

THE SIMULACRUM

A KNOT OF PLOTS



EGATHENTALE

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THE SIMULACRUM › BOOK 3

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CHAPTER 1

PART 1

I had to admit, the nightscape of the town of Timaeus certainly had its charm. The public park, in particular, was especially scenic due to the combination of moonlight and the evenly placed streetlights illuminating the meandering walkways under the autumn leaves, with the cobbling giving them that extra layer of old-world class. I would even go as far as to call the environment romantic in a quiet, introspective sense of the word, so I immediately made a mental note about taking Judy and Elly out for a stroll here once things had calmed down a tad bit.

The park also felt distinctly different from the last time I'd been here, which I believe was around the time I had my first proper meeting with Snowy. If I had to pinpoint exactly why, I'd say it was probably because now there were other people around the area. All of them were placeholders, naturally, but they were of the partially developed, more animated variety, and their mere presence made strolling through the park feel more natural. It also helped that the simulation or whatever apparently didn't get far enough to present things like homeless, drunk, or otherwise shady people on the benches, which had naturally forestalled any and all awkward situations involving them.

I'm going to be honest here: this line of thought made me feel a little depressed. Not because I really wanted to see homeless people around, but because the slow and steady development of the placeholders around the city was prime research material, but I simply didn't have the time and energy to do work on it because I had way too many things on my plate already.

Let's just put the fact that I lived in a dazzlingly artificial world running on fiction tropes aside for a moment, and just focus on the more tangible threats and complications surrounding me. First and foremost, I still had to make sure my unwitting harem protagonist friend was up to speed and able to deal with all the supernatural shenanigans the world was throwing at me in the form of the various secretive magical folks in general and a freaking mad scientist using *sentai* tactics in particular. On top of that, there were tiny little shape-shifting monsters scurrying around the city, the big boss arch-mage of the island was probably responsible for both those and the flamboyant mad scientist harassing us, and on top of that, I was more or less forced to accompany a crazy Japanese huntress and her even crazier sentient sword on hunting trips around the more scenic parts of Timaeus.

Any one of these would've been an absolute headache by itself, but when combined, they ate up all my attention and forced me to put my long-term goal of understanding the world and its mechanics on indefinite hold, which was something even my usually adamant assistant/girlfriend agreed with.

Speaking of Judy, I pulled the scarf she insisted I wear a bit tighter around my neck, and glanced around while waiting for the return of my wayward companion for the evening. She disappeared about five minutes ago, not long after saying something about how she needed to investigate a thing, and even with the extra layers and the scarf, I was getting just a little bit chilly and... Oh, who am I kidding? I was still a little feverish to begin with, so standing around in the open like this made me feel like my family jewels were about to freeze off. My dear girlfriend even forced me to wear a thicker coat *over* my usual coat, and yet I still felt cold. Nice scenery or not, I would've much rather stayed at home and under about four blankets at the moment.

Unfortunately, that would've required me to have a say in the matter, which I obviously didn't have. Judy wasn't particularly happy about it, but it was either this, or risking a certain infuriating huntress invading my house again.

Speak of the devil, just as I looked around one more time, I finally found Rinne in the distance. She was walking towards me at a brisk pace,

and as I took a closer look, I couldn't decide whether I should laugh or cry. I kept internally debating the issue until she got within earshot, and by that point, both the laugh and the cry party came to a compromise in the form of a tired sigh.

"You know, I can't decide what I find weirder: the fact that you would want to drink frozen slush in this weather, or that you've actually found someone selling them at this time of the day."

The aggravating huntress, clad in her usual purple pantsuit and carrying her wrapped-up sword on her back, gave me an odd look as if what I'd just said made no sense whatsoever, and then she took a large gulp out of her slushy before replying with, "Your comment is incomprehensible. When else would you consume cold beverages? It's for—"

"Tempering the body and spirit, yes, yes, I've heard already." I cut her off and pocketed my gloved hands.

Rinne took note of my action, and after another bite, she began to honest-to-goodness lecture me.

