a researcher, she would be at the Temple in the first place, not somewhere in this garrison.

But.

Thinking about my speculation with someone who doesn't have one, I couldn't help but think about it in a different way.

If you're not just returning to the Temple to rest for the winter, but because of your research.......

Well, Anna does.

Why are Louis Ankton and Christina?

Not in the first place.......

Louis Ancton was not a researcher on a large project like Titan. He was not included in Adelia and the Archduke's project, even though he was capable and knowledgeable enough to help with the research.

So what the heck has he been doing all this time?

Episode 563.

Louis Ankton's talent is academic.

They can't use magic, so they can't help in combat.

But he was still with the Allies, and I saw him again and again in the Royal Class garrison.

Louis Ankton is a sorcerer, a wizard who can't do magic. He actually helped design the Power Cartridge and Moonshine.

In the original, Louis helps the kids improve their magic level, and I'm sure that's what he's doing here.

Sorry Louie, but technically Louie is backwards compatible with Herriot.

But that's because we're comparing apples to apples, not that Louis is a bad boy.

While he can't actually use magic, he has the talent to fully understand and design all lines of magic.

There's a problem with starting there in the first place.

Louis Ankton had nothing to do with Adelia's project, Titan Research. But he would have been a great help.

Louis Ankton is not affiliated with the Titan project.

He may have been working on refining and improving the combat magic of the mages, but he's more than capable of handling the big stuff.

Still, Louis' lack of involvement in the development of Titan suggests that he was working on a completely different project.

Louis Ankton has a talent for understanding black magic, literally.

So if Anna is working on a project involving the undead, Louis Ankton could help her with it, or even lead it.

So, while we don't know for sure yet, we do know some things.

Anna is not eating and sleeping in a lab somewhere in this garrison.

There is no reason to conduct research related to black magic in this Allied garrison in the first place.

The temple will have a lot more facilities and will be easier to secure.

You're in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To learn the true nature of what the Empire does, you must go to the Temple, not here.

Is Anna really involved, and is Louis Ankton involved.

If she's involved, what the hell is she doing.

What you think is a death knell is likely to be very different from what you think it is, and you can't predict what it will be.

Do I really need to see that?

If so, how?

\* \* \*

When I realized that Louis Ankton and Christina were gone, I realized that I was being lopsided.

I had assumed that the desolate atmosphere of the Royal Class garrison was due to the aftermath of the Battle of Serandia.

It's winter, it's cold, and there are a lot of people hanging out in the barracks.

But it wasn't that, it was the fact that there weren't many people there, giving it a lonely vibe.

The garrison won't be moving for the winter, and the monsters around it are less of a threat now that Serandia, a key monster spawning area, has been cleared.

Royal class members get special treatment, so they were being accommodating to those who wanted to return to the temple to spend the winter.

I've seen soldiers who seem to be on vacation in the ecliptic, and I can't imagine there are any in Royal Class.

If I knew one, I'd know ten, and if I knew one, I'd only know one.

We don't know if there's actually a relevant experiment going on in the temple.

But with Anna almost certainly back at the Temple, it's very likely that the experiment, if it's happening at all, is happening at the Temple and not at the Allied garrison.

The facilities and security are far superior at Temple, and there's no need for risky experiments in a snowy Allied garrison.

It's ridiculous.

If it's a vacation or a school break, it's normal to leave school.

This is the way it is, and the students would rather go back to school than take a vacation.

I finally get a proper look at the dingy Royal Class garrison.

What's going on.

How do we verify that?

\* \* \*

Bertus was on the Yellow Planet.

Tetra, the emperor's office in the Imperial Palace.

Bertus starts reading the report.

For a moment, Bertus was speechless.

Saviolin Tana didn't speak either.

After a long silence, the Emperor spoke briefly.

"Lord Tana, if heavenly punishment is given to those who have sinned, what punishment should I receive?"

Terrible things.

I couldn't have said it better myself.

The greatest sinner in the world would be Bertus, for the sin of the one who ordered it would be greater than that of the one who did it himself.

God's punishment for such a person shouldn't end with the taking of their life.

Bertus wondered what punishment was worse than death.

"Your Majesty, all of this is for the future and well-being of humanity. You are making a decision for the good of humanity. You cannot call this a sin."

"Do you really think so?"

This was an overly exemplary answer.

"......."

Just because it's necessary doesn't mean it's not a sin.

Both Tana and Bertus knew it was just words to comfort the emperor.

That's why Tana had no answer to Bertus' overly direct question.

Because you can't block the sky with your palm.

"Well, there's no such thing as punishment, so I'm just saying."

If God watches over the world, why is there sin in the first place and why did the Gate debacle happen?

"When I think about it, it would be funny with or without the punishment."

"Funny......?"

"What kind of ridiculous joke is it when you give someone a trial they can't overcome without sin, and then judge them?"

"......."

"If there's no punishment and no reward, why did this have to happen in the first place, and what did the gods throw this into the world for?"

"......."

"Well, I don't really care about gods anymore. I'm starting to think so, though......."

Bertus clicked his tongue briefly.

"I apologize, Lord Tana. I must have gotten carried away. It's useless......."

Bertus washed his face a few times.

Retribution.

There is no such thing in the world.

Then why is there sin at all.

Who is responsible for the sin.

Who should bear the burden and who should be punished.

"By the way, do you have a handle on what's going on with the Crusaders?"

"......We don't know which groups are specifically involved, and the scene is beyond our ability to investigate."

Not long ago, Bertus had been informed of the destruction of a tomb of saints beneath the Crusaders' headquarters.

A cemetery has been destroyed and the remains stolen.

"It looks like Elion Bolton will be returning to the ecliptic soon."

"......Yes."

The work of the Crusaders is the work of the Crusaders.

Hoping this doesn't spark anything, Bertus looks at his tea, which is now cold.

"One of my classmates died, and another was crippled."

"Yes......."

Dead classmates.

And a crippled classmate.

"Ludwig, I don't know about you, but I thought stubbornness wasn't your thing."

"Yes, it is."

Saviolin Tana had watched Ludwig's swordplay when she was a dormitory warden for Charlotte's bodyguards.

Originally an excuse to watch Reinhardt's sword, Ludwig has long since grown accustomed to stumbling and falling and begging for instruction.

Similarly, Delphine had been looked at, but not specifically.

Delphine is dead and Ludwig has lost his arm.

Bertus, of course, knew everything about his classmates, if not in detail.

And Bertus was getting the full scoop on each of their performances, not only during the Temple years, but also during the Gate debacle.

Ludwig.

One of four classmates who awakened without ever learning to enchant.

Even though the comparison is between a warrior and a demon, Ludwig was unrivaled for someone his age.

It's a monster.

If it weren't for the war, he'd be in the master class in a few years.

"I know you're not the kind of guy to give up like that."

"Probably, yes."

And not just skill, but personality.

His best friend, Delphine, was dead, and he'd been picking dangerous battlefields throughout the Gate crisis, so he wasn't about to give up the fight just because he lost an arm.

Stubborn to the point of death.

Even without seeing it, Bertus knew what was coming.

To prevent the death of a classmate's dog.

Before the moth burns out.

"Tell them to return to the template."

Bertus issues an imperial decree.

\* \* \*

There are some people in the world who don't need to be persuaded or convinced.

If you want someone to come, you tell them to come; if you want them to go, you tell them to go.

Bertus is such a thing.

This is how the world has come to be, and still is, at least in the land of men.

Torn between anger and despair, between fighting on and fighting on, between Klippmann's rants, his friends' persuasions, and his teacher's advice, Ludwig needed time to think.

"Ludwig, this is His Majesty's imperative to return to the Temple."

The Emperor's orders came from the mouth of Mr. Mustang.

"If we go to the warp spot and deliver these papers, we'll be able to return to the ecliptic."

"......."

Mr. Mustang gave me detailed instructions on where the warp spots were in the Allied garrison and who to look for.

It's a shame.

Longevity doesn't come by accident.

A direct order to return to the temple, even if he was a classmate, because he was wounded and would insist on fighting, shows how gentle the emperor is.

A royal class, even a crippled one, who didn't need to be bothered.

It's the right thing to do.

I don't need people to convince me, I don't need a reality check, I don't need Ludwig to accept it and go along with it.

Go back.

With those words, Bertus can force Ludwig's behavior, and Ludwig has no choice.

Dr. Mustang was also very impressed that Bertus, now Emperor, cared so much about Ludwig himself.

But when he saw Ludwig's stern expression, Mr. Mustang's face hardened.

"Ludwig, it's Huang Ming. It's not something you can refuse. You know that, don't you?"

An attitude of hesitation.

It's an imperial gesture.

You can't say no, even if you're going to get your head blown off.

Coercive consideration.

"Yes, sir. I know. Of course......."

Ludwig nodded steadily.

Mr. Mustang breathed a sigh of relief, because he hadn't expected Ludwig to yell at him.

Ludwig receives the document containing the Emperor's decree and stares at it in silence.

Ludwig knows that no matter how much he wants to leave this battlefield, he cannot refuse this order from the Emperor.

Now, really, I can't help it.

What you have to accept, you have to accept.

You have no place on this battlefield, and so many people care about you that they're trying to get you to leave.

You can't deny it anymore.

"Even if I go back to the ecliptic, there must be something I can do, right?"

"Well, I told you, there are plenty of places that need you. You have friends in the dorms now, so you won't be lonely."

Mr. Mustang thought Ludwig might be stubborn, so he smiled and nodded at Ludwig's comment.

No stubbornness, no obsession, no desire to fight.

His brief resolve and determination to kill the demon with his own hands is eventually broken by others.

Finally, with the Emperor's orders, Ludwig must leave the battlefield.

\* \* \*

I didn't have to say a long goodbye.

The very next day.

Ludwig said a quick hello to his Royal Class sisters and brothers, packed up his things, and headed for the warp point.

Lanyon Sessor and Scarlett followed to see Ludwig off for the last time.

"You've got Christina, you've got Louis, you've got Anna, you've got Detomorian, so you're not going to be bored."

"I see."

"Take care, Ludwig."

"Thanks."

Ludwig lost his arm saving Scarlett's life, and Scarlett's expression is tinged with guilt as she realizes that it was her fault that Ludwig had to leave.

"Don't be sorry, Scarlett."

"Ludwig......."

The more Scarlett hears this, the more distressed she becomes.

You've decided to leave the battlefield.

So let's not get carried away.

As Mr. Mustang says, even in the ecliptic, Ludwig thinks he has a job to do.

Whatever it is, their work is not insignificant, and he believes he can do something about it, even if he can't fight in this war.

The Emperor's command is something to be thankful for, not something to be bitter and divisive about.

If I ever ran into the Emperor, I'd have to get down on my knees in gratitude.

Between people and transports returning to the ecliptic from the warp spot, the mages in charge of the warp begin casting Mass Teleport.

Beyond the boundaries of the warp spot, Ludwig gestures to his friends who remain on the battlefield.

"You have to be okay."

Death is a sad thing.

Wishing your friends well in distant eclipses is the only thing left to do now that news of the battlefield is out of reach.

That's a shame.

Ludwig leaves, knowing that there is no place for him now.

"Yes, Ludwig, too."

I will fight for your share, and I will survive to the end.

Scarlett told Ludwig so again and again, and Lanyon Sesor waved at him until the end of his long, long mass teleportation cast.

Mass teleportation casts take time.

It's not a spell that anyone can use, it's a way of transporting people and supplying people at the same time, so it's activated at certain times. And the warp spots were not the only ones in operation in the Allied garrison.

So until mass teleportation was activated from the warp spot, Ludwig could watch the supplies and people arriving on the ecliptic, one by one.

Ludwig hadn't been back to the ecliptic since his departure, so it was his first time at a warp spot like this.

But even Ludwig, who had never been to a warp spot before, couldn't help but notice that something was out of the ordinary.

"......Crusaders?

It wasn't just soldiers returning to the ecliptic for the winter, but paladins as well, gathered at the warp spot.

That's as far as it goes.

Paladins, however, were far more numerous than the others.

"Are we going to go all the way back to the graveyard?

And the leader of the Crusader Knights, Elayon Bolton.

Even Ludwig could recognize the faces of the heads of the big groups by now.

Ludwig couldn't help but feel strangely uncomfortable as he saw the seriousness in their expressions.

What happened.

That wasn't the end of it.

-Ellen......?

-Is Ellen going back, too?

-Yes, I'm just going to go back for a second.

In the distance, Ellen approached, causing Lanyon Sesor and Scarlett to look up when they spotted her.

Inevitably, everyone's eyes shifted to Ellen.

A warrior, Ellen Artorius, approaches the warp spot, dressed in plain clothes rather than her usual ceremonial armor.

In many ways, Ellen was an exception to the rule, allowing her to use as many warp spots as she pleased, with permission from Command.

But this isn't the same Ellen everyone is used to seeing.

You are holding something in your right hand.

-Hello!

-Buck!

-Ahhhhhhh!

In Ellen's right hand was an odd cage, with a black cat inside that appeared to be panicking, spinning in place and crying.

-I thought it would be safer to leave it in the ecliptic.

-Yes.

-Yes, that's right.

-Cat!

Ellen hugged the cage like it was precious, and the cat bounced around in its narrow confines, wide-eyed with panic.

Episode 564.

I was caught off guard.

Back at the garrison, Ellen sat me on her lap and petted me for a while, and I fell asleep before I knew it.

No, honestly, I slept next to Ellen and petted her so often that I couldn't sleep without learning from her.

The next thing I knew, I was in a cage.

It was a conspiracy.

It was a ruse.

I had an agenda.

Ellen got me.

I don't know who or what she was talking to, but Ellen seemed to decide that I was better off in the Temple than on this dangerous battlefield.

If I'm a real cat, it's a miracle I've survived this long and somehow managed to follow the Allies.

In the end, it's not the monster that's the problem, it's the fact that you've been crushed under the weight of your luggage.

I can see what you're thinking.

Ellen can't stay at the Temple forever.

So you want to send it somewhere safe, even if it can't see you in the future.

Just as Ludwig is dangerous and you want to send him back to the temple, I'm just as dangerous and you want to raise me in the temple.

-Hello!

No matter how much she cried and scratched in her cage, I could see Ellen gritting her teeth and holding it together.

It's sad to see them go, but they're probably better off in a safe environment with someone else.

You can try to break the cage all you want, but from that point on, it's out of control.

Not only Ellen, but also Scarlett and Lanyon Sessor, listened to her and nodded in agreement, and Ludwig, who had decided to return to the ecliptic, shook his head, but didn't say anything about it being futile.

What....... Ludwig is in no position to give a cat's ass right now.

-Step away from non-transmitters!

Mass Teleport casting is ending.

-Hello!

-Buck!

"Frustrating. I'm sorry. I'll untie you in a minute."

Ellen whispered quietly that she thought I was crying because I was trapped.

-Flash!

The flash of mass teleportation enveloped us.

\* \* \*

Ellen was particularly busy, but in the end, the garrison is unlikely to be in danger. So she had plenty of time for this.

Rather, Ellen should absolutely be given a break.

I use those precious, rare, I-don't-know-how-many-days breaks to drop my cat off at Temple.

This is a problem.

That's a pretty big deal, too.

In the future, if I am entrusted with the Temple, I will not be able to use Operation Cat in the future.

I suppose you could disguise the other cat, but isn't it a little suspicious that when one cat disappears, another cat immediately appears?

I'm sure the Temple stray would be a better seller than the Allied Garrison stray, but I'm not a cat!

Back on the ecliptic, Ellen pulled on a hood to avoid being recognized.

You're headed to the royal class dorms, and there's no reason why you shouldn't be accompanied on the way.

Ludwig, who lost his arm and is now ordered to wait in the rear.

Ellen returns to drop off her cat.

This makes Ellen look like a crazy person, but there's no way she's going to get away with this behavior. Because of what she's done so far.

Ludwig and Ellen are not close friends.

But I wouldn't call it a bad relationship.

"Did you get a vacation?"

"That's not it, I'll be right back."

Ludwig asked, and Ellen answered in a low voice.

He sounded guilty.

Ludwig seemed to think he was to blame for losing his arm.

He blames himself for everything that's happened since Gate, so he's bound to blame himself for Ludwig.

And no matter how necessary it was, Ludwig seemed to think it was bizarre that he was caring about a cat when he had lost his arm.

Ludwig certainly doesn't think it's Ellen's fault.

"Will....... temple, right?"

"Yeah. But I'm not going to stand still. I'm sure there's something I can do in the ecliptic, even if it's like this....... there must be."

Ludwig says cheerfully.

"There will be, I'm sure."

Ellen replies in a low voice. The good thing about Ludwig is that he's a bright guy.

War and a lot of bad things have darkened him, so he's lost a lot of that, but Ludwig doesn't want his melancholy to be contagious.

"For now, I'm thinking boot camp or guard work, so I can handle the smaller monsters, and you know how dangerous the refugee camps are?"

"Right."

Ludwig was forced to return to the ecliptic, where he seemed to find work that called to him.

"Don't overdo it."

Ellen added softly.

After all, given his personality, it seemed obvious that once Ludwig had gotten used to wielding a weapon with his left hand, he would devote himself to anything that involved fighting.

The dangers you would face in the ecliptic would be less than those on the battlefield. But there were no guarantees that you wouldn't get seriously injured trying to kill a monster.

"......You should."

The sleeve of Ludwig's right arm fluttered.

I've already come to the ecliptic.

So it's not possible for a black cat like me to reappear in the garrison.

Is this a permanent seal for Operation Cat?

Should we do a puppy or something like that next time? I think I'm going to end up on a leash.

No, and there's no guarantee that Ellen would be as cute as she is now if a different beast showed up in the first place.

It's not about being cute, it's about being able to get attention or not! It's not about being cute!

No....... Is that what it is after all......?

In the long run, it's a huge disruption to information gathering.

But it's also a good thing in the short term.

It's a situation where Ellen is personally carrying me to the Temple, to the Royal Class dormitory.

This means you have a high probability of running into Anna de Guerna, who will be there, and it's a great time to see what they're up to.

I even bumped into some of the B-class guys who would be back now.

So if you think about the information gathering I need right now, there's no better situation.

In the long run, it will be frustrating not being able to spy on Allied garrisons.

It's not hard to get out of a royal class dorm for a few days and then dump it somewhere in the temple.

But if I do, I won't be there when Ellen comes back to check on the cat later.

What if someone tries to force you into a royal class dorm?

It's getting to be a bit of a headache.

But what the heck.

I am guilty as charged, for the beast has been put in a cage for befriending man.

You just have to go with the flow.

The temple is far away, and the magic train has stopped running, so Ludwig and Ellen walk toward it.

"Earlier, I saw a group of Crusaders looking very serious....... including the leader of the Crusaders."

"Ah."

"Do you know what's going on?"

Ludwig asks, and Ellen nods as if that's the story.

Ellen's access to the chatter at the General Headquarters meant that she had a different level of information than Ludwig.

"I don't know the details, but....... Something happened at the Crusader headquarters."

"What happened?"

"Yeah, the headquarters cemetery of the Crusader Knights was grave robbed....... I heard they were hit by something similar."

Word would inevitably spread to the Alliance headquarters, which would of course reach Ellen's ears.

No one really knows what it was about yet.

Ludwig's mouth drops open at the absurdity of the grave robbing story.

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know, maybe that's why the Crusaders returned to the ecliptic to investigate the incident."

"I see......."

Ludwig nods in agreement.

Elion Bolton and others are going to have a field day investigating this senseless and heinous act.

But our Death Knight has already been replenished.

We'll never know that the missing remains were used against us in any way, and even if we did, it wouldn't make a difference. The Crusaders won't be able to find us anyway.

"Why in the world would they rob a tomb? Is there treasure in there?"

"I'm not sure."

We don't know if Ellen really doesn't know what's going on, or if she's just pretending not to.

And I couldn't tell if he knew about what the Empire was doing or not.

"......."

"......."

There's another awkward silence.

Ellen and Ludwig didn't say much to each other.

They weren't exactly close to begin with.

As you approach the main entrance to the temple.

"I wish I was as strong as you."

"......."

I lost because I was weak.

Weak and injured.

Weak.

In the end, Ludwig hates his weakness and seems to be sad that he can't have Ellen's strength.

"You......."

Ludwig looks at Ellen.

"Are you thinking of getting back at Reinhardt....... to get back at Reinhard, right......?"

Ellen's eyes widen at the cruel question.

Now that she can't do it herself, she wants Ellen to do her part.

Don't say no.

That's not the answer you want to give Ludwig.

No matter what I thought, I rather hoped that Ludwig would tell me what I needed to hear.

"Someday....... that we have to fight....... I'm thinking......."

Ellen finally said, with a stern look on her face.

Ludwig is not going to be satisfied with Ellen's answer.

"......I'm sorry. I'm not the one who gave you....... It's not like I can do anything about it......."

However, he finds himself in the position of having to hope that someone will take revenge for him.

Your own weaknesses.

It seemed to hate me more.

\* \* \*

So.

I fell for Ellen's ruse, so to speak.

I couldn't fall asleep without being petted, and when I woke up, I was in a cage.

He was returned to the ecliptic, still in his cage.

We don't know if Ellen thought of this on her own or if she decided to do this after talking to others.

But regardless of who in the Royal Class garrison came up with the idea, no one would have disagreed with the decision.

No matter how often you see them and want to pet them, they'd rather grow up in a safe environment than a dangerous one.

That might be problematic for future information gathering, but it's fine for getting me out of there.

Unless someone locks me up, I can go back to Edina.

There's a teleport scroll just in case, so it's obviously possible.

So.

By the way.

I was misunderstanding again.

I thought Ellen was trying to get me into the Temple Royal class dorms.

In fact, Ellen did return to the Temple with Ludwig.

I had to pause at the main entrance to the temple.

"Is this your cat?"

"What? Ah....... Yes."

Something tells me the guards would ask such a strange question.

After all, Ellen did take me to the Royal Class dorm.

But.

After Ludwig went back to the B-class dorm to organize his things, Ellen arrived at the Royal Class sophomore, A-class dorm.

"Is this the cat?"

"Yes."

Setting the cage down, Ellen carefully opened the entrance.

"Grow it."

In front of me was the Emperor Bertus.

From the look on Bertus' face, I'm guessing we've been over this before.

"......Yes, that's not hard."

No.

It's too safe to play it safe.

Not in a temple, but in an imperial palace, a tetra!

It's too safe to go anywhere!

No!

-Ahoy!

Ellen jumped up and clung to my chest in a panicked embrace.

-Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

"......Hold on, it's okay."

Ellen gently pushed me off of her and tried to sit on Bertus's lap.

-Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

"...... doesn't seem to like me."

"......."

Bertus smirked at me as I rambled on, and Ellen couldn't help herself.

No!

From the moment I enter the palace, I won't be able to go outside, and everyone in Edina will be screaming that the demon king is missing!

Not the cat in the temple.

Ellen was trying to make me the emperor's cat.

\* \* \*

What if I was actually a stray that had somehow infiltrated the Allied forces?

A kitten that stumbles into an allied army, gets cuddled by a warrior, and eventually becomes the emperor's cat.

This kind of status is reserved for beasts, not people.

There's no such thing as history in the animal kingdom, but if there were, it would be a big deal in the animal media.

It's a foreign topic. Uh.

But I'm not a cat in the first place, I'm just a demon turned into a cat to gather information.

...... Isn't this more international?

Anyway, thanks for thinking of me, but this doesn't work.

I can live with a temple, but never an imperial palace.

It's not about the palace, it's about being the emperor's cat.

You're going to be stuck.

It's about making sure Ellen is in the safest place in the world.

Even Bertus has no intention of saying no to Ellen's request.

If it doesn't work, it doesn't work.

I did everything I could.

When Ellen would try to pick me up from Bertus or sit me on her lap, I would twist and turn, cry, and grind my teeth.

"I didn't realize I was so unloved by animals."

Somehow, Bertus was hurt.

No.

It's not like that.......

"......Why is this?"

Ellen began to stroke the mad cat on her lap as if it were the highest dignity of mankind, the emperor.

It's an animal, it doesn't know what it's doing, and I think they both understand it that way.

Ellen is a picture that Bertus will not be able to pass me off as because I hate her so much.

This.

If you really try to force it, it will revert to its normal behavior and you will have to use force to get away.

What happens after that, whether it's a fight or whatever, I hate to imagine.

This is a rare sight, by the way.

Somehow, we're able to watch Bertus and Ellen in private, and we're not suspicious at all.

"I could have gone to the palace."

The emperor is who you call, not who you go to see.

Even if Ellen is special, I'd rather have her come to the palace, even if it's just to drop off a cat, but Bertus came in person.

"Oh, I've been here for a few days, checking in on the Temple side."

Is this something that I'm supposed to check that's related to the experiment?

Is there really an experiment going on in the temple and Bertus is checking it out?

But this conversation alone is a clue.

If Ellen knows about the topic, there's no need for Bertus to blurt out that he'll "check it out".

"I see."

It's clear that Ellen doesn't know what's going on, because she says it as if she doesn't want to know.

I don't know if that's a good or bad thing.

It was clear that Bertus didn't think it was a good idea for Ellen to handle this.

"Ellen, I'm not going back right away, but you're welcome to spend the winter here. It's never safe around Serandia, but you've done the most work to clear the neighborhood, and you haven't had much rest. Apparently, this cat has no intention of staying with me. Wouldn't it be better if you stayed here and took care of it?"

-Angel

Right.

"......."

Ellen wordlessly tickled the back of my head.

This is the hardest I've ever worked, and I can't even take a break.

Ever since the Battle of Serandia, Ellen has been busy cleaning up the monsters around her.

But you should be more or less done with that now, so you don't have to sit in your garrison waiting for a mission.

Normally, Ellen would have left me with Bertus and headed straight back to the Allied garrison.

"It's been a while since you've been back to the dorms. Get some rest while you're here."

Bertus didn't meet Ellen in the palace, but in her dormitory.

