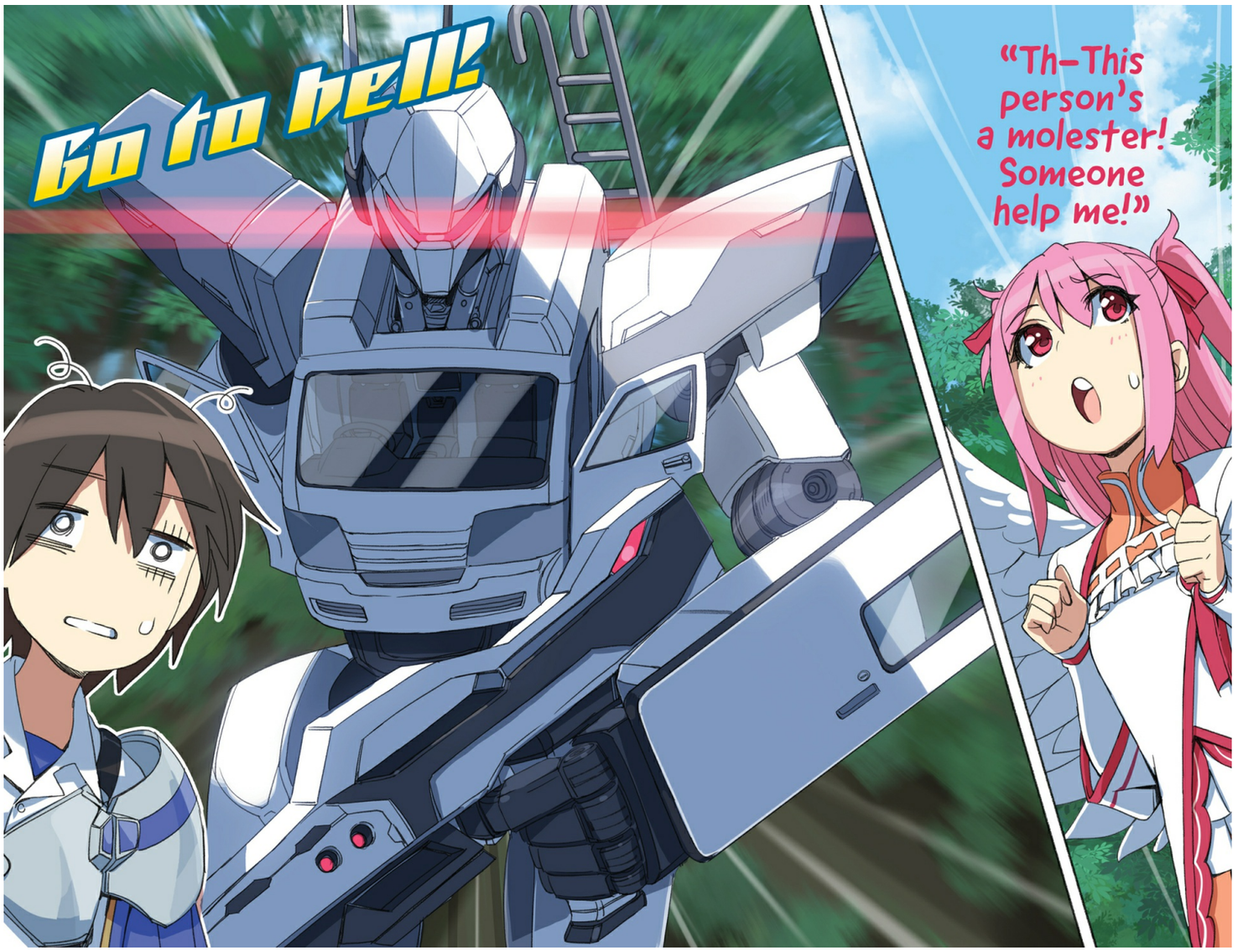

Author
Firehead
Illustrator
YahaKo
5
A Wild
Last Boss
Appeared!


It's been a while, Lufas Maphaahl.
A Wild Last Boss Appeared!
Illustrator: YahaKo




Go to hell!
"Th-This person's a molester! Someone help me!"


GO, ARIES!

Character Introduction



Karkinos the Crab
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve Lufas. He is a king crab who boasts the highest defense among all the Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Scorpius the Scorpion
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas. She is an Emperor Berserk Scorpion and a poison specialist.



Castor the Gemini
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas. He is the older brother of the pair who serve under the Gemini star.



Sagittarius the Archer
One of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas. He is working with the traitor, Leon the Lion, but his true intentions are unknown.

Virgo the "Maiden"
A heaven-winged girl who succeeded the position of one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars from her predecessor.

Minamijuuji Sei
A Hero who was summoned from modern Japan. He is a completely normal teen, except for the fact that he is very earnest and has a strong sense of justice.

In disguise

Me ♂
The person who created and played as Lufas Maphaahl in the MMO Exgate Online. After being told by the Goddess of Creation, Alovenus, "I will give you a new role," he was immediately whisked away to the game world, possessing his character's body.

Lufas Maphaahl
Once on the cusp of world domination and feared as the "Black-Winged Conqueror." Sealed for 200 years, she's now on a journey to meet her old friends, the Seven Heroes, as well as her old followers, the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars.



Aigokeros
The Goat of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas.



Libra
The Scales of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas.



Aries
The Ram of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars who serve under Lufas.



Dina
A beautiful girl who travels with Lufas as her advisor.

characters they have met:

Mercurius



One of the Seven Luminaries, who serve the Devil King.

Petto



A knight captain from the country of beastfolk, Draupnir.

STORY RECAP:

Having possessed my in-game character Lufas Maphaahl, I went on a journey with my advisor Dina and the Twelve Heavenly Stars. Our destination: Draupnir, the country of beastfolk.

There, I found they were holding a "hunting festival," which always gathered many different races wanting to test their mettle. Hoping it would bolster her confidence, I had Virgo the "Maiden" enter the festival, which she won handily.

The next day, Draupnir's emperor called upon her and the others who ranked highly in the festival. When they had all gathered, he announced his request: "I would like for you all to retrieve an elixir for me." Even though elixirs were legendary cure-alls that had been lost 200 years ago, the emperor claimed that one had been preserved.

However, one of the devilfolk overheard the emperor, turning the request into a race against the devilfolk. Both Virgo and Sei gave it their all, but in the end, they were cornered by their adversary's overwhelming power. Sei retreated when he proved no match for the devilfolk, and happened upon me through sheer luck.

Despite being feared throughout Mizgarz as the Black-Winged Conqueror, Sei believed I could be reasoned with and thus proposed an alliance. To Sei's surprise, I agreed without a second thought, and with my help they somehow managed to beat back the devilfolk.



1

The thing about trouble was that when there was none, there was *actually* none and you were drowning in boredom for ages. When trouble finally happened, it happened over and over in rapid succession, almost like it had a will of its own.

We'd only visited Draupnir to give Virgo a place to test her strength, but we'd also reunited with the hero's party, fought with Mercurius—one of the devilfolk's Seven Luminaries—and reunited with Sagittarius. It'd been a true free-for-all of trouble. With that over, a bunch of demihumans, species that were just shy of being considered human, had shown themselves and revealed that they were backed by the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, Leon the Lion...

Why does it all happen at once like this? It'd be so nice if all this stuff would form a line and come one at a time...

At any rate, I couldn't leave this alone. If I did, a huge war would start between humans and demihumans. In order to prevent that, as well as retrieve Leon and Sagittarius, we split up into two groups.

First up, there was the hero's party along with Castor and Virgo. They were going to the centaurs' village. Leon and Sagittarius were currently cooperating, but unlike the muscle-brained Leon, Sagittarius should have been the prudent and discreet type. Thus, it was hard to believe that he would follow Leon for no reason, so Castor and the others were heading out to find out why this was the case.

Meanwhile, the rest of us would be heading to the far northern point of humanity's territory, which was also its most dangerous area. There were three reasons why it was so dangerous. The first was because of the terrain. There was nothing there, so the location was simply dreadful. Humanity had almost had all of its land taken by the devilfolk, and they had been forced to live on just a small fraction of the continent. The northern part of humanity's sphere was closest to the devilfolk's territories.

However, the devilfolk still had not invaded this territory. Rather, they couldn't. That was because of the second reason. The north was closest to the devilfolk's territories, but it was also home to the kingdom of the strongest of the seven races of humanity—the vampires. Yes, it was where Mjolnir, led by the Vampire Princess Benetnasch, was. Even the devilfolk had to be cautious of Benetnasch. Apparently she'd leave anybody who just passed through her territory alone, but any army that foolishly invaded would be trampled by Benetnasch and her army instead. In other words, the reason why humanity's sphere of influence had remained the same for so long was because the devilfolk's worst enemy was in the worst possible spot.

"Benetnasch is there," Dina said.

Just that fact caused a two-hundred-year-long stalemate. Well, at least that was what Dina had taught me.

"Oh? So she really is doing something for humanity after all," I said, praising Benetnasch's efforts.

Dina smiled wryly. "I'd bet that it's unintentional, though. In fact, I bet from her perspective it's like her two neighbors started a war between themselves even though she hadn't moved a muscle," she said, shooting me down.

Benetnasch herself had never given any thought to what would benefit humanity. She just happened to be in a good spot, so the rest of humanity used her as a shield, and the devilfolk stopped on their own out of fear. That still meant that her just being there was a deterrent; and that was still something.

"The devilfolk did actually try to invade her once to expand their territories, though the result was a disaster."

"Oh? We'd like to hear about that."

Dina paused. "So many were lost to Benetnasch alone in a single night. There were the seven devilfolk leaders who could be said to have been the predecessors of the Seven Luminaries, who were around level 600. Also, there were thirty-six elites of level 500 or so, as well as two hundred devilfolk who equaled the current Seven Luminaries at level 300. Lastly, there were a thousand small fry. And if you count her subordinate vampires' efforts, you can probably double the casualty list."

For a moment, I remained in shocked silence. *Oh my god. How dangerous is Benetnasch?!* I almost shouted that out loud but somehow managed to stop myself. Being able to stop knee-jerk reactions like that was one of the good points about Lufas's body. While I still wasn't able to do anything about her manner of speech, I was thankful for the ability to control strange outbursts like that.

"We see. That certainly sounds like a deterrent. But the Devil King did nothing about it?"

"It seems as if they've had some skirmishes, but for some reason, neither of them have fought all-out yet. I don't think either of them has felt like it."

After hearing what Dina had to say, I once again had to hold back the desire to clutch at my head over how troublesome Benetnasch would be to deal with. I could kinda get why the two of them decided to hold back. They probably sensed that neither side would get off easy if they didn't. Neither of their goals lay in defeating the other, so there was no reason to commit themselves to a fight that could end in death.

From the Devil King's perspective, Benetnasch was a pain for sure, but her fundamental stance was one of disinterest. In other words, Benetnasch and Mjolnir were almost completely harmless as long as they were ignored. There was no reason to go out of their way to fight them. To Benetnasch, the Devil King was probably an eyesore, but that was it. While she was probably more than willing to destroy them if they came at her, she likewise didn't really care if they didn't. Her thought process was probably something like, "If you small fry want to pass by me and squish each other, do as you please." As a result, both parties had decided that this wasn't a fight worth starting, and thus, they had parted ways after some light jabs. At least, that was what I imagined had happened.

The worst part about this was that Benetnasch most likely wouldn't do the same for me. Once she locked on to me, she probably wouldn't stop until one of us was dead. There was no one more reassuring as a friend but also no one scarier as an enemy.

"And the third reason?"

“Yes, that would be the existence of monsters... Rather, the demihuman union, Tyrving. It’s led by Leon, the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, and consists mainly of centaurs, merfolk, bug people, plant people, snake people, and giants. In pure numbers, it surpasses Mjolnir.”

“Ones who haven’t been counted as human, huh...?”

To be honest, I wasn’t too enthusiastic about fighting them. After all, I considered them victims. They were excluded from humanity just because of the size or shape of their bodies. That alone caused them to be aligned with monsters and deemed occasional targets for extermination.

Of course, I couldn’t just blame all the people who’d decided on the definitions of humanity. They probably had their own reasons. For example, they might have calculated the amount of casualties that would occur if the demihumans and humans tried to coexist and decided to cut them off. That was a totally separate issue to whether the ones deemed as monsters would understand, though, and because they didn’t, we now had this current situation.

Also, as an aside, orcs didn’t count. Sure, it was a little sad, but they’d brought that upon themselves.

“Now then, our goal this time lies with Leon and the monsters—no, let’s call them demihumans. We need to stop them, but the troublesome thing is that Mjolnir is so close by. There’ll be no problem if Benet doesn’t notice us, but...”

All would be fine if Benetnasch didn’t notice us, but Aigokeros quickly destroyed that faint hope of mine.

“There’s no doubt she’ll notice. Vampires are the closest to us demons. The aura of mana that you give off would be impossible for them to miss, Miss Lufas.”

Apparently I put out an aura of mana that only someone like them could notice. *I’m a heaven-winged, though. At least I kind of am... I should be the farthest race from mana. I wonder why this happened?*

I was sunk into my own thoughts when something banged onto the roof. Libra immediately reacted, opening the window and climbing up top. *Is something*

going on? I decided to quickly stop Tanaka and go outside.

That was when I saw a beautiful, silver-haired girl sitting on Tanaka's roof...

"Benetnasch!" Aries shouted, shocked. He wreathed his hand in fire and glared at the girl sitting on the roof.

The rest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars all readied themselves for battle along with Aries, but the girl didn't move at all. Smiling calmly, her gaze was wholly concentrated on me.

I see... So she's Benetnasch.

I didn't remember her face, but it was definitely in our memories. She hadn't changed at all in two hundred years. Not her snow-white skin nor her blood-red eyes. Her flowing silver hair reflected the moonlight, and her face was almost too well-proportioned. Physically, she looked to be around fourteen. That was younger than I had expected. She had on something reminiscent of a white, long-sleeved blouse and a black skirt. On top of that, she wore a black coat over her shoulders, not making use of the sleeves.

On the surface, she seemed like an adorable girl. But I understood. She was the Vampire Princess. She was Benetnasch.

"It's been a while, Lufas Maphaahl." She thought silently for a moment. "Two hundred years and four months, I'd say? I already knew you were alive and well, but seeing you in person like this really brings it home. I'm happy to see you."

I paused before responding. "We see you haven't changed a bit. You still look exactly as We remember you."

"Of course I would. Time has been stopped for me ever since that day. Even if I wanted to change, I couldn't."

Benetnasch laughed amicably, seemingly happy at our reunion. That was probably how she really felt. She was truly happy to be reunited with me, but her eyes weren't laughing and they never wavered. They were locked on to me like a beast watching its prey.

Seeing an opening, Libra threw out a knife-hand strike. But without missing a beat, Benetnasch grabbed Libra's arm, gripping it with a strength no one would

expect from that small frame.

Libra was shocked.

“I’d stop that, doll. I’m rarely this happy. If you don’t do anything, I’ll let you go. But if you’re going to interrupt my reunion with Maphaahl here, I can’t say what I’ll do to you.” With that, Benetnasch eased her grip on Libra’s arm as she threw her back towards us.

Libra managed to land with a light step, but she was definitely damaged. When I looked closer, I saw her wrist was cracked. That alone told me more than I wanted to know about how strong the Vampire Princess was.

“That goes for all of you, Twelve Stars. I understand that you’re all fairly skilled, but you’re still just Maphaahl’s pets in the end. You’re no match for me. If you don’t want to die, just sit and tremble in some corner.”

“Oh ho...! You sure can talk, can’t you, pipsqueak!”

Scorpius jumped forward, cutting off Benetnasch as she jeered at them. Aigokeros also came at her after going around to the opposite side, and the both of them launched a full-on attack at the same time. But Benetnasch disappeared for an instant, and the two of them were sent flying.

Magic? No, it wasn’t. She’s just insanely fast.

With speed beggaring the imagination, she dodged both their attacks and replied in kind. Put into words, it was incredibly simple, but... *This is bad. Her speed is no joke.*

I watched quietly for a moment. *This is the first time I’ve lost sight of someone’s movements ever since I found myself in this body.*

Even from a third-person perspective, I could only barely tell that they’d been counterattacked. The two of them probably didn’t even realize what had happened.

Outraged, Scorpius was silent for a moment before saying, “Such a disgrace! And in front of Lady Lufas...! I won’t forgive you... You’re dead...!”

“Don’t think we’ll allow you to return alive after that.”

Enraged, both Scorpius and Aigokeros were about to show their true forms.

Before they could transform, I signaled with my hand to stop them. Their loss hadn't been decided yet, but they probably wouldn't get off scot-free if they actually tried to fight Benetnasch. Even if they won, either one or both of them would most likely die. I couldn't let them continue.

"Get back, you two. Stop responding to her taunts."

After shutting Scorpius and Aigokeros up, I once again turned to face Benetnasch. Even now, her gaze was glued onto me. She wasn't even paying attention to Scorpius and Aigokeros. They literally didn't even register to her.

"A wise decision. If you allowed them to fight, your cute pets would have just died. You're the only one who can fight me."

"You sure can talk. So Leon is nothing to you?"

"Oh, him? Let's see... I'll admit that he'd be a hard opponent. It'd be difficult to defeat him. But since the outcome is already decided, it couldn't be called a fight. It'd be difficult, but that's it. That thing wouldn't be able to defeat me."

Benetnasch wasn't bluffing; she was simply speaking as if that were obvious to everyone. She'd admitted it would be difficult and that she'd have a hard time of it. But there was not a shred of doubt in her mind that she would come out on top. Both her speech and mannerisms said that she was fully confident in her victory. As for whether that was arrogance or rock-solid confidence backed by true ability...

"This is just my opinion, but a fight is only called a "fight" because the outcome is unclear. I'm only fighting if the enemy is strong enough to make defeat a real possibility, and there's no one better for that than you. You should be proud, Maphaahl. You're the only one whom I can challenge," Benetnasch said before throwing a piece of paper at me.

I caught it, and it turned out to be... *An invitation?* There was a detailed map on it, too, as well as what seemed like Benetnasch's signature. On the front it said something to the effect of allowing anyone with this invitation inside the castle with no questions asked.

"What's this?"

"Exactly what you think it is. I want to invite you to my castle. Ah, don't worry.

There are no traps, and I won't bring any underlings either. Petty tricks like that wouldn't work on you in the first place. I only have one wish... I want to settle things with you this time. I want to face you one-on-one in a place where no one can interrupt."

So she wants to face me, huh? That means she came here just to tell me this. That's unexpectedly forthright of her. She's really polite in the weirdest ways.

"Don't you dare run, Maphaahl. I've been waiting for two hundred years with this fight as my only desire. If you were to refuse me now, my temper might flare, and I don't know what I might do as I sulk."

"Ah, no need to fret. Even without any threats, We wouldn't refuse an invitation from an old friend. We happily accept."

"Good." Benetnasch put on an absolutely lovely smile before she whispered to me sweetly, "I'm the only one who is allowed to kill you, just like you're the only one allowed to kill me. I will not compromise on that point. This time, let's keep going until one of us perishes."

Her smile was just like a teen's who was just about to go on a date she'd been earnestly waiting for. But the words out of her mouth were clearly about a deathmatch, and the air around her was full of the intent to kill.

The silver-haired girl in possession of such an unbalanced air gave me a final glance before she leapt away into the moonlight.

I watched her leave, silent.

Oh crap... What do I do? That girl's super cloying.

2

In the past, she believed that she was the strongest. Vampires had always been a race possessed of incredible power and magic, but she was far and away the best of them. The density of the mana she was born with was just different. Her status from birth was also proportionately different, as were her base stats and upper limits. She—Benetnasch—was born completely separated from her peers in those respects.

Those around her praised her endlessly as the princess and a prodigy, but that praise only filled her with disgust. She never once thought the vampires surrounding her as the same species. They only looked like lower beings with insufficient levels to her. There was no way she could think of them as the same as her. Was that the result of a sense of overinflated self-worth? Was it just a child's desire to think of themselves as special? It would have been nice if that were the case—truly, it would have been—but Benetnasch was different from the rest in every sense of the word.

The more she grew, the more the gap widened, and the more she thought of her hangers-on as nothing more than trash. To her, it was like they were completely different beings that just happened to look like her. She had held that precursor to a belief ever since she was just a toddler. Was she a genius? A prodigy? A wunderkind? Benetnasch tried out all the words for it she could think of, and none of them really clicked for her.

For example, if a human and a wolf were to compete in math, would the human be a genius for being able to out-calculate the wolf? No. It would only be natural for that to happen. Of course the human would beat the wolf. All this was about the same thing to Benetnasch. Just like this example, it was only a matter of course for Benetnasch to be superior to other vampires, and this gap was only there because they were simply of a lower class than she was. At least, that was what Benetnasch thought of the difference between her and others.

She rampaged around the continent in order to find someone whom she could fight with as equals. The more she fought and the more she killed, the stronger she grew. Eventually, there was no one left who could even stand up to her.

Can you imagine how boring her life was? How flavorless must victory have been, since all she ever did was win fights that were basically predetermined? How utterly unsatisfying it must have been? Sure, she experienced the visceral feedback of a fight. Sure, she'd thought some opponents were strong, but never once had she thought that she might lose, and she'd never once met an opponent she thought of as an equal.