"It's because your body lacks tempering that you suffer from feverous conditions. Your yang must be out of balance. You must temper your constitution and..." She didn't finish her sentence; instead her words slowly trailed off into silence before she abruptly nodded to herself and added, "Onikiri wonders if you're currently attempting to mimic weakness to exploit our generosity in an attempt to deceive us into handing our tempering material over to you." The moment after she said that, the frustrating huntress pulled back the hand holding the paper cup while simultaneously covering it up with the other. "We must inform you that, regardless of your response, our answer is no."

"I don't want your slushy," I told her with my inner Judy once again bubbling to the surface.

The slightly-less-creepy-but-still-pretty-annoying huntress narrowed her eyes at my comment, and after no doubt listening to whatever her considerably more infuriating sword was spouting, she stated, "Onikiri wonders just how wide in girth your cranium must be for you to deny yourself even the chance to receive our tempering material."

I immediately rolled my eyes in exasperation and responded by telling her, “Tell your stupid sword to make up her mind.”

“Onikiri says—”

“I don’t care.” I nipped the argument in the bud and sharply pointed down the walkway. “How about we just get on with today’s patrol already?”

My unwelcome companion spaced out for a moment, but at last she gave me a nod, yet not before telling me, “Onikiri requests that you consume excrement.”

“Tell her that I don’t listen to oversized kitchen utensils with delusions of grandeur,” I responded while pocketing my hands again and began walking.

Rinne was rooted to the spot for a moment, but then she hurriedly followed after me while expressing, “We do not exactly understand what Onikiri is trying to make us tell you, but instead we want you to acknowledge that we are not required to convey your messages, as Onikiri is perfectly capable of understanding you.”

“I know. I just refuse to talk to her on principle,” I told her offhandedly as we continued our leisurely lap around the park.

“Onikiri wants you to know that you are a useless person, you are out of rhythm, and that you are really mean.”

“Says the sword that would make sailors blush with her constant swearing. Speaking of which, ask her if one of her ancestors was a cutlass.”

“Onikiri says that your jokes are not as witty as you think they are.”

“... Ouch. That is the closest your sword has come to actually hurting my feelings.”

“Onikiri says Onikiri is glad to hear that.”

I shrugged my shoulders in a defiant display of indifference, and for a short while we continued our patrol in silence, save for the occasional slurping sounds my erratic companion made while she was steadily devouring her slush. That said, while I certainly didn’t want her frozen treat, it didn’t mean I couldn’t use a drink, so when we reached a familiar corner of the park I gestured for her to follow after me.

“Did you find our prey?”

I tried to ignore the way her eyes sparkled at the mere mention of the possibility and shook my head.

“No, I just remembered that there’s a vending machine around here somewhere, and I want a warm drink.”

“Irresponsible consumption of yang energy like this only exacerbates your weakened condition.”

“... Sometimes I really can’t put my finger on your vocabulary,” I mumbled so low she probably couldn’t hear it. I ignored her continued nagging, and we quickly found a familiar coffee machine. I offered to buy her something as well, as basic courtesy dictated, but she naturally refused, so a disinterested grunt later I pressed one of the buttons, and very soon I had a fresh, warm cup of hot cocoa in my hands.

So, there we were: a young woman in a fairly thin pantsuit drinking a frozen slush with a straw right next to a tall, handsome, fit, intelligent, and criminally humble young man dressed as if he was on an expedition to the South Pole, with a warm cup in his hands. We must’ve looked quite a pair.

I wasn’t really in favor of just standing around in silence, though, so after some consideration, I decided to broach a subject that’d been on my mind for a while.

“Hey, Rinne?” The unpredictable swordswoman jolted in surprise and took a step away from me while grabbing onto her weapon with her free hand, so I had to amend my words with a pretty damn confused, “What?”

“We’ve already warned you against using our name so informally!”

“... Okay, then what should I be calling you other than your name?” I inquired with the utmost seriousness.