This was partly because Bertus had been at the Temple for a few days, but it also seemed like he was trying to get Ellen some rest upon her return to the dorm.

"......May I?"

"Who else but you would do that?"

Ellen looks down at me, her hands on my waist as she sits on my lap.

"Do I deserve....... do I have it in me?"

I could see the self-pity and guilt in his eyes.

Part of Ellen's relentlessness and refusal to allow herself a break was due to guilt and self-pity.

That left Bertus speechless for a moment.

"This whole thing happened....... And what happened this time....... I feel like it's all because of me......."

I knew she was blaming herself for Delphine's death and Ludwig's, too. I stared up at Ellen as the corners of her eyes turned transparent.

Ellen.

Bertus.

And me.

It's almost as if the people who were most responsible for the Gate fiasco are all in this room together.

"If we start talking about who was really the cause and who was really the problem, it would be endless."

"......."

"Just like the gate situation won't end if I beat myself up thinking this might all be because of me. It doesn't end because you're harsh on yourself."

"......."

"You've seen how weak humans are."

Every day, I was confronted with people dying far too easily.

Humans break, die, and get hurt so easily.

"You're strong, but you're only human."

"......."

"You're getting screwed, too."

At Bertus' words, Ellen clutched the amulet around her neck.

"You don't have to be in the Alliance to fly through the winter, and if the Alliance falls apart without you, there's no point in being in the Alliance in the first place, and the Alliance needs warriors who are all in, not warriors who are all out, and to be that, you need to rest when you need to rest."

"......."

"There is no such thing as a tireless human being, and it's time for you to rest."

"......Yes."

Throwing yourself into the fray, into the fray, into the fray, diminishes a person, and Ellen is no exception.

The last thing the Alliance needs is a risky warrior.

You are a warrior who will spend the winter rebuilding your body and mind and return to full strength.

As if Bertus' words could not be refuted, Ellen nodded, clutching the amulet.

It's been a long time since I've heard Bertus speak in person.

I knew it was different, but it was a strange feeling to see it in person.

Bertus, the villain, was now something you couldn't really call a villain.

In the first place, Bertus was rarely a villain to me during my time in the Temple; the closest I came to that was right before the Gate debacle, but that didn't happen because he was a villain.

After the Gate incident, Bertus felt like the mask he always wore was off.

Bertus is filled with self-pity, guilt, and responsibility.

But what's even worse is that Bertus didn't do this when he was a villain.

Bertus, no longer a villain, is presumed to be up to something even more terrible.

"Take a break, I need to talk to Ludwig."

"Yes."

With those words, Bertus rose from his seat.

Luckily, I didn't get dragged to the Yellow Star Emperor.

Ellen looks at me with her head down.

"I should have gone."

Ellen says in a depressed voice.

"I'm....... keep....... with you."

It had multiple meanings.

No matter how long you decide to rest, you'll eventually have to return to the Allied garrison.

It also means that Ellen doesn't have a lot of time to take care of the little beast.

And finally, that it would cease to exist.

I couldn't stay with her, so Ellen found someone who could stay with me, and that was Bertus.

-Angel

"......eh."

Ellen eventually let out a long sigh and pulled me into a hug.

Episode 565.

The royal class dormitories were full of students who had decided to spend the winter here and had gotten permission.

However, the power hasn't come back and some people have been unable to return, so we haven't seen many people.

It was originally a royal class dormitory with a capacity of only one hundred and twenty students.

There weren't many people there to begin with, and even fewer now, so the atmosphere was very low-key.

Ludwig unpacked his things in his long-awaited dorm room. It wasn't much, and it wasn't a lot.

After roughly unpacking his things, Ludwig exited the room and bumped into someone.

"Ludwig......."

"Uh, Detto. It's been a while."

Detomorian, his complexion unusually sallow, stared at Ludwig's loose right arm.

"......I heard that."

"This is how it happened."

Ludwig scratched his head with his left arm and smiled sheepishly.

Detomorian was not surprised, for those who had returned earlier had heard of Ludwig and Delphine.

"How are you?"

"It's me....... Nothing happened......."

Ludwig nodded his head in relief at the Dettomorian's words. Ludwig looked around the deserted halls of the B-class dormitory.

The only thing that comes and goes is the Detomorian.

"What about the others?"

"I think they're all busy with research."

"I see. You didn't come here to rest......."

Louis, Christina, and Anna have just returned to the dorms.

These three are not rear-guarded like Ludwig, but are back in the dormitory because they have work to do.

Not yourself.

Unlike Ludwig, who was forced to remain in the Temple by the Emperor. They will be thrown back into the Allied ranks whenever the battlefield demands it.

And the master of it all.

"Looks like you're back."

Bertus stepped into the hallway of the B-class dormitory and held up a hand to Ludwig.

\* \* \*

Detomorian said he had some work to do and headed for the clubhouse, leaving Ludwig and Bertus alone in the B-class dormitory.

Since becoming emperor, Bertus has rarely had to face his classmates, with the exception of a few.

It's not Ellen that Bertus sees most often, but rather B-7, the telepathic Ivia, who serves as his liaison to the General Headquarters.

Ellen is next, followed by those involved in magical research.

So it had been a long time since Ludwig and Bertus had seen each other in person.

"Be comfortable, because that's what I like."

"Uh, ah....... Yeah."

Ludwig scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin as he tried to figure out what to do.

"For your attention....... Thanks."

Ludwig felt that he had to say so, since he had brought him back to the temple himself.

"You don't look grateful at all."

"......."

By all accounts, Ludwig was more despairing of his situation than grateful; he only said what he said because he had to.

"......No, no, thank you very much."

"I understand that you want to fight more, and I know that even in your current state, you're probably more capable than the average soldier. But....... you're not a regular soldier."

"......I know what you mean."

It's true that most common soldiers are being used as expendable and are dying in battle.

However, even such common soldiers are crippled, and if they survive, they are no longer used in combat.

Ludwig is a Royal Class troop that can still fight, but is very important.

When they die, the morale of the entire Royal Class suffers.

That's why he's been sent to the back of the line, and Ludwig knows what that means.

It's just a shame.

You can't fight anymore, and you have to take a back seat because you're making your classmates feel like a burden.

"Delphine's work is at....... I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't talk to her much, but I heard she was a good friend."

"......."

Bertus didn't know Delphine, but Ludwig had countless memories with her.

I watched helplessly as someone so dear to me died before my eyes.

That was Ludwig's nightmare and reality.

"It's all my fault."

"......?"

"Delphine was trying to help me, so it's all my fault."

Ludwig mumbles, his eyes blank.

"I'm weak, I did it all wrong......."

Bertus watched as Ludwig blamed himself.

In this situation, Ludwig was blaming himself, just as everyone else was blaming themselves and Bertus was blaming himself.

Bertus was about to say something about how it was inevitable, or that he hadn't saved Scarlett, when he was silenced.

Ludwig is broken.

It's not that it's all that special or particularly rare.

Like everyone else, Ludwig is just going through the same process.

Now that it has retreated from the battlefield, it will slowly rot in helplessness.

What Ludwig needs is not sympathy or comfort.

"There's plenty of work to be done in the ecliptic, and plenty of places that need you."

It's important to realize that you don't have to be on the battlefield to find meaning in your existence.

"I'll get you a spot in the Guard. It's not official, but at least give it a try. You can decide later if you want to do it properly."

You'll need to make them feel like they're not helpless.

\* \* \*

Ellen was the only one in her now sophomore A-list dorm.

Naturally, there are fewer people in Royal Class right now.

As a result, meals were not eaten in the dormitories, but in the great hall of the dormitories, where the grades were mixed.

Ellen was always a very large eater.

But on the battlefield, time is of the essence, and food itself is a commodity.

So Ellen ate less than the average soldier on the battlefield, where she needed to eat well.

-Omnomnomnom

After being in a place where she felt comfortable for so long, Ellen ate quite a bit, though not as much as she used to.

The quality of the meals in Temple Royal Class was also much lower before and after the Gate incident.

So Ellen didn't eat like she used to.

-NomNomNom

Still, it feels good to see you eating so much after all these years.

...... But the idea is that the animal is happy to see its master and eat well. Doesn't that make sense?

Anyway, I'm happy, so what the heck.

This kid ate as much as birdseed on the battlefield.

Was Ellen actually getting good gas mileage?

"Ellen, did you bring the cat?"

"Yes."

"It would be good for him to grow up here. That's a good idea. Ellen, are you staying here too?"

"For now."

"That's right, you need to get some rest."

As a result, other members of the royal class I encountered in the Allied garrison would recognize me and often give me a quick pat on the back or say something to Ellen.

I was sitting next to the straight table where Ellen was sitting.

Ellen handed me a sausage to make sure I had something to eat, and I was munching away at it.

It's out of shape, so you can eat it.

Of course, you didn't follow me to the restaurant to get a sausage from Ichabod.

What I'm looking for are class B guys.

First, Anna De Guerna.

None.

Secondarily, Christina and Louis Ankton.

None.

Ludwig and Dettomorian are the only two Class B guys here.

I thought I'd see Anna, Christina, and Louis Ankton in the dorms, but they were nowhere to be seen.

They can't drive the conversation, so if their name doesn't come up, I don't know what's going on.

Somebody say something!

Anna, Christina, and Louis.

Someone ask me where it is!

-Detto, are Louis and the others in the lab? Is that where they eat? I don't see them. Continue.

-Wouldn't it be.......

-Ah, so you're staying there? Isn't that too much to ask?

-I do come by from time to time across the pond.......

Ludwig!

You are the best.

They're here!

\* \* \*

Playing.

When I looked at myself objectively, there was nothing else I could say.

A few days after returning to the temple.

I was literally playing with it.

-Taktak

As if to say, "Come on up here," Ellen sat down on the bench and patted the seat next to her, and I leapt up and onto the bench.

-Angel

I didn't do much of anything except walk around with Ellen.

Luckily, Ellen didn't leave me to Bertus and head back to the Allied lines.

Ellen also seemed to be taking a break from Temple.

Originally, I was going to do information gathering.

But I can't bring myself to do it.

First of all, Ellen is always carrying me around, and secondly, the B-class guys don't come back to the dorm very often, except for Detomorian and Ludwig.

I'm pretty sure the three of them are in the temple, but it's hard to see their faces.

I think it's in the lab or something like that.

And you already have a pretty good idea of where that is.

The fact that I don't see the three I'm looking for is already information enough.

It's not like they're coming back one or two at a time, but if they're gone at the same time and not coming back at the same time, they're together.

That's why we know that the Empire's secret research includes all three.

Secret research involving the remains of a warrior.

In the case of Louis, his understanding of all areas of magic is excellent, so it's understandable that he's involved in the project.

Anna's talent for black magic is obvious.

But her talent, her alchemy.

I don't understand why you need an alchemist.

What the heck am I doing?

For now, I'm going to wait and see what happens, rather than do anything overtly suspicious or return to my human form to investigate or spy.

I've been told that Edina has a pretty generous amount of time to gather information, so that's probably the least of my worries.

So, with nothing to do, all I could do was sit back and watch Ellen rest.

Sometimes she would be unconscious and dazed for long periods of time, but she made no move to leave the ecliptic. When Ellen was in this state, she would sit in a daze for a while, and then wake up after some time.

"Here, I used to come here a lot."

-Angel

A hill on the Temple Walk.

This is where I used to run a lot.

I played with Adriana often, countless times on my own, and many times with Ellen.

Ellen gazes wistfully down the hill.

I didn't have to tell him what I was thinking.

You're probably thinking the same thing I am.

\* \* \*

The military uses that phrase.

Breaks are also a tactic.

Naturally, managing fatigue is crucial to maintaining a military's combat effectiveness, so it stands to reason that rest is a very important part of military operations.

So when I say breaks are a strategy, I'm not just saying it, it's a strategy. And a very important one.

Ellen was always at the front of the line for most battles, as she was responsible for scouting and killing, and she was often the last to return once we had captured something, as she was out pacifying the neighborhood.

First to the battlefield, last to return.

Sure, she had the occasional day off, but Ellen would always jump out of bed at the call of command.

Then Ellen is resting.

Ellen was convinced by Bertus that she needed to rest.

For the sake of others, Ludwig returned like a man driven to the rear of the battlefield.

For the sake of others, Ellen accepted that she needed to rest.

You're not falling asleep on a cot while on the battlefield.

You're safe, in your room where no one is looking for you, asleep in your baggy pajamas, oblivious to the world.

Ellen ate and she ate, but she also slept and she slept a lot.

Like you're trying to catch up on sleep you've been missing. Like you're trying to get all the sleep you're going to get later.

I've slept for upwards of twelve hours a day, sometimes missing meals and even naps.

How tired was I?

It's not just a coalition issue.

Since the Gate incident, Ellen has been called into battle against monsters nonstop.

When one place is cleared, another place, another battlefield.

They've been working tirelessly, slaying monsters.

For Ellen, it was like getting her first real break after nearly three years of gatekeeping.

I was busy after Gate, and so was he. But I didn't keep fighting. In fact, there were more days when Edina's internal affairs troubled me.

Heck, I didn't even take a break from Lizaira for very long.

However, Ellen had to fight and fight and fight.

Ellen was asleep, hugging the quilt as if she were dead.

This is probably the first time Ellen has taken a real, long break since Gates.

So it's inevitable that you'll fall asleep over and over again as if you were dead, as if to relieve the fatigue that has accumulated in your soul.

But Ellen's door is very slightly open.

When Ellen wakes up after a long sleep and sees me sitting in my room, she apologizes, and after that she sleeps with the door open for a little while.

As in, come and go as you please.

The Class A dorm is empty anyway, so there's no one looking for Ellen.

It knew that if I disappeared, I'd be back soon, and it didn't want to lock me up.

Of course, Ellen doesn't know that you shouldn't actually keep your cat like that.

The time is early night.

Let's go to the B-class dorm.

The three I'm looking for might be back today.

Episode 566.

A B-class dorm in the middle of the night.

-Ludwig.......

-Welcome back.

They include Christina and Louis Ankton, and Anna de Gerna.

And Detomorian and Ludwig.

There were five of us sitting around the table.

-I'm fine, I think there's still something I can do.

When Ludwig started working as a guard, he would leave the Burinake Temple in the morning and stay outside all day.

I don't know if it was Bertus's breath or something else, but Ludwig had found something new to do, and a lot of the despair was gone from his expression.

You have to do something to get past the despair.

Maybe this will help Ludwig regain a bit of his former cheerfulness.

"Huh? This is......?"

-Angel

Christina's eyes widened as I approached.

All three of them panic because here's a cat that's supposed to be in the Allied garrison.

"Ellen brought her, and she's resting in Class A dorm right now. I think I'll probably keep her here."

All three nodded at Ludwig's explanation.

"Oh, I see......."

Anna glared at me, then scooped me up and sat me on her lap.

......somehow.

Maybe I'm just too used to sitting on someone's lap.

I've been shapeshifting for too long, don't you think I'll get used to being human again?

Three.

I'm pretty sure we're working on the same project since we both came back at the same time on the same day.

We all sat around and talked for a long time about the injured Ludwig, the death of Delphine, and other such things, and I sat on Anna's lap and listened.

Ludwig did not cry as he said this.

However, just because you're not crying doesn't mean you're not sad.

It's not that I've gotten used to losing him, it's just that I don't know how to express my sadness.

Ludwig believes that Delphine died because he was weak.

Of course, no one said that Delphine's death was due to Ludwig.

Klippmann says it with the nuance that you're to blame for Delphine's death to get Ludwig to give up, but I don't think Klippmann actually thinks that way.

Obviously, it's not Ludwig's fault.

But if Ludwig hadn't tried to save Scarlett, Scarlett would have died and Delphine and Ludwig would have lived.

But if Scarlett had died, Ludwig's self-pity would have been the same.

I would have blamed myself for Scarlett's death because I didn't save her. In that case, I wouldn't have lost my arm.

In the end, blame games are difficult and unhelpful.

In that sense, Delphine wouldn't have died if I hadn't existed at all.

In the first place, none of this would have happened if Junior hadn't been in Bali, and the gate incident wouldn't have happened.

The future I knew so little about forced me to face the future I was trying to avoid.

When will all the self-pitying stories ever end?

Not everyone can be happy, but can the story end happily for those who remain?

I watch as they share their grief and eventually get over their feelings.

"So, you joined the Guard?"

Ludwig nodded vaguely at Louis's question.

"I'm not technically a member of the Guard, but I'm helping out with....... I'm helping out with the Guard, like patrols and....... something like that."

Ludwig had been helping out with the guards for a few days and, given his personality, would have gone to the most dangerous places.

You have to see the reality of the refugee camps with your own eyes.

"Is the refugee zone monster problem....... Is it really that bad?"

"I can't say it's not serious, but....... but I hear it's not as bad as it used to be. The real problem is....... not the monster."

"What if it's not a monster?"

Ludwig's expression darkened at Christina's question.

"Hunger is one thing, but....... people are the problem."

At that, everyone's face fell as if they understood what I meant.

Crime.

And hunger.

Refugee zones are not about monsters, they're about people.

Ludwig didn't seem to want to say more.

You've seen the truth of life's desperation and misery everywhere, and it's not going to be solved by talking about it here.

"You must be busy, by the way, because you're not coming back to the dorm."

What Ludwig said to change the subject was what I was waiting for.

Research.

When the subject came up, Christina nodded in agreement.

"Well, yeah."

Christina said so, but Anna and Louis didn't look happy, and that was enough of a clue.

It would be nice to ask them a little bit more. Of course, they won't open up, but the reaction is a good clue.

"What are you doing back at Temple, building another Titan or something?"

Ludwig's eyes glowed even as he realized he could no longer participate, for if more Titans were built, the war would be easier.

No.

Son of a bitch.......

How an alchemist and a warlock created a giant weapon.......

You don't know the difference between Magic Crafting and Alchemy, do you?

"No, that's not our field, it's ....... It's business as usual, just moonshine and stuff."

"Oh....... I see."

The lie was obvious.

You realize that the three of you are part of the same research project.

And Christina lied on behalf of them, and Ludwig didn't recognize it. Of course, there's no way Ludwig would see through such a lie, since very few people would know about the mass disappearance of bodies.

I just nodded, knowing that he wouldn't even think of doubting his friend in the first place.

But.

He's been silent all this time.

"......really?"

The Dethomorian looked at Christina with a sullen gaze, tilting his head slightly.

"Huh? What do you mean, really?"

"I don't think so......."

The Dethomorian murmurs to himself.

And the pale complexion of Louis and Anna, not to mention Christina.

I felt like a fluffball, too.

No, it sounds like you're actually in trouble.

Detomorian, this.

I don't know anything about this, but you're just hitting this with your fingertips, right?

Under the piercing gaze of the Dettomorian, Christina went white.

"What....... I'm sure you have an idea......."

He gave me a strong hint that he knew something, but wouldn't pry unless I told him, so he staggered to his feet and headed for his room with his usual sobbing.

Ludwig looked dumbfounded, alternating between his three pale-faced friends and the Dettomorian.

"Dettoga....... What are you talking about?"

"Well, isn't that what Detto does sometimes?"

As if on cue, Christina immediately changed her complexion.

Nonchalantly, as if nothing is happening.

"Yes, but......."

To be sure, Dettomorian often said things that sounded like he knew, but Ludwig didn't seem to suspect anything.

Because that's how it works.

And with that, I was off and running.

Detomorian.

I know he's not a bad guy, but he's a cheap one to say the least.

Ludwig didn't really understand the situation, and Detomorian's attitude was that whatever the three of them were working on was their own business.

Ludwig goes back to his room, saying he needs to go to bed early because he has to work tomorrow.

"......."

"......."

"......."

I sat in silence, watching Christina, Louis, and Anna exchange glances.

That leaves us with these three.

And then we're going to talk about research.

But they only exchanged glances, not words.

"Let's go inside and rest, everyone."

"......Yes."

"I guess so......."

I wonder if they've decided not to talk about their research at all.

The three of them split up after that conversation.

\* \* \*

The time of night when everyone is asleep.

I exited the royal class dormitory still in my cat form.

I could see the three people I was looking for, and I could be sure that their research project was confidential.

However, the inference is only just solidified.

We don't really know what they're doing yet.

Even if the three of us were the core researchers, it's clear that the project would have included a significant number of wizards, just as the Titan project did.

In fact, I know where I need to go without having to follow those three.

No one would conduct such research outside of the Temple. No one would conduct such a research project outside of the temple, which is the most secure place in the world.

The Titan project was developed in a mobile Allied garrison.

The environment must have been quite harsh, so it was a miracle that the Titan survived its first maneuver.

However, there is no reason why the research environment has to be poor.

The Titan was such a massive, mega-weapon that it would have had to be developed in the field where the Allies were moving.

If it weren't for that, Titan would be in a stable environment.

I'm pretty sure there's research going on at Temple, so it's no secret where it is without me following in the footsteps of the B-class trio.

It's probably the best research environment at Temple.

Temple University.

There, of course, is the University of Magic Research Building.

It's a given that there's research going on somewhere.

The reason I haven't gone there until now, even though I know I should, is simple.

-.......

After running through the Temple of Night, I arrived at the Temple College of Magic, only to find it completely locked down.

There were temple guards in the vicinity of the facility, as well as at the entrance to each lab to monitor access.

The numbers were staggering.

There were so many guards that even if you didn't know anything about it, you'd think they were doing something inside.

I'm afraid it's a bit too much.

It's perfectly possible to enter that area.

It's unlikely that the guards will try to chase away a single cat.

Importantly, the only place I can walk around in this form is the grounds of the research facility.

It would be impossible to enter the building.

Rather, if a big beast tries to enter, it will be kicked out. That's because, whether I'm suspicious or not, an animal might get into the research facility and touch something important.

There's nothing to be gained by walking around the site itself.

So here I was, knowing that the project was going to happen, and I didn't just show up, I waited for three people to come out and spill the beans.

But the three of them are tight-lipped about their research.

Somewhere in the Temple College of Magic research facility in front of me.

There's a huge project going on here that's on par with a Titan project.

How am I supposed to figure out what the hell I'm doing?

ConoLint does not pull.

I also told them not to take my word for it, which is obviously dangerous.

You don't want him to know anything that he doesn't need to know.

You can't turn into a bug. No, you could, but you wouldn't be able to control it.

It's taken me three months to get used to cats, and I can't even get used to bugs.

Should we call Sarkegar over here?

But the neighborhood itself is now heavily guarded.

Obviously, the area where the research is being conducted will have tight controls on not only personnel, but also the environment itself.

Chances are, you've configured your environment to be so precise that it literally won't tolerate even a bug crawling around.

Would Sarkozy be able to find a way out of that situation?

The use of force is obviously not a consideration.

Of course, if you think about it, you can jump right in.

Christina, Anna, and Louis.

If you transform into one of the three, you'll be able to get in right away.

But of course, it's a trade-off.

Frustrating.

It's so frustrating that I just want to grab Bertus by the scruff of the neck and ask him what he's doing.

Of course, if they were going to do that, they would have contacted me a long time ago, so it's too late. You'd be laughing if you asked me what I was doing with the Death Knight in the first place, and I'm not going to give up on it, just as the Empire has no reason to give up on the Titan, even if I were to slap it around.

Somehow.

There's nothing wrong with being ignorant at this point, trusting that the Empire will take care of itself. After all, the research here is for the current war.

But just as everyone in Edina was worried about what if the Titan turned on us, even if it never did.

We don't know if the research we do here will be a threat to us later.

If it was simply a matter of turning it into a death knell like we did, this might not be something you'd need to look into.

But black magic followed by alchemy.

The links don't mesh.

Sounds like a more complicated study than I thought.

I couldn't figure out what it was.

If you're stuck on your own, there's no way you're going to be able to break through.

I gave up.

Let's go back to Edina for a minute.

Episode 567.

It's all in the mindset, and it's actually pretty easy to get back to Edina.

Entering and exiting the temple could be done in the guise of an animal.

Not because I'm an animal, but because when I walked through the gate in the first place, I felt like it had been talked about among the guards beforehand that I was Ellen's cat.

It's like being given an intangible temple pass.

Once out of the temple, Herriot's homemade teleportation scroll would take him straight back to Edina.

It's a waste of scroll, but I can't call Heriot here because he doesn't know I was dragged to the temple in the first place.

It's not uncommon for me to disappear and return after leaving Charlotte in charge of the regency, so no one panicked.

Naturally, the first thing I looked for was Herriot.

Despite the fact that everyone else was sleeping, Harriet was in the lab, not the bedroom, looking at something.

If you don't tell him, he won't rest either.

When I showed up after being gone for a while, Herriot gave me a rundown of what had been going on in Edina.

"You were dragged to the ...... temple?"

"......."

Herriot laughed in disbelief when I told him about my experiences in the Allied lines and the current whereabouts of Cat Mode.

"Caged?"

"Uh......."

"Your pet is ready......."

Herriot said that with a hint of frustration, and I couldn't argue with him.

"But doesn't that mean you have to stay in the cat form longer?"

"I already do......."

"Ah."

"In fact, it still feels a little, well, awkward."

"...... Is that it?"

"Uh, I wonder why humans are so tall."

"...... and."

After nearly a week of low visibility, the ground seemed to tremble as I returned to my human form.

The human condition is awkward!

I told him as much as I could about what had been going on in Herriot's lab.

I thought it was just a matter of reanimating them with black magic, but Christina, an alchemist, is working on a research project.

"I can't believe there's alchemy involved......."

"I don't get it, what the hell does being an alchemist have to do with reanimating the dead?"

"In the first place, alchemy is almost as alcoholic as black magic....... In fact, the frequency of insanity is higher among alchemists than warlocks."

"...... is it?"

"Yeah, Aaron Mede, you remember him."

"...... did."

Well, actually, Aaron Mede, a lowly member of the Black Order, was an alchemist rather than a warlock.

"There's also quite a bit of alchemy associated with black magic....... So they're not necessarily incompatible magical systems, but rather related."

Is it the concept of euploidy.

It would be ridiculous to do forbidden research and touch alchemy but not black magic, or vice versa.