She eventually went from having twenty percent of a continent able to match her to being utterly unmatched on said continent, and she was finally forced to

set her sights on the world at large. Across the sea were the Devil King, the Lion King, and the Dragon King, three beings who walked the same path of supremacy as Benetnasch. She had also heard of the Fairy Princess, who was the equal of the Devil King even though she herself didn't rule and was powerful enough that the other three couldn't carelessly mess with her. Yet Benetnasch didn't seriously expect anything out of them. She figured she'd end up winning anyway. Nevertheless, they were opponents she had to face. There was a need to determine who was strongest and who would get to decide the fate of the world.

Before Lufas Maphaahl came to power, four equal powers faced off against each other, and the world was barely able to maintain balance. The devilfolk headed by the Devil King, the monsters led by the Lion King, the dragons led by the Dragon King, and the vampires led by the Vampire Princess all viewed each other as enemies in an inevitable battle yet to come. The Demon King Aigokeros ruled in Hel, but he showed no signs of wanting to come to the surface, and the Fairy Princess gave no indication of wanting to expand her area of influence either. The threat those two posed paled in comparison to the others.

For many years it was thought that only those four were fighting for supremacy. That was why it was so utterly surprising when Benetnasch heard the news that the Dragon King had been eliminated by a heaven-winged girl. One of the strongest four who had been maintaining the balance of the world at large had been killed by a completely unknown, unremarkable heaven-winged girl.

Benetnasch had heard rumors of the Dragon King. He was the picture of arrogance, insisting that everyone other than him was a lower life-form. He was a tyrant who would kill others for recreation. Apparently he even threatened the races of humanity, demanding sacrifices. It was inevitable that he was despised by humanity, and his death could have been considered the result of karma or divine retribution.

The problem was that a single person had managed this feat. It wasn't someone leading an army, and they hadn't set a trap. Neither had the Dragon King been deceived in any way. He'd been faced head-on and had been destroyed by a single person's power. That fact was more than enough to

impress Benetnasch. At that point, she still wasn't that interested in whoever it was. To her, the Dragon King had been killed because, in the end, he was weak. Basically, it only confirmed for her that rumors weren't to be relied on and that he actually hadn't been that big a deal. That was the conclusion that Benetnasch had reached, and her interest in the heaven-winged girl quickly faded.

It would only take a couple years for her to realize her mistake, which she would eventually pay for physically. The heaven-winged girl—Lufas Maphaahl—invaded her lands. It was the first time in her life she had to fight while bracing for a loss, as well as the first time in her life she felt so exhilarated. That was the moment Benetnasch met her only equal—no, her better—in several hundred years.

Their races were vampire and heaven-winged—the two races of humanity that most closely represented darkness and light, as well as probably the two most genetically different races. But Benetnasch understood that Lufas was most likely the same as her. She felt far closer to Lufas than any of the riffraff out there, including the vampires. They were both unique people who didn't fit inside the box with the existing peers of their race, improbable beings born by chance. For the first time, Benetnasch wasn't sure of her victory. Never before had she even imagined she would have to commit to a fight she would probably lose.

This wasn't a fight she knew she could win, so she just had to fight and do things as expected. It was a fight where the outcome was unclear, one that she would have to put her all into. How sensational it was! The result was a draw in name but a loss in reality, and Benetnasch became Lufas's comrade with the condition that it was only until Lufas succeeded in uniting the world.

It was shameful to Benetnasch that she hadn't been finished off, and even worse was the fact that Lufas had been considerate and decided to call it a draw. However, Benetnasch had to admit that she'd been saved by it. By meeting Lufas, she'd experienced what it was like to know someone better than herself. She was able to recognize that battles could be incredibly fun, and she understood that she could still climb higher.

She just had to look forward to the next fight, and she had to win. Even if

Benetnasch lost, she swore she wouldn't allow Lufas to take pity on her. It was her fault that time for being so weak that Lufas had the leeway to take pity on her. Benetnasch's pride wouldn't allow her to ignore that and place all the blame on Lufas, so she decided to obey her for the moment. She decided to help Lufas on her path to dominance.

The moment Lufas conquered the world would mark the time for their rematch. For that purpose, Benetnasch would spare no effort. The two of them would settle things the moment Lufas stood at the top of the world. That was Benetnasch's heartfelt wish, probably the first one she ever had.

It was often misunderstood, but Benetnasch didn't particularly hate Lufas. Sure, she was somewhat unsatisfied having had her reputation as the strongest damaged and for having been brought down from her position, but that had only occurred because she was too weak. She neither regretted what happened nor hated Lufas for it. In fact, she was thankful to Lufas and respected her. If Benetnasch were asked to name the person she respected the most in the world, she'd name Lufas without a moment's hesitation. She didn't hate Lufas. In fact, she liked Lufas. Her feelings for Lufas were earnest, strong, and blazing hot, much like an innocent girl towards her first love. In fact, her feelings were very similar to love. It was only that all her feelings translated into the urge to kill. She just expressed her love through lethal attacks filled with murderous intent.

That was why Benetnasch swore that she would be the one to kill Lufas Maphaahl. She wouldn't let anyone else kill her, and she wouldn't allow herself to be killed by anyone else. That was why she was so unsatisfied with the previous ending. She would never forgive those who had ruined her battle with Lufas.

Everything started when Benetnasch asked for her rematch with Lufas. It was a pact arranged between the two of them. On the eve of Lufas's hegemony over the world, she and Benetnasch would fight. Lufas made good on her word, and the two of them clashed with enough strength to destroy the world. The Great Conqueror gained her extraordinary strength through the golden apples formed with her power and from stat-boosting items made through alchemy. Meanwhile, Benetnasch realized her potential after gaining a fated rival in the

form of Lufas, and she herself had reached level 1000 as well after taking in an immeasurable amount of mana.

The two of them were well outside the norms of a vampire and a heaven-winged, and they used skills on each other that defied common sense without reserve. That time they fought was exactly what Benetnasch had been waiting for, and she believed that it would continue until one of them was dead.

Eventually, their fight reached its climax, and Benetnasch was cornered. She was covered in wounds. Her natural regeneration as a vampire was unable to keep up, and she would most likely fall if she were to take another full-strength attack. On the other hand, Lufas was still calm and composed. Benetnasch had no choice but to admit that Lufas had the overwhelming advantage. Of course, Benetnasch hadn't given up. After all, if she only had one attack left, then it would be fine as long as she won with that single attack.

"Let's go, Maphaahl... It all ends with this last attack."

"Yeah, you're right. Come, Benet."

As always, Lufas looked calm and composed as she motioned for her opponent to come at her. To Benetnasch, she was both hateful and absolutely precious.

If I'm going to lose, at least let me get in one last hit. I'll put everything I have into it and carve my existence into her so I'll never be forgotten.

No... I'll win! I'll use my last attack to pierce through her heart! Benetnasch ran forward, filled with the intent to win. Lufas made to intercept.

The betrayal was too sudden. The moment they were about to clash, some sort of interfering magic was cast on Lufas, which was layered with another interference skill to make her stop in her tracks. Noticing this, Benetnasch also stopped and tried to divert her attack, but the momentum wasn't easy to stop. While her claws missed Lufas's vitals, she still gouged out Lufas's flank, causing it to blossom red.

"You bastards... What's the meaning of this?!"

Of course, Benetnasch was enraged. From her perspective, someone just interrupted the climax of the fight she'd been waiting so long for. It'd be

impossible to expect any other reaction. She fixed the culprits of the interruption—the Seven Heroes—with a hate-filled glare. She quickly noticed that they were acting strangely. They were overflowing with divine power, something that would normally be impossible. Right now, they had enough power to be able to match Benetnasch herself.

What the hell? Sure, the Seven Heroes are strong, but they shouldn't be this *strong.*

Benetnasch's expression was one of fury, but the Seven Heroes didn't respond at all. In fact, they were completely silent as they restrained Benetnasch with magic.

Normally, she wouldn't have been caught with such a spell. Even if she were, she'd be able to break out immediately, but Benetnasch was wounded. She was no longer able to move a muscle. She was forced to the ground, miserable and unable to do anything but watch what was about to happen.

"Sorry, Benet. Looks like something's come up. We apologize, but we'll have to call this fight a draw and wait to settle things until next time."

"W-Wait! Maphaahl!"

"Don't worry. We will come back. Keep polishing your fangs until then," she said, before leaving Benetnasch and never coming back.

After that, it was exactly as the history books said. Thanks to the wounds caused by Benetnasch, Lufas was cornered and lost to the Seven Heroes. Benetnasch was once again forced to accept a draw in name only, and because her rival and enemy was gone, she'd lost her reason to live. Thus, she completely lost interest in the world at large, becoming totally indifferent to all things as she shut herself in her own coffin.

Benetnasch learned from her followers' reports that Alioth and the rest of them were going to try to fight the Devil King, as well as the fact that they had asked for her assistance, but she ignored all of it. Benetnasch knew that their betrayal was not something done of their own free will, but she still couldn't bring herself to forgive them. Instead, she completely stopped bothering with world events. No matter how many heroes died or how much danger humanity was in, she wasn't roused at all.

The turning point for Benetnasch happened fifty years after Lufas's defeat. The devilfolk brought a huge number of grunts with them and attacked her country, so she decided to get some light exercise in and completely crush them. The only one among them even worth fighting was the Devil King, and he dropped a huge bomb on her.

"Hmm, just what I'd expect from a vampire. I understand why you were the only one said to be able to fight Lufas Maphaahl one-on-one."

"On that note, you aren't all the rumors make you out to be. Sure, you're strong enough to make it worthwhile, but that's it."

They were not evenly matched. Though the Devil King acted composed, he was covered in wounds, and his clothes were destroyed as well. On the other hand, Benetnasch was pretty much untouched. She'd been in total control of the battle, but she'd vaguely understood that the Devil King had yet to show his true strength. She was confused as to why he never showed any sign of getting serious even after being pushed to this point.

"Such a shame. If you had joined in back then, this world may have been different."

"Whatever. I don't care what happens to that lot."

"How harsh. Is that because they interrupted your showdown with her?"

"Choose your next words carefully, or I might just rip apart that talkative mouth of yours where you stand."

"Right on the mark, huh?"

Benetnasch broke the sound barrier as she swept at him with her claws. Blood blossomed, and the Devil King retreated, having lost his entire right arm. His expression remained fearless, and it looked like his lost arm didn't bother him in the least.

"Now, now. Let's just calm down. Alcor... Ah, right. Alcor is our name for Lufas. She told you that she'd return, didn't she? You just rushed to conclusions."

"You talk as if you know something."

“Because I do.” The Devil King held his arm up to his arm’s stump as he spoke. When he did, the arm stuck and went back to normal, as if it had never been cut off.

While flexing his fingers to confirm his range of movement, he continued speaking words that were like the devil’s whisper to Benetnasch. “Lufas Maphaahl will surely return in... Let’s see, according to ‘her,’ around 150 years, I believe. That shouldn’t be that long for a vampire like you. Just wait patiently. Your wish will surely be granted.”

Even now, Benetnasch had no idea how the Devil King had known that. Neither did she have any idea about the mysterious ‘her’ he’d alluded to. But Lufas would in fact return.

Then... Then that’s fine. This reality is everything. I don’t care about anything or anyone else. If this is real, then that’s fine. I don’t need anything else.

Benetnasch had continued to wait patiently in her own room, to which her followers were forbidden entry, to sense her fated enemy and rival.

3

The capital of the vampire country, Mjolnir, had been made under the premise that it would forever be night there. The country’s airspace was constantly covered in dark clouds thanks to Benetnasch’s magic, blocking out all sunlight from the area. The concepts of morning, noon, and even evening didn’t exist in this place. All times of day were the middle of the night, but only for the area around the capital.

Probably thanks to that, the capital was very well-fixed with light sources. Man-made light illuminated the entire city. It might have been too dim for other races, but it was perfect for vampires. The architecture itself was pretty much exactly that of Europe in the Middle Ages or something like it. Though in the end, it was still somehow different from a normal townscape. Every building was fancy enough to be mistaken for a castle. Not one of them looked like a normal or shabby house. Vampires were nobles of the night, so all the residents of this capital were nobility and thus very well-off, or so Dina had told me.

Of course, it wasn't as if there was no one around for menial labor. They were everywhere in the city, holding down jobs. For example, the ones opening up shops weren't vampires but a type of undead called ghouls. Apparently, they were a rather pitiable monster that formed when dead humans were mutated with mana and revived. They couldn't reproduce, but they would spawn infinitely as long as there were dead bodies and mana. While they wouldn't prosper, they wouldn't go extinct either.

Well, they were basically zombies. The only ghouls in this city were fairly pretty and clean, so the fact that they didn't reflexively cause any physical disgust was a faint silver lining, I guess. If you ignored the fact that they were deathly pale, they basically looked like normal humans, and they could hold a conversation too.

They had nowhere else to go, but they were allowed to settle down in Mjolnir. Apparently they were barely scraping by, since they were basically slaves. While I did think they were pitiful, they probably had it pretty good just because they had a place to live. There was no way they'd be accepted by other countries, so if they were rejected here, the only fate awaiting them would be extermination as one of the undead. The ones that were more heavily damaged weren't even allowed into Mjolnir. Life sure was tough.

At any rate, the point was to never erect graves in places where mana was thick. That was why most graves in this world were built near churches and protected by mana repellent barriers put up by acolytes. If they weren't, it'd cause a huge outbreak of ghouls. But even with these countermeasures, ghouls still spawned. One of the reasons was probably because those who were afraid to die liked to build their graves in places with high amounts of mana to try to revive as ghouls.

It wasn't like I didn't understand their feelings, but... Was this something really worth becoming a ghoul for?

Still, even though they were ghouls, they weren't that scary. Since their personality in life was reflected in death, there were good and bad ghouls, just like how there were good and bad people. Good people stayed good as ghouls, and the same went for evil people. Of course, in that case, the latter would be turned to ash, because then they'd just be a harmful monster.

“One clătită.”

“Sure thing!”

When I gave my order to the pale, old ghoul pulling along his cart, he used a clean glove to pull out something that looked like a crepe. After I paid, I bit into the snack, and the taste of strawberry jam filled my mouth. Just because he was a ghoul didn’t mean he’d hand me something rotten.

At any rate, the vampires were the wealthy class in the capital, and the ghouls were the working class.

Also, the pathways were a little unique. I figured it out because I’d flown in, but this capital had a pretty funny shape. The capital itself was a perfect circle, surrounded by a wall. As for the insides of it, the city’s large thoroughfares drew a heptagram. It made me want to take my time and sightsee a little, but unfortunately that wasn’t the purpose of my visit.

The reason I was here was, of course, due to Benetnasch’s invitation. To be honest, I’d wanted to do something about Leon’s demihuman union Tyrving first, but I couldn’t predict what Benetnasch might have done if I’d left her alone. In the worst case, I might’ve gotten pincered by Benetnasch and Leon, so I’d decided to leave Leon to Dina and the other Twelve Stars and came here on my own.

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time since I’d been summoned to this world that I was completely alone.

“Well, maybe We could sightsee a little. Let’s just take a quick lap around.”

It’s not every day I’m in the vampire’s country. Let’s check it out, I thought, but a voice called out from behind me.

“Hey.”

I turned around, and there was this country’s princess with her arms crossed, looking unhappy.

I noted this already, but you’ve got some light footwork there. Damn.

I had to wonder if it was okay for one of the Seven Heroes, not to mention the one called the Vampire Princess, to be wandering around town like this.

“Mm... It’s you, Benet.”

“Don’t ‘it’s you, Benet’ me. I sensed you coming, but no matter how long I waited, you didn’t show up at the castle. To think that you had the guts to ignore me and go sightseeing.”

“Now, now. Don’t be in such a rush. We still plan to face off with you later.”

This was just a minor point, but every time I tried to refer to Benetnasch it ended up coming out as Benet, her nickname. This was most likely because it was what Lufas herself had used. Also, Benetnasch didn’t seem weirded out by it at all, strangely enough. I thought I had her solidified in my mind as someone dangerous, but for some reason, that was overtaken by feelings of fondness.

It was different from romantic love, of course, but... It was hard to explain. For example, if you were talking to an equal and a friend, you wouldn’t be able to avoid feeling close to them, right? Surprisingly, Benetnasch may have been the person that Lufas acknowledged the most.

“By the way, do you have any recommended tourist spots here? Also, We’re looking for souvenirs, and We haven’t been able to find any.”

Benetnasch watched me quietly for a moment, then said, “You... Has your personality become more lighthearted somehow?”

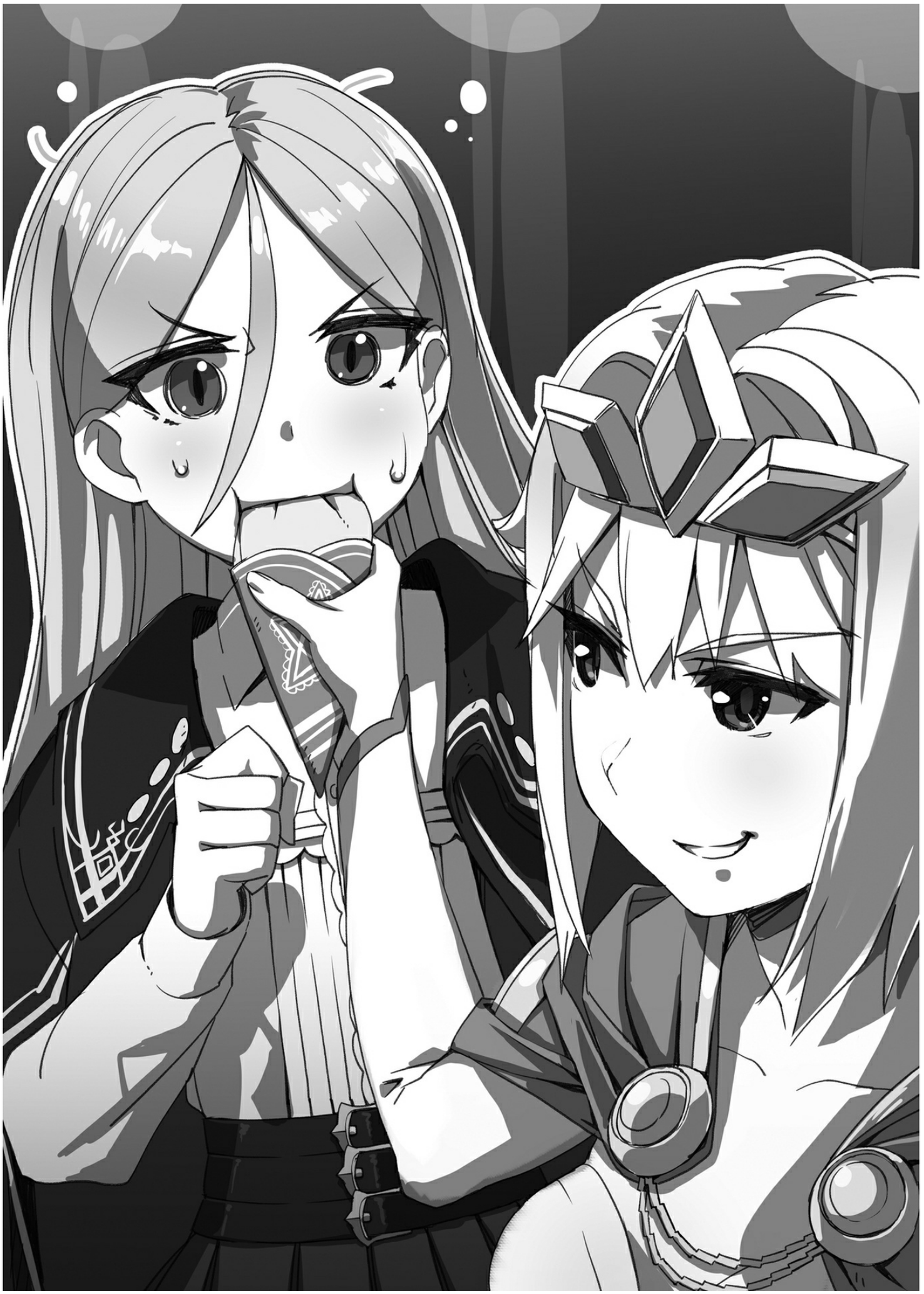
“We hear that a lot.”

She was the last of the Seven Heroes, and I finally got to meet her like this. From her words, I could tell she probably wasn’t the same as me, but that was something I’d expected from the start. Still, it wouldn’t really be fun to start killing each other as soon as we’d reunited. I wanted to talk for a while and learn how she was as a person. *Is this strange?*

“Anyway, wasting time in a place like—mg?!”

I bought an extra clătită and shoved it into Benetnasch’s mouth to stop her complaining.

“Don’t be so stiff. We’ve finally reunited. Wouldn’t it be boring to just start killing each other right away? Come on, show us what there is to see in your capital.”



It was true that the other members of the Seven Heroes had nicer personalities. Strangely enough, I felt closer to Benetnasch than any of them. After all, she didn't have any weird hang-ups about me. She didn't overly worship me like the Twelve Heavenly Stars nor did she harbor feelings of guilt like the other Seven Heroes. She wasn't afraid of me either, and she wasn't inscrutable like Dina.

She was just so natural. She stood on the same level I did, which was strangely comfortable.

Well, I guess I'm plenty weird to be feeling that even though her killing intent is crashing into me like nothing else.

