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2.

Which brings you to the present. It's been months since the Siege. Nijisanji retains full control of the ruins of Cover City. Its forces and Talents have hunted down and defeated most remnants of Hololive opposition - the few Talents that remain uncaptured have fled deep into the southern mountains, holing up in the fortress-ruins of the city of INNK, and the broken remnants of the Hololive Fleet have turned away from the shoreline and disappeared into the deep sea.

You returned to Anycolor City not three days ago. A feast was held in your honor in which you kissed the ring of Princess Helesta herself, and an edict from Emperor Tazumi gave you the rank of Executor and granted you a vast manor estate in the outskirts of town.

An estate which you will need staff to manage, as the perfumed letter currently in your hands reminds you. They are unmistakable, the pink paper and loopy handwriting enjoining you to head to the Slave Market downtown for an 'unofficial reward' - and the scent! You've had that perfume against you so many times, and now that you smell it again you're driven forward like prey to a lure.

Since you received the letter early in the afternoon, and your newfound wealth makes it easy to just rent a carriage ride, you reach the Slave Market before the day's auction has even begun, your heart skipping a beat as you see it packed to the brim with people - hundreds have come, all eyes on the massive signs posted on the entrance to the auction hall, reading: "HOLOLIVE PRISONERS - LIVESTOCK SALE".

You feel a certain trepidation as you walk past the columned portico and into the vast hall proper. Slavery is a common practice in the Nijisanji Imperium, with captives of war often sold as property, and on paper this does not really phase you. In reality, neither you nor your family had the means or disposition to own slaves. And these slaves are special, products of the brutal war you fought against them, their chains laden both with the resentment of their defeat and the bitterness of the Nijisanji survivors who lost so much fighting them.

You push past the crowd, which parts as commoners and lesser Talents alike instantly recognize you and step aside. Looking up you see the auction stage - a raised plane surrounded by concentric half-circles that house rows of chained slaves, like some sort of inverted auditorium where the prisoners were the audience and the auctioneers and buyers the speakers. The slaves are sectioned off along the steps according to their value, with lesser slaves to be auctioned off first, and more expensive ones to be sold later on. Your eyes scan the crowd of prisoners - at the bottom, near the stage, are regular captured troops and civilians, but looking up your gaze feasts on a vision of female beauty. The Hololive Talents, or at least a good few of those you know were captured. You do not know all their names (and are glad not to, since fighting the best of them during the early years of the war would have been a death sentence), but some are so preceded by their reputation that you can recognize them by their

traits alone - the poisoner Matsuri, renowned for her cruelty. The Twin Fangs, Korone and Okayu, huddled together and glaring daggers at the audience. The shocking red hair of Kiara the Phoenix, who hangs her head, eyes glazed over, gaze firmly on the ground in an expression of utter despair.

You almost feel pity. Almost, but for the memory of Mori Calliope cutting through your friends like wheat for the harvest. You look away, but this makes you meet her gaze.

You've... never seen a woman like her. Fair-skinned rather than pale, but with luscious hair so white it's like looking into a snowstorm. She has no ears - no, she has ears! But on the top of her head, two pointed vulpine ears covered in white fur. Behind her flicks her fluffy white tail, which nobody apparently bothered to bind. A kitsune... you had no idea one was among the Hololive ranks. And her eyes - you find your own gaze locked onto her sad blue eyes, devoured by them even as she stands on the other side of the room. There's no anger in that lake of green and blue, no bitter despair... only pity at the cruelty that has taken place, and pity at the cruelty that will follow.

You tear your eyes away. Anger and shame bubble up in your chest. This bitch. How dare she pity you. Like these whores hadn't started the war, like they weren't responsible for the slaughter you had to participate in. And yet, those eyes...

You refuse the urge to look back at her, and instead scan the audience. Beyond the commoners and lesser Talents, it is a who's who of Nijisanji's greatest. Kanae himself is present, idly studying the proceedings from a corner with a placid, enigmatic smile. Suzuhara Lulu is in the thick of the crowd, the bat demon Debiru (a terrifying beast, you're told, though for all the world he looks to you like a cheap stuffed animal) riding on her shoulder - they both recognize you and wave at you from the other side of the hall. Further back you see one half of the Dragon Sisters, Elira Pendora, and her fast friend the mermaid Finana. The latter girl looks at the slaves with undisguised shock and pity, her lower lip quivering as though she might cry. But then Elira leans forward and whispers something into her ear. Whatever she says seems to change Finana's mind in an instant, and the younger girl's face twists into a look of bitter disgust and rage, her tiny fists clenching and unclenching. She looks away from the slaves and turns around, resting her head on Elira's shoulder.

The auction bell rings, distracting your attention from the moment. All the better - it felt like you were peeking on something intensely private.

You look back as the auctioneer takes the stage, suppressing a gasp at the shock of seeing blue skin. Whatever commoner is usually in charge here has been relieved, and in his place is Gilzaren III!