It's a concept that breaks all the taboos if you're doing research outside of society's morals.

That's why there's alchemy based on black magic, and there's black magic based on alchemy.

I'm sure this has something to do with it.

"So, what do you think the Empire is doing?"

Her eyes narrowed at my nonchalant question.

"How do I know that?"

"......Yeah, right."

I have this trust that when the subject of magic is thrown at you, you have all the right answers.......

That said, it also doesn't make sense that Herriot has been an answer vending machine so far.

"Too few clues, and even if alchemy and black magic are involved, it's too broad a topic."

It looks like they're doing something bad with their magic, but what magic?

That's pretty much what the question was.

"Raising the dead is alchemy......."

Herriot thought about it, but couldn't seem to come up with anything.

"In isolation, I don't know, but when I try to think about it together, it's hard."

"Separately, do you understand?"

"If it's black magic, it's alcoholic beverages related to the undead. If it was alchemy, you'd have Moonshine and other enhancement potions."

Herriot doesn't see the connection either.

"I'll give it some thought. Maybe the patriarchs will have a clue."

In retrospect, it was a little silly of me to come back in the middle of the night, not a night owl, and ask for answers.

"Are you going to go straight back to the ecliptic? You're Ellen's cat, not Reinhardt's, and isn't Ellen worried that her cat is missing?"

Herriot says, covering his mouth as if to mock me.

"Are you doing this for ......?"

"Of course."

Harriet giggled, as if she found the sight of me as a pet amusing.

"Or can you stay with me today because I'll let you go early tomorrow?"

"......?"

"As a cat instead."

"Oh, no, why not!"

Stop!

I did it wrong!

"Come on. I'll give you a hug."

Herriot comes over and opens his arms wide as if to hug you.

You!

You seem to think that I, the cat, am a completely separate creature from you.

Why are you doing the doublethink and not me?

"......, please..."

"What, you don't like me, you don't like me, you don't like me?"

"Not....... It's not like that....... You know it's not......."

"Then come on, come on!"

At some point, there is such a thing.

You'll find that you'll listen to anything our paktong says.

This isn't how we're supposed to be, but at some point it's completely reversed and I can't do anything about it!

What the hell went wrong and where?

Eventually.

That.......

Well, just like that.......

I got all cuddly.

\* \* \*

Late at night.

Allied Garrison.

Cernstadt military headquarters barracks.

Louise von Schwarz was sifting through a pile of papers by the light of a single lamp.

In combat, Louise von Schwarz was busy fighting and commanding, and in non-combat situations, she was busy looking at the overall picture of the army.

The higher up you go in the organization, the harder it is to get a proper break from both mental and physical work.

Ellen Artorius and Saviolin Tanada are busy with their physical work.

If anyone is busy thinking, it's the Imperial Emperor Bertus de Gradias.

But Louise von Schwarz is also a personal mastermind who has reached the level of commander in chief.

As such, she was, in some ways, the busiest person in the entire Alliance.

Heinrich von Schwarz kept an eye on Louise's busy schedule, even after the occupation of Serandia ended.

Heinrich had already seen what the war had done to the Royal Class garrison.

It was a disaster, but in the end, the survivors survived and something had to be done.

Now.

Heinrich von Schwarz was at Louise's side, staring at her until his eyeballs bled.

Even though it's way past my bedtime.

The sound of shuffling papers echoed quietly in the command center barracks.

In fact, Heinrich looking at the paperwork doesn't make things any faster.

But the documents themselves paint a picture of the situation in Cernstadt County as a whole.

Troop status, supply status, supply plans, minimum winterization needs, etc.

The documentation is valuable in and of itself.

Louise looks up from her papers to the side of the water.

The eye is straining, but there is no focus.

Louise knows now.

I realize my son is bad at using his brain.

Seeing numbers doesn't mean memorizing them.

It's about deciding what's needed, what's not enough, what's enough, and how to use limited supplies and troops. It's also about figuring out whether or not the reports of each departing commander are true.

It does this by reading the line spacing between numbers.

But Heinrich's behavior is too intuitive, as if he's just trying to memorize numbers.

It's just too cluttered.

Also, because it's cute.

Louise looked like she was about to burst out laughing.

Of course, she's not disappointed.

If there's one thing that's great, that's it.

There are a lot of people who don't even have that.

Heinrich doesn't do this because he knows he's the true heir to the Schwarz family.

It's not that they're doing it because they're ambitious and they need to know this.

Just trying to be helpful.

Louise knows she's only doing this out of the kindness of her heart.

So it's kind of sweet to see them trying to force themselves to do something they don't know how to do.

"Why don't you go in and get some rest, you must be tired."

"......is still good."

There's still no personal conversation between the two.

But slowly, something is changing.

If this is what it takes for this war to end.

I wonder if it could be a normal parent-child relationship later on.

Louise thought it was funny.

They're not exactly what you'd call ordinary, but that's what they both want in the end.

And Louise hasn't yet told her son the full story.

"...... is the youngest."

"What?"

"My friends' work is....... That's too bad."

Louise was also informed of the situation at the Royal Class Garrison.

It's none of her business, but she knows Heinrich cares, and she's heard the news.

Death and injury are not uncommon on the battlefield, but I can't imagine how anyone could be comfortable with what their friends went through.

At Louise's words, Heinrich seemed a little dazed, and then he smiled bitterly.

"What can I say......."

It was a mixture of self-help and despondency.

Even if you do everything you can, some things are inevitable.

It was sad, but I could see he was trying not to think too deeply.

It hurts to think about it, so we turn away from it, like running away.

"Thank you, sister."

Heinrich smiles wryly and looks at his papers.

In conclusion.

Louise is thrilled to see this side of her son.

The cold hard truth is that it doesn't help.

Just as he had not been able to rest for a long time, his son had not been able to rest for a long time.

This winter will probably be the last break.

"Not everyone is allowed to do this, but you know there are those who are allowed to return to the ecliptic or their homeworlds for the winter."

"It's ......."

As long as your hometown is safe, you should have that premise.

During this long break, the Allies were selectively giving long furloughs to those who wanted to go back and rest.

"Go back to your templates for now."

"Is that ......?"

Heinrich looks at Louise with a dumbfounded expression on his face, as if he's been told something out of the blue.

"It means take a break and come back. The big fight is over, you haven't had a long rest, and you deserve it."

The unexpected vacation order left Heinrich a little frozen.

"I'm fine, sister. Just in case something happens......."

His desire to stay in case of an emergency is admirable.

Louise doesn't just want her son to have a break.

"The king will be making an inspection soon."

"!"

The man you knew as your father, but was actually your grandfather.

Constantin von Schwarz will soon make his inspection as the battlefield situation stabilizes.

After all, Louise von Schwarz is the commander of the Cernstadt army, not the king.

"I have some explaining to do to the king, and it will be a very uncomfortable and dangerous place for you, Heinrich. It will be an uncomfortable and dangerous position for you, Heinrich."

A sister who faked the disappearance and murder of two brothers is approaching the moment when she must explain what happened to her father.

There's no telling if they'll ever be found.

But there's nothing good about having Heinrich in that position. Whether the truth comes out or not.

"So, that means stay away."

It's a quick getaway in the guise of a vacation.

For a vacation, for an escape.

In the end, it was Louise's consideration that led her to return to the temple.

"Sister....... Is that okay?"

"...... should be fine."

It must be terrible for her, to kill her siblings, to remain silent, to tell the truth, but she only says it briefly.

But Heinrich understood that forcing himself to stay by her side would not help her in the upcoming inspection.

"Again, it's not about inspections. It's about rest."

Heinrich is no stranger to long hours.

Even Heinrich wasn't among the superhumans who could enchant.

But he was more active than most, so it was clear that his fatigue was building up.

Louise thinks vaguely.

Temples.

If only I could see it with my own eyes.

I couldn't wait to see where my son had spent his life.

But the wind is the wind, and she had an awful lot of work to do.

This winter.

Heinrich will rest when the fight is far away.

However, Louise von Schwarz's place is here.

You never know.

Maybe after this war is over, I'll be able to set foot in the temple myself.

Episode 568.

Alchemy and black magic.

Undead and Alchemy.

I can't figure out what the relevance is, and Herriot can't figure it out either.

The decision was made to call Sarkegar, the Allied garrison, the Temple, and Herriot decided to meet with the Senate to try and deduce if there was any significant connection between the clues.

Antirrhinus, Gazoo of Toyo.

And Friday's gazoo, Lerouen.

Both vampire clans have been studying alchemy for a very long time.

As such, we can make some inferences about what the Empire is trying to do through the Lord Vampires.

We don't know whether Sarkeghar will break into the lab first, or whether he'll come up with a likely deduction at the Senate meeting.

In conclusion, we need to know what possibilities the empire is exploring.

If it helps the war effort, that's great, but it's also important to determine if it's going to be a threat to us in the future.

And.

"ugh......."

I was back in Ellen's room after a long night.

After being turned into a cat and captured by Herriot, he arrived at the ecliptic as a cat because he knew he would only be turned back into a cat if he returned to his human form.

The time is morning.

Even in winter, the morning sun was warm on Ellen's face.

Ellen is lying on her back, her eyes wide open, and she stretches as if she's struggling.

It stretched, almost writhing, as if trying to wake a dead body.

Standing up straight from head to toe, Ellen begins to shiver.

-Burr

No, you're not going to break something while stretching, are you?

He's twitching?

"Ugh....... ugh......."

Ellen stretches out on her belly for a while, her eyes wide as a horse's, and then looks around.

Are you looking for me?

-Angel

"......."

Ellen picked me up from where I was sitting on the bed without batting an eyelid, placed me on her chest, and hugged me to her.

That.......

Now, let's be honest.

Get used to.......

This feeling, I'm not even embarrassed anymore.......

Sorry.......

"Good night......."

-Hello!

No.

Yum!

Isn't that the flow?

Ellen closed her eyes and slept for another two hours.

\* \* \*

Ellen was shriveled up like a jellyfish.

It's nice to see you completely relaxed.

What to say.

It's like a human porridge(?).

Ellen opened her eyes groggily and found me sitting there, unwashed, hugging a pillow and glaring at me.

It's a complete mess, and it's not like he's a human....... So, yeah.

Because the kid who's always been Carl is a mess....... He's just cute.......

Without saying anything.

One minute he's touching my head, the next my waist.

He tapped me on the bridge of my nose.

He buried his face in the nape of my neck, mouth agape.

I felt like a knitter whose only job was to stare at cats all day.

Are you even hungry?

-Snicker

I keep getting that sound.

Ellen stared at me blankly, as if she couldn't be bothered to eat.

Hey, this isn't broken, is it?

It's not broken, is it?

Is this one of those things where you have to get rid of the cat for the greater good? Isn't Ellen going to be one of those people where the cat is the only thing that's bothering her?

In the end, it's just a bunch of people looking at each other.

I've seen him scoop up cats and roll around in bed on his own.

It's nice to see that Ellen still has a bit of her normal self left, after all.

It's not that you've changed, but you can be a child for as long as you want to be.

Still, you can't do that all day, after all.

-cough

My stomach has been rumbling for a while now, but I just keep rolling around.

"I'm hungry......."

Stop mumbling and go eat!

Eventually, torn between annoyance and the realization that I needed to get up, I punched Ellen in the cheek a few times.

-pakpak!

"????"

-Cat!

After a few slaps, Ellen's eyes widen and she glares at me.

Ellen's cheeks flared as if to say, "Go for it.

The nudge backfired.

Do you want to get in trouble?

-Haah!

"......Okay."

Finally, as if she understood, Ellen staggered to her feet and headed for the shower.

\* \* \*

Ellen got up, washed up, changed into her normal clothes, and went out into the hallway.

By the time I realized I'd been idle, it was already close to lunchtime. Ellen walked down the hallway, checking to see if I was following.

Apparently, he's going to eat my lunch while he eats his own.

Class A dorms were different from yesterday.

"......Heinrich?"

"Uh, Ellen."

Somehow, there was Heinrich, who seemed to have just arrived.

"I decided to stay here for the winter, too."

"I see."

Heinrich looked at me and nodded as if he knew what was going on. It looks like we'll be getting a few of these over the winter.

At this rate, I'm sure we'll all be back in Temple in a few years.

Ellen pointed her finger down the hallway, not toward the dormitory dining hall.

"We can eat in the ballroom, the dorms are all closed."

"Oh....... Yeah, I guess so, come to think of it."

Heinrich walked after Ellen, as if Ellen's explanation had convinced him that he should eat as well.

How is the situation at the Cernstadt military garrison?

Once I realized that Louise von Schwarz would never kill Heinrich, I was relatively unconcerned.

Heinrich's expression didn't seem to shade too much, so it didn't seem like there was anything too noteworthy.

I don't know about you, Louise von Schwarz, but I thought you were pretty blunt.

Surprisingly, it doesn't seem to squeak.

Honestly, Heinrich's problem is not something I need or want to care about anymore.

"You're the only one in our dorm, right?"

Heinrich is a member of the Cernstadt army, so he's probably not aware of the Royal Class situation. Of course, he knows everything he needs to know.

"Yes."

"Class B?"

"Ludwig, Detomorian, Christina, Anna, and Louis. That's five. There might be more, but I don't know."

"That's quite a lot, there."

"Yes."

Ludwig had no choice, but Heinrich seemed pretty surprised that there were five returnees from the B class.

"By the way, did you like....... by the way?"

Heinrich said, looking back and forth between me and Ellen.

"It's cute."

Ellen paced, then let out a sharp breath.

\* \* \*

The trio of researchers were not in the banquet room at lunch. They probably headed to the university research building after breakfast.

Unsurprisingly, there was no Ludwig on guard duty, and Detomorian was nowhere to be seen, having gone off to do his own thing.

"Hmm?"

Heinrich scratched his head as he realized that there were five of them in the dorm, but none of his classmates except for the seniors.

"Where did everyone go?"

Heinrich asked, sitting across from Ellen as she picked up her meal.

"Ludwig's in the Guard, three of them seem to be doing some sort of magical research, and Detomorian has....... He's got his own thing going on."

The other four might, but does Ellen even know what the Dettomorians are doing? Heinrich narrowed his eyes at her comment.

"Guards? In that condition?"

"Yes."

"Is ...... okay?"

Heinrich muttered under his breath, wondering if he'd ever be able to do guard duty with his body, even if he was superhuman.

He seemed to think I was a terrible person.

"I don't think he's going to do anything that would put him in danger....... that would be dangerous."

He's less powerful, but as long as he has access to enchantments, and as long as he's as skilled as Ludwig, he's not going to be taken down by anything.

In fact, no matter what the level of the Guard is, Ludwig will be able to do what a platoon, not a squad, of Guardsmen can do with his left arm alone.

They don't call it spare the rod for nothing.

From the moment Ludwig is assigned, he's already among the elite.

Heinrich ate, and I ate the scrambled eggs that Ellen had made.

Taking things for granted is dangerous because it's become so normalized that you don't think about it anymore.

By the way, Ellen is back and so is Heinrich.

With the return of Erhina Kaeir and others, the old Temple vibe will return, but it will be a limited respite.

"Hmmm......."

Heinrich wondered what he was thinking, even in the middle of a meal.

"What's wrong?"

At Ellen's question, Heinrich shook his head.

"No....... I thought I was just hanging out here."

"......?"

"Ludwig is also doing guard duty in that body, and I think it's a bit much for me to be playing......."

No.

If you're here to rest, you'll rest. Why are you trying to copy someone who isn't resting?

When you need to take a break, just take a break!

If you're not going to take a break, why are you back here in the first place?

By the way.

"I was about to make my move."

Ellen nodded, as if she'd been thinking about it.

I wondered why I was so saggy today.

Ellen, were you trying to drive and then do something?

Apparently, in Ellen's mind, this was her last day off.

For some reason, it's been flopping around like crazy.

Ellen takes a bite of her sausage and says

"I was thinking of doing a lap of the Outer Rim tomorrow, and you can take half of it."

"Oh, okay, let's do that then."

He wants to work as soon as he gets back.

And the one who puts him to work right away.

-Cat!

"Do you want to come with me?"

-Hello!

It was my favorite thing to watch, a beast of prey.

\* \* \*

Edina, capital of Razak, royal castle.

Senate Chamber.

"Black magic and alchemy. They're practically inseparable."

As soon as I shared the clues Reinhardt had given me, Antrianus, the head of Toyo, smiled sinisterly.

That's a total of six in this spot.

They were Lord Vampire Five and the scribe Herriot de Saint-Ouen.

I didn't need any more. The topic of this meeting is magic, high magic.

At Antrianus' words, Herriot hummed and twisted his lips.

"It's not indivisible, is it?"

"Doesn't even a scribe know that any magic, when it comes to reaching its peak, requires the blending of disciplines?"

"I know, but......."

"A spell to summon a meteor is impossible to implement without a simultaneous understanding of numerous magical systems, and alchemy and black magic are no different."

As with any magic, when taken to the extreme, it's not just a mix of two disciplines, it's a mix of multiple disciplines.

In that sense, we might as well call all magical systems inextricably linked.

"But we need to know what the Empire is trying to do, not theories and concepts. For one thing, we know they're stealing the bodies of heroes and warriors from the past, just as we took the ashes of saints and reanimated them into Death Knights to power them. Something like that."

At that, Elise's mouth went still.

"Creating higher undead similar to Deathknights doesn't necessarily require the power of alchemy, warlocks are sufficient, Scribe. But the fact that alchemy was used means....... I wouldn't call it simple, but it does mean something different is going on than simple undeadification."

At that, Galarsh crosses his arms and mutters.

"But just because an alchemist is helping doesn't necessarily mean that alchemy has anything to do with it. It's entirely possible that they're working on something else entirely."

In the end, only Christina confirmed that an alchemist was involved.

"And that kid, the alchemist, can't necessarily only do alchemy."

While Anna helped create Moonshine, it's not a product of black magic.

Likewise, it is certainly possible that Christina is assisting in the research with her knowledge of black magic, not alchemy.

Is it really a collaboration of two magical worlds?

Is it an entirely separate study.

Or is it just black magic.

"We have to think about the worst case scenario."

It was Lerouen who commented.

"Alchemy meets black magic, and the ashes are being used. And then. What the hell can we do....... Shouldn't we be thinking about that?"

"Right."

Whether or not that actually happens, you should assume the worst.

It's up to us to predict whether or not that's a threat to Edina.

There's no point in being optimistic about the situation.

"The lords of Thursdays and Saturdays have a knack for alchemy, can you think of anything?"

"Thurday's alchemy is mostly vegetative, mostly botanical. Rather pure, I'd say. Black magic or anything close to sobriety isn't really our thing....... I honestly don't know."

At Herriot's question, Lerouen shook his head.

Thursday.

Theirs is a very pure discipline of alchemy.

It is no exaggeration to say that alchemical knowledge of vegetation is now a large part of Rajak's food supply.

Knowledge of the undead, or rather, anything close to sobriety, is scarce. Alchemy is a vast field of study within the magical realm.

Lerouen didn't seem to have a clue, and Herriot stared at Antirianus nervously.

"From the Lord of Toyo......."

"Well, you're looking pretty excited about this."

"...... This may be rude, but I find it odd that the Lord of Toyo doesn't know about these things, and I do."

-nod

Everyone nodded in unison as Herriot spoke.

Alchemy related to black magic.

If it's evil, vicious, and cruel, it doesn't make sense for that perverted, four-legged vampire to not know about it.

Episode 569.

"Hehe....... What the hell do you all think I am......."

Lucinil made a face at Antirrhinus, who was obviously disappointed.

"Antirrhinus, I suspect you know more than the correct answer, and that's what's bothering me."

"That....... That....... Really?!"

Herriot couldn't help but be enlightened by Rusinil's words.

I'm more afraid of that madman because I think he might know a way to do something even more cruel and terrible than what the Empire is doing now.

In fact, Elise's already white complexion had turned a ghastly shade of purple before she heard anything.

Herriot was beginning to wonder if he'd rather not hear what Antony had to say.

Wouldn't you rather not know what strange and terrifying possibilities lie in the maw of that abyss?

"Well, maybe you should just say nothing to the Lord of Toyo......."

Herriot was newly terrified, as the story sounded more hellish than it actually was.

"Alchemy....... The last patriarch did endeavor to create the ultimate in it, the Sage Stone."

The expressions on the faces of the other four patriarchs changed.

Antirrhinian's predecessor Toyo's gazoo certainly pursued it.

"The Philosopher's Stone?"

Antrianus nodded at Herriot's words.

"I thought it was a legend, like a dragon."

A legendary on par with a dragon.

In other words, it was a bunch of hype.

"Indeed it is, since the previous patriarch failed to create the Sage Stone."

It was hard to tell from Antirrhinus's questioning look what the truth about the former Toyo's gazoo was.

But the story we're talking about isn't about the Philosopher's Stone.

"Of course, my research was a little different than his."

"What was the study?"

"For example, the study of the convergent evolution of species......."

"......convergence evolution?"

"Yes, sir."

Herriot felt like covering his ears.

"There are quite a few examples of different species having similar capabilities, like demons and humans both finding their own ways to handle mana, albeit in different ways."

"Oh, yeah......."

"It's a study of what humans will become if they continue to evolve at this rate. It was a study of what demons would be like if they continued to evolve. It was a study of what would happen if they evolved to have more and more similar features, so that they became the same thing with different roots."

"......So, how did you do it?"

"Failed."

The conclusion was so far-fetched that Herriot and the other patriarchs were dumbfounded.

But what came next was enough to shock everyone.

"To do that, you'd first have to make the growth rate of humans and demons much faster than it is now, so that there would be frequent generation changes, and since you've failed to improve the two species in that way, you'd never see the end of it, would you?"

Everyone else has no idea what Antony is talking about, but everyone in this room is a wizard.

We know what Antony meant by his words.

Lucinil stares at Antirrhinus with a trembling expression.

"......So, you were trying to improve the species itself?"

"Yes, that's right."

The idea was that humans and demons would be able to change generations quickly enough to watch the species evolve, but it failed.

In other words, it was a living experiment. Needless to say, there were live humans and demons involved.

Herriot's complexion was grim.

This is the story of Antirrhinus leaving something terrible.

It was because all the other householders heard the story and were like, "Oh, yeah.

Even Elise was a little freaked out, but not frightened.

Because everyone in this room is old enough and wizened enough to know better.

So did Antirrhinus, and so did the other road vampires.

A shiver ran down her spine at the thought of what her father, a man who shunned unclean and unholy powers, would say if he knew she was in the company of these beings.

Herriot asks nervously.

"So....... Why did you do that experiment in the first place? Was it because you wanted to be one of those....... or something like that?"

"I'm bored, I have all the time in the world, and I have nothing to do, so I'm curious, so what's the point?"

"Ah."

"So I tried it, and I just stopped because it was clear that if I could improve the species, it wouldn't be natural in the first place, so there would be no point in going that route, and evolution doesn't flow in the direction of progress, so it was a pointless experiment in the first place."

After all, Lord Vampires are immortal wizards.

I've lived a long time and I'm curious about things, so I do weird experiments, and there's no big reason for it.

Antirrhinus rambled on about his other alchemical experiments.

Experiments have been conducted to synthesize harpies and humans to create exoskeletons, or to artificially imprint magic circuits on animals to make them magical.

"We've done experiments where we've transplanted the brain of a creature into another creature."

"......Have you done all the weird shit you can think of?"

"The heterogeneous case failed, but the homogeneous case succeeded."

"......No, it worked?"

Sometimes, I've done things that would have been outrageous and succeeded.

In human terms, that's like saying you switched brains from different humans and they came to life.

"Of course, the downside was that no matter how long you lived, you never lived more than a day."

There were some failed experiments, some semi-successful experiments, and quite a few successful ones.

As it turns out, Antirrhinus was a mad wizard.

A wizard who has dabbled in all manner of strange and terrible things.

That's Antony.

And it didn't come as a surprise to anyone. Everyone nodded in agreement that that's what Antony would have done, and Herriot was no exception, even if he was appalled by the story itself.

It's just a guy who seems like a guy doing a guy thing.

I've done a lot of things over the years that deserve to be hung and burned if I touch one.

Antirrhinus was right when he said that alchemy and black magic were inextricably linked.

The experiment itself was black magic in the first place, and I almost always resorted to black magic to make it work.

"Of course, I've experimented with creating a demand lord."

Antrianus looks at Lucinil with a wry smile.

"......itis."

"You're not surprised, are you?"

"It's like you would do something like that. No, it's weird that you wouldn't."

"I can't believe you realize how much I love the Lord of Demand......."

"Shut up."

Lucinil clicked her tongue, as if she didn't think he would.

Herriot knows.

Lucinyl was originally a product of the homunculus experiment, one of the forbidden liquors of alchemy.

When Herriot realized that Lucinil was a homunculus, he freaked out.

That's not all, he's also a vampire.

The fact that you can be a homunculus and a vampire at the same time is already something of a miracle.

"In the end, what I'm trying to say is that it's a misconception and a preconceived notion that alchemy is about potions and reagents."

"......."

"Alchemy, as practiced by the alchemists of the world, is castrated magic."

Herriot listened to Antony's explanation and understood what he was trying to say.

Reagents and potions.

Alchemy wasn't that kind of magic in the first place.

Because only acceptable levels of alchemy were permitted in the world, alchemy was watered down and tarnished from its original meaning.

"In the beginning, alchemy was a forbidden art that dealt with life."

Even the word "alchemy" already overly limits the magical nature of alchemy.

Life experiments.

In other words, Chimera.

There you have it, Homunculus.

That's pretty much the essence of alchemy.

It's only natural, then, that the magic of dealing with the dead would include alchemists, according to Antony.

\* \* \*

Alchemy is rather life magic.

"I suppose you're saying that because you approach alchemy that way, your method is the norm, but Antony is right."

Rusinil nodded in agreement.

"Alchemy is a magical system that is inherently closer to black magic than white magic."

Alchemy is more about sobriety. Dealing with potions and reagents is a very limited and narrow aspect of alchemy, and is an oversimplification of alchemy.