*　　*

Led by Benetnasch, we came to a place that seemed like an arena. She probably wanted to start fighting already, but as soon as I had threatened to leave she'd easily folded and started to lead me around tourist spots. She was truly easy to handle. If possible, I'd have liked to continue dragging things on with a relaxed air just like this until she eventually forgot about fighting completely, since from what I'd heard, defeating Benetnasch now would be terrible for humanity. It was precisely because Benetnasch was around that the devilfolk couldn't continue their invasion. Looking at it another way, that also meant that as soon as she was gone, they could do as they pleased. Personally, I'd have liked to delay the fight.

"This is a monster colosseum. We pit captured monsters against each other and bet over the outcome. It's the most popular form of entertainment here."

"What a bloody piece of entertainment."

"Monsters from Tyrving have been attacking a lot recently, so there's no shortage of contestants, even if we execute some."

She said something so creepy with such ease, but to be honest, it wasn't that weird based on the rate of this world's advancement. Even back on Earth, executions had been a form of entertainment in the Middle Ages. There've been records of public executions drawing huge crowds in places like France and Britain, after all. On top of that, this was the country of vampires, who were

known to be belligerent. Not to mention, the ones being executed were monsters from an enemy nation. Of course normal morals or pity wouldn't work in that situation. The only places here where people could say something like, "What do you think you're doing?! That's awful!" would be a peaceful human country with enough leeway to learn proper morals.

The problem was... I didn't actually feel that much resistance or disgust towards this even though I was from just such a drunk-on-peace country, namely Japan. It was true that I thought the monsters were pitiful, and I did have thoughts like, *Ah, how cruel...* But before all that, my biggest impression was just, "Oh, I guess this is just that type of place."

I might have come to quite the dangerous place.

"While we're here, wanna bet?" Benetnasch suggested as I looked over the arena.

"Let's."

I described it as an arena, but the place was surrounded by high walls, making it impossible to escape, so it was more like a prison. Vampires watched over it from a safe, high spot, talking about whatever they wanted as they cheered on their bets. Inside that space were a clearly strong giant hippo and a smaller, weasel-like thing. While the hippo was over five meters in size, the weasel was only around one meter. To be honest, it didn't even seem like a fight to me. Of course the odds favored the hippo, and it was basically guaranteed to win, even in just the stat comparisons. *This is just bullying at this point.*

"Then We shall put fifty el down on the hippo."

"What a cheap betting style." She looked at me exasperatedly.

She really is the ruler of a country. Our money standards are just too different. Fifty el was about equivalent to ten thousand Japanese yen, so I actually felt like I'd bet quite a bit. This was probably a pittance from her perspective.

As soon as the battle began, the hippo started dominating the fight, as anyone would have expected. Of course it did; their builds were just that mismatched. Given that sports like boxing separated fighters into weight classes, size and build played a huge part in a fighter's power and toughness.

Stats managed to nullify a lot of that in this world, but the hippo won in that respect, too, so the match had basically already been decided.

The hippo slammed the weasel with a vigorous tackle, and the weasel's small body flew through the air. Its arms and legs were bent in unnatural directions, and it was clear that it was near death after just that one attack. But as the weasel fell, it righted itself and bit into the nape of the hippo's neck.

I guess this is like how a weasel emits a stink from its anus when it's frightened. It's not like this one farted or anything, though. But something was off. The weasel just wouldn't let go of the hippo, and the hippo cried out like it was in pain. Eventually, the hippo couldn't stand the pain and fainted, and the weasel started to devour it.

Hey... What? The small one won?

"He he. Looks like you predicted wrong. Havarins are small, but they lack fear. They're dangerous monsters that will keep biting until their target dies. They're pretty famous in this arena for giant killing."

"Havarin?"

"It's a new type of monster that sprouted up after you got sealed. It's like a small wolverine that mutated and became a monster."

I looked around and noticed a lot of resentful vampires who were yelling things like, "That thing won *again*!"

I see. So they made a mistake like I did.

Accepting that I got beaten, I paid the fifty el.

Libra'll probably scold me later if I tell her I gambled.

4

After the arena, Benetnasch showed me to a lot of different places, but I was currently having some regrets. *Maybe I shouldn't have left things completely up to her.* Personally, I was going to see if I could keep up this light, peaceful atmosphere and completely avoid the fight, but as one might expect, reality wasn't that sweet.

Benetnasch showed me to a mansion near the castle, but there was nothing inside. It looked like a magnificent mansion on the outside, but inside, there was only a sturdy looking ceiling, walls, and floor. There wasn't even a minimal amount of furniture. There was no way this space was meant for living in.

"I built this mansion specifically to prepare for this. I used Mizar steel that I imported from Blutgang, so most things won't even scratch it. It's still probably brittle to you and me, but we should be able to let loose here easier than anywhere else."

"There is no way this is a tourist spot, at least in our opinion..."

"I could have continued showing you around, sure, but... Sorry, I'm just not used to being made to wait this long. I just can't wait when such a juicy carrot is being dangled in front of me. I seem to have less patience than even a horse."

Benetnasch smiled as she spoke, but behind that expression, she was overflowing with an obvious desire to fight. If a low-level person were to walk in right now, they'd probably be so overwhelmed by her pressure they wouldn't even be able to stand.

She can emit pressure like this naturally without even being a heaven-winged. What the hell is up with her?

Still, now that it'd come to this, I had no choice but to accept that a fight was inevitable. She was clearly nothing like any of the enemies I'd fought before, so I probably couldn't look forward to an easy win. *I'll just have to brace myself for this...*

"I've waited for too long. I've been waiting for this...just for this."

Benetnasch's expression twisted belligerently. Her good looks turned aggressive as the corners of her mouth pulled upward, revealing her fangs. Her eyes glinted a deep scarlet, and her silver hair billowed out behind her. Taking that as a cue, I sharpened my senses, causing the scenery to slow down around me. Even so, the feeling Benetnasch gave off didn't change, meaning that the flow of time she was experiencing was keeping up with mine.

"Come, let's start this thing!"

As soon as those words left Benetnasch's mouth, she jumped forward. Just

the force of her leap made the ground explode, the fragments freezing in the air. Technically, though, they weren't actually frozen in the air. From a third-party perspective, it would have looked like Benetnasch had disappeared and the ground exploded, and the rubble would have fallen to the ground within a second. It looked different to me, though. Time as I was currently experiencing it was so far compressed from the normal flow of time that the rubble looked frozen in midair. It was almost as if time had stopped. Within that moment, only Benetnasch still moved with remarkable agility as she closed the distance to me.

She just accelerates to this speed like it's nothing?! The Devil King was the same, though. I guess the title of strongest of the Seven Heroes wasn't an exaggeration. Of course, that's a bad thing.

Amazed, I caught Benetnasch by the wrist, stopping her claw swipe before kicking her away. She kicked right back, even though I thought I'd put her off-balance for at least a moment, and I had to release her wrist in the spur of the moment and jump back. The vertical kick passed between Benetnasch and me like a cannon shot and blew a huge hole in the roof.

And she said most things wouldn't even scratch it...

Also, as an extremely minor aside, I couldn't avoid being shown something that should have been off-limits thanks to her kicking upwards right in front of me. *White, huh...? That's a little unexpected. Anyway, wouldn't she be better off with a skirt that's, like, a little longer?*

While I was preoccupied with my own dumbass thoughts, Benetnasch turned her vertical kick into an ax kick. While there was no way it would hit given our physical distance, I also couldn't imagine her completely whiffing either. I settled on taking a half-step away, and as I suspected, a black slash passed through the place I just was.

Magic...! And a high-powered spell with no chants, fired from her leg! But I didn't have the leeway to naturally process the surprise. Benetnasch was already moving on to her next attack. A black glow started to condense in her hand before she unleashed a torrent of darkness that was like a pure incarnation of destruction. *Is that a big-ass laser? Or, like, some sort of death*

and destruction beam? I'd be a little hard-pressed to describe it in words, but for now, it'd be easy to understand as something often seen in manga.

The attack traveled in a straight line, and though I dodged it, the beam continued on and pierced a hole in the wall of the mansion before flying off into the distance. *Ah, crap. This place straight-up can't withstand having Benetnasch in it.*

Anyway, I can't just stay on the defensive. Let's go on the attack. I kicked off the floor and closed the gap between us before throwing out a knife-hand strike at Benetnasch. She blocked it and countered with a finger stab. I dodged a half-step to the side and Benetnasch's arm passed by, grazing my cheek. I countered her counter with a knee, but Benetnasch threw out her knee to intercept mine while simultaneously aiming a punch at my cheek.

I weaved my head around that to avoid the damage before flipping my entire body around. Using the centrifugal force from that, I threw out a backhand, but Benetnasch ducked under that while performing a low kick to sweep my legs. While it may have looked like I was about to fall, I put my hands on the ground and used sheer arm strength to jump. I kicked out while I was upside down as I rose upward, connecting with Benetnasch's jaw. But she simply flipped in midair and came right back towards me, and I moved forward to intercept her.

Our arms and legs flew back and forth at high speeds, with feints weaved into multiple strikes as our limbs clashed between us. Allowing the momentum from a clash to separate us, I quickly made my next move.

"Psycho Compression!"

When in doubt, debuff. That's the bread and butter. I hit Benetnasch with my telekinesis, hindering her movements as I pressed in.

Benetnasch brute-forced her way out of my telekinetic restraints faster than I could approach and counterattacked with her claws. *You— What the hell? Restraints don't work?!*

Still, I'd managed to slow her down for just a moment. Her claw attack whiffed, only managing to damage the walls and floor even further. As for me, I leapt into the air to dodge, landing behind Benetnasch. She was a little too slow in turning around. My roundhouse kick landed, and she was thrown clean away.

That hit would have instantly killed one of the Seven Luminaries, and even a member of the Twelve Stars would have taken major damage. However, Benetnasch put on the emergency brakes in midair and came back to the ground like nothing had happened.

But...it didn't look like she was going to start attacking again. *Maybe she's just going to observe the situation for now.*

My inner time went back to normal, and the rubble that had been kicked up by Benetnasch at the start of the battle finally fell to the ground.

"Hmm... Well first, I guess I should have expected this of you. I managed to guard in the heat of the moment, but my arm is still broken," Benetnasch said happily as she looked at her arm, which was bent at a weird angle.

In a battle for supremacy, having an arm crushed was definitely not something to just be laughed off. It would have been a large enough amount of damage to decide the fight right then and there. Yet Benetnasch simply forced her broken arm back into its normal position, and it started moving like nothing had ever happened.

Is that just a vampire's regeneration? No, it's too fast. Hmm, I think it'd be best to assume she has some sort of effect on her clothing that helps her regeneration. Still, it was a huge thing to know that her arm would still be broken by something like that. No matter how fast her recovery was, her max HP wasn't exactly high. I was on top in both power and toughness.

"Still, this attack is nothing, coming from you. I'm not too happy about you holding back on me." Benetnasch sounded a little unsatisfied as she glared at me.

Holding back, huh...? Well, it's true that I didn't add any skills to that, and I wasn't buffed with heaven-arts either. While I would say yes if I were asked whether or not I'd used my full strength, it was still true that I wasn't going all out. Even though I hadn't added any buffs or skills, I had still kicked her for real. It had been the same during my fight with the Devil King. I'd been fighting seriously, but my opponent had thought I was holding back. This meant that the Lufas from two hundred years ago was still stronger... If Benetnasch had equaled Lufas in strength two hundred years ago, that would mean this

situation was really dangerous for me.

I guess I won't have the room to take it easy, huh...?

I buffed myself with heaven-arts, but Benetnasch activated her stat-boosting skills in response.

"Next, let's see how long you can afford to hold back!"

"It's not like We were really trying to, though."

Once again, Benetnasch flew at me, but this time it was a little faster than before.

So fast! Even I could only track her movement for a moment, so I just managed to know that the attack was coming. I managed to react and guarded in time, and I felt a heavy shockwave come through my arms. I tried to counterattack, but Benetnasch was already gone.

By the time I thought I saw a silver flash, I'd already been assaulted with a shockwave from behind. I somehow managed to use my wings to block. *Crap... I can't see her!* I was clearly stuck on the defensive.

The silver flash kept coming, and I was assaulted from all directions, but I somehow managed to defend myself from all of it. I wanted to counterattack, but I couldn't even find her, so there was nothing I could do. I was barely managing to see her afterimages, so I was capable of defense, but I couldn't win that way.

Then there's only one thing to do.

I predicted the next attack and threw out a punch while discarding all thought of defense, trying to take her down with me. My fist connected with Benetnasch's face. Her attack hit my cheek at the same time, but my power trumped hers. While I bent backward slightly, Benetnasch was blown backward as if she weighed nothing, and her beautiful face was wet with blood. She was laughing fiercely though, and she jumped right at me again while her wounds were still regenerating.

Hey, come on... Wouldn't you normally hesitate for a bit after that?

Not caring at all that she'd been countered, she continued her attack on me.

While I was being pushed back by her, I was reminded of the arena fight between the two monsters I'd witnessed earlier. *That wolverine-like monster... It was a havarin, right? That thing also fearlessly challenged a monster with better stats and body build than it, and it even won. Nothing's scarier in a fight than someone with no fear.*

Not faltering meant they didn't care about their own safety, and that was hard to deal with. It was a lot like the saying "cowards live longer." I wasn't denying that. In fact, it was probably the truth. Being daring and resolute sounded nice, but it also basically meant completely ignoring one's self-preservation instincts. There was no way for anyone like that to live long. However, the ones with no fear were the scariest once the fight started.

Benetnasch was exactly that type. She was, without a doubt, betting everything on this single fight. It hadn't been an exaggeration when she had said that she'd been waiting for two hundred years. She thought it'd be fine if she died here. Even if I managed to inflict a wound that would be with her all her life, she wouldn't care because she was already fine with dying. She was going to keep going until one of us was dead. That was the entire reason why she'd brought us here.

She's definitely the strongest one I've fought so far...

"Transmute: Winter of Swords!"

I used alchemy to form a sword and stabbed it into the ground. Countless swords spawned from the ground, turning into an inescapable area attack towards Benetnasch. I didn't expect to defeat Benetnasch with just that attack, of course, but being able to control how she moved would be useful. Trying to wind her way through the swords would slow her down, and if she tried to break the swords in her path, then I'd be able to see her as well.

But she did neither of those things. I couldn't see Benetnasch in the crowd of swords at all, so there was only one answer. I jumped without any confirmation of my hunch, managing to tackle Benetnasch in midair just as she was about to assault me from above. Attacking me from the ground would have been more difficult because of all the swords, which meant that attacking from above was much easier.

“Hah!”

I grabbed Benetnasch’s arm and slammed a kick into her soft belly. At the same time, I slammed my elbow into her back, scissoring her between my knee and elbow. Blood came out of Benetnasch’s mouth, and I flew away, carrying some guilt with me.

I broke through the ceiling and rose up into the sky. Once I was high enough that Mjolnir’s buildings looked like small specks, I dove down. Using my downward momentum, I threw her onto the ground far away from the city, and I followed up with a skill.

“Transmute: Hrungnir’s Right Arm!”

Sand and rocks swirled up from the ground, rising up above the clouds. When I swung down my arm, the cloud parted, giving way to a gigantic fist. The gigantic fist had been made with an Alchemist’s skill, and it weighed several dozen tons. It mercilessly crashed into Benetnasch, emitting a loud sound and caving in the ground.

“...”

The attack ended, and I looked over at the giant fist I’d made.

How was that? Did that attack end it? Or maybe I went too far? It’d be nice if she just got knocked out from this.

My hopes were easily dashed as the giant fist grew cracks. It was obvious who was making those cracks. Eventually, the fist completely broke down, and the silver-haired Vampire Princess flew out of it, stopping in front of me.

It looks like it did something...but she’s still smiling.

“As I thought. That was quite the attack, but you’re still being kind. Am I not worth getting serious over? Or...” Benetnasch’s eyes glinted dangerously, and her laugh exposed her fangs.

Crap. I have a bad feeling about this.

“If I get serious first, will you finally get in the mood?”

Yep. There it is. The “I wasn’t going all-out” declaration. I kinda felt like that was the case. Dammit.

5

The pressure I felt from Benetnasch increased. I reflexively broke out in a cold sweat, and I understood that I was being overpowered. *Damn, this is no joke. To think that I, who usually pressures other people, am getting affected by pressure myself.*

Benetnasch's silver hair waved in the wind, and thunder sounded. As if in response, the dark clouds that had been covering the skies cleared away, and moonlight shone over all of Mjolnir. Normally, Mjolnir was covered in Benetnasch's magic which shut out the rays of the sun, but now that she'd gotten serious, that magic had probably gotten canceled. This meant that the mana she'd been using on the spell until now had returned to her, and even worse...tonight was a full moon.

In other words, Benetnasch was now being buffed by the full moon on top of having gotten some of her strength back. In the game, vampires being strongest under a full moon was just lore; a "full moon" didn't exist in the game in the first place. Nighttime always revealed a crescent moon in the game, showing off how many corners the devs had cut, but here, everything that'd just been lore actually had an effect.

The waves of magic power I could feel rolling off Benetnasch got stronger, and it didn't end there.

"I'm thankful to you, Maphaahl. If I hadn't met you, I probably wouldn't have been able to come this far. So, this is the greatest show of respect I can give you."

No, this is quite enough. I don't need any more. Please, spare me. But there was no way I could put such pitiful thoughts into words, and once again, I cursed this body's speech patterns. *Come on, at least let me complain.*

"If you won't get serious, then that's fine. That just means I haven't made you feel like it yet. So I'll show you what I have first. This is what you showed me long ago, the world beyond level 1000!" Benetnasch said as her silver hair started to shine.

Huh? No, wait. Seriously, wait a second. Level 1000 is the hard limit of this

world, right? At the very least, level 1000 was the limit to my knowledge, and any extra strength beyond that had to be achieved with stat-boosting items. But of course, Benetnasch wasn't talking about that.

"HAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!" Benetnasch shrieked.

The pressure she gave off multiplied explosively, and her whole body started to glow silver. A storm started to brew with her at the center. The earth shook, and it was as if Mizgarz itself were quaking in fear. Finally, the ground itself cracked, and all the clouds were erased. However, even without the clouds, the lightning didn't stop. The magic power flowing out of her in waves was messing with the surrounding mana in the area, probably changing it. Eventually the storm subsided, only leaving Benetnasch, still enveloped in silver light.

I already felt like I couldn't keep up with Benetnasch, and now she had even more power. Her silver hair glowed.

Ah, crap. I can't see her stats, but I can still tell this is bad. She's gotten a power-up that's somehow worse than the Goddess's buff. The hell? She's a monster.

"Now, let's do this!" Benetnasch said before she disappeared.

Alarmingly, at the same time, I felt a shock as if I'd been punched by something, and my point of view quickly started to shift forwards. The way I felt it, the pain came before I realized I was punched. I was blown so far that, for a second, I couldn't see Mjolnir anymore, but I managed to put on the brakes and made an emergency landing. Even so, I still couldn't see Benetnasch at all.

My internal clock was already being compressed. It was clear that my perception of time was still different. Even so, I still couldn't see her. I couldn't even catch any afterimages. *Does that mean that just like how I see everything stopped, she sees me as stopped too?!*

"Gah—haggh?!"

The next hit was to my stomach. I was assaulted by another shock, and the pain was so intense I almost felt like I'd been pierced through. But I saw no sign of Benetnasch, and like a fool, I could do nothing but prepare for the next hit.

Dammit... Every fight's been easy since I started inhabiting this body. Sure, I

may have had to put in a little work sometimes, but none of them had actually been a hard fight. But now, I had lost sight of my enemy. It was like I was a punching bag. Unable to keep up with Benetnasch's speed, I had realized that she'd shifted into a higher gear, a smaller frame of time.

I couldn't even aim for a counter to bring her down with me. At this point, I couldn't even tell where she'd come from. Even so, I couldn't just allow myself to be killed so one-sidedly. *This time, I'm going to predict how she'll move!*

"Transmute: Winter of Swords!"

Countless blades sprung up from the ground, limiting Benetnasch's movement. *Now, with this...*

I was shocked to find out my plan was too short-sighted, and I was made to come to the painful realization that the gap between us was so wide that such small tricks wouldn't work. Of all things, all the blades in front of me were shattered at once, and Benetnasch, accompanied by silver lightning, punched me flying before I could even put my guard up. I didn't even have time to right myself before she caught up, continuing to hit me in the stomach, then back, jaw, and flank. The force from the hits assaulted me one after the other.

This is bad. There's no way. She's too strong and too fast.

At the moment, I couldn't even tell if I was being punched, kicked, or even hit with magic. The only thing I understood was that I was being beaten like a punching bag.

Now, this is just broken. I mean, what the heck even is the world beyond level 1000? I have no idea what that even means! Still, she's seriously strong.

Oh look. I got hit again. This time, it was my shoulder. I was slammed to the ground, and I could feel a magic spell hit my back.

I heard over and over again that she was strong, and to be honest, I'm stumped. I never thought she'd be this *strong. She'd always been on a different level from everyone else, even when I first met her. I guess this is the result of meeting me and aiming even higher. This is great. I love it.*

Hmm...? No, no. The hell does "when I first met her," mean? That's not me. That's Lufas. Oh no. I'm losing consciousness thanks to all the hits I took. My

memories are getting all jumbled up, and even I can tell I'm confused.