“We’ve told you: our name is Onikiri no Tsukaite Rinne. Our name is written as *gallant* and *mountain*!” She explained it as if what she said was entirely self-evident, although I had absolutely no idea what she was blabbering about.

“Soooo... What you are trying to say is that I should call you Mountain Girl?”

Mountain Girl responded to my query by giving me one of her typical “Am I having an aneurysm, or is this guy really this stupid?” looks and stated, “We don’t understand the question.”

“It’s not that hard though. You said I cannot call you by your name, you said your name means mountain, so I’m calling you Mountain Girl. Simple.”

“We’re not sure we like that.”

“Too bad, I’m using it,” I stated on the spot, and just to accentuate it, I also flashed the third iteration of my roguish smirk, which itself was a branch of my roguish smile line of expressions. It must’ve worked, because Rinne stopped squeezing the handle of Onikiri, and she was actually looking at me quite attentively. As such, I immediately moved on by saying, “Anyways, there’s one thing I’ve wanted to ask you for a while now: Where did you learn about the Chimera on the island?”

She became visibly crestfallen the moment she heard my question, making me wonder just what exactly she was expecting me to ask her. Probably something silly, like if she wanted to hunt leprechauns together. Nevertheless, after pointedly taking another large gulp out of the cup, she unreservedly told me, “Our clan received the news from a nameless source.”

“So it was an anonymous tip, huh?” I wondered without even trying to hide my suspicion. “And how about after you arrived here? Were you contacted by Amadeus?” Seeing her uncomprehending expression, I clarified by saying, “I mean the head of the Magi on the island.”

“Are you talking about the daimyo? For if you were, then no. If he were to call upon us, we would pay our respects, but our clan is not beholden to his authority.”

“Really? So you’ve never even met him?” She shook her head. “Then where did you learn about me?” This time she was just looking at me funny, so I stifled a groan and explained to her, “You obviously knew who I was the first time we met. Who told you about me?”

“Your image and the description of your deeds arrived from the same source as the news about the creature of the underworld prowling the streets of this once-peaceful city.”

“I think it’s still pretty peaceful, but that’s beside the point,” I rebuked her before falling silent for a while. Truth be told, I actually expected that Lord Grandpa might’ve been careless enough to make direct contact with her, but in retrospect, I might’ve overestimated his folly a little bit. After all,

if he really was behind it all, and he intended to hoist Rinne upon me for some reason or another, even a true idiot would make sure not to show his face like that. But then again...

"Hey, Mountain Girl?" Curiously enough, she actually responded to my call. "You said you got a picture of me?"

"Yes," she confirmed, and before I could even ask her to do it, she used her free hand to reach into the breast pocket of her suit and extracted a folded-up piece of paper.

"A moment."

After saying so, I quickly drank the last of my drink and threw the empty Styrofoam cup into a conveniently placed nearby trash bin before returning to her and taking the photo. I fully unfolded it, and after some squinting in the dim light, I had to conclude that it was indeed a mug shot of yours truly. As a matter of fact, it wasn't just any mug shot, but one I was really familiar with.

"Can I keep this? I mean, it's not like you need it to recognize me anymore, and I think I could find a use for it."

Rinne shrugged her right shoulder only, which I figured must've meant agreement, so I returned her gesture with a thankful nod and pocketed my first piece of evidence.

Since I'd finished my hot cocoa, it was about time we moved on, and when I did so, she quickly finished up the last of her drink and obediently fell in line next to me. For the next ten or so minutes, we continued our round around the park without much else to talk about, right until her head suddenly snapped to our left near one of the crossroads where the paved paths met.

"Is there a problem?"

Instead of just giving me a straight answer, she gestured for me to quiet down before she walked a few steps forward, only to come to a sudden halt less than two seconds later. Once she did so, my fickle companion dramatically looked around, kind of like one of those phony genius detectives when they were assembling the clues or reconstructing the crime scene in their heads in those late-afternoon crime dramas. It didn't last long,