"You're saying that it's very possible that what the Empire is doing now involves chimeras and homunculi?"

"It's inevitable."

Undead are technically animate in the broadest sense of the word.

So it was very likely that that branch of alchemy was being applied.

"So, are you saying you know what the Empire is doing or you don't?"

At Lucinil's question, Antrianus smiled and shrugged.

"Obviously, I didn't see it with my own eyes, so how would I know? I was merely pointing out that it's not all that unusual to have an alchemist in the mix."

The question of why Alchemist is included in the first place is already flawed.

There's nothing strange about its inclusion.

But we're back to square one. It makes sense that it's included, but we still don't know what it's doing.

"But it seems clear that the Empire is doing something."

"Good Lord....... That's a given."

There is no one in this room who doesn't know that the Empire is doing something in the first place.

So we're back to square one, and despite her fear of Antirrhinus, Herriot pokes fun at him.

"Scribe, did you not hear me?"

"The Lord of Toyo is....... did a lot of scary things......."

I can't tell you how many experiments I've done that made my skin crawl and my stomach turn.

"Scribe, what I meant to say was not that I've done so many experiments. What I meant to say was that I've 'failed' so many experiments."

"ah......."

Antirrhinus didn't do this to show off his cruelty and insanity.

They're all one-trick ponies, so it's not like they're snorting, but the other road vampires are.

So, in fact, Herriot was the only one in the room who was surprised by the story of Antony's experiment.

"Chimera and homunculus experiments usually fail. That's because life is such a precise and sophisticated system that it's not easily accessible to magic."

Antirrhinus didn't do it to show off, he did it to tell the story of his many failures.

"That's right," said Antony, "I've been studying and experimenting longer than he has, trying to build a homunculus like me, and of course I've failed."

Rusinil nodded in agreement.

Herriot wondered who made Lucinil and what happened to it, but that wasn't the point of the meeting.

Chimera and homunculus.

It is a very difficult magical system before sobriety, because it involves life.

Herriot thinks for a moment.

Antirrhinus lived a very long time, and Lucinian lived even longer.

When they both tried to study chimeras and homunculi on a given topic, they sometimes succeeded, but mostly failed.

We're at war.

There's no reason to put people and resources into something you don't know.

The Titan project was an adventure to some extent, but it had a solid rationale.

This will be no different.

"Not research or experimentation. You're doing some definite 'work' ....... Is that what you mean?"

"I suppose so."

There's a certain "way" to do something, and empire is about doing it.

It's doing something that's a definite power boost.

But that's already a homophone.

Of course, there's a way to do it, so it's no wonder the project is moving forward.

"But it's strange, the lands of the humans, let alone the Empire, are very strict about prohibition when it comes to black magic."

"Yes....... That's right."

Don't go sober for nothing.

While individual wizards are not immune to deviation, those who study forbidden magic are naturally punished severely.

"Also, the Empire didn't do any sobriety research itself; it was a nation that had a pretty good idea of magic and applied it to itself."

It's a ridiculous situation to argue about the desirability of a man who ate sobriety research and experimentation for a living, but the Empire literally wasn't a country that dabbled in sobriety through the back door.

"Something that must have involved alcohol, knowledge of it."

Antirrhinus smiles wryly.

An empire that has never dabbled too deeply in black magic and alchemy is dabbling in magical work that requires a high degree of knowledge of sobriety.

Of course, you're trying your hand at it because you know you'll succeed.

"Where the hell did that knowledge come from. Isn't that more important?"

The research itself is important, but even more important is the source of the research.

Herriot looks at Antirrhinus, his mouth agape.

Forbidden magic.

Two groups that had vast knowledge about it.

One is the Cantus Magna.

The other.

"No way....... The Empire has joined forces with the Black Order....... Is that what you're trying to say?"

Antrianus laughs at Herriot's question.

"It would be weird if it wasn't."

The suspicion of the undead went beyond the truth of the suspicion itself and suggested a completely outlandish possibility.

Episode 570.

There's no way the Empire hasn't done extensive research on black magic.

But if you're working on a very large project, that knowledge has to come from somewhere.

The Black Order has taken to the continent to deal with the Gate in their own way, and it's taken a toll.

They put most of what was left of their strength into killing the demon with a last ditch effort.

But even the swordsmen and archmages who reached the Master Class, and the last Black Order leader to reach the Master Class, were no match for the demon.

The rebels fled as soon as they realized there was no hope.

After that, the Black Order was no longer able to intervene on the continent.

But the Black Order may have lost its power, but not its knowledge.

It is possible that Black Order remnants are working with the Empire and providing knowledge. The Empire may have accepted the knowledge of sobriety because they cannot afford to hide it.

While we don't know the full extent of what the Empire is up to, we do have a suspicion of another possibility.

But in the end, we had to call it a very important harvest.

"The Black Order tried to kill you. Whatever the Empire's intentions, if this is true, it can't be good for us."

At Eleris' words, Herriot nodded.

It's not just the Empire that thinks anything that helps the war effort is good, it's Reinhardt.

If the Black Order's knowledge could help end the war, Reinhardt wouldn't want to do it.

Silent, Lerouen crosses his arms and stares out the window.

"The Empire isn't doing research, they're doing something with a clear purpose and deliverable, and it's very likely that the Black Order's knowledge is the foundation."

"The Black Order is a very old magical order, and their library of sobriety and research must be the most extensive of any magical organization in the world - next to the now defunct Akasha, I'd say."

"I wonder what the Empire is trying to do with that knowledge......."

"But before we do that, let's get something straight."

Lerouen looks at Herriot.

"You said that bodies disappeared and were replaced in the Imperial Mausoleum and the Hall of Heroes."

"Yes, my lord."

Herriot nodded.

"Are 'all' the bodies in the Hall of Heroes gone?"

At that question, Herriot shook his head.

"I'm not sure about that, because we didn't open every sarcophagus, but the ones we did open were all empty."

"Hmmm, I guess so."

Lerouen looks troubled, and Herriot shakes his head.

"My lord, does it matter?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Why?"

Lerouen shrugs.

"I don't know who specifically is buried in the Hall of Heroes, but I'm sure it's not just physically strong heroes."

Those who made it to the master class.

Warriors aren't the only ones who have excelled in their majors or left their mark on human history.

"Be specific."

Lerouen asks.

"Was the sarcophagus of Mullern, the wizard among the warriors, also empty?"

Herriot's eyes widened at that.

Hall of Heroes.

Lagan Artorius' body was never there in the first place, Charlotte said.

That means there were remains in the other sarcophagus.

Herriot had apparently opened all of the sarcophagi of the Five Champions that day, though not the others.

"Yes, apparently....... was empty."

Olivia Ranze said.

When creating a Death Knight, it's all about the basics.

It's a pretty vicious example, but Olivia is clear that you can't make Death Knight out of Herriot's body.

But it's clear that the empire isn't doing the same thing as Olivia, it's doing something completely different.

"That's pretty....... scary possibility."

The imperial family must have recovered the remains because they have a plan, something they know they can do.

"Are you saying that dead bodies can use magic?"

"Is such a thing....... possible?"

Herriot asked, his face turning white.

"It's not like the undead use magic in the first place."

Antirrhinus points to himself and looks around.

The road vampires in this spot are undead.

"I've never heard of such a thing and didn't think it was possible, but isn't it possible to create a reach?"

Resurrect a dead warrior and call him a Death Knight.

If so, it's not impossible to lich a dead mage.

This magic has never existed, but that doesn't mean it won't.

"If the Empire can resurrect all the heroes and wizards that have ever existed in human history and send them to war, then war is not the problem."

Lucinil says with a stern look.

"The Empire will have more military power than ever before."

If this assumption is true.

Humanity has been weakened.

When the project is complete, the empire will be stronger than ever.

\* \* \*

The Senate meeting revealed nothing, and raised more suspicions.

Until now, we hadn't paid attention to who the remains of our missing heroes were.

There are indications that the Empire may be able to go beyond the Death Knight level and create a Lich.

Of the remains of the missing wizards, only Mullern has been properly identified.

This means that it is possible that the remains of great archmages were recovered along with the remains of other great archmages, many of whom reside in mausoleums such as the Hall of Heroes and the Hall of Wisdom.

What if they were all brought back to life as lich, and could use magic at the same level as when they were alive?

The Empire would have the most powerful army in history.

Elise says still.

"If the war is over and the Empire disposes of those troops, I don't know, but....... If they don't, then......."

"You can't say that there's no chance they're going to target us."

Elise's dire prediction sent chills down Herriot's spine.

It can't be.

There's no reason it shouldn't be.

It's more powerful than ever, so why let go?

We're working together unbeknownst to each other, but we both know it can't last forever.

Galarsh says.

"Whatever the Empire is up to, I may have to destroy it before it's finished."

It's a shared goal to end this war.

But we all know that world peace doesn't happen the moment a goal is realized.

The Empire's preparations will help end the war, but here's the catch.

In the end, it's a fool's errand.

I'm afraid of what will happen after this is all over, so I have to think about destroying the means that might end it all.

If left alone, the war might end more easily.

However, after the war is over, the means that made it easy to fight that war may destroy us.

So should we foolishly interfere with this?

The Demon Wars were caused by humanity's fear of demons.

Gate was also caused by fear and hatred of each other.

And now.

Again.

Everyone is put to the test.

Do you have to watch your opponent wield enormous power?

Or should we go against that plan?

None of this would have happened if you trusted your opponent.

But just as the Empire could not trust the Darklands.

Darkland, too, could not trust the Empire.

\* \* \*

I believe that when you rest, you should rest.

I'd watch Ellen or Heinrich and think, "I can't take a break," and then realize that I can't either.

Add to that the fact that Heinrich wants to go for a spin around the ecliptic as soon as he gets back, and it's not like he's here to rest in the first place.

Come to think of it, the most dangerous place to be right now might not be the Allied garrison with its ever-present troops, but the Zodiacal Gradient. The security here is probably the worst, as is the safety of the Outer Rim.

In that sense, you might as well make sure your neighborhood is safe for the winter.

Ellen and Heinrich seemed to be planning to take a lap around the outskirts.

Ellen travels half a circle from the north end to the west.

Heinrich from the south end to the east halfway.

It was a simple agreement.

"Watch out for the guys with no fire."

"I hope so."

At the main entrance to the Temple, Ellen and Heinrich had a brief conversation before being separated.

It's not exactly an agreement with the Guard, it's an autonomous mission.

It's not like they're going to take law enforcement action in the refugee camps, they're going to go around the outskirts and if there's a dangerous monster, they're going to shoo it away and then they're going to come back.

"Um......."

Ellen stares at me as I follow her out of the temple.

Ellen wore a robe in case anyone recognized her.

Ellen hesitated, wondering if she should take me with her, but eventually pulled me into a hug.

"Let's go."

-Angel

Like Heinrich can handle flames.

Ellen can also use Rafelt's flames to destroy monsters from a distance.

Lightly, like you're going for a walk.

Ellen picked me up and we headed north of the ecliptic.

\* \* \*

Several days had passed since Ludwig had been assigned to guard the 17th Evacuation Zone, southwest of the ecliptic.

Ludwig could not be treated as a mere guard.

And I wasn't even an official security guard now. I was told I could quit anytime I wanted to.

It's not because you lost an arm.

More than just a member of the Temple Royal class, he is a superhuman who is far beyond the average guard.

In addition to being a veteran of the Allied forces, he has remained committed to the policing of the zodiac even after being sent to the rear.

So Ludwig was very much appreciated for his willingness to do something about it, rather than for the parachute treatment.

Ludwig wanted to be treated as a mere guard, but everyone treated him harshly, regardless of his temporary rank, including the captain of the 17th Guard, to which he belonged.

Now, however, Ludwig was facing a troubled-looking guard captain at the headquarters of the 17th Guard, one of the few intact buildings in the evacuation zone.

"You mean support for the marauders?"

"Yes, sir."

"umm......."

Ludwig's words made the captain of the guard uncomfortable.

A few days into his assignment, Ludwig was itching for another assignment.

Swarm missions.

A guard that patrols the outskirts of the ecliptic and fights monsters directly.

Ludwig told the captain of the guard that he wanted to take the job.

Since the lynch mob was not under the jurisdiction of the 17th Guards and was part of a completely different chain of command, Ludwig was asking to be assigned to a different unit altogether.

"We need your help here too, Ludwig. You know that, don't you?"

"......, I'm pretty sure I know that."

"I thought you understood that the work here is not to be taken lightly."

"No, I'm not ignoring what's going on here......."

Ludwig isn't just saying this because he wants to fight monsters.

As with all Zodiac Guards, the one in the refugee zone is very understaffed and needs Ludwig.

Ludwig isn't ignoring the work on this side of the world.

"The work here is making me....... too difficult."

"......."

Crime.

Immediate judgment and action must be taken from time to time for crimes involving humans.

It's almost a lawless zone, and it's not uncommon for guards to be attacked.

Over the past few days, Ludwig has seen the immediate action at the hands of the guards take the form of summary execution.

No trial, no process.

The security situation is so volatile that the guards are given more than a modicum of autonomy.

Ludwig found it challenging to have to take immediate action in such a situation.

Is your judgment right?

Ludwig wasn't so sure.

When you're fighting a monster, you don't need that kind of judgment.

Monsters are evil.

So kill it.

But whether or not refugees who commit crimes really did something wrong, and if that's the case, whether or not we should forgive them because they can't help it.

You never know when your actions will result in the death of an innocent person, or when your poor judgment will land an innocent person in jail.

Work isn't worthless.

It's too hard for me.

Ludwig knows he's not very smart.

You may be wrong.

That's what was killing Ludwig.

Fighting monsters may be hard, but it doesn't have to be a headache.

"I can't do that."

"......."

"You know that the higher-ups won't accept your request, Ludwig."

The Emperor has a seat for you.

If you want to go somewhere dangerous, you're not going to be able to go there, even if you've been told not to.

Ludwig is not a parachute. But he's not a parachutist either.

So Ludwig can't get out of this one.

If you continue to deny the Emperor's favor, you may even be burned in the temple.

I may not even be able to do this.

"......OK."

In the end, Ludwig had no choice but to stay and trust his own shaky judgment.

Episode 571.

Ludwig never liked to kill.

Technically, they're afraid of it.

Still, Ludwig fought because he felt it was the right thing to do.

Ludwig is such a person.

If you have a clear, defined goal, you don't hesitate to run toward it. Even if you're afraid of it, you stay the course.

But.

Ludwig is lost in a problem that doesn't have a straightforward answer.

Until now, Ludwig has relied on his friends to help him with such problems.

Delfin Izadra.

Lanyon Sesor.

Scarlett and Louis Ankton, of course.

The other classmates in B judged me.

Someone made the judgment call for him, and Ludwig went on his way.

But Ludwig is now alone.

And I had to face questions with no clear answers.

In the vagueness of living well, there are no rules and no theories.

So Ludwig didn't know whose hand to raise among those living in vague despair.

There has never been a reason to build such a thing.

Ludwig's justice is nothing more than the punishment of a manifest evil.

The culprit behind all of this.

A monster that seeks to destroy humans.

Where there was an obvious enemy, Ludwig's unbreakable will shone through.

But places like this.

In the chaos, where everyone was neither good nor evil, in the refugee camps, where everyone was just trying to survive, Ludwig didn't know what to choose.

Ludwig thought the battlefield was terrible.

-One more piece! Give me one more piece!

But what a horrible sight it was to see them fighting over a mere slice of bread.

Ludwig walked through a refugee neighborhood of shacks with a guard patrol.

Ludwig has to get used to the smell of poverty, stench, and hunger that permeates everything like grime.

The outfits of the guards were the placenta, hiding in the alleyways of the shacks.

If you're honest, there's no reason to hide.

Are they all guilty of something, or are they planning to commit a sin?

Ludwig gritted his teeth as he watched the adults and children retreat into silence.

No way.

In the lawlessness of the refugee camps, the guards treat most sins with the utmost severity.

Even if I hadn't done anything wrong, I would have avoided it for that reason.

In fact, while talking to Ludwig, I saw a guard on patrol slap a young boy on the cheek for bumping into him.

Ludwig froze as he watched the boy scramble across the floor, his cheeks popping and the corner of his mouth bleeding.

I didn't know what to say to the guard, who smiled sheepishly at me, saying he was being gentle in front of Ludwig.

When Ludwig realized that it was actually a slap on the wrist, he was at a loss for words.

It was a pain in the ass to look at.

Ludwig is currently accompanied by two guards.

"Hmmm......."

Thorntine, the senior soldier, stops in the street and stares off into the distance.

"I think we should go over there."

Beyond the shack, a guard points in a certain direction.

"Is there....... anything?"

"I smell meat grilling."

"Yeah, I think there's smoke, and I don't know why......."

The guard shrugs at Ludwig, who doesn't understand.

"Why would meat be here?"

"......."

Ludwig wasn't so sure he understood what she meant.

\* \* \*

After a while.

"Oof! Oof!"

The skeletal remains stared at the ground with sunken eyes, while the guards clicked their tongues at the vomiting Ludwig.

"It's not uncommon."

The other guards are neither surprised nor appalled.

I'm hungry, so I eat.

It's a no-brainer.

For those who are cornered, cannibalism is sometimes the only option.

The guard's nonchalant attitude.

And the salivating stares as the guards watched the spilled contents from afar.

Ludwig looked at them and gritted his teeth.

This is.

Beyond the hard stuff.

It was painful.

\* \* \*

Cannibalism is punishable by death.

You can't forgive them for that, no matter how starved they are.

If there is no punishment for the behavior because it was an unavoidable choice, it's not that people shouldn't do it in the future, it's that they shouldn't get caught.

In that case, cannibalism becomes the norm in the evacuated areas.

We don't kill because we hate sin, because it is an unforgivable evil.

Some sins could destroy the entirety of this refugee colony.

Ludwig knew that the refugee zone needed help.

When you thought there was something you could do.

He felt that he could find a sense of purpose in that small task.

"......."

But where is the smallness in this?

Some may decide that this is better than risking your life on the battlefield.

Ludwig found the battlefield easier.

It was more comfortable.

This terrible place, where everyone was the enemy of everyone because of a single enemy: hunger, was the most difficult place for Ludwig to work.

I want to run away.

For almost the first time in his life, Ludwig had such a thought in his head.

\* \* \*

Ludwig realized with his own eyes how ridiculous it was that troops were not starving in an Allied garrison.

I couldn't help but wonder why the Allies kept replenishing their ranks.

You might not starve until you're trampled to death by a monster's feet.

For now, the soldiers in the Serandia Alliance garrison will remain comfortable during the winter months.

I couldn't help but feel how important that "eating" was in the matter of livelihood.

There's only one problem.

Hunger.

But the many offshoots of that problem don't boil down to a single cannibalization.

"...... What is this?"

"I don't know."

Ludwig felt an indescribable sense of revulsion when he saw what Sontaine had brought back from rummaging through the shack, bits and pieces of bones frozen together.

You don't even know which bones are which.

There was a lot of mumbling in one corner of the shack, and a guard, sensing something was amiss, went into the shack and brought it back.

Seven people were praying to this bone idol in a small shack.

Not surprisingly, it doesn't resemble any of the gods' holy names.

Heresy prevails.

The Mercenary Church, which believes in Ellen Artorius, cannot be treated as a heresy.

But it wasn't just the warrior religion, strange and unexplained superstitions were popping up all over the refugee camps.

"Demon worshippers?"

One of the guards spoke to the kneeling members of the cult.

"Oh, no, we believe in Esta, our soon-to-be-manifest savior......."

Heretics who believe in an unidentified god.

"For salvation is coming soon......."

Ludwig felt like he was being unraveled.

"What shall they do?"

"You don't have to kill them all."

Does this mean we're sparing them?

-Poof!

"Off....... off......."

No, he was talking about killing only one person.

"Don't believe in heresy."

With those words, the guard turned away.

They don't die because of some law.

One guard.

People's lives hinge on that guard's judgment.

-Damned bastards.......

-Heaven forbid.

Curses were hurled at the backs of Ludwig and his companions as they turned, and the other guards walked away without even responding, as if they were used to it.

\* \* \*

It's best not to think of them as people.

A senior guard who was deciding whether to kill or spare the refugees.

The words were spoken by Sonthein, a member of Ludwig's gunnery guard at this point.

"You might as well think of it as a bug."

"But how can......."

Then I fought to defend the worms, and lost my arm.

I've lost a few friends, and I've lost a few men, defending the bugs.

How does it make sense that the guards here would so easily stomp on their loved ones as if they were bugs?

The Allies are dying for nothing but bugs.

Who are you to judge such things?

Ludwig felt like he was about to burst into tears, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

Or whatever.

What to do.

It's no secret that none of this happens when their hunger is satisfied.

I wonder if all this is happening because we can't solve it.

The answer is easy.

But there's no way to answer that.

"If you don't think that way, you can't do the job."

Sontaine looks around.

As the adults and children duck for cover, Thorntine speaks up.

"We think of them as bugs, and they think of us as monsters."

Bug-killing monsters.

Guards were just that here.

"Don't go easy on them."

"......."

"I can't tell you how many guys have gone to the goal."

Guards are a collection of monsters.

Refugees don't like guards who kill them like dogs.

I can't count the number of guards who have been stabbed to death because they thought they were different from the others.

Just as the guards summarily execute the refugees, the refugees kill the guards.

The guards treat the refugees badly, the refugees take revenge on the guards, and the guards become even more extreme in their behavior.

That chain of hatred is what is happening in the refugee camps now.

Ludwig nodded grimly at Sonthein's words.

\* \* \*

Well-crafted laws don't stay well-crafted.

As long as there is power to uphold the law, the law can be upheld.

The criteria can be vague.

It doesn't have to be fair.

It doesn't matter if the law has become so vague that it can't even be called a law.

Laws, no matter how fair and great they are, are not trustworthy unless there is an authority, a force, to enforce them.

Therefore, the basis of the law itself lies in its power, not in its perfection.

The refugee zone was a stark reminder of that reality.

There has to be a tipping point at some point in this situation where we're just using violence to keep the refugees down.

At some point, the anger and hatred of the refugees will cross a threshold where they can be suppressed by force, and the state will be overthrown.

Laws, deprived of the only force that sustains them, will become meaningless and chaos will reign.

Hunger.

Cannibalization.

Ethan.

Murder of the guards.

And.

Attacks on guards.

-Pak!

-Die, you devils!

Ludwig catches a fist-sized rock flying toward his face with his left hand and watches as the boy disappears into an alley, shouting hateful words.

For a moment, Thornton is amazed at Ludwig's reflexes. He looks calmly into the alley.

"Chasing?"

"It's okay, I'm the one who got attacked."

-Well, now there's an asshole guard!

Ludwig smiled bitterly as he heard the echo of the boy calling out to him in the alley.

And it's not just the direct attackers.

Gazing at themselves in the gaps of shacks, in alleys.

I can feel the murder and hatred in his gaze.

No matter how arbitrarily the guards beat and kill someone, the stare itself is not punishable.

It's not because you can't see the guilt in their eyes.

We can't do that, because if we kill everyone who looks at us like that, we'll have to push the refugee camps out of existence.

Ludwig shakes his head as he grabs the rock that flew at him.

If he gets used to it, Ludwig, like the other guards, will have to kill refugees.

At the end of the probationary period, Ludwig should also participate in these private sanctions.

I wonder if we can do something like that.

Is it okay to do this?

Ludwig didn't think he could handle this, no matter how much he thought about it.

Fighting was not allowed, and what could be done was to beat, subdue, and sometimes kill the helpless in the name of law and order.

You might as well go back to the temple and stay in your dorm.

Or find something else to do elsewhere.

Ludwig would eventually come to that conclusion.

But leaving doesn't make the tragedy here go away.

Turning away because it's too much to bear is never the right thing to do.

We don't know what's right, but Ludwig had to know that much.

\* \* \*

Patrolling is literally walking from place to place, identifying anomalies on the street and taking action on the spot.

Sontaine's patrols, led by Ludwig, weren't necessarily violent, killing refugees.

Retrieving bodies left in an alley and determining the identity of the deceased.

Mediating to prevent petty arguments from escalating into violence.

Watching for thieves at a food distribution site.

Ask refugees what's going on in the streets to get a sense of the overall situation in the area and if there are any organized criminal groups.

Then there was the case of a child crying in the street because she had lost her mom, and we brought her safely to her parents.

While many evacuees feared and disliked the guards, others did not.

'If this is all you do, you'll be fine.......'

Ludwig smiled as he watched the child run back to him, holding his mother's hand and waving wildly.

Executing refugees was an extreme situation and not something that happened very often.

Some things were trivial, and some things were important and had to be done.

It wasn't all doom and gloom.

Ludwig wandered the streets with Sonntein until the patrol was over.

"That's a restricted area. You don't have to patrol it."

"You have the line ......, right?"

Ludwig saw that there was a cordon down a certain alleyway.

It was like they had closed off a whole section of the site.

Ludwig watched as a grayish smoke billowed skyward from inside a certain area.

It's clear that there's a fire.

"Is there a good reason for a lockdown?"

"There's an epidemic going around."

"......Pandemic?"

"It's not uncommon. We have epidemics all the time."

"Isn't it dangerous, if there's an epidemic with people this close together......."

No matter how much we locked down, if the pandemic started to spread, we would have a huge problem.

It's not going to end with one or two people dying, it's going to be thousands.

No, it's not the pandemic in the first place.

"Shouldn't the priests come to....... shouldn't they be here?"

It is the role of the priests to cure diseases.

Even if you can only afford to heal one or two wounds, priests should be brought in for big problems like epidemics.

But the priests don't come because they're just closing off the plague zone.

At Ludwig's words, Sontaine stares at the smoke from the cordoned off area.

It was clearly smoke from burning bodies.

"The power to cure disease is the power of Tuan, the god of purity."

"Then the priests of Tuan will be able to......."

"A lot of them are dead."

"What?"

"You know how you're treated now......."