Strangely, I didn't feel panicked or annoyed. In fact, I was filled with respect and joy.

Well done getting this strong. It's amazing that you polished yourself this diligently. Seriously, you're amazing. Honestly, I can only bow to you. Getting this strong must have taken an incredible amount of effort.

That was why We were already laughing before We realized it. This situation was too fun for us not to.

Ah, seriously... I'm so happy, Benet. Well done climbing this high.

*　　*

The aura Lufas let off changed. Benetnasch felt it keenly, and she stopped attacking and put some distance between them. Up until now, she'd been attacking one-sidedly, but she'd never once thought she had the upper hand. After all, she knew that Lufas Maphaahl's true strength was nothing like what she'd shown so far. The enemy and rival that Benetnasch had wanted, feared, loved, and chased after could never be so weak. That was why she was so sure that Lufas would definitely show herself... And she finally had.

"You're here...!"

"Hmm..."

Lufas's composed smile never broke as she stood up and gave Benetnasch a look before moving on to her surroundings. She moved as if she were looking at something nostalgic, which gave Benetnasch some pause before she quickly gave up thinking about it.

The important thing is the present and everything that is here. Lufas is finally getting serious... I'm fine with just that.

"So it really was you. We knew you would be the one to wake us up."

"What...?"

"Ah, don't worry about it. We're just a little drowsy. We have been half-asleep up until now. Well, We expected all this, though."

Lufas took a step forward. Following her lead, Benetnasch unconsciously took a step back, and she realized she was afraid of Lufas.

That's right... This is the real Lufas Maphaahl, the only one I respect and my feared enemy. She, Lufas Maphaahl, has to be like this, Benetnasch strongly reminded herself. She took a step forward as if to make up for the one she'd taken back.

"Thanks to you, We are awake. That was a bit too extreme for a wake-up call, but it was perfect for us. We believed that you would be the one to smack us awake. That means it was worth coming here." Lufas giggled as she extended her black wings. "We can't do this with Aries or Scorpius. They're excellent in their own way, but We'd be able to deal with them even while half asleep." Lufas paused. "We have to give you our thanks, Benet."

Lufas gathered mana in both her hands. Both divine power and magic power circulated around her equally as she gathered more and more power.

There's no doubt. Right now, Lufas is totally in the mood to go.

The Black-Winged Conqueror, who once ruled the world two hundred years ago, overcame time to finally stand before Benetnasch. Her joy at that fact had Benetnasch's mouth curving upwards, and she once again ran off at almost the speed of light.

"AAAAAAAAARRGGHHH!!!"

With a war cry, Benetnasch charged at Lufas at her maximum speed and with all the strength she had. This assault was nothing like how she'd been acting until now, trying to get a sense of what was up. Benetnasch was now focusing everything she had on this attack.

A normal person wouldn't even have been able to recognize they'd been attacked, let alone spot her before they died. Her strike occurred at basically the speed of light. The attack she'd used had once destroyed an entire continent, along with the monsters and devilfolk on it. Benetnasch didn't hesitate to unleash that attack again, and after a moment's delay, a shockwave dissipated behind Lufas.

The ground was gouged out and turned into a wasteland. The forest that had

been behind her was completely destroyed, not a single trace left behind. Both the sea and the sky split, and even then, the wave of force didn't stop as it split the atmosphere too. Mizgarz wasn't the only casualty of Benetnasch's attack either. A single asteroid of around five kilometers in diameter that happened to have been close to Mizgarz suddenly and without any warning cracked, caving in on itself. After a few seconds, it completely disintegrated, turning into nothing but space dust.

Benetnasch's attack literally destroyed a heavenly body, of all things. Her strike was transcendent, fitting of the strongest of the Seven Heroes. But the Vampire Princess' all-out strike, which could even destroy an asteroid, was stopped by just the tip of Lufas's finger.

The ground and even an asteroid behind Lufas looked as disastrous as if they'd been hit directly, but the fingertip that'd taken the full brunt of Benetnasch's strike wasn't wounded at all. In fact, the attack hadn't even broken through a single layer of skin.

Benetnasch froze for an instant, but she quickly moved on to her second attack.

I knew this would happen. I expected it. Predicted it, even. Yeah, my opponent is none other than Lufas Maphaahl. She's the only one to ever surpass me and the ultimate being, so it's only natural that she can do this much. It's a matter of course. She's a wall so high I can't see over it. That's exactly why she's so worthy of overcoming. She's worthy of challenging!

"WOOOOOOAAAAARRGGHH!!!"

Stronger, faster, sharper! The attacks Benetnasch unleashed with her magic-infused claws were like a storm. Yet every single one of them was stopped by Lufas, and Benetnasch wasn't able to hurt her even once.

Lufas smiled kindly and raised her hand to Benetnasch's forehead. She flicked.

Benetnasch received a shock strong enough for her to believe her head had been snapped right off for a moment as she was blown backwards. The scenery passed by her in an instant, and suddenly Benetnasch saw the ocean and then land again. That was when Benetnasch finally flipped in midair and landed...and she realized that just that attack had forced her clean across the ocean and

onto another continent.

What a huge gap in power... It's like this even under a full moon?! Benetnasch wiped the blood flowing from her forehead, and her mouth twisted upwards in a crazed laugh.

I've waited for so long...so long I almost got tired of it. She's worth surpassing. She's worth challenging. This isn't some fight where I'm guaranteed to win, so a victory is nothing special. I don't know if I can win this one... No, it's more like I have almost no chance of winning, so I'm challenging a tough enemy with all my strength.

Now this is a true fight! A true challenge! Right now, I'm experiencing firsthand what it's like to be a challenger, an underdog. Sure, I'm frustrated. But more than that, I'm happy. The opponent I've set my sights on really is incredible. And that fact brings me such bliss.

Those feelings were exactly why Benetnasch didn't falter at all. She kicked off the ground, just that causing it to crack, as she headed back to where her long awaited enemy was waiting.

Seeing that, Lufas praised Benetnasch. "As expected. You didn't lose your nerve."

"What a foolish notion. Of course not. If I'd lost my nerve from that, I wouldn't have challenged you in the first place."

Lufas thought fondly of Benetnasch's unending spirit as she looked over her own stats.

【Lufas Maphaahl】

【Level】: 3000

【Race】: Heaven-Winged

【Class Levels】:

・Warrior: 200

・Swordmaster: 200

・Grappler: 200

・Champion: 200

・Monster Tamer: 200

・Alchemist: 200

・Ranger: 200

・Strider: 200

・Acolyte: 200

・Priest: 200

・Esper: 200

・Psychicer: 200

・Mage: 200

・Sorcerer: 200

・The Archenemy: 200

【HP】: 1805000

【SP】: 72290

【STR (Strength)】: 46600

【DEX (Dexterity)】: 29250

【VIT (Vitality)】: 40900

【INT (Intelligence)】: 34900

【AGI (Agility)】: 42334

【MND (Mind)】: 34650

【LUK (Luck)】: 27840

【Equipment】:

・Head: —

・Right arm: —

・Left arm: —

・Body: Queen of Heaven’s Dress (Status condition nullification, HP

regeneration)

・Legs: Swift Horse Boots (Field movement speed up)

・Other: Cloak of Seven Days (Halve all elemental damage)

Eighty... No, seventy percent, huh? After confirming her own stats, Lufas realized that she was still far from being fully recovered. *Still, this should be enough to fight Benetnasch.*

In this world, level 1000 was normally the limit for people. That was the absolute rule set by the Goddess. As long as her rules were obeyed, there was no way to rise above that limit. Lufas had managed to surpass that limitation, which meant that she had surpassed the restrictions the Goddess had made for the world. That ability was not limited to Lufas alone. Benetnasch had done so as well, coming close to Lufas's level. And for Lufas, that was something to be happy about.

【Vampire Princess Benetnasch】

【Level】: 1500

【Race】: Vampire

【Class Levels】:

・Grappler: 200

・Champion: 200

・Assassin: 200

・Strider: 400

・Mage: 200

・Sorcerer: 200

・Necromancer: 100

【HP】: 705000

【SP】: 31430

【STR (Strength)】: 26112

【DEX (Dexterity)】: 10787

【VIT (Vitality)】: 14305

【INT (Intelligence)】: 14318

【AGI (Agility)】: 42001

【MND (Mind)】: 11295

【LUK (Luck)】: 10282

【Equipment】:

・Head: Moon Tiara (HP regeneration)

・Right arm: Claws of the Plunderer (Steals target's HP on hit)

・Left arm: Claws of the Plunderer (Steals target's HP on hit)

・Body: Garments of the Immortal (HP regeneration)

・Legs: Silhouette of Black Shadow (Double evasion rate)

・Other: Cloak of Moonlit Night (Double HP regeneration speed during nighttime, ※Equippable only for vampires)

Seeing Benetnasch's stats, Lufas felt true admiration, not scorn. While her stats couldn't be compared to Lufas's, she'd still managed to free herself from the limits set by the Goddess. And even though she was being supported by the full moon, her combat ability could only be described as superb.

It was understandable that the devilfolk weren't able to get past her. There was no way those who were still bound by the Goddess's rules would be able to face Benetnasch, who'd surpassed those rules. Benetnasch was now also qualified. She'd obtained the right to challenge the Goddess.

Still, she won't be able to win against me, and I don't feel like allowing her to win just yet either. But simply defeating her when she's waited so admirably and earnestly these two hundred years would be too pitiful. There wouldn't be any reward in it. It'd be way too rude to delay our date all this time and not even give her a present for it.

There's only one thing for us to do, and that's to use all my might to mercilessly and relentlessly beat her until there's nothing left. I won't resort to any petty tricks like my Pressure. She'd probably be able to ignore skills like that,

but her movements should still be dulled if I use it. Winning like that would be just too boorish... It wouldn't make for a good reward for her.

I'm going to accept all that Benetnasch can put out and overwhelm her anyway. That will serve as the best thanks, the best show of my respect, and the best present to her.

"Be proud, Benet. You are worthy of our best. Thus, We will need a weapon worthy of you."

Lufas paid Benetnasch a sincere compliment as she raised her hand. Both divine power and magic mixed together inside it. The two different powers clashed, warping the world created by the Goddess and ripping a hole in it. The hole in the world became a gate, and it temporarily connected two different places, effectively making their distance nothing.

"Come, my weapon, through this Exgate."

It was a summoning by the Conqueror. Responding to that, Maphaahl Tower, which rose high into the sky in a faraway land, started to rumble.

6

The many arms and armor Lufas had retrieved from her grave were stored in Maphaahl Tower, and they could only reach Lufas's hand through Dina, who could use Exgate. At least, that was what Lufas herself had thought up until now, and it'd been true. However, she had just overturned that preconception.

Using the Exgate she herself had made, Lufas managed to summon her weapon without going through Dina. The weapon she summoned was a set of twin swords consisting of an unrefined-looking sword that emanated power and an elegant and refined short sword. The two of them looked rather mismatched, but they were also reminiscent of the pairing of a man and a woman.

"This is Lifthrasir, the mythical sword said to be able to survive even if the world itself ends. Small fry aren't worth using this on, but this sword will happily lend me its power to face you."

“Nothing will come of this much praise, you know.”

“It was an honest compliment. Just take it.”

Lufas swung her sword even though they weren’t close enough for it to land a hit. Of course, Benetnasch wasn’t stupid enough to simply wonder what the hell she was doing. Common sense had no place in a fight of this level; in fact, it wouldn’t be too much to say that whoever managed to flout common sense the most would decide the battle.

Benetnasch quickly flew out of the way. Not long afterwards, the ground split, and the slash that Lufas had launched cleared Mizgarz and traveled far into space, eventually bisecting an asteroid. However, the two combatants had no way of knowing of any secondary casualties that happened in the depths of space.

Lufas and Benetnasch both kicked off the ground at the same time, their clash in the middle whipping up violent winds. Benetnasch’s claws and Lufas’s short sword met, but Benetnasch quickly lost that contest of power and was thrown backwards. She hurriedly got back up, though, and held her arm out in front of her, palm facing outward.

“Luna Shooter!”

“Sol Bullet!”

Benetnasch unleashed a torrent of darkness from her palm, which was canceled out by a white ball of light shot from Lufas’s finger. The two spells became a pillar of black and white that stretched to the heavens, both eating at each other in a spiral as they raged upwards into the sky. The two spells were even in terms of power, but the magic that Benetnasch had used, Luna Shooter, was a high-ranking Moon element spell which used an enormous amount of mana to overwhelm and kill the target. It was one of her trump cards. On the other hand, Lufas had used Sol Bullet, which was a basic Sun element attack spell. Her spell was of a much lower tier. The fact that Lufas and Benetnasch were even in power showed the difference in their magic abilities.

On top of that, the clash didn’t last long. Lufas slashed through both spells as she flew forward. Seeing that, Benetnasch couldn’t help but click her tongue. *What an annoying sword.*

The sword Lufas wielded—the twin swords Lifthrasir—was one of many in her collection. The demon sword, Lif, was the longer one, and it was capable of cutting apart heaven-arts and reaching the enemy through any barrier. The heaven sword, Thrasir, was the shorter one, and it was capable of cutting magic itself, giving the wielder strong anti-magic capabilities. Benetnasch couldn't use heaven-arts in the first place, so Lif was pretty much completely unnecessary for fighting her, though the silver lining was that it was still a sharp sword regardless.

Of course, both swords were originally a single sword, and when they were combined in their true form, they were able to cut through both magic and heaven-arts alike. However, Lufas had never seen nor heard of that ability as long as she'd been using the swords, so as of yet, this remained the stuff of legend. If Benetnasch were asked whether or not that fact made her feel better, the answer would've been no. After all, it was Lufas, the strongest being in Mizgarz, who was using the swords. In her hands, even a simple knife would overcome a legendary weapon used by anyone else, and now she herself had a legendary weapon. It would be easy to imagine the increase in her power and threat level.

"Haaarrggghhhh!"

With a loud war cry, Benetnasch turned into a silver flash. She paid her creaking joints no heed as she threw out attacks from all directions, surpassing her own limits.

Lufas's expression remained detestably cool as she parried each strike with her blades. She never even got scratched. In fact, Benetnasch was the one who easily lost an arm from Lufas's light counter.

After a moment of silent shock, Benetnasch quickly grabbed her severed arm and pushed it back onto her stump, forcing it to regenerate. Then, with no sign of faltering, she charged in from the front, throwing some of her own blood, which had gotten on her palm, to try to blind Lufas.

Without missing a beat, Benetnasch circled behind Lufas and stabbed her arm out, aiming for Lufas's heart. That attack didn't land either. Lufas had brought her sword behind her to block without even bothering to turn around. On top

of that, she spun in place and used the centrifugal force to kick Benetnasch's chest.

Several of Benetnasch's ribs broke with a cracking sound, and blood leaked out from her mouth. Even then, she didn't falter. After barely managing to stop in midair, she stuck her palm out in front of her and started to rain down magic. Every single shot was a dense bullet of mana capable of erasing a town by itself, and Benetnasch didn't hold back as she unleashed several hundred—no, several thousand—bullets. The magic bullets rained down mercilessly, causing several pillars of light that stretched up to the heavens.

Even then, Lufas was unhurt. She flew out of the cloud of dust and dirt, cutting apart the magic bullets before arriving in front of Benetnasch. Lufas didn't hesitate before cutting Benetnasch in two at the waist, sword flashing!

"Don't you dare underestimate meeeee!"

Benetnasch still managed to counterattack in that state, landing a direct hit on Lufas with a magic bullet. Furthermore, Benetnasch had pretty much surpassed the territory of mere tenacity and now had something more like a deep-seated grudge.

Her lower half started moving on its own even after it had been disconnected from Benetnasch's brain and began to kick Lufas. Lufas's eyes widened into saucers in surprise as she was kicked away. Using that opportunity, Benetnasch reattached her upper half and lower half, but the damage was still telling, and she sank to one knee.

"No... Not like this...!"

I know no pain. I know no damage! I've decided that this fight will continue until one of us dies!

This fight was something Benetnasch had wanted her entire life. She couldn't allow herself to collapse like this, unable to do anything. She couldn't allow herself to stop.

"As if this'll STOP MEEEEEE!" Benetnasch charged forward, rushing Lufas with a fierce attack without waiting for her regeneration to finish.

Benetnasch's attacks were by no means slow. They weren't weak or dull

either. In fact, they were fast enough, strong enough, and sharp enough to be incomparable to anyone else in Mizgarz. Each blow she threw would have instantly killed someone of the Seven Luminaries' level. The series of blows would have even put someone of the Twelve Heavenly Stars' level in checkmate. There was no doubt Benetnasch was the strongest of the Seven Heroes, and one of the strongest people in Mizgarz, right up there with the Devil King.

But Lufas easily dealt with all of her attacks, and the kick she threw out as a counter snapped Benetnasch's neck. The Vampire Princess regenerated as she tumbled along the ground, and though she got up immediately, her breathing was ragged. She was clearly being worn down.

Dammit! I knew this, but she's so far...! Am I seriously unable to even fight evenly with her, let alone win?! Benetnasch was happy that her rival was so strong. That aside though, her loss was inevitable if she couldn't figure out a viable course of action.

Benetnasch had picked this fight fully prepared to lose, but being prepared to lose was very different from wanting to lose. Her greatest wish, after all, was to win and surpass Lufas. The gears were desperately turning in Benetnasch's head as she tried to find a way to grasp victory. At this point, she wasn't going to fuss about using underhanded or unfair tricks. In the end, winning was everything. Whether it was blinding, deceiving, or ambushing, everything was on the table as long as it was viable. At this point, Benetnasch wasn't going to be picky about how she won; her opponent wasn't someone whom she could afford to care about things like that while fighting.

I don't care if it's ugly, dirty, or unsightly. If I can win, there'll be no greater treasure.

<<Then I shall grant that wish.**>>**

Badump. Benetnasch's heart leapt. A voice resounded in the back of her mind that she shouldn't have known but still seemed familiar somehow as something started to flow into her. That something was power. It was the exact thing she'd been wishing for, something to close the gap between her and Lufas.

<<This is what you wished for, isn't it? To claim victory over her? Then I will

become your power. You might be able to accomplish exactly what you wished for.**>>**

For a moment, Benetnasch could have sworn she saw a beautiful blue-haired woman in a dress. She saw the woman's strangely comforting smile and thought she witnessed the woman hugging her. That was when she felt it. Divine power overflowed from Benetnasch's entire body, and she was filled with power.

I see. So it's this. This was it. This is the secret that allowed the Heroes to defeat Lufas back then. I always thought it was weird. I've wondered how they managed to win with the gap in power this huge for so long, but now I understand. This power would certainly make victory possible. Not to mention that if I were the one with this power, I'd probably be able to face Lufas one-on-one.

With this... With this power, I can fight.

Benetnasch smiled as she opened her mouth. "You're in the way. Get lost."

The surprise of the owner of the voice was communicated to Benetnasch, but she had no idea why the woman was so surprised, and neither did she want to know.

This fight is mine and mine alone. This is something I'm going to continue by myself. It doesn't matter whether victory or defeat, life or death awaits me. Everything that happens is mine alone. I'll never share even a millimeter of it with anyone else.

What the hell kind of misunderstanding does that dumbass bitch have? Did she seriously think I'd be happy having that done to me? Did she seriously think I'd get on my knees like an idiot and pray something stupid like "Ah, my Goddess, thank you"?

Know your damn place. There's a limit to how shameless and nosy you can be. No one asked you to come here. You aren't needed. Did you ever actually hear anyone calling for your help? Just when did I ask someone like you to help me?! Honestly, it's deeply irritating having you go around the place acting like some sort of merciful goddess, flinging your shit everywhere. Don't touch me, you hypocrite. The only one who's allowed to touch me right now is her.

“Did you not hear me? I told you to get lost, you third-rate playwright!”

Benetnasch screamed, and her body started to effuse a silver light. The power that had been filling her body disappeared, the divine power bouncing off of her.

I don’t need it. I don’t need this fake power. I don’t want to be part of your plot.

It’s true that I want to beat Lufas so much I could die, but I’d rather die than win with borrowed power. It wouldn’t be my victory if I did that in the first place. If I won using that power, it would just be the victory of someone who borrowed the Goddess’s power in the end. It wouldn’t even necessarily have to be me.

Sure, I thought I wanted to win no matter what dirty trick I had to play. I wished to surpass her, no matter how miserable I would seem, but I don’t want to win with someone else’s power, especially if I have to lower myself to be their puppet in order to have it! That’s right. This is my fight. This stage is only for Lufas and me. As if I’d let anyone else up on this stage. I’ll even kick the Goddess off into the spectator seats. The only thing you’re allowed to do is watch. Just sit there and let me work, you inappropriate goddess.

“Sorry for making you wait... Now, let’s continue our fight. I won’t let anyone else get in the way.”