"What the hell..." you murmur, as the wooden floor of the stage creaks under the muscular weight of this mountain of a vampire. Gilzaren is renowned amongst Nijisanji Talents for being so elusive few commoners even know he exists, but of displaying extraordinary power when the

Imperium does call for him. Having him overseeing the proceedings is an implicit guarantee of security - one nearly as strong as the rune-covered collars binding the enslaved Hololive Talents.

"Ladies. Gentlemen," Gilzaren speaks, his gravelly voice booming across the hall, curt and to the point. "We will begin the proceedings immediately. The livestock will be sold to the highest bidder in order of value. Once the commoners and prisoners of war have been sold, we will take a small break. Then we shall return to auction the highest value slaves present - the Hololive Talents."

A roar of approval and applause issues from the crowd at this last statement, the audience delighting at the humiliation of their cruel, hated enemies. It's so loud you feel your ears pop.

"Enough!" The hall falls deathly silent at Gilzaren's admonishment, though he does not seem angry - an understated smirk plays on his lips. "I understand your enthusiasm. But we *will* follow procedure, and in an orderly fashion."

He turns and beckons somebody up onto the stage. As you see who it is, your heart skips a beat, and you take a deep breath, as though the same scent on the letter could travel from her all the way to you.

"The Imperium's Surgeon General, Sukoya Kana," Gilzaren states. "An invaluable help in these proceedings, and a personal sponsor in the sense of having defeated and captured some of the livestock present."

"Kana..." you murmur.

You first met Sukoya Kana during the third year of the war. Having just been recently assigned independent command of your own battalion, you were sent to the Nijisanji Imperium's eastern shoreline to guard resupply points from Hololive raids. You met Kana there - her troops had established a large field hospital in the area, and she tended to the sick and wounded day and night. Initially it was a shock to you to see such a powerful Talent voluntarily confining herself to a support role, but it took very little for you and your men to start admiring her as a bit of a guardian angel to your own wounded. Eventually, you found yourself seeking her out - first to talk about your duties, then just to talk, then sometimes merely to look at her... for she was nothing if not worth a look. *Everything* about her was pale, from her skin to her hair to her eyes to even her clothes, and her supple, delicate form captured your gaze and held it thoroughly, promising every delight you could come up with and more. Added to that her charm and intellect and it was a matter of weeks before she had you wrapped around her little finger - and she responded to your attraction not just with acceptance but with a burning, consuming lust that demanded, *needed* you rutting on top of her whenever you were free, your muscular frame crushing down on her doll-like body, your tan, scarred skin a contrasting painting to the perfect white of her flesh.

But then of course you'd been called forward. To the front, to the attack on Hololive's inner fortifications... and finally to the Siege. And you'd not seen Kana since. Well, until now. And she wrote the letter summoning you here...

Her gaze runs over the crowd and you feel her eyes on you, a small smile playing on her lips. Gilzaren mentioned a break after the first half of the auction... clearly Kana wants you to wait until then. But before -

"Ladies, gentlemen. Esteemed, victorious Talents. And the commoners, I suppose." She smirks dismissively at the murmurs from the crowd. "We are gathered this afternoon for a momentous occasion. The bean counters amongst you will call this the most important auction in history... they cannot see in front of their noses. This is so much more than that! This is an act of mercy and integrity! These bloodstained whores have finally been brought to justice." She gestures at the rows of chained slave girls. "And yet... they're not dead, are they? After all they did? After the murder and carnage they inflicted on us?"

The prisoners are deathly silent in spite of Kana's declaration, their slave collars imprisoning their voices and keeping them quiet.

"So yes! This is a triumph of mercy and civility. A victory for those who, like me, despise the sight of blood." Kana turns around on the center of the stage, facing the slaves with a smile, pearly teeth bared. "And we have been merciful, haven't we? While you depraved animals murder whoever is unlucky enough to face defeat at your hands, slavery has kept the Nijisanji Imperium's dignity intact-

"IT'S ALL A LIE!!"

It's a short, pale and slim girl with twin-tailed purple-ish hair who is causing the commotion, but where the noise comes from is almost as important - the upper tier of the slave lineup, one of the captured Hololive girls. A murmur of fear runs through the crowd of commoners, and any pretense of relaxation disappears from the Nijisanji Talents in the audience, yourself very much included.

"It's all a lie, it's all a lie," she keeps ranting - how she managed to talk through the slave collar you don't know, but it looks like her movements are still bound at least, and she struggles in futility. "It wasn't our fault, we didn't start the war! No one here was at Yumenographia, nobody! We didn't do it! I swear, I swear..." Her golden eyes widen like plates, a realization dawning on her. "You... you evil fucking monsters, I bet it was *you*, I bet it was an excuse, you just wanted an excuse to kill-ACKGH!"