"ah......."

"Still, it shouldn't have been this bad, but the worse it gets, the more people hate the priests of Tuan and Alth, as well as all the priests of the Five Great Houses."

The two gods who granted the demon a holy object.

The persecution of their faith had been intensifying since the Gate incident.

Priests would come to treat epidemics and provide relief to refugees, but the hatred of them had already reached a fever pitch.

The people who need help hate the people who will help them.

So when Tuan's priests enter this massive refugee camp during the plague, they have to worry about getting home alive.

Ludwig could not help but realize from Sontag's words that the number of priests who had actually died was countless.

As a result, priests were not allowed to enter the refugee camps.

The epidemic goes unchecked.

"Of course, it's a big problem if left alone, so we've sent out a request for assistance to the Crusaders, so the plague cleanup will be handled by priests with hidden identities. They'll be a little slow to respond, but that doesn't mean they won't."

"......I see."

In order to save people, you have to hide who you serve.

"I'll call it a night on patrol, and you can go home now. I'll report to the captain of the guard."

"Ah....... Got it, thanks."

"Mr. Ludwig."

Sontaine calls out to Ludwig as he turns to leave.

"...... You don't have to do this."

You're not the right person for this job.

The implication was that someone who had returned from a glorious job shouldn't have to do something so miserable and disgusting, and Ludwig had no answer.

\* \* \*

Ellen and Heinrich decided to split up to patrol the outlying areas, north and south.

The bottom line is that Ellen never made it outside the ecliptic.

Ellen returned to the temple, her face white with panic, and set me down on the bed in her arms.

"......."

-Angel

No one recognized Ellen because she was wearing a hoodie, but everyone saw her hugging her cat.

Honestly, it wasn't unexpected at all.

Kids on the street say, "Sis, can I have that?

Can't you give it to me?

Hungry.

Ellen's face turned pale as she followed him around.

They did.

When a group of grown men and women tried to sneak up on her with their mouths watering, Ellen turned on them.

Episode 572.

It never occurred to Ellen that her small, cute cat might be considered food by someone else.

It's unlikely that Ellen didn't know about hunger in refugee camps.

However, since the Gate incident, Ellen has been repeatedly entering and leaving the battlefield via mass teleportation.

That's why we've spent so little time in the ecliptic since the Gate incident.

He is now a member of the Allied forces.

By the look on his face, it's clear that this is the first time he's entered the refugee zone today.

This is the first time I've ever seen a body, adult or child, starved to death, not killed by a monster, but left to die of starvation.

They're not surprised because of me, they're surprised because it's too much for them to handle.

Ellen stood there for a long moment with me sitting on the bed, wondering what I was thinking.

"I'll go by myself."

Ellen patted me on the head and left the room.

Unlike Ellen, I had seen the conditions in the refugee camps firsthand, but I sensed that they were worse than before.

There would be less food to feed the army and less rations to go to the refugee camps, so hunger would only increase.

I wondered if we were in the midst of a plague or something, and I saw the occasional person who looked sick, but not from hunger.

The divine power of Tuan, the God of Purity, is needed, but the refugees hate Tuan and the Order of Als.

Maybe your priests aren't doing their job.

The question of what to eat.

It's winter there.

There will be countless people who will starve, freeze, and die of disease.

The dense population of the ecliptic has surpassed 100 million.

The number of people who die of starvation or freeze to death on the ecliptic over the course of a winter is likely to exceed 10 million units.

It's a shame, and it's hopeless.

But that's not something I can fix.

The population of the ecliptic alone is ten times that of the entire Edina Archipelago.

Edina's food situation is better than the ecliptic, but it's not exactly relaxed.

The same goes for food surpluses.

If there's enough food in Edina to feed tens of millions of refugees, there's no way to get it to the ecliptic.

I can't feed the hunger here.

What I can do.

No, I don't know if you can or not, but what you can try is to get to the end of the gate situation.

What happened next was something I would have to think about later.

\* \* \*

Heinrich and Ellen were out on patrol, and Heinrich was the first to return to his dorm.

-Angel

"Hmm?"

He shook his head when he saw me wandering around without Ellen.

"I thought you were trying to take me to ......?"

Heinrich did not appear to be injured. There aren't many monsters in the ecliptic, and if there were, they wouldn't pose a threat to Heinrich.

It's like that.

If an orc shows up on the outskirts of the ecliptic and starts rampaging, a few dozen refugees will die in a hilarious fashion, but Heinrich can dispose of it with a wave of his hand.

"Hah......."

Heinrich looks out the window and sighs.

To get around the outskirts, he would have had to enter the refugee zone, and he would have seen the same thing that Ellen saw today.

So I couldn't help but make that face.

About two hours after Heinrich's return.

It wasn't until close to dinnertime that Ellen returned to her dorm.

He's coming back safely, of course, but I can't help but feel a little reassured.

A ballroom in the evening.

There were other students, but Ellen and Heinrich and the returning Ludwig and Detomorian were the only two sophomores.

The three researchers rarely return from the lab.

Detomorians have a bad complexion by nature.

Ellen has a bad complexion because of what happened today.

Heinrich has a bad complexion because he sees something similar to Ellen.

Ludwig works for the guard. So he's seen worse, or maybe he's done something terrible. Not surprisingly, he's in a bad mood.

So all four of us started dinner with a bad complexion.

My stomach is in knots.

Ellen paused as she scooped the scrambled eggs onto my dedicated plate.

"......."

A look of guilt flashes across my face that I can't hide.

Like thinking about what a luxury it is to keep an animal when there is so much hunger.

I was thinking that Ellen could not help but think that.

Ellen looks down at me, looking like she's going to cry.

Eventually, Ellen relieved me of the scramble, making sure she couldn't starve me, and gently stroked my hair.

It was as if the hand was telling me that I had done nothing wrong.

Ellen didn't gobble it up like she did when she came back.

You feel guilty about feeding them, so it makes sense that you feel guilty about eating.

It's hard not to realize that eating well and resting is the right thing to do for people.

It just doesn't go over well.

"How was your patrol? I was too wide open to go all the way around."

Heinrich asked.

"I didn't go too far, so I didn't have any problems. What about you?"

"Me neither. I'm kind of bummed that I didn't get to do anything, but that's probably a good thing."

"Yes."

They moved to check on the situation in the outer ecliptic.

If those two just came back from slaying a bunch of monsters, there's no reason to celebrate. That means the outlying areas are dangerous enough to be infested with monsters.

That's why it's better to do nothing at all.

"Looks like we're not the only ones who thought the same thing."

"......?"

Ellen shakes her head at Heinrich's words.

"The Alliance is in good shape, which means the Empire wants to make sure the ecliptic is safe for the winter. They must be running a large mopping-up force."

"......That's great."

Definitely.

If they can think it, so can the empire.

It cannot save people from starvation, but it is pacifying the region around the ecliptic to eliminate the threat of monsters.

Ellen and Heinrich seemed to be contemplating volunteering for an extermination mission to patrol the outskirts of the ecliptic and find and slay monsters.

Of course, Ellen thought about it and shook her head, saying she didn't think so.

Bertus wanted Ellen to rest for the winter, and he wouldn't allow it if she volunteered for a raiding mission.

Heinrich was similarly unable to participate in the lynch mob, so they decided to go their separate ways.

It never hurts to have more hands.

This can't be a bad thing, as it means that if there are any dangerous monsters running around, we can fight them off, or the ecliptic is safe.

In both cases, it seemed like they were going to try to get out to more remote areas tomorrow.

Just....... Can't we take a break?

Heinrich makes a short tongue-in-cheek comment.

"The problem is food."

What refugees are facing now is not monsters, but hunger.

A monster in a refugee camp can kill hundreds of people in an instant, but starvation slowly kills tens of millions.

Everyone knows what the real enemy is.

However, you can't kill what you can't knock down.

You can kill monsters, but you don't know how to kill hunger.

"......."

In the silence, Ludwig struggled to eat with his left hand.

\* \* \*

The King of Cernstadt, Constantin von Schwarz, makes an inspection as the Allies enter a period of rest.

But the king's main concern was not the inspection, but the whereabouts of the two missing princes.

Louise didn't think lying to him would work.

Even the princes' own entourage is suspicious of their disappearance.

And the current King of Cernstadt, Constantin von Schwarz, had already been briefed long ago.

He would have thought about it and deduced the truth.

With only Louise and Heinrich of Schwarz's royal family left alive, I had a pretty good idea of what the vice-king would guess.

Louise didn't make excuses. It wouldn't work.

I didn't even say it was unavoidable. Because you can't rationalize it.

That's why I said it myself.

"I killed it."

I told the vice king, who wanted to know the truth about my two brothers' disappearance, that I had killed them with my own hands.

And he didn't say anything.

Louise is not a talkative person to begin with.

There was no rebuke, no condemnation, no astonishment, no fear.

Constantin von Schwarz looked into his eldest daughter's face for a long time and said only one word.

"Have you nothing more to say?"

Apologize.

Excuses.

Tears.

Grief.

Guilt.

A plea or an angry rant about it all.

When her father asked her that, she nodded.

"No, I don't."

Daughters are soft-spoken because they take after their fathers.

"Yeah, okay."

Just as a daughter's inability to speak doesn't mean she doesn't think, a father's inability to speak doesn't mean he doesn't think.

In the silence, Louise was thinking, and in the silence, Constantin von Schwarz was thinking.

They were a father and daughter who had only the necessary conversations. Just like Heinrich and Louise do now.

"Where is Heinrich?"

"We've briefly reverted to the ...... template."

He knew what that meant.

We can't help but feel for Louise, who took her son into hiding because she didn't want to start a fire.

Constantine von Schwarz did not say a word about his eldest daughter's behavior in killing his two sons.

She didn't make any excuses.

Only each other can know what the other is thinking.

There are relationships that are understood without conversation, and there are relationships that are not understood without conversation.

"Your prince is dead because of Heinrich."

The father-daughter duo fell into the latter category.

Two in the hands of a son.

Two in the hands of a mother.

Heinrich von Schwarz said that for the sake of one prince, four others had to die.

The harsh words stunned Louise into silence.

"If they hadn't all laid a hand on my son, he wouldn't be dead."

A sharp word gets a sharp answer.

The two princes who tormented the young Heinrich were burned to death at the hands of Heinrich, who awakened his psychic powers.

And the two brothers who tried to assassinate Heinrich died at the hands of Louise.

We could have left Heinrich alone.

There will be harsh words, and then there will be harsh words, and then there will be irreparable words.

But Ruiz was determined.

No matter what I was told, I was going to protect my son.

So Louise looked at the silent king.

"I thought it would be a little later, earlier."

"......Yes?"

Constantin von Schwarz's words caused Louise to panic.

"He said he thought it would be sooner."

"......."

"I would have thought you would have gotten your hands on your siblings a little earlier."

Louise never thought her father would feel that way.

Constantin von Schwarz thought it would happen someday.

The child does not know the parent.

Parents don't know their children.

Parents know their children a little better than children know their parents.

So Constantin von Schwarz saw what had to happen.

I can't take it for granted, but I can't help but think it's inevitable.

"Either you're less wise than I thought, or you trusted your siblings more."

Even without Louise's explanation, Constantin von Schwarz was predicting what had happened in the Allies.

Children's strength.

Jealousy and envy.

And stupidity.

And Louise's guilt and love for her son.

Even so, it was going to happen at some point.

"Did you love your brothers?"

"......."

Louise couldn't answer.

I couldn't say I loved it or didn't love it.

I watched my daughter shed tears of unspeakable sadness, self-loathing, and guilt, unable to make a sound.

Watching my daughter with tears streaming down her cheeks and not being able to wipe them away.

I watched my daughter shed tears she couldn't bring herself to shed in front of her son and grit her teeth in front of her father.

"Okay....... That's it....... that's it."

The father could not forgive his daughter for killing her brothers.

I had no choice but to accept the inevitable.

\* \* \*

Whatever the real reason, an inspection was the original purpose, so Louise helped the King inspect the military in Cernstadt.

We talked about the status of the military, its strength and supply.

And after the debriefing, Constantin von Schwarz said the same thing Louise had said to Heinrich.

"Rest."

"......Yes?"

"I will take command of the army for the winter."

Just as the mother ordered the rest because of her son's prolonged fatigue, the father ordered the rest because of his daughter's prolonged fatigue.

"I will see that the Emperor is granted permission. Since you wanted to go so badly, you and Heinrich can spend the winter at the Temple."

An unexpected break.

And to spend it with my son in a place I've only dreamed of visiting.

I've been able to visit places where I wasn't even allowed to see where my son lived and grew up.

Upon hearing of the princes' disappearance, the king accepted what he had to endure and what he had to understand.

After all, the throne is a cruel place.

He thought his daughter might do such a thing, and he had to look the other way because she was supposed to be the king.

What mattered was the heir to the throne.

You'd think that now that what you thought might happen has happened, you'd want to clean up what's left.

You might have thought that there was no reason for those who remained to continue to suffer.

His behavior is not one of understanding, but of resignation.

Knowing that made her feel even more guilty.

Episode 573.

Ludwig headed to the 17th District Guard the next day.

While Heinrich or Ellen could voluntarily patrol the outer reaches of the ecliptic, Ludwig could not and would not be allowed to do so.

They feel deprived or something like that, but they don't know the difference between absolute capabilities.

I didn't dare cross what Ellen and Heinrich could do.

Ludwig makes his way to the guard.

It's hard and it's painful, but do what little you can in the midst of it.

Something as simple as returning a lost child to the hands of its parents is certainly not without meaning.

Hoping that would be the case, Ludwig turned to the guard.

"Ludwig, I have an important mission for you."

"......Important mission?"

"It's a job worthy of Ludwig."

Do what's right for you.

Both the gunner, Sontaine, and the captain of the guard respect Ludwig.

But apart from that, I knew Ludwig couldn't handle the horrors of the camp and the brutality of the guards.

A job befitting such a Ludwig.

"Escort."

Looking at Ludwig, the captain of the guard, Nazik, says.

"Escort......?"

"You know about the pandemic, don't you?"

"Yeah....... I saw it yesterday."

"A priest has been sent to do the cleansing."

Pandemics.

And purification.

Ludwig's eyes widened.

"I'd like an escort from the priest we've sent."

Fighting the pandemic.

What you need to do to save people.

"......Thank you for your consideration."

I know what Ludwig struggles with and what he wants, so I give him this job.

\* \* \*

Priests of Tuan are needed to cleanse the plague.

But Tuan and the Order of Als were being persecuted by the Devil.

Under these circumstances, it was impossible for the priests of Tuan to move in public, even if they were there to cure the plague.

Not only are Tuan's followers persecuted, but the priests suffer even worse.

But the plague cannot be left alone. If the plague spreads beyond the refugee camps and into the ecliptic, it may be beyond the reach of divine power.

That's why Tuan's priests must risk their lives to enter the refugee zone to cleanse it of the plague.

Of course, you can't wear a priest's robe, so you'll have to be stealthy.

You can't be escorted by a large group, or you'll draw attention to yourself, so you have to be stealthy.

Even though you're not doing anything bad, you're trying to save people.

"Priest, this is Ludwig, who will be your escort today."

Ludwig bowed his head as he saw the priest in his graying robes.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Rowen."

"Hello."

The priest, who looked to be about Ludwig's age, looked at him and smiled.

"I don't think you'll make it, but I'll do my best."

Ludwig added, in case anyone was offended by the fact that the only escort the 17th Guard gave him was a one-armed man.

"Yes, please, then."

But the priest smiled gently and nodded, as if he hadn't thought of that at all.

\* \* \*

Ludwig left the 17th District Guard headquarters with Rowen.

Cleaning up the plague. Ludwig's head seemed to clear for the first time in a long time.

It's a simple thing that doesn't require judgment about what's right.

They weren't even dressed in Guard garb to be stealthy, and Rowen had a tattered robe covering his face.

You can't tell that he's a priest or that he's a guard.

If you're doing cleanup work in a plague-ridden area, that's it.

But if it came to it, we might have to use force. Rowen looked at Ludwig walking beside him and shook his head.

"I take it you're not a member of the official guard?"

"What? Oh....... How did you know?"

"As the Captain of the Guard salutes......."

It wasn't even a great line of reasoning.

"Oh....... Actually, I just got back from the Allied garrison, so......."

"You're a participant."

"Yes....... An injury put me in the back of the line, but......."

"You're a great guy, I admire you."

Ludwig felt his face heat up at Rowen's words.

Not because I was ashamed or embarrassed, but because of shame.

Ludwig was only ashamed because he didn't think he deserved it in the slightest.

It's people like Rowen who deserve to be called great.

Priests trying to save people, even though so many people would hate and hate the priests of Tuan.

It's people like that who are great and awesome.

I've been kicked out because I failed, Ludwig thinks, and I don't deserve to be told that.

"We're going to be stealthy, so there won't be any arguments or fuss, and Ludwig, you'll only have to step in if, and only if, you need to."

As if he hadn't done a cleanup job or two before, Rowen told Ludwig what he needed to watch out for.

"Mr. Ludwig, are you good at running?"

"What? Ah....... Yes, I'm sure."

Run.

It's one of the few things Ludwig is confident about doing.

"What about running with people?"

You don't have to tell me who you're running with.

"I'm confident I can do that too."

"If there's a problem, pick me up and run."

Rowen said with a smirk.

If they get into an argument with a refugee, they don't kill them, they leave.

"Yes, I will definitely do that."

Ludwig liked Lowen's approach.

\* \* \*

Today, Ellen joined Heinrich on his ecliptic patrol.

Based on what we talked about yesterday, I don't think we should have to go out, but we were both so sore that we couldn't stand it, so we both left after breakfast.

So I had nothing to do but laze around in bed for a while. Gathering information from inside the temple is also blocked for now.

I wonder how long he's been lying like that.

-TalkTalk

As I sat up in bed, I turned my head, and there was a sparrow.

Cats and sparrows.

-TalkTalk

-Tweet!

The sparrow looks at me and shakes his head.

-TalkTalk

-Second!

It's been a while since I've seen that.

Sarkegaroguman.

\* \* \*

Outside the Royal Class dormitory.

Sarkegaard and I chatted, pretending to be returning students.

Honestly, I don't even need to disguise it.

The interior of the temple is almost unrecognizable. It's not completely devoid of people, but it's very rare. The only people you see are the guards.

Our paktong found Sarkegar and sent him here.

We also heard the results of the Senate's meeting.

That it's rather odd that alchemy is irrelevant.

It's not as simple as making undead as we do.

Alchemy is a magical system that is part chemistry, part biology, and part science.

Dealing with corpses is technically dealing with life, so it's no surprise that alchemists are involved.

As an added bonus, the list of Antony's works made me even more dizzy than I already was.

Empires don't do research or experimentation.

You're working on something with a tangible outcome. It's an exhibition, and you don't have the resources to invest in pure academia.

"......Yes, and there were no Mullern's ashes."

More importantly, the Empire might know how to bring a mage back to life as a Reach.

A leech is essentially a living mage undeadizing themselves. It's what a mage does to his or her own body during life. In that case, the Death Knight retains a sense of self, Olivia said.

What we did this time, however, was to bring a dead warrior, or technically a paladin, back to life as a Death Knight.

What if you raise a dead mage as an undead?

It's a lot of choice, and it's going to be a lot of power.

And in war, the role of the wizard is crucial.

Wizards in large-scale attacks, saturation, and support roles definitely have a role to play on the battlefield.

"Sire, the Senate has said that we may have to use force to prevent the Empire from acquiring that level of power."

"......Yes."

"I think so, too."

I know what you're worried about.

The Hall of Heroes also contained the remains of a mage. But it was mostly warriors who were there.

But the Imperial Mausoleum also contains the graves of wizards who have done great magical work. And I'm sure there are many more.

Raise the remains of the greatest archmages in the history of mankind as relics and raise them as an army?

If so, it's like having a large army of mages that far exceeds the Imperial Mages.

Warriors and wizards who have left their mark on human history.

All of them are resurrected and become an army to save humanity.

The situation itself is very plausible, but it's what happens when the knife is pointed at us that's the problem.

Just because Bertus isn't willing to fight us doesn't mean there won't be a war.

Because wars are fought in good faith.

While the addition of Master Class power is scary, the real problem is the addition of Archmage power.

Titans can't cross oceans, but with the right amount of Archmages, an army of that size could storm Edina.

They don't know the status of Edina, but if she is located, it could really happen.

No.

It's not the army that's the problem, it's the thousand or so Archmages that are Lord Vampires, and you might be able to drop a Titan on Edina.

I didn't want to gate, but I ended up gating.

Bertus doesn't want war, and I don't want it either, but for some reason it might happen.

I'm pretty sure there's some sort of curse that keeps putting me in situations I wish wouldn't happen.

Whether it's fate or a prankster's trick0.

If you leave Imperial research alone, the Gate debacle could end more harmlessly.

But if it destroys the world I've worked so hard to build.

I'm not sure it's my destiny to lose everything like that.

However, if the Empire destroys all the projects you're working on because you're doing research that's too risky, isn't that a bad idea?

I'd rather have a war over this than destroy a key project of my empire.

If I attack the Empire now, war will surely ensue. If anything, my decision may prevent the Allies from advancing any further.

If I leave the empire alone now, the gate will be easier to close, but I could lose everything.

Bertus and I both know that we have no animosity toward each other, we just haven't talked about it.

If things change later, it will be because of other people, not because of Bertus' will.

Or maybe Bertus, who doesn't want war, is killed and the new emperor wants to go to war with the devil.

Everywhere I look, I see a future where I'm at war with the Empire.

If you attack, it becomes a rationale for what you're doing now.

When you are silent, the demands of the world become your cause.

If it's a war you're going to fight anyway, you might as well do it against a weakened empire.

But a stronger empire could prevent the unexpected death of someone like this one.

Maybe Delphine doesn't have to die and Ludwig doesn't have to lose his arm.

What about the countless Allied soldiers I don't know.

If we leave the Empire alone, hundreds of thousands of people might survive, and if the Gate crisis ends soon enough, we can use that money to help the refugees.

But Edina.

My people.

I am also responsible for a country.

The empire has more people, so my country can go away and you can live.

You don't get to make that choice.

I felt like I was at a crossroads.

The choices you make today can make a big difference in your future.

I know this one.

Whatever I choose, I'm sure I'll regret it greatly.

It will be another long day of nightmares.

The issue raised by the Senate is not a tilt this time.

Reanimated warriors and reanimated wizards.

The possibility that we might be able to bring the wizard back to life as a reach.

It all starts with that.

But if this can help end the gate crisis, I must also consider the option of leaving it alone.

On the contrary, if that army helps break the final gate, you may be forced to use Alsbringer against the Otherworldly Dragons because you have destroyed the Empire's new power.

Then I would be effectively committing suicide by stopping this project for the empire.

"And then there's the most important issue."

"Most important issue?"

"It is possible that the Empire has joined forces with the Black Order."

"......."

Sarkegar's words stunned me into silence.

Black Order.

Yeah, if it's a sobriquet involving alchemy and the undead, they're probably involved.

Whatever the Empire is doing, the source of the knowledge could be the Black Order.

The power of the Black Order itself may have waned, but the knowledge remains, and it's not impossible that they've found a group that will find that knowledge more valuable than themselves.

But.

The Black Order tried to kill me.

I thought I had to die because my death was necessary for humanity.

So there's a chance that they still want me dead.

If the forces and empires that are hostile to me have joined forces, I need to see what's going on with my own eyes as soon as possible.

It can go either way.

You can either risk meeting Bertus in person and get the whole story, or send Sarkegar to gather information.

Meeting and talking to Bertus is a very dangerous thing. It's dangerous for me, and it's dangerous for Bertus.

But Sarkegar is not a one-size-fits-all.

And the projects the Empire is working on right now are likely to be places that even Sarkhegar would find difficult to enter.

"I need to see the emperor, in person."

I finally decided that I had to meet Bertus in person.

"Your Majesty, it's dangerous."

Naturally, Sarkegaard was concerned.

"It may become dangerous at some point, but that's not now."

Just as Bertus wouldn't attack me if he knew my whereabouts right now, he wouldn't attack me if he saw me.

You can have a conversation. I don't know about later, but we can definitely have a conversation.

Episode 574.

The choice to meet Bertus or not was always mine.

Bertus knows I'm helping the Allies advance, but he has no idea where I am, and I can always predict where he will be.

Bertus will be traveling between the three locations.

Tetra, the central palace of Neptune.

Allied Garrison Commander-in-Chief.

And now.

"It's a pretty obvious place, isn't it?"

"Yes, obviously....... I see."

The University of Magic research building in front of me.

Bertus must be traveling to and from one of these three locations.

The Imperial Palace is the Imperial Palace, and the Allied Garrison is the Allied Garrison.

And since there is a very important research project going on in the College of Witchcraft and Wizardry research building, I'm sure I'll be visiting from time to time to keep an eye on things.

"If it's that heavily guarded on the outside, it must be harder to get inside."

No matter how sarcastic you are, no is no.

"Still, rather than risk your Majesty, I would rather......."

"Forget it, how long am I going to have to ask you to do everything for me?"

"That's true, but......."

It's not that I didn't want to do it, but the idea of sending Sarkeghar to the Black Order had long since passed me by.

That doesn't mean Sarkegaard doesn't have a job to do.

Sarkhegar will wait for Bertus to appear nearby.

"Bertus won't attack you anyway, just like he won't attack me. If he shows up here, approach him and tell him I need to talk to him, and then we can talk privately......."

Before I could finish.

In the distance, I could see Bertus and Saviolin Tana exiting the research building.

The fact that I was able to spot them so quickly is more a sign of the emperor's frequent visits than a coincidence.

"Less work."

"Your Highness....... Just one more thought......."

"It's okay."

You can be okay with not being okay.

Leaving a worried Sarkegar behind, I began to approach the research wing of the School of Magic.

\* \* \*

Emperor Bertus does not like to travel with large armies.