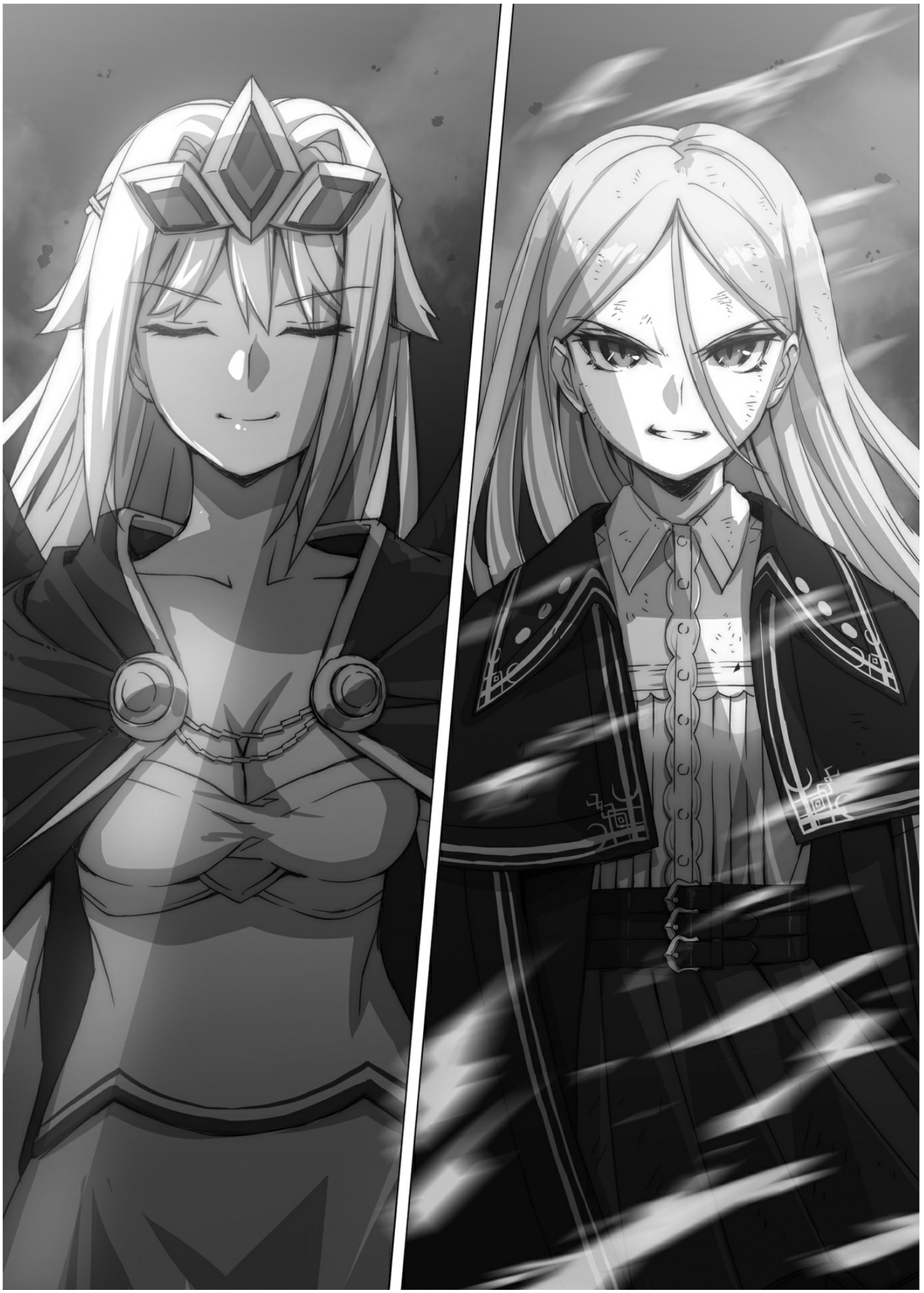
Lufas said nothing, merely watching Benetnasch, who gave her a quizzical look.

“What’s with that dumb look, Maphaahl?”

“Nothing... We just thought you were amazing. We’ve never respected anyone as much as you at this moment, Benet.”

Benetnasch’s eyes widened, and she broke out into a laugh. “What? You’re saying that now? I’ve always been great. If I weren’t, I wouldn’t have been able to name myself as your fated enemy and rival.”

“Yeah, that’s true, isn’t it? You surely are worthy of being our fated enemy and rival. We keep being reminded of that.”



The two of them laughed together before suddenly going quiet. They had laughed, but this was a battlefield, and they were in the middle of killing each other, so the silence didn't last long.

Even exhausted, Benetnasch was nimble and fast, and she resolutely attacked Lufas with the most skill she'd ever brought to the table. She was going so fast she was harming her own body. Blood leaked out of the corners of her mouth as she attacked Lufas repeatedly.

Lufas perfectly blocked, parried, and countered every single one of Benetnasch's blows. Then, Lufas followed up. Benetnasch barely managed to brace herself as she was kicked, but her ribs still snapped, the bones stabbing into her innards, further destroying the thin girl's body. Even then, the Vampire Princess didn't give up and remained standing.

"Not yet! I won't lose yet...!"

Benetnasch jumped and concentrated all her remaining magic into both hands. In a premonition of destruction, all of Mizgarz shook. Animals all around the world were thrown into chaos, and the Sword Saint who accompanied Sei suddenly refused to move out of fright. This was probably due to something like wild instincts, which he and the other animals innately felt. They understood that this power lay in the hands of a woman who wouldn't hesitate to fire it straight at Mizgarz.

This was the moment that power, which could destroy the entire planet, was formed.

"You and Mizgarz can both... DISAPPEEEAAAAARRRR!!"

Light erupted from Benetnasch's hands and pierced through the sky. Right afterwards, a single arrow appeared overhead, but its size was ridiculous, being several kilometers in length. At that point, it was more like a spear rather than an arrow... No, not even a spear would be this extravagantly big. At any rate, what appeared was too powerful and too large to be called a mere arrow.

"Maiden Who Shoots a Silver Arrow!"

Benetnasch swung her arm down. When she did so, the strongest Moon element magic spell came crashing down towards the earth with all the power

it could muster.

Any damage the spell would do to Mizgarz was only secondary to Benetnasch. It didn't matter to her if the world were destroyed. She'd be fine with it as long as Lufas was beaten, even for a second. Benetnasch wouldn't mind dying afterwards.

Lufas laughed fearlessly as she planted herself firmly in front of an attack that would literally destroy the world. Then the silver arrow struck the place Lufas was standing with a deafening sound.

7

The silver arrow with the potential to destroy Mizgarz itself raced towards the ground. While watching it happen, Benetnasch prepared her next move so it could be executed at a moment's notice. It was true that she didn't care whether or not the arrow destroyed Mizgarz, but at the same time, Benetnasch was also sure that it wouldn't happen. After all, Lufas had Lifthrasir, which could cut through magic.

If it were in the hands of someone normal, they wouldn't be able to cut through the arrow; it was too big. However, Lufas was anything but normal—she was Lufas. That was why Benetnasch was sure her spell would be cut to ribbons. Even so, she figured that cutting through such a large spell would at least give her an opening. If Lufas knew this, she would still have no choice but to stop Benetnasch's spell. After all, the spell would destroy Mizgarz if she didn't. That moment would be Benetnasch's chance. Sure, Lufas would probably only need but a moment to cut through the silver arrow, but that moment would become a chance extending several minutes for the Vampire Princess, who had surpassed the limits of speed.

I can win. I can win as long as I aim for the moment where even Lufas will be off-guard and attack with all my might!

However, Benetnasch's expectations were wrecked in the next moment. Unbelievably, the final trump card that she'd poured all her magic into was stopped right before it touched the ground. Lufas stopped it with one hand,

completely ruining any momentum it had.

“Wha—?! With one hand...?!”

“You can have this back.”

Lufas threw the arrow back, and Benetnasch dodged. The arrow, which had missed its target, exited the stratosphere and flew into space. It pierced through a distant planet, which was a little bigger than Mizgarz, completely pulverizing its core and causing it to explode.

Benetnasch was taken by surprise, and the roles of attacker and defender shifted, but in a way, she had been the one who’d originally shifted the roles in the first place. There was a single instant when Benetnasch froze. It was an unavoidable, unguarded moment created from her subconscious. She was defenseless. She wasn’t frozen for even a tenth of a second in real time, but it was more than long enough for Lufas to easily be able to finish her opponent.

However, Lufas didn’t attack. She went out of her way to ignore the opportunity. Was Lufas taking it easy on her? Or was Lufas just showing off how much leeway she had? Had she just let her guard down? No... It was none of those.

In order to show her respect, Lufas was committed to beating Benetnasch utterly and completely, which meant not making use of unguarded moments to surprise the enemy. Lufas was going to fight her head-on and beat her down with pure power. That was why she had let that moment go. When it came to Benetnasch, Lufas wanted no part in any boring victory gained by taking advantage of surprise.

Lufas’s expression twisted belligerently, her scarlet eyes shining like fire. “Benet, We shall show you ‘transmutation using mana.’ Be happy... This next skill is still in its testing stages. We haven’t shown it to anyone else yet.”

Alchemy usually occurred using physical materials as a medium, and it was considered impossible to use magic itself as a material. To be more specific, alchemy using magic as a material was technically feasible, but it would quickly dissolve back into mana, so there was no point in it. This was considered common sense by all alchemists, and it was known to all who walked the path of alchemy.

But Lufas now knew that wasn't true. Alchemy using mana as a material *was* possible, and examples of its success were littered all around the world.

"Transmute: Winter of Wolves!" Lufas shouted.



The mana around her gathered and solidified, shaping itself into wolves. Then the pack of several hundred beasts all rushed at Benetnasch.

Magic in the form of wolves? That's about right. Magic is defined as the solidification of mana, so this is undoubtedly magic. The fact that it took the form of wolves isn't especially surprising either. Birds and beasts often feature in magic spells. There are even several spells that imitate the human form. For example, the water spell "Apsaras" falls into that category.

But why is it like this? For some reason these things have their own wills and make decisions on their own while they attack. It's very different from the magic we use. This is way closer to the devilfolk than traditional magic.

What Benetnasch still had to do hadn't changed, though. *It's the same whether it's magic or devilfolk. I just have to get rid of all of them!*

"Don't think you'll be able to get me with just this!"

The silver streak moved left and right, ending one wolf after the other. Having been ripped apart and unable to maintain their form anymore, the wolves dissipated back to formless mana and returned to Lufas. When all the wolves had been killed, the mana that they had been made of congealed together to form a single huge wolf. It was no less than two hundred meters tall, a ruler of wolves that outsized even Aries. It fixed Benetnasch with a stare as it bared its fangs.

"Transmute: One Who Shakes the Earth." Lufas smiled unsettlingly as the wolf that seemed like it could even devour a god opened its mouth.

Then, it howled.

The wolf's howl could hardly be put into words. The sound itself became destructive energy and swallowed Benetnasch whole. The invisible and unavoidable shockwave was directional, and it continued to destroy the surface layer of Mizgarz as it traveled far off into the distance.

Benetnasch, who'd taken a direct hit from the attack, was badly wounded. Her entire body had been torn apart in an instant, and she was bleeding insanely heavily. The only reason why she hadn't lost any limbs despite this was because she was Benetnasch. Anyone else wouldn't even have had any bones

left.

“Gah! Hagh... Hhh...”

Benetnasch had finally reached the end of her rope, and she fell to a knee. The beating of her heart was loud in her ears, her fingers were trembling, her vision was blurring, and she couldn’t focus on anything. Benetnasch herself could tell.

Ah, I’m at my limit. At best, I can manage one more attack.

Benetnasch only had enough left in her for one last, all-out attack. After realizing that, she couldn’t stop herself from smiling.

Ah, this is the same. This is the same as back then.

The fight two hundred years ago had gone just like this. Benetnasch had been cornered to the point where she could only have managed one more attack, and she had been about to bet it all on a one-hit wonder. Back then, the battle had suffered some dumb interference, but this time, things were different.

Benetnasch focused all her remaining power into her right arm and fixed her enemy with a level gaze. “Let’s go, Maphaahl... It all ends with this last attack.”

Benetnasch made sure to use the same lines she had two hundred years ago, and Lufas, realizing that, replied in kind. “Yeah, you’re right. Come, Benet.” Even her beckoning motion was the same, and to Benetnasch, that was both hateful and unbearably lovely.

Okay, the stage you’ve waited for all this time is right in front of you, Benetnasch. The continuation of that day is happening right now.

Benetnasch’s face twisted into an expression of joy, and her crimson eyes burned.

“OOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH!!!”

This is the end, no matter the outcome!

Benetnasch, who was using even her life force as fuel, was truly a shooting star. Her actions were something that Lufas had never seen the likes of in her several hundred years of life. She was the fastest she’d ever been, and shined the brightest as well, as she charged Lufas head-on.

On the other side, Lufas also charged straight in. She chose to employ no tricks and faced Benetnasch head-on, so in order to intercept the blow, Lufas raised her right arm. Both of their arms crossed, and blood sprayed.

The one who was bleeding was...Lufas.

Benetnasch's all-out attack had ripped open Lufas's shoulder and scored a large wound. The wound wasn't exactly deep, but unfortunately, it wasn't shallow either. While the bleeding was showy, the wound itself hadn't reached bone, so Lufas would be able to heal it quickly.

On the other hand, Lufas's sword had gone right through Benetnasch's heart. The blade itself had become a stopper, so there wasn't much blood on the outside yet, but it was obvious the wound was fatal. This meant that, yes... The battle was over. Benetnasch hadn't been able to claim victory over Lufas.

For a while, she was absentminded, but eventually Benetnasch realized her defeat and smiled self-deprecatingly. "So it didn't...reach..."

How vexing. Benetnasch felt this from the bottom of her heart. *She was the first goal and rival I'd ever made in my life. But in the end, I was never able to surpass her, not even once. Right up until the end, I've only ever been chasing Lufas's back.*

Her arm slumped as the strength left her body.

There was a moment of silence before Lufas said, "Are you satisfied, Benet?"

Benetnasch could already no longer see, but somehow Lufas's hateful voice came through to her clearly.

"Oh, whatever. Losing at the end is the worst. I don't want to give all this up yet."

She's asking if I'm satisfied now? Does she even want to show off how calm and composed she is? But Lufas is just like that. There'd be no end to it if I got mad at every little thing.

"Ah... But... I feel like I've gotten a load off my chest. This isn't bad."

"Didn't you just say this was the worst?"

"Shut it."

Losing strength in her legs and unable to brace anymore, Benetnasch fell.

Lufas caught her. No longer having the strength to shake her off, Benetnasch allowed herself to stay in Lufas's arms.

Looks like this is it for me. I have lingering attachments, but I have no regrets. This fight is something I wanted, along with everything that comes after. With this fight, my wish has finally come true. While I'm not satisfied with the conclusion, I finally feel like I lived.

So... Yeah, this isn't terrible. It was only for a little while, but time has finally started to move forward for me. So even if this lasts only for a little bit...it'll be much more fulfilling than those two hundred years where everything had stopped.

"Maphaahl... Did you know that this would happen?"

"Yeah. Didn't We tell you that We would be back?"

"Hmph... You fool... You made me wait too long." Even while verbally abusing Lufas, Benetnasch never stopped smiling.



Underneath her eyelids, Benetnasch saw the forms of the people she had once somewhat approved of—she saw Alioth, Dubhe, Phecda, and Mizar, all people who'd left before her, as they'd once been.

Thinking back, those days weren't bad either. Those days where I stood with Lufas and fought to conquer the world even while swearing a rematch... They were about the only people who would treat me, the feared Vampire Princess, as a friend and an equal.

That was exactly why I couldn't forgive their betrayal, though. I couldn't help but be furious seeing how you all let yourselves fall. I don't regret not helping them. They deserved what they got. I won't apologize or reflect on my actions either. But... Yeah... Maybe it'd be all right to forgive them by now.

Benetnasch didn't hate them so much that the thought didn't pop up in her head.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

"Hold me tighter... I'm starting to lose feeling."

Lufas was quiet for a moment. "Okay, sure..."

Alioth and the others left ahead of me, and now it's my turn. That's all there is to it. There's some kind of liquid in my mouth. It's probably just blood, though. I can't even taste it at this point. Benetnasch forced herself to swallow, and as she finally felt her consciousness slipping away, she was very aware that she was reaching the end.

"Maphaahl, do you really think that you can change the world? This is the Goddess's playground... We're no different from the monsters in the arena. The Goddess just watches us struggle from on high. How're you even going to fight against someone like that?"

"We've gathered our hand. Everything's been going well so far. That Goddess is definitely making her own moves, but... Well, it shouldn't be a problem, since we're blessed with such good followers," Lufas said as she thought of her subordinates.

They'll surely do well. Because she had such strong belief and trust, she allowed herself to be the plaything and jester of the Goddess and continued to dance to her tune. Though Lufas had been shocked awake for the moment, she knew she'd go back to sleep soon. She would wander around like a sleepwalker, eyes closed, to get the Goddess to let her guard down.

"*She* is especially good... Ophiuchus will surely do great work."

"I don't recognize that name... Weren't there only thirteen people in your Twelve Stars because of the twins?"

"There's a hidden thirteenth Star. She started working under our orders two hundred years ago... No, she came to us even before that. The reason We're here like this is entirely due to the fact that she's gotten ahead of the Goddess."

"So everything's going as planned, huh? That's annoying," Benetnasch muttered unhappily, but unlike what her words suggested, she felt relieved.

As I thought. The person I chose to be my rival really is terrifyingly amazing. She's an abominable woman who's even trying to outmatch the Goddess and make her dance in the palm of her hand.

But that was exactly why Benetnasch thought, *Ah, it'll be fine... She won't lose to the Goddess. It makes me mad, but I just can't imagine her losing. That's good. Don't lose to anyone. Just be you... Be the absolute pillar of strength that I longed for. As long as you are, I'll be happy in the afterlife.*

"More than that, you proved it during our fight, didn't you? You proved that the Goddess's plot isn't perfect, that people can overcome it. You were the one who showed it to us."

"Hmph..."

Benetnasch received Lufas's praise coldly, but she wasn't unhappy about it. If anyone else had said it, she might have gotten angry, wondering why the hell this person was acting all high and mighty, but it was none other than her rival who had said it.

It's not a bad souvenir for the afterlife. A small amount of the pride she felt leaked into Benetnasch's words.

“Maphaahl.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t lose. If you’re brought down by someone else after defeating me, I’ll punch you flying, even if I have to come back from the afterlife to do it.”

“You got it. Don’t worry. We won’t lose.”

Lufas’s confident reply seemed to satisfy Benetnasch, and Lufas could tell. After that, the two spent a few seconds in silence before Benetnasch opened her mouth once again.

“Hey, Maphaahl.”

“Yeah?”

“Did I...manage to become your rival? Your archenemy?”

“A foolish question. You’re the only one to ever chase after us, trying to truly defeat us so wholeheartedly. You could also be said to be the one who understands us the most.”

“I see...”

Benetnasch didn’t give any sort of impression to Lufas’s reply, but somehow, Lufas could tell she was happy about it. Then, after a few more seconds, Benetnasch spoke again.

“Hey, Maphaahl?”

“Yeah?”

“You still there?”

“We’ll be here until the end. Don’t worry.”

It seemed like Benetnasch’s consciousness was finally fading, and her body had lost its feeling. The time for parting was close... Benetnasch felt that keenly. *But dying in my rival’s arms like this isn’t too bad.*

“Hey, Maphaahl.”

“Yeah?”

There was a long pause as Benetnasch gathered the strength to speak.

“Thank you...”

Those were the last words she spoke. After that, Benetnasch went quiet and stopped moving.

Lufas gently laid Benetnasch down and removed the sword that was still stuck in her chest before making her body whole with healing heaven-arts. The Vampire Princess had a peaceful expression on her face; it bore a soft smile that she rarely showed to anyone. After gently stroking Benetnasch’s hair, Lufas was besieged with a thought: just as Benetnasch had had Lufas as her goal, Lufas had once had Benetnasch as her goal as well.

Back when Lufas was still young and green, the Vampire Princess was already well-known as humanity’s strongest. She ruled along with the Dragon King, the Devil King, and the Lion King as the world’s four pillars of absolute strength. At that time, Lufas was still weak, and she wanted to become just like Benetnasch, who she had yet to even see. Lufas wanted to become strong like the Vampire Princess, strong enough to not be afraid of or lose to anything. She wished to become strong enough to reject all the unfairness in the world.

Benetnasch had thought she one-sidedly saw Lufas as a rival, but that wasn’t strictly true. Lufas had seen Benetnasch as a rival first and made the Vampire Princess’s strength her goal.

“We should be the one thanking you. If it weren’t for you, We would never have gotten this strong,” Lufas said, pausing before continuing. “Thank you, Benet... Rest well...”

Done with her parting words, Lufas raised her head. There she saw ten vampires who were probably Benetnasch’s followers, and each one of them was far from ordinary.

Their levels are... The weakest is level 500. They probably survived the fight two hundred years ago. Thinking back on it, Lufas realized that Benetnasch had challenged her alone two hundred years ago and hadn’t taken part in the battle against the Devil King, which meant that all the great warriors in her camp were still alive. Still, they were no match for Lufas as she was now. If she wanted to, she could massacre them all in a blink of an eye.

“You’re Lady Lufas Maphaahl, correct?”

“Correct. And you all are Benet’s subordinates?”

“Not subordinates. Tools. Every single one of us has willingly offered ourselves up to her.”

“So she was well-loved.”

Seeing Benetnasch and her peaceful expression, the vampires all held their breath as they gently picked up her body. Then, they bowed deeply to Lufas.

“We are grateful to you, Black-Winged Ruler. You kept your promise to our master.”