Gilzaren makes to move, but he stands down with a sign from Kana, who weaves past the crowd of lesser slaves like flowing water. In an instant she's in front of the Hololive slave, her closed fist slamming into the smaller girl's abdomen in a brutal, augmented punch.

You suppress a flinch as the girl doubles over - for a split second it looks like Kana's fist might explode out of her back. The girl's golden eyes roll back into her head, and she collapses unconscious, limbs splayed out on the steps. The other Hololive girls look on in despair, prevented by their slave collars from so much as taking a step forward.

Kana shudders as she watches the girl hit the floor - a small spasm of her back muscles that perhaps only you, quite familiar with her, could notice. You know for a fact she abhors violence, so to do this means she must be eager to set an example.

"Tokoyami Towa. We'll make sure to discipline whoever was careless enough not to take a second look at your collar." So that's the girl's name. Kana turns back to the audience, and just like that her severe expression gives way to a girlish giggle. "But, and I do apologize for the interruption, this makes for a perfect opportunity to get to the point. All the slaves you see before you have been approved for sale by the most experienced inspectors of this hall. Given the importance of this particular auction, and my position as the realm's foremost medical officer, I was called in to reinforce these standards. You will all be very pleased to know I have personally documented the health of the captured Hololive Talents. Of those who are virgins, you will be glad to know it was *my* feminine touch that you can trust to have confirmed it." As she says this Kana brings one pale finger to her mouth and runs it briefly over her lips while the Hololive girls bound behind her glare murder at her svelte form.

Damn this lustful monster of a woman. You find yourself shifting a bit where you stand, jaw clenched. It would be, to put it mildly, awful form to pop an erection now.

Kana keeps on going. "Having established that the product passed inspection, what's left before the auction is to remind the audience of the laws that bind both buyer and livestock. Which is where I was going before this little tart ran her mouth." She nudges Towa's unconscious body with the tip of her shoe.

"For, you see," Kana continues, "it is these very laws that make slavery a merciful judgment compared to the weight of the Hololive Kingdom's war crimes. Livestock might be just that, but the Nijisanji Imperium recognizes that even murderous whores like these are still human."

She turns to the slaves, smiling broadly, like a mother telling her children that she bought them cake. "You will not be allowed to die, no matter how much you deserve it. The laws of slavery command that your masters might not kill you, cripple you, amputate your limbs, render you permanently sterile, or otherwise destroy you in the fashion I'm sure most present dearly believe you deserve. Do you understand that, slaves?"

The Hololive girls are silenced by their collars, so there's predictably no response. Kana shrugs and moves on. "Our benevolence runs deeper still. Your masters are obligated to feed you, clothe you, and pay after your health. You will even be paid a stipend of 100 gold crowns a month, which you are allowed to spend on what legal items you wish. Earn enough, and just like any other slave, you may yet be allowed to buy your freedom."

Some of the younger Holo girls have their eyes go wide at this statement - a minuscule but concrete scrap of hope. And also a cruel joke - the price of a slave's purchased freedom by law never goes lower than 100,000 gold crowns.

You bite your lower lip, again feeling an odd shame overtake you. Is this really necessary? Is this cruelty justified? And again, the rebound - indignant anger in your chest. Why the hell are you feeling *any* empathy for these sluts? Those girls whose troops you did not personally fight in the carnage would have been just as willing to kill you. Hell, they had been as willing to others not so lucky - Korone of the Twin Fangs was famous for brutally killing anybody dumb enough to try to surrender to her, and the Phoenix Kiara had been a blight throughout the war, using her power of flames as a sort of nightmare artillery that could torch villages whole. These women were just as, no, *far more* willing to kill you than you'd ever been to kill them. They don't deserve your pity, so why...?

You find your gaze scanning the rows of slaves again, looking, against your own will, for the white-haired fox girl. Her expression remains the same as always - a look of melancholy, serene acceptance utterly incongruous with her predicament. She keeps her eyes fixed on Kana, whose voice grabs your attention once more.

"I entrust that both the livestock and our esteemed audience understand these terms, and understand as well that no matter wealth or social standing, any master that fails to fulfill these stated duties will be prosecuted as the criminal he is." She smiles at the Hololive slaves - that girly, innocent smile that completely charmed you before. All teeth. "Carve our mercy into your minds, whores. You really don't deserve it."

She keeps going. "In exchange for the enforcement of these rules, masters of acquired livestock can expect full and absolute obedience, in body and mind, at all times, from the slaves that they own, enforced by the slave collars if so required. Should a slave prove unruly, do not hesitate to punish your property as you see fit, within the rules. And of course, the slaves should be aware that their stay of execution holds one exception - the punishment for trying to escape slavery is death by crucifixion!"

A roar of applause shakes the hall once more at Kana's warning, and again does not die down until Gilzaren commands the audience to settle down. The vampiric giant takes the center of the stage once more, addressing the buyers. "We have had the honor to hear the Surgeon General state our laws. Let the auction begin!"

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