Not one to shy away from protocol, Bertus ascended to the throne in a time of crisis. It was a time when such things could not be afforded, so ceremonies were either eliminated or scaled back to the point of excess.

This is not to say that we don't have "lots" of troops, but that we don't value security.

Most of the time, Bertus traveled with the viola tana. That's enough bodyguarding for now.

And when you're going to a place that's supposed to be confidential, you obviously can't take a lot of people with you. So when Bertus is traveling, his bodyguard is always Saviolin Tana, who takes care of everything.

As a result, Xavier Tana has become more than just the head of the Chanapelle, but also the Emperor's personal assistant to some extent.

Of course, when the allied armies are marching or there is a battle, others will take over the guard, but now that he's been hit, Bertus is moving with Savior Tana.

So Bertus stopped by the research wing, and he and Tana were on their way back to the palace.

With so few people inside the temple, the streets were deserted, and Bertus and Saviolin Tana were the only ones walking down the orderly but grimy streets.

"You're on track."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"If it's too smooth, that's a problem."

Bertus smiled bitterly, and Tana stiffened, unable to find the words.

"By the way, I didn't expect the three of you to make this much progress so quickly......."

Bertus sighs.

"No matter how many continents we've gathered from, the Royal Class sophomores are incredibly special."

Adelia, the creator of the Titan and Power Cartridge.

Christina, the creator of Moonshine.

And Louis Ankton and Anna De Guerna.

Emperor.

Empress.

Warriors.

And the devil.

The second year of Royal Class is an uncanny breed. So much so that some powerful destiny is felt.

"What about you, Ludwig, by the way?"

"ah......."

Saviolin Tana's complexion has changed.

"It's....... seems to be having a hard time adjusting."

"......I guess my thinking was short."

When Bertus thought about what Ludwig would face in the Guard, he couldn't help but wonder if he had made a mistake in assigning him to the Guard.

Bertus has a lot of work to do, too. So while he cares about Ludwig, he can't give him the attention he deserves.

"Maybe you should take a job at a training center instead."

"I'll ask Ludwig's doctor."

"Yes, and this time......."

-Angel

Bertus stopped talking at the sound of a cat in the distance.

Neither Tana nor Bertus could do anything but stare at the black cat standing still in the middle of a wide, deserted street.

"Um....... That one?"

"You're a cat."

-Angel

The black cat slowly approaches the emperor.

"It's not just a cat, Lord Tana."

"If you say that's......?"

"Ellen's cat."

"ah......."

"I know it was unavoidable in the garrison, but I'm not sure it's right to let them run loose like this in the temple. I can understand not wanting to keep them locked up......."

"Ugh. I've never had a cat, so I don't know......."

It's even weirder that Savior Tana, who's been holding a sword her whole life, should know how to raise a cat.

"By the way, you've come a long way from your dorm, do you even know how to get back?"

I met a cat wandering around in the middle of nowhere.

Had the cat ever roamed such a large area? Bertus didn't know.

But the black cat is coming toward Bertus.

This is strange, because last time I saw Bertus, he was scrambling to get away.

Bertus squats down to watch the approaching cat.

You might be lost, and Ellen might be worried.

"I think we should take him to the dorms first......."

The moment Bertus reaches out to lift the cat.

Suddenly.

The cat's body began to change.

-Kuruk

"!"

"Your Majesty, it's dangerous!"

Saviolin Tana harshly pulls Bertus away, keeping him at a distance.

The cat turns into something.

And then, in a flash, it took shape, and Bertus and Savior Tana froze in their tracks.

"Well, ....... Not for a long time, to be honest."

Black cat.

"It's been a while. Right?"

Reinhard the Demon appeared.

\* \* \*

Ellen's cat has suddenly turned into a Reinhardt.

There's no way to know why, what the reason is, or what the purpose is.

Even if you don't understand the situation, what you see is what you get.

With Bertus hidden behind her, the pale-faced Saviolin Tana drew her saber.

"Wait. No more, no more approach."

Saviolin Tana's expression was tinged with fear, though not hostility.

Saviolin Tana wasn't the only one caught off guard.

"Reinhard......?"

Bertus swallowed hard, stunned by what was happening in front of him.

"I know you're shocked, but you know you're not here to fight, or you wouldn't have shown up like this."

If you were going to kill it, there were better ways to do it.

There's a reason why we're showing it up front.

"I'd like to talk to you somewhere quiet. It's been a while."

Just as time has changed many things, so has Reinhardt.

"If you stay out there too long like this, you're in trouble. You know that, right?"

The streets were deserted, but it was crazy to wander around the Temple as Reinhardt.

Bertus looks at Reinhardt, who has suddenly appeared, with a stony expression.

"Your Majesty......."

Saviolin Tana also stares at the Emperor with a confused expression.

"Okay. Anywhere is good, so let's go in."

Even the Emperor didn't like it when someone saw a demon in his temple.

\* \* \*

Bertus and Tana are the only ones who know that the demon is helping humanity. That's why they know he's not here to fight when he suddenly reveals himself.

Most of the buildings in Temple were empty, including schools and shops.

So I went to the second floor of a nearby vacant storefront that used to be a cafe.

The door is locked, but that doesn't matter to anyone in the room.

Slashing the lock on the closed door with an auror blade, the three sat down.

The tables and chairs were dusty, but no one seemed to mind.

You only need the space anyway.

"I want to tell you something, but let's not talk about cats because it's not important and I don't want to."

Bertus looked at Reinhardt's vulnerable face and couldn't help but notice how he had changed over the years, if nothing else.

It's even more shameless than before.

"Yeah....... Let's call it that, because it's not like I have any idea why."

You would have wanted to keep an eye on Ellen.

We also learned why Ellen had a seizure when she tried to leave the cat with the emperor.

Reinhardt crosses his arms, muttering to himself.

"Let's not even talk about the good old days. Who did what, where did it go wrong, all that stuff."

Talking about fault is also pointless.

Talking about each other's responsibilities when there's only reality to be faced is only going to make things worse.

The demon warned the emperor that his men would cause a gate crisis if he did not release him, but the emperor refused to release the demon.

That's where the gates came in.

But there's no point in discussing it now.

We have a problem to face, and we have a job to do.

Everything else is pointless except to focus on it.

Bertus nodded at Reinhardt's words.

"You do realize we were clearing a path ahead of the Allies, right?"

"Yeah. I knew that."

Bertus looks at Reinhardt and asks.

"Can you really manipulate the weather?"

"To a limited extent."

Reinhardt doesn't say it's necessarily Liana de Granz's superpower.

Bertus' and Tana's faces hardened at the mention of something no mage could do.

"It's okay, you know what would have happened if you'd tried to use that power to destroy the human race."

"......."

"......."

If a demon were to go on a rampage in the middle of the ecliptic while the Allied forces were in full force, the ecliptic would be devastated.

Now, it's one thing to know that it might happen, but it's another thing to actually have verbal confirmation that the devil can do it if he puts his mind to it.

Humanity should have perished long ago, except for the mercy of the Devil.

But most people hate the devil without even realizing it.

It only takes a day for the Devil to really wipe out the human race, but no one thinks about that.

If the devil threatens the emperor with the very existence of humanity, it is the reality of the empire and of humanity that he must listen, no matter what he says.

However, so far, the Devil has never interfered with humanity in such a way.

"I'm not here to threaten or blackmail you, I'm just here to ask you a question."

Reinhardt asks quietly.

"One of our main sources of power is Death Knight. We used up a lot of it during the Battle of Serandia, so we tried to replenish it last time."

At that, neither Tana nor Bertus are silent, listening to Reinhardt's words.

"That's why I tried to resurrect him as a Death Knight in the Hall of Heroes in the Imperial Mausoleum."

"......what?!"

Bertus and Tana couldn't help but be stunned. To be told that they had tried to break into the imperial mausoleum at such an inopportune time would be astonishing.

"The method is secret, but I got in anyway."

Worse, they've already been breached without realizing it.

Bertus listens to the story with a pale face.

"But....... You see, the coffins are all empty."

"It's not just the imperial mausoleum. I've also confirmed that the bodies of Allied soldiers killed in action are being switched and buried in the national cemetery."

"Just like we tried to make Death Knight, it seems like the Empire is doing some crazy stuff....... I don't know."

"I've been trying to sneak up on them rather than make contact, but I knew I couldn't do that. That's why I came to you."

I'm not going to say, "You shouldn't be doing that, you shouldn't be doing that, you shouldn't be doing that, because I'm doing something similar."

"But you need to know what's what. Because I am, and my people are very uneasy, and you may have aligned yourselves with those who may be my enemies."

"I only have two questions."

The demon stares at the emperor.

"What are you doing at Temple College of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

The substance of the study.

"You guys are in cahoots with the Black Order."

And suspicious alliances.

"You'll have to explain."

The devil asked two questions.

What research is being done at the Temple School of Magic.

And if they're in cahoots with the Black Order.

There is silence.

Tana couldn't speak before Bertus, so the demon only looked at Bertus.

I don't know if it's before the devil approaches, but the devil asks outright.

Unless you've done something like that, silencing the devil himself is impossible.

"I knew you were watching us, but....... It's kind of weird to realize that."

Bertus said with a bitter smile.

"Yes, we're doing something with the bodies of our fallen heroes."

Bertus nods slowly.

"But I don't know what you mean about the Black Order."

"...... is it?"

The Demon King stays still and watches the Emperor's expression.

It's hard to read intentions from facial expressions.

You can't tell if it's a sham or the truth just by looking at the face.

"They're not working with the Black Order, at least not that I know of."

With that, the Emperor shrugs.

"You don't have to doubt me, you know that, right?"

"What."

"After touching a dead body to end the Gate debacle, what's to say you couldn't recognize the hands of the Black Order, even if they were the ones who tried to kill you?"

It's a weird thing to say what you can and can't do when you're already doing terrible things.

"Are you saying that if the Black Order had come to you, you would have joined hands with them?"

"Yeah. But I didn't, and if I did, I don't think it's in my best interest to put you in this situation in the first place."

"Hmmm......."

In the words of Bertus.

There was nothing the Empire couldn't catch the hands of the Black Order at, with everything they had that could help them. Bertus grinned bitterly at the nervous-looking demon.

"I've found that when I tell the truth, people don't believe me."

Bertus laughed bitterly, saying that when you tell the truth, people doubt you.

"I can at least show you what we were doing."

The demon looked a little surprised, as if he hadn't expected that.

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I knew that if I met with Bertus, we would have a conversation, and I knew that he would have to give in to my demands.

I chose to take the risk and meet Bertus in person.

It's not that I'm in danger of getting in trouble for meeting Bertus, or that he's in danger of getting in trouble for meeting me.

The fact that Bertus and I met.

It's dangerous if someone finds out about it later in some way.

So it wasn't hard to get to the bottom of it once I met and talked to Bertus in person. But I didn't expect them to show me what they were doing.

Bertus barked orders at Savior Tana.

Evict everyone in the Hogwarts research building for three hours.

I would change my appearance, of course, but it wouldn't do the Emperor any good to have anyone see that he had entered the laboratory with an unknown person.

Saviolin Tana left to deliver the order, and Bertus and I sat in the empty dining room talking until everything was ready.

"Charlotte is....... How is she doing?"

The look on Bertus' face when he asked that was complicated.

They once hated each other to the point of trying to kill each other, but at some point, Bertus began to feel sorry for Charlotte.

Bertus decided to execute Charlotte, but he was actually calling for me.

And I left, taking Charlotte with me.

Bertus wanted to save Charlotte.

"I've got my own job, and it's better than living in the palace."

"Is that......."

Bertus says with a sad look on his face.

"Thank you. Reinhard."

I wonder if he's thanking me for showing up to save Charlotte.

It will mean one thing, and it will mean something else.

My relationship with Bertus is much different than it was in the past.

Now Bertus was technically in a low position.

You don't want to know that I have less than you.

Guilt.

He felt incredibly guilty about it, and he's still using me to this day.

When Bertus heard of Charlotte's whereabouts, he seemed a little relieved.

It didn't lead to more conversations.

Three years is a long time, but in some ways it's not that long.

But those who survived those three years experienced too much.

The public conversation was over, and there were too many obstacles to have a private conversation.

You never know what the future holds.

"About the Gate debacle....... Is there anything else I should know?"

There wasn't much I could say to Bertus' question.

"Just do what you're doing now."

Last gate.

That was all I could say because it wasn't Bertus' business.

\* \* \*

By the time Saviolin Tana returned, the Emperor's instructions had been carried out.

They all left the lab without leaving a single ant behind, and the guards cleared out.

Changing his face with the Ring of Sarkegar, he donned his robes and headed to the research wing of the School of Magic with Bertus.

"I don't think it would have been possible to sneak in here."

There were several layers of security checkpoints on the way into the underground lab alone, so it's unclear if even Sarkozy could have penetrated the system.

"Dreadfind might find a way. Coming to me directly would have been a convenient option, but not the only one."

Bertus held Sarkeghar captive for nearly two years.

So it was inevitable that I would learn about the Dreadfind clan.

"Anna and Christina suggested it first."

"......what?"

I don't know what that means, but I couldn't help but ask.

When he suggested it, he was obviously referring to this thing I'm about to see.

"Even if it's a terrible way to do it, if it helps end the gate crisis, is it okay to do it?"

"Anna and....... and Christina....... first?"

"Yeah. Louis joined us later."

They suggested it first, not Bertus.

No one is unchanged by the war, and comparisons to the original are now laughable.

Either because of terrible things, or because of something else.

Anna and Christina have come up with a way to reanimate the fallen and reintroduce them into battle, and they've even proposed it to the Emperor.

Just as Adelia created the Titans.

No.

Seeing Adelia's involvement in the Titan project may have inspired Anna and Christina to do something of their own.

Titans were not in the original.

Maybe the Titan inspired Anna and Christina, and that's why they thought of ways to contribute to the war in their own way.

"I thought about it. For a long time."

Bertus says as he descends into the underground laboratory.

"For a very....... very long."

It desecrates the bodies of the fallen, the bodies of those who were too good to die.

When he said he'd thought about it for a long time, I realized how much Bertus had agonized over the decision to accept the job.

In the end, Bertus would have said yes.

He may have even decided to use the tombs of heroes in the imperial mausoleum.

Just like that, I saw

What Bertus was working on after Titan.

"This is......."

Huge culture pots.

"This is undead?"

"......Yes."

There was a human body there, pristine, without a single wound.

From the looks of it, it was definitely not the body of someone who had died of trauma.

The other ports were no different.

It wasn't hard to figure out why the bodies of people who should have died of trauma were so clean and intact.

"Did you really....... played?"

"Yes, I'm regenerating flesh and muscles that have been lost or decayed."

It was a body that had been restored to near-original shape, not a body that had retained its original shape.

Such ports were placed throughout the underground lab.

"Homunculus is the alchemy that creates life."

"......Yes."

"So the homunculus is said to be a magic that creates something out of nothing, which is why it is said to have a high probability of failure, because you can't create life easily."

Bertus stares at the body of an unnamed person, still, eyes closed.

"The homunculus is that kind of magic that explores the truth of life, but we don't want to know the end of the homunculus technology, we want a homunculus that can be electrified, so we don't have to create something out of nothing."

"Is this a case of making something out of nothing?"

"Yeah."

More precisely, it's about breathing life back into something that was once dead.

"Making something that no longer functions as a living thing function again. I hear it's easier than building a real homunculus."

A homunculus creates a life form that never existed in the first place, but in this case, it's a reconstruction of a life form we already know.

If you have a good understanding of human anatomy, you can build a human, and the material was already human from the start.

Homunculus's arcane skills allow him to restore lost, damaged, or decayed organs, flesh, and muscle.

Not like the undead.

Undead are those that move while dead.

But it's about giving something resembling life to a dead body.

"It sounds like you can resurrect a dead person from....... from the dead."

"No, I'm not going to research that, and I don't think it's possible. I mean, just because they give you your life back doesn't mean it's really your life back."

Bertus, me, and Tana walk through the underground lab.

The bodies of strangers on the ship were being restored. They could be Allied fallen, people who had died since the Gate, or heroes of the past who were long dead.

"It's a long-winded way of saying it, but that's what it boils down to: you take the bodies of the dead, reanimate them with the arcane arts of Homunculus, attach a fake body to a real one that shouldn't be meshed with the skills of a chimera, and animate it with black magic, and you create a creature with almost as much, if not more, power than the living........ undead."

Bertus looks at me.

"Making it a golem. That's what we're doing."

A living golem, technically.

It contains tricks for many magical disciplines, most of which are forbidden, but at its core it is a living golem.

Golems are made from living humans and reintroduced into the war.

It's also more powerful than when the lion was alive.

"Can you bring a wizard back to life?"

"That's still in the testing phase, but it turns out it's possible."

That's what people in Edina were concerned about, and it's clear that it's possible.

"You don't think it's the priests?"

"......what?"

"I can revive clerics, too, with holy power available, though I don't know why."

At that point, I was at a loss for words at the absurdity of the world.

"Yeah....... I knew the Five Great Houses weren't normal."

Chimeras, homunculi, and black magic.

Eventually, through a combination of alchemy and black magic, the Empire was able to resurrect the corpses of the dead with nearly all of their abilities and use them at will.

"Do you have a self?"

"I don't have it, and I'm glad I don't have it."

A doll that bears an uncanny resemblance to a living human being.

I'm not sure if they should technically be called undead, but they are, after all, undead, and they are like golems.

"Not all of them can be reanimated in this way; some won't regenerate if the defect is too large, and others will regenerate but won't budge when you try to control them."

The success rate is around 7 percent, Bertus added.

In my opinion, it was ridiculously high.

"If I fail to control....... something very bad is going to happen. Am I worrying too much?"

As powerful as Death Knights are, they don't actually restore life abilities. In this case, however, it restores the ability to live.

If you revive a Swordmaster, you get a Swordmaster, and if you revive an Archmage, you get an Archmage.

Just thinking about what would happen if they lost control was enough to make my head hurt.

Bertus smiled bitterly at my question.

"Reinhard, the fate of the world is at stake."

"......."

"How can you not take that risk?"

You'll have to borrow a cat's hand.

If you can borrow a cat's hand, why not the devil's?

Once that devil's hand has gotten me out of trouble, it doesn't matter what happens next.

Bertus' words made sense.

Will these save us.

Or will it take us down another rabbit hole.

"But....... doesn't seem to be ready for live deployment yet, seeing as how it's only incubating things like this."

I don't know what to call them, but with the finished product nowhere to be seen, they're not quite ready to be fielded yet. The moment they come out of the port, the game changes.

"No."

But when I asked, Bertus shook his head.

"It's already in pilot."

"......what?"

"You saw it."

Bertus points his finger upward.

Ground.

"Didn't you think there were too many guards in the temple?"

"......?"

"Weren't there an unusually large number of them, especially around here?"

As it turns out, the security around the College of Witchcraft and Wizardry is very tight.

A large group of guards roamed the neighborhood of the College of Magic.

"If they had that many guards left, they would have sent them to a refugee camp or something. I mean, how many people do you think the Temple has that many guards at the College of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

In the first place, most of the guards near the College of Magic were homunculus undead.

You may not recognize them, but the guards are all wearing helmets.

So you never see their faces.

No one wants to know what face is inside the helmet in the first place.

"Once we're sure it's taking commands properly, we'll test it by slaying monsters outside the ecliptic."

Suddenly I understood why Ellen and Heinrich hadn't been able to find any monsters near the ecliptic.

A raid to rid the world of monsters in the outer reaches of the ecliptic.

They were resurrected corpses that had nothing to do with the Guard in the first place.

The area around the ecliptic was already a testing ground to see if we could get the resurrection up and running.

The mercenary mission was never meant to be for anyone else, for entirely different reasons.

"After winter, we'll put them all in the field."

The actual deployment was already underway.

It's obvious without looking how much power it will have and how much it will help.

"If they alone can end the gate debacle....... It's funny to say this, but we might not need any more allies."

If an army of returnees is all that is needed to wage war, and if their individual strength is greater than in life, then a larger army may not be necessary.

The gate crisis may end a little sooner, and no more major sacrifices may be made.

If you do something you shouldn't, you can prevent further sacrifices.

The temptation is too great.

I was tempted to just make Death Knight, but Bertus was even more tempted.

It's a choice I have no reason not to make, and I can't help but feel that it was necessary.

However, there is no way to predict the extent of the risk.

What happens when the returnees get out of control.

I don't know.

But it does help.

And if Bertus is right, it doesn't involve the Black Order.

So I've come to the conclusion that no matter how much of a risk this may be to me in the future, I'll just have to wait and see.

Whatever inevitability comes later.

Just as Bertus takes advantage of this, so should you.

But aside from the conclusion, there's another realization.

A body restored to near-original condition.

I think I know what that means.

It's restoring the dead to something close to what they were when they were alive, but it doesn't really bring them back to life.

But it will eventually move like a living thing.

Christina and Adelia suggested it, and it took shape.

I thought this was due to Titan.

They thought they were inspired by Titan and wanted to contribute to the war.

You don't know until you try.

But there's something I would have tried to do.

"Are those guys....... maybe......."

Christina and Anna.

"You didn't try to revive Ashur, did you?"

The first classmate who died.

B-4 Ashur.

I don't know if I started this to bring him back, or if he died while I was doing this and I tried to bring him back afterward.

I would have definitely tried.

"......."

Bertus said nothing.

The silence made me realize that they were trying to revive Ashur.

And, of course, I knew it was bound to fail.

We don't know if the restore succeeded or if it failed.

I didn't have to, and I didn't want to.

Episode 576.

Bringing a dead friend back to life.

If it was completely impossible, I wouldn't have even tried.

But what is half-heartedly possible will eventually lead people to despair because they will never be able to achieve complete success.

It's a ridiculous world, but the truth that death is irreversible seems to be the only thing that can't be overturned.

We couldn't save Ashur, and we wouldn't have even tried in the case of Delphine, whose body we couldn't even find.

It's just a restore that looks like a resurrection.

You may have the abilities, strength, and appearance of a living person, but you have no self.

It's just an animated taxidermy.

This can be used in combat, but not in relationships.

Battle may be more useful than life, but it is of no use to those who hope for a true resurrection, and it should not be used for such a thing.

The topic of Ashur has silenced us.

I didn't bring up the topic any further.

If only the dead could come back.

We all think about it.

It wouldn't just be Christina and Anna and Louis Ankton, it would be Bertus, and it would have to be Savior Tana.

"Reinhardt."

"Uh."

"You can't justify all of this."

"I didn't know you were the kind of guy who cared about that."

"I never thought I'd care about this either."

Bertus smiles bitterly.

We were the prince and the beggar, now we're the emperor and the devil.

"I owe you an apology."

"I don't need an apology for the past, I told you."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about."

Bertus leads the way.

"Follow me."

As I followed Bertus, more massive ports began to appear. They were three times larger than the others, and while I couldn't recognize the bodies in each compartment, it was clear that restoration work was being done on very important bodies.

Bertus stands in front of a petri dish and looks at me.

As if to say look inward.

In front of me was the body of someone.

He's a gray-haired old man.

"This is the body we've had for a while now, and we kind of expected it, but it's not opening its eyes, even though we succeeded in restoring it, so to speak....... failed. He must have been important to you....... I'm sorry. I had to write what I could, and what I didn't have to say....... I wanted to tell you that I wasn't working with the Black Order, that I wasn't deliberately deceiving you. If you resent me, I have nothing to say to you......."

"...... Who is this?"

What is this in the first place?

How is this apologizing?

As I stood there dumbfounded, so did Bertus and Savior Tana.

Like I'm surprised by something I don't know.

"No, what do I have to say to you to make you forgive me or get mad at me? Who is this person......."

Elderly.

Gray hair.

Saying you're sorry.

"Oh wait."

I think I know what it is.

"Is this him....... Is that him?"

Who.

I don't remember the name.

"Larken Simonsteinstein."

Saviolin Tana answered on her behalf.

"The Four Heavenly Kings of the Darklands and my mentor."

Yeah, him.

Saviolin Tana nods slowly, as if remembering something.

"Come to think of it, you said you lost all memory of being Prince of the Darklands......."

"ah......."

Bertus nodded, as if it had dawned on him.

The person I'm supposed to recognize has no face, no memory, and Bertus is apologizing for stepping on my toes.

But.......

That, to say the least.

I'm such a weirdo that I don't even recognize the face of the Warrior King.

\* \* \*

Larken Simonsteidt.

Former Squadron Xanafel leader and one-time Grandmaster of the Continental First Sword.

A being who retired from active service, but somehow became the Four Heavenly Kings of the Demon Army after the outbreak of the Demon War.

That's why he was hated by all mankind.

After the Demon War, the body of Larken Simonsteid was taken from the Empire. They didn't need a reason to take it.

But after the events of the Gate, Bertus saw no reason why Larken's body shouldn't be used to resurrect countless war heroes.

Bringing a Grandmaster back from the dead with all of their abilities intact would be an incredible power.

However, just as we did not succeed in golemizing all the corpses, Larken Simonstein's body was not resurrected. We don't know if this is because something was done to it, or if it simply failed.

Anyway, Bertus apologized because he thought he might have been important to me, and things got weird when I didn't remember Larken at all.

No, but now that you believe me, you still don't believe that I have any memory of Darkland?

It's not that I don't believe it, it's just that I haven't considered it.

Honestly, I don't feel the slightest bit guilty about trying to capitalize on Larken's body.

You don't need to know anything to be upset.

If I can't relate to the Ancestral Demon King, how can I relate to the Four Heavenly Kings?

"Do you have the bodies of the other Four Heavenly Kings?"

Bertus shook his head at my question.

"No, we retrieved the body in the first place to study whether magical means were used in Larken's betrayal."

"Oh....... I see."

The body was recovered to determine if it had used magic to brainwash the Grandmaster.

"Of course, Larken wasn't brainwashed."

I knew everything there was to know.

What the Empire was doing. What was really going on.

Ethically, it's totally fucked up, it's dangerous, and it could be a huge threat later on.

If you're looking for an excuse to spill the beans, there's nothing you can't do.