“You don’t hold a grudge...?”

“This is something our master wished for. Whether it ended in victory or defeat, life or death... We simply prioritize our master’s wishes.”

While that was what they said, Lufas suspected that they were still wrestling with complicated feelings internally. One of the vampires in the back was clenching their fist so hard they’d drawn blood, and another vampire was patting the first vampire’s shoulder, comforting them.

“Our master was surely satisfied... That is...our greatest...happiness.”

“Don’t force yourselves...”

The second Lufas said that, the vampire who had been bowing at the front suddenly raised their head like it had been bounced off of something and swung their fist. Before it managed to reach Lufas, their arm was caught by another vampire and stopped. Then, the vampire came to with a gasp as their eyes widened, realizing they’d been about to act rudely. It had probably been something done reflexively out of anger.

He quickly bowed once again while still tightly clenching his fist. “That was rude. I’m sorry. Please forgive this transgression.”

“We will excuse ourselves here. We must hold a state funeral for our master.”

The vampires then turned their backs to Lufas and flew off. They never turned back once, but Lufas knew that their eyes were most likely filled with hate and grief. After all, the one who’d almost taken a swing at her earlier had been crying tears of blood.

After pausing briefly, Lufas muttered, “Seriously... She’s really loved, isn’t she?” to herself as she picked up the twin swords that had fallen to the ground.

With that done, Lufas walked off across the ruined landscape, aiming to reunite with Dina and the others. However, her footsteps seemed somehow heavy.

*　　*

“I never thought that she’d be able to rebuff the Goddess’s temptation... I might have underestimated the Vampire Princess a little.”

Sensing that the fight between Lufas and Benetnasch had come to an end, the woman who’d split up with Lufas—Dina—chuckled to herself. *Honestly, the strength of Benetnasch’s spirit was completely unexpected. I’ll be honest; I did not see that coming.*

By Dina’s calculations, Lufas would have had to fight Benetnasch, who, despite the Goddess’s power-up, would have lost anyway. However, the actual outcome had been a complete surprise... Still, it didn’t change the end result.

“That was a little unexpected, but it doesn’t change anything... In fact, this may be better. Everything’s going well. It’s all according to plan,” Dina muttered to herself.

Yes, everything’s been decided from the start. There are no problems with the script that I’ve—no, that my master—has written. Even Lufas’s awakening this time was nothing more than passing a checkpoint to reach my master’s goal. This event was unexpected, but that’s it. The scenario is still in the palm of her hand.

“Now then... It seems like we’re finally at the second half of this scenario. It’s about time for them to realize that I’m no ally... But, just a little longer. Let’s keep deceiving them for just a little longer. Jeez, jesters have it hard, don’t they?”

Dina’s eyes narrowed, and her smile never wavered as she spoke. *Everything will be as written in her plan. There are no deviations in this fake scenario.*

8

Hello, Lufas here. I was flying to Dina and the others to meet up with them, and thinking about what had just happened. Everything after the part where I had been beaten on by Benetnasch was blurry, but I was somehow sure that I'd defeated her.

But... *What the hell was that?* No, I mean, I understood what happened. I had most likely been backed into a corner by Benetnasch, and the "real Lufas" had come to the forefront and beaten her. I knew that much.

What I didn't get was why it felt as if I'd done that. It wasn't as though I'd been looking on in third person as a stranger had controlled the body I inhabited nor was it as if I'd been completely sealed, and the real Lufas had been fighting in the meantime. It was like... It definitely felt as if it'd been me; it felt like I'd done all that.

How should I word it...? If I were to compare this to something, it'd be like a drunk person feeling all high-and-mighty, doing things that they would never normally do. If that happened, you wouldn't say that person had dual personalities, would you? It might be a little hard to understand, but if I had to pick, that would be the best way to describe it.

Back then, I'd also described myself as if I were normally "half asleep," and that had been correct... Like, I distinctly remembered feeling as though I'd truly woken up. My mind had been clear, and it'd felt as if I'd been freed of my shackles. I'd gotten that feeling many times before. The feeling had been especially strong during times I'd derived enjoyment from the fight itself, like when I'd fought Scorpius.

I was becoming someone else. Were we merging? Or was I being absorbed? Either way, I'd changed a lot compared to how I'd been when I'd first come to this world.

But some things have been weird from the beginning. Even though I'd been living in peaceful Japan, I'd easily killed other living beings while feeling no qualms about it. I wasn't sure how many times this'd made it, but I felt like I'd once again had my terrible powers of insight pointed out to me. I'd thought I still had some time, but how wrong I'd turned out to be. I had no time at all... And it'd probably been like that from the beginning.

If things stayed as they were, I didn't know what would happen to me when Lufas truly awakened. Would it be like what had just happened, and I'd feel something like merging? Or would I be completely taken over and disappear?

This most likely wasn't something that'd been planned by the Goddess. She thought that Lufas was in the way, so there was no way she'd be happy about Lufas awakening. Was this just a failure on the Goddess's part? Had this happened because she'd chosen me, and I turned out to be too weak a lid for Lufas's strong will...? If that were the case, then the Goddess was a little too incompetent.

And what was the meaning of those words I'd said back during the fight with Benetnasch? "Everything is going as planned." I had definitely said that. Just what was going as planned, and what had I been thinking of when I'd said that? It was about me, but even I didn't know the answer.

I... Who in the world am I?

* *

Turning back time a bit, it had just been decided that Lufas would be separating from Aries and the others, who would continue on in Tanaka to the country of the demihumans, Tyrving.

While the Twelve Heavenly Stars were worried about their lord and master, they still believed that she would win against Benetnasch. She had yet to show any signs of going all-out ever since she'd come back, but that was just because they'd never fought anyone worth getting serious over. As long as Lufas showed her true strength, it would basically be impossible for Benetnasch to win, no matter how strong she was. And because Aries and the others had such absolute belief in Lufas, they'd reluctantly allowed her to leave while they continued on to defeat Leon.

"I see it! Isn't that it, surrounded by the walls?" Aries said as he spotted a city encased in fortress walls as he looked out Tanaka's windows.

Libra confirmed his conjecture. "I sense many signs of life... They seem to be snake people, giants, and bug people... There's no doubt. It's Tyrving."

They were currently using Tanaka's flight mode, so they were moving through

the air. The members of the Twelve Stars all looked down on Tyrving's cityscape from above. Inside the city surrounded by fortress walls were several more layers of walls separating several districts, each of which was built to suit a different type of demihuman. As a result, one part of the city was a deep forest for the dryads and other plant people to live in, while another district, separated by a mere wall, was dotted with holes filled with seawater for merfolk and the like.

Looking down from above, the scenery was very chaotic. The center stood out starkly as well, where a uselessly large castle towered over the rest of the city, asserting its presence. This was most likely where Leon was.

"Now what do we do? Do we just barge in?" Karkinos asked, looking around at everyone.

Both Libra and Dina waved their hands in front of his face, denying his suggestion.

"No, the castle is most likely rife with Sagittarius's traps. There might be traps in the city as well."

"Well, I guess there's no reason to fight in enemy territory."

The enemies had Sagittarius, a trap specialist, and they knew Aries and the others were coming as well. There was no need to purposefully step into their territory, even less so when they already knew that traps had been set.

That was what Libra reasoned as she transformed her right arm into a cannon barrel and stepped out of Tanaka. Seeing this, the others realized what she was going to do, so they all moved on top of Tanaka's roof.

"We know where they are, so there's only one sensible course of action. A preemptive strike!"

Libra pointed the barrel of her cannon at the castle, and a red icon popped up in her vision, pointing out Leon's location. Then the target lock marker appeared, as well as her hit percentage. At the same time, Aigokeros's magic power rose, Dina raised her hands, and Aries wreathed his hands in flame. Scorpius took a deep breath, and Karkinos, the only one with nothing to do, stood there uselessly.

“Zuben El Genubi: maximum output. Fire!”

“Die! Deneb Algedi!”

“Aqua Judge’s Gavel!”

The usual beam of destruction erupted from Libra’s arm, while Aigokeros unleashed a black wave from his arms. The magic Dina used materialized a large mass of water shaped like a judge’s gavel to drop onto the castle. For what was usually a small hammer, this gavel was quite big.

“Mesarthim Version Three!”

Aries generated a huge fireball, but he only ended up giving this technique a plain name. It seemed that he was aware that he was using his skill in a way that wasn’t originally intended.

“Grafias!”

Scorpius’s Grafias was a deadly poison breath attack. Normally, breath attacks were the territory of dragons, but Scorpius was the queen of poison. Anything using poison was right in her lane.

Unfortunately, Karkinos had no part to play in this. His special skill, Acubens, was a counter skill that was only usable after he’d been attacked. He only had one skill that could be used for attacking as well, which meant that he had no choice but to rely on normal attacks when in a situation where he could not use Acubens.

As for his other skills, one of them was “Tegmine,” which raised his defensive power. There was also “Altarf,” which was only usable the moment he was knocked out. Its effect was to double the damage dealt by his allies’ next attacks. The special thing about this skill was that it could ignore the usual max single-hit damage limit. Lastly, there was “Asellus Borealis,” which would pull physical attacks towards himself—or as Lufas would put it, it was a skill to forcibly shift targets—along with its partner, “Asellus Australis,” which pulled magic attacks towards him.

These were all of Karkinos’s main skills, and it was obvious at a glance that he was not the type to proactively attack. He was undoubtedly excellent as a wall, but in this situation he was about as useless as a stick, so as it turned out, the

crab didn’t have a role today either.

While Karkinos was busy being nothing but a decoration, Libra and the others’ simultaneous attacks hit the castle, causing a huge explosion. Luckily, the surrounding town wasn’t too affected thanks to a shield Dina had erected around the castle beforehand. However, the castle area itself was a disaster zone.

At any rate, the group had managed to get in the first hit, and almost all of the traps around the castle should have been destroyed. Still, Leon was the strongest member of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. There was no way he would be killed by only this much damage, so Libra and the others were all already preparing for a second attack.

“We will fire once more. Let’s continue to shave away Leon’s health from a distance.”

If you’re going to laze around in your castle, that’s just fine with me. I’ll make this castle your grave then. Libra took aim, but the next moment her expression turned serious. “He’s coming! Scatter!”

Everyone followed Libra’s orders with no hesitation. Right afterwards, a man came flying out of the castle while emitting a dreadful amount of pressure, smashing through Tanaka’s roof as he passed. Then he touched down on the ground, following gravity’s pull.

The man who’d touched down turned out to be huge, over two meters in height. He shook his mane-like, dark red hair as he looked at his past comrades with wild and ferocious eyes, like those of a carnivorous beast. He wore a black bodysuit that tightly hugged his figure, and his pants were ripped in places. The corners of his mouth twisted upwards crookedly.

“Yo... Well, if it isn’t some real familiar faces.”

If the man’s features were to be summed up with one phrase, it would be “mass of muscles.” He had very well-defined biceps, pectorals that seemed as if they were made of steel, and eight-pack abs. His looks were unique among the Twelve Stars, which was basically a gathering of fair and beautiful figures. He was by no means ugly, but he certainly felt like he didn’t belong lined up with the rest of them. Putting it nicely, he was manly, but really, he had a fierce and

evil countenance, like that of a wild beast. The adventurer Jean and Gantz the mercenary actually looked more intelligent and thoughtful than he did.

Sagittarius the centaur, who was also the bearer of rather unique facial features, landed beside Leon. Each of them was unique alone; together they were extraordinary. They reeked of so much manliness it almost felt like the smell of sweat would reach Aries and the others at any moment. They were so out of place, it was out of control. It was enough to make a person wonder why Lufas had decided to make Leon’s human form look like that.



All the other Twelve Stars gathered here looked nice and pretty, which made their strong features stand out even more in a bad way.

“But it looks like Lufas isn’t here... This is looking like it’ll be a boring fight...” Leon said, spitting out his words.

Aigokeros’s anger spilled out, covering him in dark mana. “Oh? That’s some cheek. Bold for a traitor.”

Even seeing Aigokeros change from an elderly gentleman to a goat-headed demon in an instant couldn’t break Leon’s composure. Instead, he just made a small gesture, signaling Aigokeros to come at him.

“You’ll regret this!”

Aigokeros leapt forward, slamming a fist into Leon’s cheek. The aftershock of the attack was strong enough to destroy some trees behind Leon, but his expression didn’t change a bit. He hadn’t even been knocked backwards a little as he fixed Aigokeros with a cold stare.

“Aw, what...? That’s some half-assed punch you got there... You see, you gotta punch like this!” Leon shouted as he thrust his fist into Aigokeros’s face.

Just that was strong enough to blow the monster known as the Demon King away and burst straight through Tyrving’s fortress wall. Aigokeros disappeared, mowing down several buildings in his path.

Aries was shocked. “Aigokeros?! You...!”

Furious, Aries leapt forward and unleashed a kick at Leon’s thick neck after seeing his friend get hit. However, Leon simply dodged it with the slightest of movements before pulling back his fist and making sure Aries saw him preparing his counterattack.

Before that could happen, Scorpius’s hair wrapped around Leon’s arm, stopping it. On top of that, the end of her hair stabbed into Leon’s neck, injecting him with poison.

“Hee hee hee! You let your guard down, you fool. You know the effect of my skill Shaula, don’t you? The poison it produces can’t be gotten rid of without an elixir or the strongest of heaven-arts. It doesn’t matter how strong you are...

You’re done for.”

“Oh? And...?”

“What? ‘And...?’ I just told you that you can’t rid yourself of the poison.”

“So?” Leon grinned widely as he grabbed hold of the hair wrapped around his arm. Then, he spoke as if the poison were nothing to him. “You’re the fool! All that means is that I should kill you all before the poison does its job!”

Leon pulled on Scorpius’s hair, drawing her in range to punch her in the stomach. When the punch landed, there was an ominous snapping sound of something breaking, and fresh blood spilled from Scorpius’s purple lips. Just like that, Scorpius was thrown away bodily, flying farther and farther until she couldn’t be seen anymore. In the distance, there was a thunderous crash as she struck something.

Seeing that, Aries couldn’t stop himself from shuddering.

As I thought. He’s really strong...! He’s just preposterously strong!

9

“Don’t get too full of yourself, Leon.”

Libra’s eyes glinted, and a membrane of light enclosed the surroundings. When the membrane formed, Aries and Dina were pushed out of the field, leaving only Leon, Sagittarius, and Libra inside. Leon and Sagittarius instantly realized what was going on when they saw the field being established.

It’s coming...! The skill that’s buried many warriors in the past, and boasts the greatest annihilation ability amongst anything the Twelve Stars has.

White light converged on Libra, and she shined like a star. The aurora expanded and pulsed.

“Brachium, activate!”

Then, the star exploded.

Inside the field of light, an even more intense light flashed, trampling over everything inside. From the outside, it looked like a storm of light. Colorful

particles danced and scattered, piercing through any kind of defense. Neither heaven-arts nor skills had any meaning in the face of it; Brachium was given priority over any ability without question. In short, it was the end as soon as it was activated. Brachium was an unfair skill that would lead directly to death, as long as the victims didn't have over 100,000 HP.

The damage it was capable of was something nearly on the level with those of high authority in the world, which was only possible because Libra had once been the guardian of the Goddess's sanctuary. It was strong enough that Lufas had once said, "In terms of attack power, she might be better than me."

And Leon... He easily crossed that whirlpool of light.

Libra was rendered speechless in surprise.

"Too lukewarm! Ha!"

Leon struck out with his stout arm. Libra managed to react in time, crossing her arms in front of her to guard, but a shockwave ran through her steel arms, cracking them. With just one punch, Libra's body was repelled backwards, dispelling the light field.

Brachium had definitely activated, and Leon and Sagittarius had definitely been damaged by it. But Leon had a huge enough HP pool that he probably hadn't needed to worry, so he'd continued on without caring about the damage, closing the gap between himself and Libra. Apparently, Sagittarius had also somehow survived and remained conscious. Libra could see him using some item out of the corner of her eye.

"OOOOaaarrggghh!"

Libra leapt out of the way of Leon's second strike and stopped in midair.

Even though he's a traitor, he's still the strongest of the Twelve Stars, I see. He's not someone who can be fought by ordinary means. Then I'll just have to use all my trump cards as well.

With that decided, Libra called her new weapon, the use of which had been authorized by Lufas beforehand.

"Armament selection: Astraia!"

Responding to Libra's summons, a port in faraway Blutgang opened, and a set of steel wings flew out. The thing, named Astraia, flew at supersonic speed towards Libra. Once it was near, it commenced support fire, unleashing a flash of light at Leon, who had just leapt into the air.

"Whoa!"

Astraia managed to catch Leon completely by surprise, and he was shot out of the air as Astraia looped around above them. It fired a second round, and then a third. Astraia continued to unleash beams from its cannons, keeping Leon in check. Of course, Leon wouldn't be killed by an attack like that, but while he was distracted, Libra and Aries closed the gap between them and Leon, unleashing a fire-wreathed kick and a slash.

Seeing that, Leon immediately dodged the kick and caught the blade with his forehead. The blade bit lightly into his skin and drew some blood, but there wasn't much damage.

"You're so annoying!"

Leon kicked Aries right back, sending him away and burying his slim body in a wall. Next, he punched at Libra, who dodged by a hair's breadth as she backed off and gained some distance. On top of that, she shot lasers from her eyes as she did so, hitting Leon in the back and further irritating him.

Taking advantage of that momentary distraction, Libra flew up into the sky above Astraia. Astraia transformed, looking as if it were folding into itself as a red line of light connected it to Libra.

"Link!"

The newly created golem made just for Libra combined with her in midair. Astraia's cannons folded over Libra's shoulders as if she were carrying them, and two more cannons showed themselves on either side of Libra's waist. Lastly, Astraia deployed its wings, giving Libra three sets of wings.

"Docking complete... I'm coming!"

"The hell is that?!"

"It looks like she gained a new combat form at some point."

Libra pointed her four new cannons and her right arm down at Leon and Sagittarius, fixing them with a hard stare.

The opponent is a former member of the Twelve Stars. A mediocre amount of firepower won't work here, so there's only one recourse... Annihilate them with maximum force!

"Firepower at maximum output... Releasing all cannons... Full salvo: fire!"

Beams of light came out of every one of Libra's barrels—from her right arm, both shoulders, her hips, and her eyes. Having fired a full salvo from seven weapons, the seven beams of destructive light made a beeline for Leon and Sagittarius.

The two of them had barely managed to get out of the way, but it wasn't as if Libra could only fire once. Salvoes of cannon fire rained down upon the two of them, with a slight delay for each one. Each and every shot was from a destructive weapon, which didn't allow for light jabs. Such fire rained intermittently but consistently down on Leon, and no matter how strong he was, there was no way it wouldn't do damage.

Clicking his tongue, Leon jumped up and kicked at Libra. Thanks to the mobility boost afforded to her by combining with Astraia, Libra instantly retreated to an even higher altitude, avoiding Leon's kick and slamming a full salvo into him as a counterattack, sending him back to the ground.

"Tch!"

Leon spun in midair and landed, looking up at Libra balefully. He had her beat in pure combat ability, but the matchup was a little bad for him. While he wasn't in any danger of being defeated by her, letting things continue like this would just waste his stamina. Leon had no idea when Aigokeros and Scorpius would rejoin the fight either, so he couldn't afford to have this much trouble with Libra. On top of that, Scorpius's poison was slowly but steadily shaving away at his HP, furthering his impatience.

Aries is no threat. He's just filth who used to be a garbage monster. It doesn't matter how strong trash becomes—trash is always trash. He's just prey that should never have been allowed in the Twelve Stars in the first place... Someone like that can't be a threat, so I don't care about him.

As for the blue-haired girl who's watching from the side... I don't really get her, but I can probably leave her alone.

"Sagittarius!" Leon shouted.

"Okay," Sagittarius responded, drawing his bow.

Leon grabbed onto the yet-to-be released arrow, and pointed it at Libra. His insanely well-built arm was so strong that grabbing the arrow didn't shed blood.

"Al Nassr!"

Sagittarius's absolutely accurate skill activated, and the arrow instantly teleported in front of Libra. The unavoidable arrow pierced Libra's flank, but the real threat was Leon, who had grabbed onto the arrow and moved with it.

Libra struggled to react in time, much like someone in a panic.

"I've got you!"

Leon swung down his right fist, which went into Libra's shoulder, caving in a cannon barrel. Libra thought she would simply be forced to the ground like that, but she barely managed to right herself in time and took flight again. Only there was no way Leon would let her go. He chased after her, unleashing a kick that was like cannon fire itself, blowing Libra away.

Libra flew backwards in a tailspin, punched through the wall, and entered the nearby capital. There, Leon came crashing in, breaking through entire houses—even though it was his capital—so that he could throw a finishing blow at Libra. The blow was unavoidable, and would easily go through any defense Libra could put up. She was literally in life-threatening danger, but someone barged in and took the blow for her with their face.

"Wh-What...?!"

"Tsk tsk tsk... You can't forget about M E now, can you, Leon?"

His glasses had been broken, and the ground behind him had been damaged by the aftershock of Leon's punch, but the person who'd actually taken the blow looked unaffected. He was even smiling calmly as he stood there.

"Here, I'll give this back to you! Acubens!"