But that's all the more reason to leave it alone.

We were already well into the research and development phase.

The golems are already in use as guards near the College of Magic, as well as in the extermination squads that patrol the outer reaches of the ecliptic and slay monsters.

Wearing a helmet so no one can recognize you.

The guards are armed, of course, so no one will suspect anything.

"Reinhardt, if this army is committed, the Allies may end the war sooner than planned, maybe even in an instant."

"I suppose."

If the heroes of history are brought back to life, humanity's power will rise to a level never before seen in history.

Not even the heyday of the Demon Kingdoms would compare.

No matter how many monsters there are in the gate, it doesn't matter. Maybe even the dragons of the otherworld are hunted in vain.

It was almost surreal to realize that the end of the gate crisis was so close.

What I saw was both horrifying and overwhelming at the same time.

Their army may pose a threat to Edina and I, but the last warp gate is our priority.

This army of the dead may, in the end, be the key to preventing me from using Alsbringer at the last minute.

The rest is history.

"I'm going to have to pay for all this someday."

"......."

"Reinhard, I need to talk to you."

Bertus said as if he had made up his mind.

\* \* \*

I spoke with Bertus, and it wasn't a long conversation.

The price for all this work.

Someone has to pay the price.

There were a few other stories, but that's what it came down to.

So, I decided not to touch the empire and this project.

It's not even touchable.

As for the Black Order connection, I decided to take it with a grain of salt.

Eventually, you have to choose something.

Whether this is a regrettable choice or a better one is unknown at this point.

After finishing the conversation, I stepped out into the lobby.

Saviolin Tana looks at me. She is very suspicious, questioning, and angry at Larken Simonstein's decision.

He hated them, called them traitors who had betrayed humanity.

But now Saviolin Tana will never know what that betrayal was all about.

"Lord Tana, I don't know much about Larken Simonsteid."

"......."

"But the Great Demon Valier wanted to create a new world with Akasha, which he took from Cantus Magna, and move all the demons to it."

Sure enough, I saw a letter written by the Ancestral Demon King.

"Perhaps Larken Simonstein would have agreed with the devil."

The only people who knew the true purpose of the Ancient Valier were the Demon King himself, me in my Valier days, and the Four Heavenly Kings.

Larken Simonstein would have helped complete Akasha.

"You know, they didn't want to fight."

If the demons were gone, so would the knowledge of demons and humans, and there would be no fighting.

But because Akasha was such a powerful weapon, there was no room for dialog or persuasion.

They didn't understand each other, so they fought, and one was wiped out.

"It was...... would be......."

Saviolin Tana shook her head, speechless.

In the end, I wanted peace.

The wishes and desires of all beings are trivially simple.

I want to be happy.

I don't want to get hurt.

I wish the world were at peace.

Those simple, intuitive desires lead to different behaviors.

Someone for peace, someone for a new world.

For the sake of peace, someone has to draw a sword.

"Akhya said....... What happened?"

"I don't know. I probably won't be able to use it again."

We don't know where Akasha came from or what it is.

All that remains in the world is what misused Akasha has caused. We are the ones who must fix it, scrape what's left of the world, and reap what little tranquility there is.

Your work is done.

I was doing something more dangerous than I realized, but I decided to leave the empire alone.

There are no reversals.

"Are you going?"

"Uh, I should go. What's the point of staying here?"

Bertus looked a little disappointed.

"Wait, how do I find you?"

As I turned to leave, Bertus asked.

No, that was a weird way to say it.

You're really getting there, aren't you?

"Dormitory."

"......?"

"She's in the dorm, probably in Ellen's room."

"......?"

"I'll be here for the winter, if you have anything to say."

The look on Tana and Bertus' faces when I turned into a cat was priceless.

-Angel

"......."

"......."

I don't feel embarrassed anymore.

I'm not the least bit shocked that you're looking at me like that!

-NanNan

"You crazy....... asshole......."

I pretended to be cute and they both looked even better.

Honestly, it's kind of cute.

I look cute in the mirror when I look like this, too.

\* \* \*

Ludwig was given a special assignment.

None other than a priest who cleanses the plague from the refugee zone.

To guard that priest.

Ludwig and Rowen talked as they headed into the epidemic zone.

"You're not being escorted by the Crusaders, are you......?"

It is too dangerous a place for a single priest to roam alone. When Ludwig asked if it wouldn't be safer to be escorted by paladins with armor, Rowen shook his head.

"If we had the manpower to do that, we'd be better off sending priests to more places."

"......I see."

Ludwig nodded when I told him that we were absolutely understaffed and had no choice but to be scattered like this.

And with the majority of priests and paladins deployed on the battlefield, manpower was even more scarce.

"If you don't mind my asking, ....... What happened to your arm......."

"I was bitten by a snake."

"Snake......?"

"It was a snake with petrifying venom. It wasn't a very big snake, but....... Just because it's a monster doesn't make it any less dangerous."

"I see......."

Rowen looked at Ludwig's empty arms and couldn't hide her sadness.

"It's okay. It's better than losing your life."

Is it better to lose an arm and survive than to die and never come back?

Ludwig doesn't know if that's true, but he thought he should say it anyway.

It's not about the arm you lost.

It's painful to think of all the other things I've lost.

"By the way, is the pandemic problem....... how serious is it?"

So Ludwig forced himself to change the subject.

"I don't think the individual epidemics themselves are that big of a problem, because not all epidemics necessarily lead to death - most of them are small, cold-like illnesses, for example."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but the point is that a cold in a healthy person is not the same as a cold in a debilitated person."

"Oh....... I see."

For a healthy person, a cold may last a few days, but for a debilitated person, a cold is a serious illness that can take their life.

"The basic conditions are too poor, and even if they are cured, they can't stop their weakened bodies from dying."

Death by debilitation is not a disease and cannot be cured.

Those who are already weakened, even if they are recovered from the disease, will die because their energy is already exhausted. That cannot be prevented.

"And if those bodies are left unattended and decay, they'll start another plague. It's a cascade."

Ludwig's complexion darkened further at Rowen's words.

"At least it's winter now, so decay is slow, so the plague is less than it was last summer, although I wouldn't call that a good thing."

A corpse left out in the cold will not decompose.

But that's not a good thing, because the cold itself can kill you.

The pandemic is a problem in and of itself, but more importantly, the inhospitable environment itself.

People are dying from diseases that don't have to be.

So even if we eventually clean up this epidemic, it's always a work in progress because there will inevitably be another one, Rowen added.

Rowen is the kind of person who knows it's poison, but has to pour water on it.

"First and foremost, we are short of priests. With most of our paladins and priests on the front lines, Tuan's priests have been reduced in absolute numbers. Some have died, but many more have converted or....... abandoned their faith."

"Oh....... I see."

"Yes, because of the devil's work......."

There are countless examples of believers who felt betrayed by their god who chose the devil, and left the faith.

The Tuan and Als faiths have a problem not only with their adherents, but also with their priests, whose numbers are dramatically lower than before.

The remaining priests and paladins were sent to the front lines.

So it's no wonder that there are always a shortage of Tuan Cult priests to deal with the plague.

Even for the priests of Tuan, the entire ecliptic, let alone the refugee zone, is somehow more dangerous than the battlefield.

Ludwig began to wonder if Lowen's staying in the ecliptic to help clean up the plague might be a more dangerous and noble endeavor than going to war.

Rowen was wandering around looking for work that no one praised, work that he had to do in a place where everyone hated him.

And he didn't give up his faith in Tuan.

"I often wonder if I'm human."

Rowen says, walking still.

Rowen says, looking down at the floor.

"What the devil is really like."

Demon.

It's like a stone in your throat.

For most people, the devil is a symbol of hate and a sign of despair.

Rumors abound about what the Devil is like.

But Ludwig wasn't the only one who heard the rumors.

That's why I hate it all the more.

We lived in close proximity to each other and didn't realize he was a demon.

"He was a classmate."

"Is that ......?"

"I lived with the devil in the temple."

"!"

Rowen stared at Ludwig with his mouth hanging open.

Ludwig is now a household name, for better or worse.

I realized that just by being in the presence of someone special, I was bound to be treated as special.

Episode 577.

It's no secret that the Devil has infiltrated the temple.

Even the fact that he lived in the same grade as emperors, princesses, and warriors hints at the evil and malicious side of the demon.

He was close to the most important people in the empire, observing them and learning about them. He even tried to recruit the empress and the prince to his side without their knowledge.

Eventually, however, the demon was discovered, and those who had been captured by him dared to betray humanity, rescue him, and escape.

We don't know what the Demon's true purpose was, but he caused the Gate Crisis in order to exterminate humanity.

Henchmen of the Devil who betrayed humanity.

And some of the second-year Royal Class members, including Ellen, had become very important people.

Emperor, Bertus de Gradias.

Warrior, Ellen Artorius.

Adelia, the creator of the Power Cartridge and Titan.

Heinrich, the flame wizard.

Christina, the creator of Moonshine.

Ludwig had never been too conscious of being their classmate, but facing Rowen's astonishment, he was reminded that his classmates, with the exception of the Devil and Ellen, were too large to be easily discussed.

Rowen looks at Ludwig with a mixture of fear and curiosity, somehow afraid, but unable to contain her curiosity.

"What was the devil like?"

"......."

What Reinhardt was like.

As a freshman, Reinhardt was a below-average student, albeit an A student, and Ludwig wasn't sure if that was a facade to hide his true power or his true self.

Ludwig has seen many forms of the Devil, though not of the same class.

He was violent and abrasive.

I couldn't say it was evil.

But now that Gate has happened, Reinhardt is evil.

"Well....... I don't know."

On the contrary, after all the time they had spent together, Ludwig could only feel sorry for himself, saying that he didn't seem to know the slightest bit about Reinhard.

"I thought I knew a little bit, but now that I think about it, I don't think I did."

"......Yes."

Ludwig stares up at the ashen winter sky.

"Except that the devil....... One day, he will surely......."

As an underdog, as a loser, there's only one thing you can do.

"I just wish they would pay for everything they've done."

Longing for a non-existent punishment.

And the curse.

That was it.

\* \* \*

Rowen and Ludwig crossed the cordon's demarcation point and entered the plague zone.

Ludwig and Rowen both wear masks.

The plague-ridden area was off-limits like it was yesterday, and when Rowen showed some sign, the guards obediently opened the way.

"......."

"This is what I do, and I see it often, but I just can't get used to it."

Once inside the epidemic zone, Ludwig couldn't help but notice how different the atmosphere was from outside.

The rest of the place was just as grim and gloomy, but you could practically smell the death wafting through the cold air.

The guards pulling the carts were heading somewhere, loaded with skinny bodies, and smoke was rising from the direction they were headed.

When Ludwig heard the word plague, he imagined a terrible, grotesque pestilence that spread like wildfire and ate people in a matter of hours.

But the bodies didn't show any signs of the plague.

It's just a bunch of people who are too weak, too sick to die.

Ludwig watches in disbelief as they are loaded onto a cart and driven away, dying of nothing more than an insignificant disease.

The entire area is cordoned off, and the people inside will soon be dying of the plague, even if they aren't sick.

This is probably what's happening all over the ecliptic refugee camps.

Once you've cleaned up this area, you're not done.

New epidemics will continue to arise, and people will continue to die from trivial infectious diseases unless the underlying issues are addressed.

"Now what and how......."

"I'm going to go through the streets and offer a prayer of purification, all you have to do is follow me."

"Are you sure you don't want anyone to see you praying......."

Rowen shakes his head at the suggestion that it might be dangerous.

"Mr. Ludwig."

"Yes, Priest."

"I wonder if there's anyone here who has the stamina to take me down, and if so, that would be a good thing."

"ah......."

"Extreme situations are more of a what-if, and it's unlikely that Ludwig will step in."

It's not that we haven't had problems, but rest assured, it's not a common occurrence," Rowen smiles.

Most people don't even have the energy to express their hatred with violence.

If they do, all you have to do is run away with Rowen in tow.

"And it's not like I'm singing loudly, most people think I'm a crazy woman walking around mumbling to myself."

Rowen said it in a playful way to reassure Ludwig, and Ludwig couldn't help but laugh in spite of himself.

But he wasn't kidding, he was serious.

Ludwig watches Rowen wander the deserted streets, head bowed, mumbling prayers to himself.

From what she said, she didn't look like anything other than a crazy woman who had lost her mind.

\* \* \*

There was no brilliant white light, no gentle golden glow.

At Ludwig's side, Rowen walked through the shacks filled with unprocessed bodies and coughing, mumbling unintelligible prayers.

The murmurs sounded ominous when overheard, but when listened to properly, they clearly contained the contents of a purification prayer to Tuan, the god of purity.

The only thing that convinced us that we were doing something right was that the stench that had been wafting through the streets was disappearing, even in this cold weather.

Off to the side, Rowen was reciting a prayer, each step deliberate.

Later, the plague may break out in other parts of the country, but this terrible disease in this street will surely disappear, and the sick will be healed.

-The will of purity, which rejects corruption, decay, and nightmares.......

Ludwig suddenly found the whole thing bizarre.

This epidemic, with so many people dying in vain, even if it's not a deadly disease.

A single prayer.

It's sobering to think that a plague can be wiped out by a single priest.

How is this possible?

Is this the power of the gods and a miracle.

Though men may feel betrayed by two of the Five Great Givers and deny them, the power of the gods benefits men to an absurd degree.

Ludwig suddenly realized.

If humanity can survive, no matter how this ends.

The power of the gods is eternal, and the people will restore their faith, if only to receive the power and grace of Tuan and Als.

Divine power is different from any action that uses mana as a resource.

While different priests have different abilities, divine power does not require a price.

Another mystery, apart from psychic powers, divine power is a costless miracle that is manifested by the mere act of believing in something.

Why the gods.

He does great miracles in the world.

Why the gods.

Did you choose to be that way?

The prayer was long.

The blighted area itself was large, but Rowen walked very slowly, praying.

By evening, the entire area was cleaned up. Luckily, it went off without a hitch.

"I think we're finally getting somewhere....... Mmm. Mmm. Hmmm!"

Rowen had been reciting the prayer for over eight hours, and she could almost taste her throat. His throat was so hoarse he could barely hear his own voice.

I'd been praying for eight hours without a sip of water, so I had no choice.

He could heal his own throat, but he didn't want to do anything conspicuous, so Rowen cleared his throat and coughed a few times.

Ludwig stares at Rowen, wondering if he has to do this all the time.

Turn on the stretch so that she stretches.

"Mmmm! Hmmm......! Gee, that's a weird sound........ Anyway, I'm glad nothing happened today."

"Yes....... Thank you for your service, Priest."

"By the way......."

Rowen looks at Ludwig with a slightly sheepish look in his eyes, as if he can't help but be tired.

"What were you thinking?"

Whether he was praying or watching Ludwig's complicated expression, Rowen asked curiously.

Nothing much happened, no threats.

So being by Rowen's side for such a long time made Ludwig very tired.

I saw the greatness of God.

And I saw God's inscrutability.

It evokes a certain fear, despair, and hope all at once.

Because that's what God is.

"If the gods are so gracious....... why did they choose the devil?"

It is the Great God who bestows such a great miracle without payment.

But why did Als and Tuan, not just one, but both, choose the demon that brought so much disaster and despair to the world?

Ludwig could not understand it, no matter how much he thought about it.

The gods seem to be gracious, but in the larger scheme of things, they seem to want disaster even more.

Like so many others. Ludwig was both grateful and desperate for the gods' unearned power.

At Ludwig's words, Rowen stares at him.

"Ludwig, the gods are not on our radar."

"......."

"They see things we can't see, and they know things we don't know."

A number of logics have been created to affirm Alsatuan's choice of demigods in the five major pantheons.

The gods were not wrong.

The classic logic is that the gods are aligned so that what is happening now will eventually have a good ending.

Even the evil actions of the devil will eventually bring about good.

Just because a holy object is given to a demon doesn't mean that the demon is right.

The logic is that the demon's arrogance in holding the holy object is also part of the gods' plan, and will eventually lead to his destruction.

The five major schools of thought created a lot of logic to say that God is right and the devil is wrong, but that's the bottom line.

Everything is calculated, and the devil is just being used by the gods.

The Devil will eventually pay for his arrogance and cruelty, and will suffer eternal torment in the afterlife before the judgment seat of the gods.

That there will be an ending that benefits humanity in the end.

No one knows what it is, but it's an irresponsible story, perhaps, that the gods are so great they must have thoughts.

"Are you saying that all of this is the plan of the gods, that it will be good for humanity in the end....... Are you saying that through things like this?"

What good would come of all this horrific despair and death? Ludwig could see no such thing.

At Ludwig's exasperation, Rowen shakes his head.

"Well?"

"......Yes?"

"I'm not sure."

Ludwig was taken aback by this somewhat innocent demeanor.

"I don't dare to gauge the will of the gods, but isn't it possible?"

Rowen's words were similar to Ludwig's.

"Mr. Ludwig."

Rowen says.

"Isn't believing that the gods necessarily seek the good, rather, an act of daring to redefine their will?"

"Is that ......?"

"Is there any reason why the gods shouldn't wish for the extinction of the human race?"

"Moo, what do you mean......."

"The world and humanity are a byproduct of the gods."

With the smile of an innocent priest.

"It's up to the gods to lend their power to the byproducts without payment, or to take them away."

"Yes......? What are you talking about......."

"The gods may be wishing for the destruction of the human race."

"!"

"To believe that the gods always seek the good. No, it's blasphemy to believe that the gods always make choices for humanity."

Ludwig realizes the obvious.

In this situation.

In this environment.

In this reality.

"Didn't the gods ever say that the good they seek is the same as the good of man?"

A priest still in the service of Tuan and the Als cannot be sane.

Episode 578.

The will of the gods is beyond human comprehension.

The gods see farther and wider than we do.

And.

The idea that gods must be for the good of humans may also be a preconceived notion or misconception that has arisen from a long history of faith.

What the gods think is good may not be what we think is good.

If the destruction of humanity is good for the gods, then they may want it.

So, the gods may wish for the destruction of man.

Ludwig was stunned by Rowen's words.

There are believers and priests who have betrayed Tuan and Als.

But those who left weren't the only ones who changed their minds.

Those who remained could only endure if they changed their minds.

I had to change my mindset to keep the faith.

"That, that....... If the gods want something like that....... then why the hell are you helping people?"

"It's an assumption, it's not the truth."

The will of the gods is the realm of the inscrutable.

"I'm just doing what I can in my position."

Rowen doesn't know what the will of the gods is, but he does his best.

If you want to be destroyed, you will be destroyed.

If there's a good ending to this, we'll just have to wait for it.

"If everything is the will of the gods, then this behavior is part of that will, so I'm just doing what I think is my part."

It doesn't mean that I can do whatever I want because my actions are part of God's will.

It means doing the best you can.

Wander the refugee camps, purifying them, pouring water on the poison that lies beneath.

The mindset is that of a madman, but the behavior is that of a saint.

But there's also the danger of self-rationalizing that it's okay to do anything.

The logic that my actions are all subject to the will of the gods is, in effect, to assign responsibility for everything I do to the gods.

Ludwig felt both offended and sublime at the priest in front of him.

"I personally hope this all comes to a good end, but if it doesn't, I guess it's just the way it is."

It's more like resignation, but not giving up on action.

If the gods wish for destruction, we must accept it without resenting them.

It was pure faith, without a shred of doubt.

"I'm....... I'm not sure."

Ludwig could not understand the gods, of course, nor could he understand Lowen, whose faith was so pure as to be extreme.

Rowen looked at Ludwig and smirked.

"These are chaotic times, so it's natural to feel confused."

The good news.

Rowen's point was that he wasn't a fanatic who was angry that others didn't understand or affirm his beliefs.

"It's cold out, shall we turn around?"

"Oh....... Yeah."

That's it for today's to-do list.

Somewhere along the way, Ludwig and Rowen heard the sound of horses' hooves.

Not one, not two, but a group of steeds.

Ludwig and Rowen scrambled to the side of the road to avoid the approaching horses in the distance.

A group of guards on dozens of warhorses rides up the main street of the refugee camp.

Guards patrolling the area don't ride steeds.

And Ludwig could see the manes of the horses, the armor of the guards, and the stains of blood on their helmets.

It's a sign of battle.

People on the street duck into the shacks. Rowen watches the scene and says, "I'm sorry.

"It's a slaughterhouse."

"Oh....... They're......?"

"Yeah, thanks to them, the monster problem is gone."

What Ludwig wanted to do.

Culling squads to deal with monsters outside the ecliptic.

Without a word, Ludwig stared blankly at the guardsmen riding silently by on their warhorses, not casting a single glance at the refugees.

I'd rather have that job. Killing monsters didn't require much thought, and they seemed to be far removed from the normal duties of guards, as if they only needed to be involved in mopping up.

It doesn't have to be a death squad.

Something you don't have to think about.

If only I could keep doing what I'm doing today.

With that in mind, I couldn't help but look at the back of my head.

"Shall we go?"

Rowen tugged on Ludwig's sleeve.

\* \* \*

Rowen and Ludwig returned to the Guard and reported that the cleanup was complete. They could now lift the blockade on the plague epicenter.

But what's the point, Ludwig thought, and he couldn't get it out of his head.

Priests are scarce, and plagues continue to break out.

Even if it's not a plague, the slightest chill from the cold is enough to kill you.

Ludwig even seemed to understand Lowen a little bit.

She's the one who travels to the refugee camps to clean them up and drive out the plague.

She knew best that it would solve nothing. In her despair, Rowen could only bear it if she thought there was meaning to it all.

But she couldn't see how this despair could possibly lead to anything good.

It made me think that the gods might abandon us.

If the gods had abandoned us, we could only keep our faith in the idea that we had to affirm it.

Ludwig couldn't help but feel sorry for Rowen, who had seemed so strange, as he realized that perhaps he had become that way out of the deepest despair of all.

'Maybe that's why.......'

So I asked.

What the devil is like.

How evil they really are.

He asked because the nature of the demon would give him some idea of the will of the gods.

"Ludwig, why don't we go back to the ecliptic together, we're on the same road anyway."

"Oh, yeah. If you don't mind, I can send you an email at......."

Ludwig felt that the frail-looking priest was a candle that would be extinguished by the slightest winter breeze.

\* \* \*

Leaving the Refugee Zone and returning to the ecliptic.

In fact, Ludwig did nothing today. He simply walked beside Rowen for a while, keeping an eye on his surroundings, ready for any eventuality.

But the fatigue was worse than yesterday.

Seeing the horrors was like seeing them yesterday, but the emotional toll was higher.

That the gods might wish for man's destruction.

That the idea that the Five Great Gods are for the benefit of humans may be wrong.

The words confused Ludwig.

"Are you going to a different zone tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, I'm going to come back to District 17 to make sure the epidemic has really stopped, and then I'm going to District 15, and then I'm going to District 6, and then I'm going to....... I'll have to go check that out, because I'm sure there's more places I need to go. The list goes on."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Priests who can use their healing powers are far removed from the notion of being exhausted. Mental fatigue is inevitable, but when you think of the people who need to get through the day, you can't afford to be that hard on them, can you?"

"......I see."

Ludwig couldn't help but notice that Rowen wasn't sleeping well, even though she hadn't mentioned it.

Even though we were out of the epidemic zone, the refugee camps were not much different.

I see the same despair everywhere.

"Guard work. You're not used to it, are you?"

Ludwig couldn't help but shake his head at Rowen's words.

"My expression says it all....... in my face."

"Yeah, because he's so different from the other guards."

Ludwig would have been an oddity to Rowen, as he would have been escorted by guards who treated refugees like bugs.

"Mr. Ludwig."

"Yes, Priest."

Rowen looks at Ludwig.

"If you don't mind my asking, may I have you guard me again tomorrow?"

"Is that ......?"

Tomorrow, Rowen would go to a different sector, and the other guards would be manned.

"You know, the guards are....... kill people too easily."

"......a."

"It's painful to watch."

So far, I've been traveling around the refugee camps, and it hasn't been without its problems.

Rowen had seen escort guards make extreme choices in extreme situations.

Ludwig is not used to this, even if he pretends to be, and is reluctant to kill people.

He was even relieved when I told him to take her and run if anything happened.

Rowen knows Ludwig won't do anything extreme, so she asks him to escort her.

Ludwig hesitates.

Part of me wanted to nod coldly, but I wasn't sure if I could really help Rowen.

"Nothing happened today, but....... I wonder if a body like this can protect a priest in times of real danger......."

"You said you were confident."

"......."

"You can also do enchantments, shouldn't that be enough?"

We're not fighting, we're just picking it up and running.

Ludwig had nothing to say to Rowen's words.

People are precious, and Ludwig is, by definition, a precious person.

And Rowen is a valuable resource.

The priest who cleanses the plague, the one who guards it.

It doesn't matter how much of a band-aid it is, it's necessary.

It's not like you're fighting a dangerous monster, as Bertus and others worry. Your escort would rather run away if something goes wrong.

It's not risky, and there's little room for value judgment.

Soon.

It's safe to say that this is the most positive thing that has happened to Ludwig to date.

I admire the work of a martial artist because it's a no-brainer.

Similarly, this is a no-brainer and something people need to do.

"I'd have to get permission from the captain of the guard, but....... I see no reason not to."

"I'm so happy for you, Ludwig."

Ludwig smiled awkwardly at Rowen's wry smile.

By the way.

Today.

We've talked about it a lot.

In those words.

Did I mention I know how to do disenchantment?

Ludwig said no such thing.

I had a small question.

Episode 579.

After leaving the refugee camp, Rowen made his way to the Temple of Tuan in the outer reaches of the ecliptic.

"Is that where you live?"

"I tend to rest at the temple closest to where I need to be the next day, so I don't really have a favorite place."

As vast as the refugee zone is, so is the ecliptic, so she has been wandering the ecliptic with no fixed abode, resting wherever the Five Great Houses are.

"I need you here tomorrow at nine o'clock at the latest, and if you're late, I'm going to dump you, okay?"