Karkinos threw out a high kick with beautiful, fluid form, but it wasn't a regular kick. It was a counterattack with the force of Leon's own attack added to it. That single attack lifted Leon off the ground, and this time, it was his turn to be blown away. After destroying some buildings that were in his path, Leon righted himself and landed, but Karkinos came charging in right afterward.

"You bastard! You're just a crab that can't do anything but wait for other people to attack!"

"Y E S! Y E S! Y E S! That's all M E can do. But because that's the case... I won't fall short of anyone on this point!"

Karkinos had brought out his half-scissors from somewhere and was raining attacks on Leon. Of course, they basically didn't work at all. All it did was irritate Leon, but that was all right, since that was Karkinos's goal.

Leon landed a kick to Karkinos's jaw, knocking Karkinos into the air for a second. Right afterward, a more powerful kick buried itself in Leon's jaw, sending him up into the air. Then, Karkinos leapt after Leon.

"Yoooouuu!"

"Stop, Leon! Don't attack!"

Leon ignored Sagittarius's warning and struck out with his stout arm. The punch's force caused Karkinos to spin, but he just used that centrifugal force in a counter, which landed on Leon's cheek, causing Leon to spin even more.

This style was purely defensive. Karkinos would never use big attacks on his own; he couldn't. The only offensive skill he had used the enemy's attack as a trigger for activation, so it wasn't suited for being on the offensive at all. Being called useless wasn't exactly false. In truth, Karkinos was the most useless of all the Twelve Stars in offensive situations. He was slow, had no range, and couldn't manage area of effect—AoE—attacks either. As always, he could only do one thing—"wait and counter." That was it. But because of that, there was no one more effective when facing off against enemies like Leon.

Leon was beaten to the ground, and Karkinos approached ever closer. Leon glared at Karkinos with murderous intent as he put as much power as he could into his fist.

Defense? Counters? As if I care. If he's tough, then I'll just have to pulverize him even harder.

"OOOOooooOOOOOOAARGGHH!!!"

Leon visited Karkinos with a storm of blows. The combo had everything from punches to backfists, knee strikes, elbow strikes, rising kicks, ax kicks, roundhouse kicks, and double sledgehammers. Leon beat Karkinos down, struck him upwards, and in general slammed him with as much violence as he could muster. Karkinos's handsome face was quickly stained with blood as his body was forcefully bent backwards.

Karkinos's mouth curved upwards... Next, it was Leon's turn to pay the price for such violence with his body.

"H A H A H A H A H A!"

Karkinos repeated the exact same combo that Leon had hit him with earlier. It ended with him being beaten down and then back up again! The combo was repeated again, and it was Leon's turn to be covered in blood.

The damage dealt to Karkinos had been by no means small. No matter how tough of defense he boasted, there was no way Leon's attacks would've done zero damage, but Karkinos was at an advantage, given that he'd dealt more damage to Leon. Karkinos ended with a kick that dropped Leon to the ground as Karkinos himself landed elegantly.

"Hey! Come on!" Karkinos said, taunting Leon with a finger while the lion was still on the ground.

Furthermore, that was the moment Dina decided to end her spectatorship as she hit Karkinos with some healing heaven-arts, fully recovering him. That move had just taken away Leon's option of winning in a battle of attrition, immediately turning the tide of battle.

Having realized that this had to be bad, Sagittarius moved to support Leon, but he was stopped by the feeling of a barrel being pressed against the back of his head. He didn't even have to look to know it was Libra.

On top of that, Aries got back up unsteadily as the phantom of a large goat manifested in town along with a giant scorpion monster. The two of them, who

had clearly recovered, were filled with murderous intent, and it seemed as if they'd completely forgotten about their enemies being former comrades. Karkinos let out a strained chuckle seeing them like that before turning to Leon.

"It's checkmate. This fight is over, Leon."

Leon could only grit his teeth in frustration.

10

In the past, he believed that he was the strongest. He was unrivaled by those around him from the moment he was born. He was born to be on top of all monsters from the beginning. The power he had from birth was just on a different level, as were his rank, base stats, and upper limits. Leon was born with all of those things at a level far removed from his peers, so everyone around him worshiped and obeyed him as a king as if it were only natural. In turn, Leon also accepted that this was the natural state of things.

I'm strong, so it's only a matter of course that other people follow me, he thought*. I'm allowed to treat these lesser beings however I want; strength gives me absolute authority.*

He never once thought of other monsters as the same as him. *I'm at the top, and all of you are lower than me.* That was what Leon felt from the bottom of his heart, and because their power was too different, no one could object to that. Rather, Leon would just eat them if they did.

Was it hubris born from too much pride? Or was it a childish delusion born from his desire to believe he was special? No, Leon rejected all of that. To him, it was all the truth. *I am better than all of you. I always have been.* And that was all that mattered.

Having decided that, and with no one to stop him, Leon plumbed the depths of tyranny. There was no way anyone was able to fight evenly with him. *Ah, such pleasure. This sense of absolute superiority is all thanks to being born a king.*

As it was, Leon would get into fights he knew he would win, and he won those fights because it was predestined.

I'll definitely win. It'll come true if I believe. Beating people down who come to face me spouting shit like, "We have our sights set on the future, so there's no way we'll lose to some beast" while laughing and dominating them with pure force is just bliss! It doesn't matter what people believe, what future they wish for, or even if they're right. Weaklings are weaklings, and trash is trash.

I'm absolutely strong, so it doesn't affect me no matter what small fry like them shout. I can do anything. If that frustrates anyone, they can just try to stop me. But they can't, can they? And that's the end of it.

In the end, Leon thought of everyone else as nothing but bugs to be squished at his leisure. No matter what he did, it didn't affect him in any way. He wasn't even aware that he was doing anything wrong.

Leon had never felt like he would lose. In fact, he'd never met anyone who was his equal, and he never doubted that would be the case for his entire life.

It seems like there's the Vampire Princess, the Devil King, and the Dragon King on the other side of the ocean, but they're probably all small fry. Since this was how Leon thought, there was nothing to be surprised about when he heard that the Dragon King had been killed by some heaven-winged person. All he thought was, *Ah, so a weakling beat another weakling*, and he promptly forgot about the whole thing.

He would eventually realize that had been a mistake, because none other than that very same heaven-winged—Lufas Maphaahl—would assault his territory. That was his first experience being dominated by sheer power, since he was usually the one doing so, as well as the first time he was ever afraid of an enemy.

So this is fear. This is pain. And this is defeat.

All the things that Leon expected to never experience in his entire life were carved into him by one woman in a single night. It wasn't a fight where he was expected to win, so he just had to carry things out like expected. Leon had never even imagined a fight where he would be forced to throw himself at an opponent that he didn't expect to win against.

I won't accept it... I won't accept that I was bested by a single woman...!

The fight ended in Leon's defeat, and he was added to the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, who were Lufas's subordinates. He was relieved that he hadn't been killed, but at the same time, he was ashamed to be relieved. There was no greater humiliation in his eyes. The fact that he was lined up in the same group as some insignificant bug like Aries was also a great disgrace akin to being executed.

I can't stand this. I hate everything about this. No one is allowed to be above me. I won't allow it. Yeah, I'll have my revenge for this humiliation. I will never forgive Lufas Maphaahl. I will definitely kill her. I won't let anyone else have that right. Next time, I'll be sure to pound her into dust, force her down, and dye her smug, good-looking face in fear as she painfully realizes her own defeat. And once she starts begging for her life, terrified, I'll bite into that white neck and eat her until there aren't even any bones left.

Once I do that, I'll finally go back to being the true strongest. I'm sure the feeling of eating her, who is unmatched by anyone else, will be so pleasurable it'll be like I climaxed.

That was the first strong desire that Leon ever had, and it was twisted beyond measure.

Among all the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, Leon was unique. He was the only one who didn't respect or worship Lufas. In fact, he despised and resented her. He swore that he would one day kill her.

The actions Leon and Benetnasch took were similar, but the feelings behind them were the exact opposite. The reason Benetnasch had attacked Lufas was because her love had been flipped upside down, but the reason Leon did so was because of pure hatred and murderous intent. It was far removed from Benetnasch's lukewarm feelings of familiarity. That was why he couldn't be satisfied with how things had turned out. He couldn't allow himself to forgive Lufas, who had just shoved the loss down his throat and then disappeared on her own.

I'm going to be the one to kill her. Shouldn't she be killed by me instead of anyone else?

But Lufas ignored that and fought on her own whims before disappearing just

like that. *Now I'll have lost to you forever. I'll never be able to regain my pride.*

With his goal lost, Leon threw away his title as one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars and spent some time doing nothing; he'd only started taking action recently. Up until then, he'd just been randomly killing and eating adventurers and devilfolk as they came to him, but apparently the other monsters thought that he was protecting them.

By the time he'd noticed, he was being worshiped by bug people and snake people—all folk he didn't care about. They all praised him, saying that he was their king. Basically, it was a return to the past. The people around him fell at his feet on their own due to his overwhelming strength, but he wasn't unhappy about it. *That's right. I am a king. I'm a paragon of strength people will bow to, even if I don't do anything. This is the natural state of things. It was everything else up until now that'd been strange.*

Having reached that conclusion, Leon allowed them all to gather under him. Leon honestly didn't care about demihuman rights or retaliation against humans at all, but since they all wanted to become his servants, he figured he needed to be generous. That was when he got an idea.

I'll be able to say that I surpassed Lufas if I conquer the world myself, right? Even Lufas wasn't able to put the entire world under her thumb, so if I make that happen, then that would mean I'm better than Lufas.

Lufas herself is no longer around, so I can't beat her and overcome her that way. Since that's the case, let's prove my superiority by accomplishing what she couldn't. I'll prove that I'm above Lufas, something that should have been evident from the start.

But... But what the hell is this? I'm just fighting Lufas's subordinates, the Twelve Heavenly Stars, not even Lufas herself. Why the hell am I being cornered? Why am I being done in by these small fry? I don't like this... I really, really hate this...

*　　*

"Dammit...! How could I be toyed with by lowly trash like you bastards and not even Lufas..."

Leon forced his blood-soaked body upright, glaring at his former colleagues, who were surrounding him.

Colleagues...? No, I've never thought of them like that even once. Everyone else is lower than me, so there's no way I'd think of them like that.

It was true that he was strong. If he were to fight anyone here, he would be able to win one-on-one against any of them, regardless of the elemental type matchup. He'd even be able to brute-force his way past Karkinos's staying power. But with Dina's healing in the mix, there was nothing he could do. Even if he were to attack Dina, Karkinos would just get in the way, and Leon wouldn't be able to escape this situation. On top of that, Libra, Aigokeros, and Scorpius had to be added to the mix.

Leon was strong—absurdly so—but no matter how strong he was, his opponent was also a group of monsters that surpassed common sense, the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars. Against them, even Sagittarius and Leon together wouldn't be able to win.

"Shut up. You're grating on my nerves."

That was when a black flash interrupted Leon. The Moon element spell that Aigokeros let loose, Luna Shooter, hit Leon directly, pushing him back. Following up on that, the giganticized Scorpius grabbed Leon with her pincers and used brute force to slam him into the ground.

Even if Sagittarius wanted to support Leon, there was nothing he could do. He still had a barrel pressed against his head, though who knew if he would actually support Leon even if he could move freely. At the very least, it didn't seem like he was trying to find a way to turn this situation around on Libra.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You're losing to me, a piece of lowborn trash, so you must be an even bigger piece of lowborn trash, and I can't seem to hear what you're saying! You betrayed Lady Lufas, you towering, ripe mountain of shit! Stop your whining!" Scorpius shouted, hysterical, as she brought her pincers down over and over.

Every time she did, the ground shook, gradually forming a depression. Scorpius didn't have a scrap of mercy or tolerance for her former comrade. Her world revolved around Lufas, so Lufas was naturally the basis for all her

decisions. That was why Leon, who'd betrayed Lufas, was no longer a comrade to Scorpius. He was nothing but an annoying pest of a monster.

"I mean, aren't I right?! Hey, say something! Come on! Everyone else thinks so too, don't they?! I mean, Lady Lufas is always right, which means these people who're opposing her are all bad! I seriously wonder why these idiots can't even understand something so simple! Ah, right. I see. They aren't thinking of anything, are they? That's why they don't realize it! Come on! Come on come on come on! Take those filthy heads of yours and scrape them on the ground as you apologize to Lady Lufas! Beg for your life! Say it was all your fault, and that you know you're idiots and pieces of shit!"

Scorpius's words sped up as her incomprehensible rant continued. "Hey what the hell're you doing I told you to do it already didn't you hear me are your ears rotten or something I hated that you always got treated so nice just because you're a little strong it made me so mad ah yeah that's right it'd all be good if you weren't around yeah that's a good idea ah why didn't I figure out such an easy solution sooner but that's all right it's not too late I can just slice you to ribbons and turn you into meat chunks then Lufas'll praise me and she'll say that I did great and I'm amazing and she'll pet me on the head and—"

"O H..."

Scorpius continued acting hysterically, and it was no longer possible to understand what she was saying as she persisted in attacking Leon. Karkinos couldn't help but rub his forehead. Normally, Scorpius could be reasoned with, but once she started going off the rails like this, there was no longer any way to stop her.

The rest of the Twelve Stars just looked on with blank stares and fed up expressions, thinking, *There she goes again...* Seeing her like that, it was evident she was so far gone that it brought up a thought: *Maybe the Goddess's brainwashing didn't have much to do with it.*

At any rate, it seemed the fight was over. Actually, Leon would die at this rate, so the others had to figure out a way to calm Scorpius down. It was true that Leon was a traitor, but even so, he was still one of Lufas's limbs and a member of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, so the decision to kill him had to be

made by Lufas herself. It wasn't all right for her subordinates to decide to cut off one of her limbs on their own, so even if they put him on the verge of death, they mustn't actually kill him.

I won't accept it...

That was why none of them noticed Leon's hatred and anger boiling over as he was hit. They didn't notice the fact that, because he was cornered, he'd lost all sense of reason. They should have known that there was at least one existence that would see this as a perfect opportunity.

<<Do you want power?**>>** Leon's heart leapt. A kind female voice filled with love tickled his eardrums, and he could feel a premonition of power greater than he'd ever felt before throughout his entire body.

This is what I've been waiting for. What I've been wanting is right here. Enough power to fight Lufas is right here.

<<You are the strongest monster, so this must not be allowed to happen to you. If you wish, I can give you power.**>>** Leon saw an unfamiliar but beautiful blue-haired girl in his mind's eye. She smiled and extended her hand towards Leon. Obviously, this was a ploy by the Goddess and an invitation to Leon's doom, but the corners of his mouth tilted upwards as he grinned.

Power... It's power! I won't lose to anyone as long as I have power. I can even fight Lufas. I don't need my pride. Power is everything. Power is absolute. Weak people can't even protect their pride anyway.

Leon didn't hesitate to grab the hand offered to him.

I don't need the whole pitch... Stop stalling; hurry and give it! Power. I want it! Shut up and give me absolute power that won't lose to anyone!

<<All right then. I will fulfill your wish.**>>** The Goddess smiled and held her hand to Leon. The next moment, Leon's body explosively filled with divine power.

11

It happened suddenly. The fight should have been over with everything

decided, but the result was overturned by an unscrupulous third party from beyond the board. Leon's entire body glowed as it overflowed with uncharacteristic holy power, and everyone other than Scorpius, who was in the middle of her hysterics, sensed the danger at the same time.

"Crap! Get away, Scorpius!" Libra warned.

But the rampaging scorpion wouldn't stop. Without noticing, she continued to slam her pincer down time after time, but it was no longer working on Leon. Even while being wailed on by Scorpius, Leon's body swelled as he threw away his human form. His bright red hair changed into a mane, and fur sprouted from his entire body as he eventually grew even bigger than Scorpius, showing his true form as a ferocious monster. He was the strongest monster, one that had been lined up with the Dragon King, the Devil King, and the Vampire Princess—the Lion King Leon.

He swiped Scorpius away with his front paw like she was nothing but an annoyance right in front of the other Twelve Stars, who were frozen in the face of his new, overwhelming aura. That action alone caused the giant scorpion to fly away, crushing buildings under her as she slid across the ground.

"Ggghhh... ROOOAAAARRRRRR!!!"

Leon let out a beastly howl with no hint of reason behind it before looking straight at the members of the Twelve Stars with murderous intent in his eyes.

At the same time, Libra pointed all her guns at Leon and fired a full volley. He was engulfed by explosive fire but leapt out of it before the smoke cleared. Leon charged into Karkinos, who reacted fast enough to put himself in the way, along with Libra, both of whom were knocked away.

Aigokeros's phantom attacked Leon from behind. The Lion King kicked him with his back leg, dispersing the phantom, before stomping on Aigokeros's real body, which was on the ground.

"You! Mesar—"

Aries jumped and attempted to shoot Mesarthim in midair, but Leon looked at him as if he were a bug and swatted him away with his tail.

Dina shot a golden beam, but even though it hit Leon directly, he didn't even

flinch. Leon glared at her, and she wasted no time in opening a gate and escaping.

We can't match him, the Twelve Stars thought as they faced off against Leon.

They all understood what had happened, since they'd encountered this before. The Goddess most likely had something to do with this, just like with Scorpius. The problem was that Leon was the one strengthened this time, and Lufas wasn't here. Leon was already strong, and now with the Goddess's strength on top of that, he'd far surpassed what the Twelve Stars were capable of dealing with. Libra's cannon fire hadn't made him falter, and he'd easily broken through Karkinos's defenses. Even the poison he'd received from Scorpius had disappeared.

Leon breathed in deeply and set his sights on the members of the Twelve Stars below him—Libra, Karkinos, Scorpius, and Aigokeros. Aries was the only one who'd been sent off in a different direction, so he wasn't in range... *Well, whatever.* Leaving a weakling monster like that alive wouldn't cause any trouble for him. Rather, allowing a monster like Aries to cause trouble for him would hurt Leon's pride.

He unleashed a breath attack that boasted the heat of a star, and it assaulted the members of the Twelve Stars. Not even they could survive that attack and be fine if they took it full-on, so what happened was probably lifesaving.

Right before the breath hit them, Leon thought he heard Sagittarius's voice.

"Everyone, grab on!"

Then, the heat passed. The aftermath was gruesome; even rocks had been melted. But the corpses of the Twelve Stars weren't there, which meant that they'd all escaped through some means. All that was left was Leon and Aries.

"Tch! That bastard Sagittarius... He betrayed me!"

Leon clicked his tongue hatefully before looking over at Aries. He was bathed in Leon's intense gaze, and there was still no sign of him standing up. Aries had realized the gap in their power, and his instincts had him cowed; he couldn't rise.

Seeing this, Leon snorted. "That look suits you, Aries. You're just a trash

monster, after all. Being scared like that is how you should be."

"What...?!"

"It's true, isn't it? You were picked up by Lufas, trained by Lufas, and given everything by Lufas. None of that power is yours. Seeing garbage like you treated the same as us makes me sick."

Aries stared at Leon in shocked silence.

It seemed as if Leon had lost all interest in Aries, who wasn't standing up. As soon as Leon had finished what he wanted to say, he jumped away, leaving the sheep who was too cowardly to even stand alone.

Aries looked down, frustrated, and tightened his fist. *I'm so...so pathetic. I knew that already too. I didn't need Leon to point it out to me. More than anything, I can't forgive myself for not standing up.*

Even so, Aries couldn't stop shaking, which made him feel even more miserable.



*　　*

Turning back time, it was now just before Aries and the others made contact with Leon. Lufas and the others were off on their own mission, so Sei and his party were traveling in the camping car golem Suzuki, heading towards the centaurs' village.

Of course, the insides of Suzuki weren't as flush as Tanaka's were, but even so, Sei and the others were afforded far more comfort than would normally be expected from travel, teaching them just how far removed from the norm Lufas's skills with alchemy were. They were more than grateful just for the fact that the golem moved on its own, carrying them at a speed of sixty kilometers per hour towards their destination. On top of that, Suzuki was equipped with beds and a sofa, as well as a simple bath, toilet, and even a kitchen.

Not even nobles had a means of transportation this extravagant. In Laevateinn, the royal family had a special wyvern carriage for their exclusive use. The cabin wasn't towed along by horses but by captured wyverns. The interior was befitting of royalty in that it was gorgeous, but because of the way it was built, they couldn't escape the fact that there wasn't much room. It wasn't like the wyverns lacked power; it was just that if the cabin was too big, turning would be too hard, and it would be dangerous.

Suzuki was different. It wasn't being towed around by horses or wyverns. It could move and turn on its own, so its maneuverability was on a whole other level. Of course, it still wouldn't be able to turn if it had no room to do so, but it was at least capable of far tighter turns than carriages were. Well, if there were any places that Suzuki couldn't drive, it'd just fly past, though. It was unbelievable, but they'd come across a huge boulder that they couldn't circumvent earlier, and Suzuki had just deployed its wings on its own and flew over it.

On the way, it defeated nearby monsters on its own as well. One time, the party went outside to try and deal with monsters when they appeared, but Suzuki used some sort of cannon-like thing and exploded all of them before the hero's party could do anything. Basically, they didn't need to deal with anything weaker than Suzuki themselves.

By the way, Suzuki's level was 350, which was even higher than Virgo. As for what that meant, well, Sei and the others couldn't do anything against a monster that Suzuki couldn't win against either, which left everything up to Castor. In other words, there was nothing for Sei and the others to do, no matter what happened.