Ludwig scratched the back of his head in confusion at Rowen's playful comment.

"Yes, I'll be sure to come."

Helping Rowen is a stopgap measure, but a necessary one.

Just being able to help with that seemed to take some of the pressure and gravity off Ludwig.

If I had been smart, if I had been wise, I would have known what the right thing to do was.

When Ludwig was faced with a difficult task, he was confronted with his own limitations.

So for the lost Ludwig, Lowen was, in a sense, salvation.

Temple of Tuan.

The temple was in a state of decay.

The area was deserted, and the gatekeepers looked tired, as if they were afraid of spreading uncleanliness.

Not only that, but the stone walls of the temple had been defaced with graffiti that was barely legible.

The decrepit state of the temple and the graffiti spoke of the people's anger and hatred of the Tuan faith.

The temples of Tuan and Als looked like this everywhere.

It's avoided, has few devotees, and people secretly vandalize it.

"Shabby, right?"

"What? Ah......."

"Sometimes they want to start a fire."

Arson attempts beyond graffiti and defacement.

Ludwig could only stare in disbelief.

"Is that as good as......?"

"Right."

There was a deep sadness in Rowen's expression as he said that, though he said it nonchalantly.

People treat the Temple of Tuan as if it were a temple to a demon.

Ludwig approaches the entrance to the temple.

Then the faces of the gatekeepers changed.

Like you're nervous about something.

Obviously, he wasn't nervous to see himself.

The priests' eyes turn to Ludwig's right.

"Great, Archbishop, you've done a great job today!"

"Yeah, you guys had a hard time too."

Archbishop.

Ludwig froze at the words.

"See you tomorrow, Ludwig."

"What? Ah....... Yes, yes!"

Rowen looked at Ludwig and bowed his head slightly, then went inside.

Come to think of it, he said priest, but Rowen didn't say what rank he held.

Ludwig didn't ask, either, so Rowen wasn't deliberately deceiving, just not telling him what he didn't need to know.

I was just assuming it was a layman.

But.

He realizes that a priest with the divine power to cleanse a vast refugee camp of plague with a simple prayer is no ordinary priest.

If an archbishop wanders into a refugee camp alone, unescorted by paladins, does that mean he's a great man?

Or does it mean that the Order of Tuan has declined as it should.

When Ludwig realized that the priest he'd been walking with all day was an archbishop of the Tuan Order, a group he'd never normally encounter, he froze for a moment.

He even went so far as to ask, in front of the archbishop, why the gods had chosen the devil.

We don't know if Rowen was being merciful because of the circumstances, but under normal circumstances, he would have committed a blasphemy that would have been unspeakable if he had been hauled before the Inquisitor.

Rowen was an archbishop, not a lay priest.

He was an incredibly high ranking priest.

But Ludwig is a fool.

'If you're an archbishop....... How high is he?

I was surprised to learn that Rowen was a high ranking officer, but I had no idea where it was.

\* \* \*

I knew what the Temple School of Magic was doing, and I'd seen it in action.

It wasn't just bringing a dead mage back to life as a Reach, it was doing more than that. It's a half-hearted resurrection that restores his abilities but not his memories or his self.

It was nothing like Lich or Deathknight.

I relayed my findings to Sarkegar.

We didn't see any connection to the Black Order right away, and even if we did, we decided to take the risk and take no action on this one.

If the end of the gate crisis is the only good in the world, then anything that makes it happen a little faster is a better good.

Therefore, I will turn a blind eye to what the Empire is doing.

It was a bit of a gamble to meet Bertus in person, but it paid off.

There's no telling where this and my conversation with Bertus will lead, but it was the best I could come up with at the time.

I didn't go back to Edina right away.

Honestly.

Right now, Ellen would be crying and scouring the temple if I were gone.

If he leaves me here and doesn't return to the Allied lines, I'm stuck here.

You don't want to create a missing cat incident that will affect Ellen's mental state.

If you're in a hurry, you can also leave Sarkegar behind, alas.

In any case, we're stuck in the temple for the time being.

Late in the evening, the banquet hall is filled with people who have returned late from running errands. The evening was well and truly over, but the banquet hall had preserves for the late arrivals, so they could at least get something to eat, if not a full meal.

Ellen and Heinrich on ecliptic patrol again today.

Neither of them seem to have done anything out of the ordinary today. I don't know about anything else, but the monster problem seems to be under control.

The last thing you need is a monster problem. The marauders outside the ecliptic aren't just guards or knights, they're resurrected war heroes.

The exact task is not to kill the monsters in the first place, but to make sure they are controlled well enough to be put into action.

There's nothing for Ellen and Heinrich to do, because they're shooting missiles, not cattle prods.

Plus Ludwig, who'd just gotten back from a late night of guard duty.

There was no reason to sit separately, so the three of us sat around the table eating a late dinner.

Ellen eats dry bread and water.

Heinrich is jerky.

In front of Ludwig was a piece of hard bread.

They knew it was a luxury, so they were inclined to share it.

Since it was late, there were only a few people in the ballroom.

I was sitting at the kitchen table in my cat form, listening to them talk. Ellen held out a piece of dried jerky, but I didn't take a bite.

I'm not really hungry.

You hate wasting food, and so do I.

Ellen tapped the bridge of my nose a few times as I turned away from the jerky, then popped it into her own mouth as if to say, "I'm not going to force feed you.

"Archbishop?"

"Uh, how high is an archbishop?"

As soon as Ludwig returned, he sat down next to Heinrich over some hard bread and a glass of water and asked.

What does the Archbishop have to do with the Guard?

Heinrich bites into a jerky and grunts at Ludwig's question.

"Well....... that should be the case."

"What do you mean, often?"

"Because we don't know if the archbishop is an archbishop in rank or an archbishop as head of an archdiocese."

"...... Archbishop? What's that?"

Heinrich stares at Ludwig as he asks the question.

Is Ludwig's brain going to overload, or is your brain going to overload as I explain?

If you think about it, Heinrich, this guy's head isn't in the right place, but he's not as stupid as Ludwig.

Heinrich opens his mouth, looking thoughtful.

"I don't know all the details, but from what I understand, the archbishop is the priest in charge of the archdiocese, but not all archbishops are in charge of the archdiocese. There are archdeacons who are in charge of archdioceses, and then there are priests who are archdeacons because they have completely different roles, so even within the archdiocese, technically, they do different things, and there are different hierarchies."

"......."

At that, Ludwig is silent and looks at Heinrich.

"Uh, I'm sorry, ....... What the hell is an archdiocese?"

"Ah."

It's not a matter of understanding.

It's not that I don't understand it, it's that I don't know it.

Heinrich stiffened, his mouth slightly open as if he didn't know where to begin.

"Think easy."

Eventually, our Ellen stepped in.

"If you're a bishop, you're in charge of three or four temples, and if you're an archbishop, you're in charge of dozens of temples. Not all of them, but that's a good way to think about it."

"Oh....... lord or something?"

"Yes. I think of bishops as lords and archbishops as great lords, and there are actually some things that priests do that are like lords, like episcopal orders and archbishop orders, though that's kind of obsolete now."

It's not like a lord, but an episcopal or archbishopric is actually a lord.

A bishop is a lord, and an archbishop is a high lord, was Ellen's heavily abbreviated but fairly acceptable explanation to Ludwig.

"So you're a very high priest, then?"

"Yeah, the only priests above that are cardinals and the Pope."

"But what's this about there being a hierarchy even among archbishops?"

Heinrich talks nonsense, which makes Ludwig wonder.

Ellen remained silent, popped the bun into her mouth, and mulled it over for a while, then took a sip of water and said, "I'm sorry.

"An archbishop who oversees all the temples of the ecliptic."

"Serandia, the last city we captured, was also a large city, so there must have been an archbishop in charge of all the temples in Serandia."

"Archbishop of the Ecliptic, Archbishop of Serandia."

"They are both archbishops, but who is more senior?"

At Ellen's question, Ludwig nodded with an ah-ha moment.

"You must be the Archbishop of the Zodiac?"

"Something like that."

Ellen nodded, seeing that she had gotten it pretty much right.

"But is there an archbishop who controls the entire zodiac?"

"...... I don't know because I'm not a member of the Crusader Knights or the Five Great Houses. But Huangdao is the city with the most temples on the entire continent, so I'm sure it's a bit more subdivided, with archdioceses, and maybe even a different rank of Archbishop in the first place......."

Ellen is about to explain something when she looks at Ludwig.

"I don't know."

Ellen said nothing and bit into her bread.

Yes.

Don't explain.

He doesn't understand anyway.

An archbishop is a high rank, but it's important to understand that there are ranks within archbishops.

But our Ludwig had a more curious look on his face.

"So cardinals and popes are higher ranking than archbishops anyway?"

"Yes."

"And what rank is a crusader knight?"

a.

Yeah, you might be wondering about that.

"Cardinals and above, popes and below."

Ellen's answer was short.

"The position of the Crusader Master is ambiguous, as the position never existed in the first place. He is actually below the Pope, but above the Pope in power, so he's actually on par with the Pope."

"I see......."

"But why is the archbishop suddenly?"

Heinrich asked, and I was thinking about it.

Why does he want to know this?

Ludwig explained what had happened today.

A plague-ridden area, and being tasked with escorting a priest.

And then there's the fact that when it was all over, I realized that the priest I thought was a layman was actually an archbishop.

"The Archbishop himself is doing it, and he's not even escorted by paladins?"

"This must be pretty serious."

Neither Heinrich nor Ellen seemed shocked to hear that the archbishop was on his feet.

If there are any clerics left, we'll have to cut them up and scatter them throughout the refugee camps. Escorting is better done with the help of the Guard.

"I think I'll be escorting him back to work tomorrow."

"That's great."

He's been looking pretty confused lately, but I can tell by the look on his face that today's work was pretty rewarding.

It's not dangerous, and it's something people need.

And, as much as it pains me to say it, it's a never-ending job.

The pandemic will keep popping up here and there, so the job will literally never end until the hunger problem on the ecliptic is gone.

It's a vicious cycle that never ends.

While nothing happened today, there's no guarantee that nothing will happen in the future.

"Well, when you think about it, maybe that's not such a strange thing."

Heinrich said.

"Isn't that weird?"

"An archbishop-level priest moving alone."

"Oh....... I heard that's because priests are needed for a lot of things."

"No, I'm saying there might be a lot of archbishop-level priests, so he might be traveling alone."

"Huh?"

"Most of the places you could call archdioceses have been destroyed, which is why there are so many archbishops in the Alliance garrisons, the Crusaders, and the ecliptic."

"Maybe."

Can a lord be called a lord if he has lost his lands?

If so, an archbishop who lost his archdiocese to administer could still be called an archbishop.

So, Heinrich said, with the archbishopric clustered around the ecliptic, it might not be strange for a priest of that caliber to be traveling alone, and I thought that sounded pretty plausible.

No place in the world was safe, so high priests flocked to the ecliptic.

As a result, there are now more archbishop-level priests than you would normally see.

Most of them are probably in the Allied forces by now, and those who aren't may be wandering the streets trying to clean up the plague like this.

Rather, the power of the high priests is concentrated.

But it's still a laughable situation of understaffing.

In fact, that's a given.

There are more survivors concentrated in the ecliptic than there are priests.

Still, he's an archbishop.......

-Angel

"Why?"

This is something.

It's cheap.

580 episodes

Ludwig reported to the Captain of the 17th Guards and was assigned to escort Lowen.

After confirming that the progress of the epidemic in Zone 17 had completely stopped, we headed to Zone 15.

As Rowen says, extreme situations don't happen that often.

Twice at most.

The disturbance was not caused by the discovery of the priest's identity, but by the encounter with the robbers, and Ludwig's escape with Rowen in his arms.

Once he ran away, once he was blocked on all sides, and once Ludwig beat him with only his left arm, and Bomu walked away.

The robbers made the mistake of assuming Ludwig was a one-armed man.

Thus, it had been four days since Ludwig had taken over Lowen's guard.

\* \* \*

A four-day escort mission.

Nothing much had happened in the meantime, and since they were traveling back and forth and had to be together all day, they couldn't help but talk about things.

Rowen had a frail appearance, but he was quite a bright guy.

He also wasn't one to talk about his high status.

We acted as if there was little formality.

Ludwig, who was quite ignorant of formalities, could not help but be grateful to Lowen.

So they talked a lot during that time.

"It was in a place called Cielan in the Kingdom of Lucepena, which you probably don't know, but I was a bishop there, not an archbishop."

This was Lowen's answer to Ludwig's question about where he had been an archbishop.

"So....... Gate debacle, you became an archbishop?"

"There's a shortage of people, there's a lot of deaths, and when there's a vacancy, someone has to fill it, so I took on a position that was overflowing."

The vacancy must be filled by someone, which is why Lowen said he was appointed archbishop despite his inability to do so.

"Was it correct to say that the archbishop....... as an archbishop?"

"No, just call me plain, and I'd rather you call me by my first name than call me priest."

Rowen looks at Ludwig and frowns.

"You're walking around in a place where you have to be careful in a lot of ways, right?"

Only then did Ludwig realize that calling him priest for a few days was a pretty risky move.

"That....... I see, I'm sorry."

"No, nothing much has happened so far."

Rowen points to a refugee camp just beyond the ecliptic boundary.

"Let's go, I have a lot of work to do today."

"Yes, Priest....... No, Mr. Rowen."

"You can count me out, Ludwig, because I'm counting you out."

Rowen smiles grimly and walks ahead of Ludwig.

Rowen was a bishop in a city that had already vanished, in a country that had already vanished.

After the gate incident, she somehow managed to survive and make it to the ecliptic.

And in a situation where someone had to fill the void, Rowen filled it.

He wasn't always an archbishop, he was appointed one after Gate.

"Are you being made an archbishop by doing this?

Ludwig shook his head and followed Rowen's lead.

It is the fourth day since Ludwig accompanied Archbishop Lowen.

There were still many streets in the Huangdao refugee camp that needed to be cleaned up, and more were popping up.

And little by little.

Snow was falling from the sky.

\* \* \*

My freshman year at Temple.

Sometime during the second semester group mission.

The day I was immediately eliminated from the group mission and stood by.

When you're in an open-air bath with only one wall between you and Ellen, who was equally eliminated on the first night.

Ellen asked.

Do you like snow.

To be honest, I didn't think about snow. Or, more accurately, I didn't have time to think about it.

But I dared to step into the snowy open-air bath.

Because there's no reason to.

So, at that point, I replied that I think I like snow.

Yes.

I don't have an appreciation for snow, but as it turns out, I think I like it.

I'm alone in Ellen's room, in the Class A dorm, without Ellen and Heinrich.

Perched on the window sill, I stare out the snowy window.

There are many types of snow.

There's sleet, there's sleet, there's sleet, there's sleet, and there's a blizzard that Riana can summon.

Clearly, I liked the snow.

I loved the snow that fell with Ellen, and Harriet and Ellen. I also have fond memories of building a snowman with them.

If it's snow, hammock snow.

I loved the snow that fell until it covered the world.

I look from inside the window at the snow falling outside the window.

It is painful just to imagine the lives that the falling snow will swallow.

The snow falling now is flurries.

I didn't like that kind of snow because it didn't feel like snow, it felt lonely, like it was just a type of wind.

Because snow that doesn't pile up isn't snow.

That's what I thought.

But I'm glad it's just a light dusting of snow.

If it was piling up, if it was pouring, there would be just as many people suffering as if it was falling.

May this snow not pile up.

May it snow, and may it not be a blizzard.

I stare blankly out the window at the snowy sky.

Let's call Riana.

and ask him to stop the eye of the zodiac.

Not to kill monsters, but to save people.

But the harder you work, the sicker he gets, and if you ask him to keep you warm through the winter of the ecliptic, he'll do just that.

Now that we've melted the snow, we should also make sure that people don't suffer from the cold.

It will be at least three months from now before winter is fully over.

If she had to exert herself for three whole months, she'd be crazy by the time winter came around.

Riana's power is for war. It must be conserved.

It's a war to save someone's life, but you have to turn a blind eye to someone dying for it.

It's snowing.

The snowflakes were getting thicker and thicker.

Now, I hate snow.

\* \* \*

The snow soon turned into hammock snow and began to fall across the ecliptic.

The good news is that it wasn't accompanied by a strong winter wind.

"It's snowing quite a bit."

"That's a big deal."

Ludwig and Rowen sighed as they realized that the plague progress in Sector 38, which they had just cleared yesterday, was completely over.

It was snowing hard, and both Rowen and Ludwig were covered in white on the shoulders and hoods of their robes.

On the streets, most people huddled in the cold snow.

Rowen's complexion worsened as he looked at the shack, which didn't even provide adequate protection from the wind.

"I don't know if it's moderate or not......."

"There are a lot of people who can't stand the cold, right?"

At Ludwig's concerned question, Rowen shook his head as if that wasn't the problem.

"When it snows a lot, it's not the cold, it's the shacks that collapse, and that happened a lot last winter."

More people were crushed to death by collapsed shacks, and Lowen said the danger was not the cold caused by the snow, but the snow itself.

The harshness of nature.

Ludwig resented the gradual accumulation of snow, but he didn't know where to direct that resentment.

They walk toward their next destination.

Most of the refugees were looking up at the sky in frustration, while some of the children were simply running in the snow.

You like it because you don't know what you're looking at, Ludwig thinks as he watches.

"Before the world was like this, did you like snow?"

It was an unnecessary question now, when the snow looked like the mark of death. Ludwig stared blankly at the hammering snow falling from the sky.

"......I don't know."

I don't even remember if I liked or disliked the snow.

After Gate, it seemed like everything that came before it had been erased.

I didn't even remember it anymore, like it had become something that was pointless to have or not have.

It was as if the misery and despair was so great that it had consumed him. It was overwhelming just to think about what could be done.

Ludwig suddenly wondered if Rowen was still capable of thinking about such things.

"I, uh, liked it."

Rowen looks up at the sky and remains still.

"Lucepena, the kingdom I was in, was in the north of the continent, and half the year was winter, so it was very easy to see snow."

In a place where half the year is winter, it was hard for Ludwig to fathom what such a place would be like.

"Doesn't that make you hate snow......?"

When you see snow so often that you're sick of it, you're supposed to hate it, because it's actually a sign of cold, just like people are afraid of snow now.

"Well, just because it's common doesn't mean you shouldn't like it, right?"

"......I see."

"Lucepena was a winter country, and Cielan was high up in the mountains, so it was cold, there was a lot of snow, and I was born there."

Rowen's eyes turned to look very far away, as if he were contemplating his now-defunct home.

"I've had snowball fights with my friends, built snowmen, touched the snow until my hands froze to death, gotten frostbite, been scolded by priests, and lost count of the number of times I've been healed."

Recalling his childhood, Rowen smiled wistfully.

I touched my eyes until I got frostbite.

"Even after I was ordained a priest, there were quite a few times when I got into a snowball fight with monastery children and got scolded for my lack of stamina, and when I made a statue of a goddess out of snow, I was scolded by the bishop who told me not to make such things."

Rowen looked quite amused as he spoke.

"Not that I've really had to since I was elevated to bishop, but... well....... Yeah, Lucepena was a cold country, but it didn't matter, and Cielan was a particularly cold city, but it didn't matter, because the Empire was huge, and there were a lot of tourists coming to Cielan, the Land of Snow, thanks to the Warp Gate, and it was pretty scenic."

"That was the case until just three years ago."

"Even if it's freezing cold, even if it's snowing hard, even if you live in the most inhospitable place."

"Humans could live anywhere."

"I didn't know it then, but I think three years ago was the last golden age of humanity."

"That day may never come, maybe never come again."

When all you had to do was look for beauty in the eye.

It was only three years ago that humanity could live anywhere, when supply chains called warp gates connected every continent.

But now that everything has been destroyed, the past has become a lie.

"Now mankind must be afraid at the slightest chill, and the slightest snowfall from the sky keeps many sleepless at night."

A smaller humanity is threatened by the smallest things.

I never had to worry about heavy snowfall in my big, sturdy house, but now I live in a shack that collapses at the slightest hint of snow.

The shack doesn't even have a fireplace, and the winter winds aren't much better.

The golden age is over, and humanity has much to fear.

"Ludwig."

Rowen looks at Ludwig.

"Don't you like snow?"

At that, Ludwig gives a small, nervous nod.

"Yeah....... I think so."

At that, Rowen smiled sadly.

"Now I do."

They walk down the street.

Snow was slowly accumulating on the roofs of the shacks in the refugee camp on a cozy snowy day.

\* \* \*

Lowen and Ludwig headed to the next sector, sector 42.

The snow had begun to accumulate, and I could hear it crunching underfoot.

After reporting to the guards in Sector 42, they headed to the plague outbreak area of the sector.

As he had done all along, Rowen walked the streets praying.

It wasn't often that Ludwig had to step up to the plate, so much so that he wondered if Rowen even needed him.

Of course, every time Ludwig said that, Rowen said that Ludwig was doing a good enough job of making him feel safe.

In the refugee camps, he has to watch out for robberies rather than attacks motivated by hatred of priests. For one thing, people don't even know Rowen is a priest.

Ludwig looked around, just in case, but saw nothing unusual. It was snowing and people were holed up in their shacks.

About three hours later, the snow was up to my ankles.

-pull!

There was a commotion in one corner of the refugee camp.

Both Rowen, who was praying, and Ludwig, who was assessing the situation, could not help but glance in that direction.

-Aigo! Aigo, help us! We are....... We're just.......

When Ludwig saw the people being dragged out of the shacks and the unknown jewelry around their necks and arms, he knew what it was.

Not unlike what we saw last time, wooden idols are dragged out into the street and trampled underfoot by guards.

-I've warned you before, if you bring this idol in here again, I'll burn it.

The five guards stare at the men, who, for the umpteenth time, are dumped on the ground.

Ludwig could only stare at Rowen in disbelief.

Rowen approaches the scene with a determined look on his face. Toward the guards, who look like they're about to spear the heretics to death.

"Wait, who is it?"

The guards pointed their spears at Rowen and Ludwig, as if to say don't come any closer.

"This is Rowen, the priest sent to do the cleanup, and he's my bodyguard, and he's been cleared by the 42nd Guard."

"Oh, you must be a priest, excuse me."

The guards lowered their weapons and nodded in acknowledgment as Rowen drew the holy symbol from his holster.

"May I ask what's going on?"

"Oh, that....... that......."

Rowen's tone was neither aggressive nor threatening.

But the guard sensed an unspoken pressure in Rowen's calm smile.

It was the same for Ludwig.

As if she were wearing a mask, Rowen's smile now was far too kind and gentle for this situation.

"Are they pagans?"

"Yeah....... Yeah, but they're probably the ones who don't know what they're praying for......."

Perhaps not as harsh as Ludwig's gunner, Sonntein, who had just been berating the infidels, the guard in charge seemed to defend those who had been dragged away when the priest appeared.

Rowen looks at the people lying face down in the snowy streets.

She stays still, staring at the shack they've been dragged out of.

"Do you mind if I come in?"

"Yes? Yes! Uh, feel free to......."

"Mr. Ludwig."

Rowen gestured to Ludwig, who was frozen in time.

As in follow me.

"You're welcome to join us."

Rowen said as he turned to the prone men.

Despite being technically the responsibility of the guards.

Rowen said, as if commanding.

\* \* \*

A shack in an epidemic zone.

There were five of them praying.

There was an adult man, two elderly people, and two women.

Inside the shack, where he could barely stand upright, Rowen looked around, including at the behemoth inside the shack.

As if looking for something.

"Hmmm......."

In the eerie silence, Rowen was lost in thought, not talking to anyone, looking at something, scratching his head, staring at some giant, thinking for a long time.

After some time, Rowen picked up a small wooden idol lying in the center of the shack.

It was a piece of wood that looked like it had been molded into a human form.

"What were you praying about?"

Rowen, holding the idol, looked at them, trembling, and asked, "What is it?

No matter how much the priests are hated, they are only as powerful as their civilian numbers.

When the power of the authorities prevails, their hate or hatred has no power yet.

The old man shudders at Rowen's gentle question.

"That, that....... I hope the pandemic is over and everything works out for you......."

"Against this wooden doll?"

"......."

"What is this wooden doll?"

Rowen asks the old man.

"I'm asking you, is this your god? How is this wooden doll going to solve the plague?"

Rowen seemed genuinely curious.

The warmth of the question, mixed with the warmth of his smile, had struck fear into the hearts of everyone, even Ludwig.

"I really don't know, how does this wooden doll get to......."

-pot!

There is a small golden glow in Rowen's right hand.

"You believe you can perform these miracles, why on earth would you?"

For an instant, the golden glow from its radiance washed away the cold, and I felt the weakness in my body dissipate, and a sense of vitality fill my body.

Prayers to unidentified idols.

A real miracle of healing and purification.

Rowen looks at the pagans as if he doesn't understand the gap.

"I'm asking you, what is this wooden puppet, what does it represent, what do you believe, what are you trying to do?"

It's all very nice, but everyone is afraid.

The old man rambled on, unable to answer, but someone else spoke up.

"Yo....... 용사님......."

"......?"

"Hey, warrior....... for you."

The trembling young woman's words hardened Ludwig's expression as well as Rowen's.

A wooden idol that seems to mimic a human form.

He says it's an imitation of the warrior, Ellen Artorius.

"The warrior....... will save us all......."

At the young woman's trembling words, a stoic Rowen nods slowly.

"Oh....... I see."

Rowen stares at the wooden idol in silence.

Ludwig had an ominous premonition that something abysmal was stirring in Rowen's eyes.

However, after a few moments of silence.

Rowen gently set the wooden idol he was carrying down in the center of the room.

"That's right, a warrior is coming to save us all."

There are a lot of heresies out there.

However, martial religion could not be treated as a heresy.

"But why don't we sharpen it up so it won't be misunderstood in the future? It's a sculpture of a great warrior."

Rowen looks at the trembling cultists and smirks.

"Rumor has it that you're very, very beautiful."

Rowen quietly left the shack.