"Th-This is amazing. This vehicle named Suzuki, that is... It's way faster than the royalty-only wyvern carriage and far more comfortable too. I heard there are independent golems in Blutgang, but I'm sure even those aren't this well-done."

"Yeah. On top of that, there's a bath, a toilet, a kitchen, and bedrooms. This thing's got everything. I've traveled everywhere as a mercenary, so I've experienced both horse-drawn and wyvern-drawn carriages, and I've never had a journey this easy."

Kross sincerely praised Suzuki's perfection, and Gantz also strongly expressed how impressed he was. Apparently the camping car was an unknown thing to them, made from technology that they couldn't even imagine, let alone understand. That wasn't exactly wrong in actuality. Things like camping cars were normal on Earth, which was far more advanced than Mizgarz. This world was several hundred years away from reaching that point on their own. Well, except for Mizar, who'd made Blutgang and was an exception among exceptions. He was strange enough to have even made Lufas say, "That cheater alchemist. There's something wrong with his head."

"Hey, Kross, could we buy this? Lufas could probably make more of these if she wanted to, so if the country hands over, say, a million el... If we have one of these, our travels will get so much easier."

"No, Jean. Not even Lufas Maphaahl can make something like this so easily. This is most likely something like a masterpiece of hers. Never mind one million el... Maybe ten million el... No, but the budget..."

The party was totally impressed with Lufas's self-propelled golem, but only Sei had a complicated expression.

It's true that this is amazing, and if anyone asked me if this was comfortable, I'd have to say it is. But... But... Why a camping car?! Why is something from

Earth recreated here? And the name... Suzuki? Seriously? Kross and the others are categorizing Suzuki as a vehicle similar to carriages, both horse and wyvern drawn. But it's different. It's called a camping car, and Lufas should know that too.

Actually, when Sei had questioned her about it, Lufas had answered rather normally. In fact, she'd come back with a question of her own, asking, "Would a truck have been better?" Yes, it was clear she knew about Earth and its technology. On top of that, she gave it a name like Suzuki for some reason.

N-No, calm down. That's not what's weirdest! The problem isn't the name. Honestly, there's so many weird things to point out and retort to, I can't help but think this is some sort of gag or bit. But whatever. The real problem is why Lufas knows about any of this at all.

Lufas had knowledge from Earth, which meant that there was some way to learn about it in this world, and she had access to it.

There was a situation a lot like this in a story Sei had read a long time ago. It was a story where the main characters fought lots of enemies in a different world, and the big boss that appeared at the end knew about Earth, since his final plan was to invade it. When Sei thought of that, his face naturally paled.

No. No way... Megrez said that Lufas isn't an enemy. But... She does have a history. Setting aside whether she's good or evil, she actually did aim for world domination through military expansion two hundred years ago. That's indisputable history. So maybe... Maybe her goal actually includes Earth? I heard from Megrez that she aimed to unite the world through power because she was so sad at its current state, but if you flip that around, that just means that she's the type of person who's not afraid to get violent and isn't picky about her methods for Mizgarz's sake. So isn't it possible? She could be aiming for Earth's technology in order to develop Mizgarz and make it more plentiful. That'd be the worst case.

Sei shook his head. *Looks like whenever I start thinking, my thoughts always head in a dark direction, as I constantly think of the worst-case scenario. It's a bad habit.*

That was when Virgo spoke up, worried after noticing that something seemed

wrong with Sei. “Sei, are you all right? Your face looks pale.”

“Huh? Wha—?!”

Sei hurriedly looked up, making eye contact with Virgo. He saw her fluffy pink hair, big eyes, white skin, and pure white wings. She looked like the very picture of an angel, which flustered Sei. No matter how many times Sei saw her face, he couldn’t get used to it. That was just how absurdly pretty she was. In fact, the more Sei was exposed to her and the more accustomed to her presence he was, the less resistance he had to her looks.

“You’re really not pushing yourself?”

“N-Nah, I’m fine. No problems here.”

Endure it! Endure it, my reason! Now is the time to show your steel-like qualities! Sei desperately tried to control himself, managing to force his instincts as a man into submission with sheer will, powerful as a hydraulic press. But inside his mind, there were macho men appearing in front of his reason made of steel, breaking it down with hammers while spouting things like, “You know all men are beasts, right?”

No, don’t give me that. Who the hell are you people?

Sei grabbed the macho men that appeared in his imagination and threw them up into the sky. Then, he hurriedly repaired his sense of reason, forcing himself to keep up appearances, but that was when Virgo heartlessly made a follow-up attack as her soft hands caressed Sei’s forehead.

“Doesn’t seem like you have a fever...”

What the hell is this? What the hell is this super-old, cheesy romantic comedy trope doing here?! Am I gonna die? Wait, am I really gonna die today? Did I use up all the luck in my life, so now it’s just going to be one misfortune after the other until I die? Sei could feel his heartbeat quickening without his consent.

Hey, stop that! Seriously, please get away, I’m begging you. I’m not joking. I’m gonna fall for you.

That instant, a light Sei and the others couldn’t see glinted menacingly inside Suzuki.

“Confirmed activation of master’s top order. Activating normie elimination mode.”

Suddenly, Suzuki’s ceiling opened up, and the sofa Sei was on flew up on its own, moving him up to the roof of the car. Then, the ceiling closed again, leaving him on his own. Of course, the roof was equipped with a table and such, so Sei could still spend his banishment in comfort, but he wouldn’t be able to return inside for some time.

One of the orders the overprotective Lufas gave to Suzuki was, “If anyone starts sticking to Virgo, banish them to the roof for a while.” It was aptly named “normie elimination mode.” However, there was a flaw with this. Suzuki had no knowledge of how the human heart worked nor of its customs and actions, so it would activate this mode even though Virgo was the one who initiated the contact. Thanks to that, Sei was sadly banished to the roof even though he hadn’t done anything wrong himself.

“Wh-What did I doooooo?!”

Suzuki continued despite Sei’s shouts. The destination: the demihuman village occupied by the centaurs.

Unbeknownst to them, there was a huntsman spider demihuman watching them from atop a giant tree in the forest.

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The village the demihumans lived in was several kilometers southwest of Tyrving. It was true that Tyrving was their capital, but it was wartime, so living there wasn’t easy for anyone who wasn’t a combatant. Because of that, different races of demihumans had returned to the villages they’d lived in before settling in Tyrving until the war was over.

Centaurs, bug people, and plant people mostly lived in the huge forest as if they were hiding from human eyes. Suzuki stopped around a kilometer away from the forest while Sei and the others prepared to enter. The place they were heading was the home of demihumans, so of course it wouldn’t be friendly towards humans. If Sei and the others boldly entered through the front, they’d

just pointlessly raise the other side's guard.

Both Lufas and Libra's groups had assumed combat from the start, so they simply charged in boldly through the front like fools, but Sei and his group's objective was investigation. They also weren't as muscle-brained as Lufas, so preparing and taking the necessary precautions was a matter of course, and Castor had just the thing they needed.

"We're going to be walking into the village, everyone, so before that, I'd like you all to drink this."

Castor took out several small bottles from his coat pocket. There was enough for everyone. He distributed the bottles to the others and explained its effects.

"This contains the effects of the Water element spell, Illusion, which disguises your appearance. It's not a very high-level spell, so some of you should know about it. More accurately, this bottle contains a magic potion which has the same effects. By drinking it, you can change your appearance for about three hours."

"U-Um, is this really all right? From what I just heard, this potion should be rather precious... Actually, most potions that have magic effects should have been lost a long time ago, so even though there's so little left..."

"Ah, no need to worry about that. It's true that this is rare and expensive in this day and age, but that doesn't apply to us. Don't worry so much. Just use it."

Apparently items which have magic effects are worth a lot these days. Based on the RPGs that Sei knew of, they should have been rather normal, but it was true that he'd never seen such an item up until now.

No, technically the sword Virgo uses is one. I've just been thinking of it as a thin sword, but apparently it's a really strong piece of equipment. Well, now that I think about it, she's also with Lufas. And judging from Suzuki, Lufas is really protective of her, so it'd only be natural for Lufas to give her a good weapon. Sei felt weirdly satisfied that he'd figured out a mystery.

While Kross was glaring at the potion while muttering, Jean and Gantz downed the liquid with no hesitation. A female knight and a tiger followed their example. After some hesitation, Sei also downed the potion in one gulp, and

after that, Virgo steeled herself and drank it as well.

The changes were remarkable. First, Sei grew a horn on his head, and his skin turned red. Of course, none of that actually happened; it was only an illusion. *I look like an oni,* Sei thought, deciding to ask Castor about his new form.

“Um, Mr. Castor... What’s this?”

“Ah, that’s a type of monster called an ogre. They look really similar to humans, so it’s said that their ancestors were humans, but the truth is unknown. They’re a little aggressive, so they’re categorized as monsters, but they can, in fact, hold a conversation.”

So monsters like this exist? Sei thought as Virgo’s transformation ended.

She’d barely changed at all. All that had happened was her wings changing to look like those of a white butterfly.

“I gave Virgo one that would change her into a butterfly-type half-bug person. To be honest, though, no human would be willing to have children with a bug person, so they’re more an endangered species rather than a rare one. But that just shows how little they blend into human society, so it wouldn’t be strange for her to come to a demihuman village.”

After hearing Castor’s explanation, Sei was once again surprised by the sheer variety of races in this world. *This world has those too? Like, it’s impressive that there are so many branches to this biological tree. Earth has a huge number of species too. I can’t help but wonder which world has more.*

At any rate, I was really skeptical when I heard that this stuff would change us into something not human, but it looks like Castor really did put some thought into these.

Neither Sei nor Virgo had changed that much; it was still in the realm of cosplay. That fact ran itself through Sei’s mind as he looked over at the others.

“Oh ho! This is impressive. I can’t even tell this is an illusion without touching it.”

“It feels kinda weird. My bottom half looks like a horse, but I still feel like I’m walking on two legs.”

“I do not believe this was a good choice.”

Gantz had grown an armor-like carapace similar to a rhinoceros beetle’s and now had a horn coming out of his head as well. On the other hand, Jean’s upper half had stayed as-is, but his lower half was now that of a horse. He’d turned into a centaur. Both transformations weirdly suited them, and it made Sei want to snort in laughter.

Meanwhile, Petto had become a cat entirely. It seemed like Castor had judged it better to pretend he was a tamed monster rather than put on a poor demihuman disguise in his case.

Next, Sei looked over at Friedrich and froze... He’d kept his tiger-like looks, but now had a stag beetle’s horn growing out of his head, and his lower half was a horse. He also had black moth wings coming out of his back. *What the hell is this mistake of an amalgamation?*

“Um... Mr. Castor?”

“A-Ah, sorry. Looks like I made a mistake. That one was an amusement item for a party that had the features of a bug person, centaur, and moth all mixed in one.”

“What do we do with this creature...?”

“I wonder...”

I guess there’s no choice but to cover him with a cloth like Lufas for now. If we just leave his wings exposed it should prove to the others he’s a demihuman.

Next, Sei looked over to the female knight, and he had to rub his eyes to make sure what he was seeing was correct. The female knight’s upper half was the same, but her lower half had become a spider. She’d turned into an arachne. That in itself was fine, but because of her original looks, she just looked like a combination of a gorilla and a spider.

Lastly, Kross had turned into a bipedal grasshopper thing. The grasshopper part reminded Sei of a certain national Japanese hero, but Kross didn’t look nearly as cool. *How should I put it... He’s just a regular grasshopper. Not like some sort of cool cartoonified grasshopper, a real one.*

“What is it, Sei? Why do you look so disappointed?”

“N-No, it’s nothing.”

There’s no way he’ll ride around on a bike or do a cool signature kick like this, huh? Sei thought, disappointed, as he averted his gaze.

Then, Sei turned his thoughts to when he should talk to Lufas about the golden apples. The reason he’d never talked about it in Draupnir was because he hadn’t wanted to worsen her first impression of them. If he’d suddenly asked for a golden apple upon their first meeting, then he might’ve given Lufas the impression that it had been his goal the entire time. At least, that was what Sei would have thought in Lufas’s position.

Well, it’s not totally wrong that the apple is my goal, but the order of importance is essential here. My first goal is peace with Lufas. Making a united front with her is the most important thing of all. Having her doubt me would be extremely bad.

Sei had made sure to make no mention of the apple. Just imagine how unnatural it would be if someone came up to you claiming to want peace, but asked for golden experience-giving apples the very same day. It’d only be natural to think that the apples were the person’s real objective, and they were being too greedy. Not to mention the fact that Lufas had been betrayed by her friends once already. That was why Sei figured he should be careful about the subject.

It was true that Sei wanted strength. As long as he was trying to make his way in this world, he needed enough strength to protect himself and those close to him. Still, he couldn’t allow himself to be blinded by his desire for strength and lose sight of his most important objective.

Let’s wait a little longer to ask about the apples... For now, I need to make sure to complete our goal here and build some trust. Sei still didn’t know that, regardless of how Lufas had been in the past, the current Lufas was laid-back and thoughtless enough that if asked about the golden apple she’d just say “sure” without thinking too deeply about it and actually give him what he wanted...

* *

As Sei and the others approached the demihuman village, several bee-like demihumans who seemed like guards appeared wielding spears. If they looked like hornets, they'd just be monsters, but honey bees could be called cute if a person looked closely. Of course, both were horrifying when blown up to human size, but it was still better that the guards didn't have the vicious face of a hornet.

They looked at Sei and the others suspiciously, but once Castor said that they were homeless demihumans looking for a safe place, the guards instantly believed him. The one they were most suspicious of was Castor. He was a fairy, so he wasn't truly a part of humanity, but outwardly, he looked completely human. Because of that, it took some effort to get them to believe him.

"Now then. First, we need to quickly find the centaurs' settlement. The secret to why Sagittarius is helping Leon should be there."

Nobody objected to Castor's suggestion. Sei and the others nodded, and they all walked off together.

The demihumans lived together cooperatively in this forest, but since their races were different, their cultures were too. Basically, it was natural to assume they'd be separated to at least some degree. Bugs on Earth were the same. Even though a forest contained many varieties of animals and bugs, you'd never find an ant in a beehive. The sizes here were different, but the concept was the same. In other words, the centaurs were living together somewhere in this forest, so finding that place was the first step to achieving their goal.

"Find? But how?"

"Hmm. For now, let's just look around and ask directions," suggested Castor.

"Um, but... Then why didn't you just ask the bee people at the entrance?" asked Sei.

"I see. That's a good idea. Whoops." Castor laughed refreshingly as he turned back, and Sei got a bad feeling about what was about to happen.

He made a mistake with the potions he gave us, and he failed to notice something really obvious and just charged forward... Now that I think about it, he'd been wandering around the forest all beat up when we first met even

though he had a recovery potion the entire time.

Wait... Is he actually airheaded, despite how he looks? Sei realized.

There was no one around to give Sei an answer, but the answer would have been that Sei was right. For example, Castor had met Sei and the others after being defeated by the Devil King, but there had actually been a sizable gap in time between those two events. As for what he'd done in between those two points, he actually hadn't done anything in particular. He'd just been lost.

Castor's personality was quite rare among the Twelve Stars in that he was benevolent and knew common sense, but he was a little airheaded. Put kindly, he was broad-minded. To put it less kindly, he just overlooked the small details.

"Okay, I'll go ask the bee people at the entrance, then we can go look for the centaurs' village." Castor spoke as if he were trying to hide something as he walked forward.

As Sei watched him, he had a thought. *The Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars is a group of monsters beyond human understanding who follow Lufas Maphaahl... I heard that each of them has the power to take down an entire country alone, and that they're basically walking disasters and personifications of fear. But... I wonder if that's really true?*

Virgo doesn't seem that way at the very least, and I'm walking right next to her. Giant form aside, Aries is normally very well-behaved. Castor also just seems like a nice big brother who's kind of airheaded in some ways. Maybe they're not that scary after all. There's a huge difference between what I hear and how they actually seem in person.

While pondering the difference in their reputations, Sei could feel that his fear of the Twelve Stars lessening.

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"I can see it now. There's no doubt. That's the centaurs' village," said Petto, who, thanks to the magic potion, had become a regular cat, as he walked out front.

There was a clearing up ahead where he was looking, and it was true that there were demihumans with the lower halves of horses living there. Then a little while later, Sei and the others had finally reached their destination, but they'd had some trouble getting to this point.

And of course they had. Castor had been leading them at first, and he'd gotten them lost several times. Then, he'd led them to different villages several more times. Once the count of those instances had reached the double digits, everyone finally realized that if they left it up to him, they'd be there all night, and Petto summarily replaced Castor as the leader.

"Oh, so those're centaurs, the sages of the forest."

Kross, who was walking beside Sei as a grasshopper monster, cheered and rushed forward. Elves were the only ones among humanity to look at centaurs as friends, and Sei had heard that they paid the centaurs much respect. Unfortunately, Kross was currently a grasshopper monster. In Sei's eyes, he just looked like a monster trying to invade the centaurs' home.

"Grrrrrr."

"Then let's go."

The two amalgamations, Friedrich and the female knight, both tried to follow, but they were a far cry from even Kross's level and looked like pure monsters. If they approached, they'd probably just put the centaurs on guard unnecessarily, so Kross stopped the two of them and asked them to wait.

"Ah, sorry. Please wait here, you two. Seriously."

Then, Jean, as a centaur, took the front position as they approached the village. When they did, all the centaurs looked up at them at once, and the stares they were giving weren't too friendly. Had it been a bad idea to have the non-centaurs enter too?

A single old centaur approached Sei and the others while they were still confused and started to speak. "Leon's underlings, I take it. What is it you want?"

The party could tell that something was out of place. It seemed as though the centaurs had mistaken them for Leon's followers, but that led to the question

of why they were being so hostile if that were the case. Leon and Sagittarius were allies, so the centaurs should also have been under Leon's umbrella. Still, having this much hostility directed at them made it harder to talk, so for now, the best course of action was probably to solve the misunderstanding.

"Wait a second. We just got here after escaping from human oppression. We don't know what you mean by 'Leon's underlings' at all."

When Jean spoke of the group's prepared backstory, the elder centaur's expression visibly softened. At the same time, the hostility disappeared from the surrounding centaurs' gazes and were replaced with cautious, observing looks. That wasn't exactly pleasant either, but it was still better than being glared at.

"I-I see. Sorry about that. We've just been rather on edge lately."

"What happened? We heard that all the demihumans were following Leon. We aren't his followers, but shouldn't it be no problem if we were?"

Once his attitude softened, Jean unhesitatingly questioned the elder centaur. Being able to heedlessly charge into situations like this where a person would normally hesitate was probably one of his strengths.

The elder groaned in response to Jean's obvious question, but he couldn't talk back too strongly because of the guilt from their hostile gazes earlier. "Ah... Yes... So that's what they say on the outside. It's true that you could say we centaurs are currently under Leon's rule."

"That's some really roundabout wording."

"Well..."

The elder scratched his cheek, troubled, while he considered what he could and could not say. But in the end, it seemed he decided that there would be no problems if he did talk. Either that or he might have just let his guard down because Jean also looked like a centaur. In that case, these disguises were really pulling their weight.

"We—or rather, our chief, Sagittarius—didn't originally want to ally with Leon. He refused the invitation at first."

Everyone reacted when Sagittarius's name came up, but their expressions quickly returned to normal. The goal for coming here was to find out why Sagittarius had allied with Leon in the first place, so the fact that his name had already come up was good luck.

"But Leon threatened to destroy this village if Sagittarius didn't obey him. It was mortifying... I hate how powerless we are. If it were just Chief Sagittarius, he would never have accepted that fool's invitation, but because of us, he was forced to cooperate."

Truly angry, the elder clenched his fists, but that was when Gantz chimed in with a question.

"Hey, if that's the case, then why not just let this place go and escape?"

They knew that they were hostages, so if they hated Leon, then why didn't they just run? Sagittarius would be freed if they did.

The elder shook his head. "We would have if we could. But... There are watchdogs here in this forest just so we can't do that."

"Watchdogs?"

"Yes, and if they receive an order from Leon, they'll become executioners and kill us all. They're detestable people."

The elder finished speaking and looked around. Then, after confirming that no one was watching, he returned his gaze to Sei and the others.

"At any rate, let me show you into the village first. We shouldn't be talking out here at the entrance," the elder said, walking into the village.

Sei and the others followed after him, but the dual amalgamations, Friedrich and the female knight, stayed back. If they came, they'd just cause an unnecessary fuss.

The first thing everyone thought upon entering the village was probably a remark about how simple and frugal it all looked. The centaurs' village was made up of simple, bare wooden houses lined up together, and it looked as though they hadn't constructed much outside of what was absolutely necessary. Even the houses themselves seemed strangely well ventilated. They

looked like stables, which made the party wonder, *Is this really okay for sages of the forest?*

The centaurs all looked the party's way, seemingly interested and curious, but no one attempted to approach. In fact, whenever one of the party met the gaze of a resident, they would avert their eyes.

Sei thought this was strange, so he whispered to the grasshopper being next to him. "Kross, could these centaurs be..."

"Yes. They're very cowardly... Rather, they're very wary. I don't think they hate us exactly, but they'll definitely stick to observing from a distance for a while."

It seems there are individual differences, Sei thought, *but the race in general has this trait? But if that's the case, then Jean must seem like a really weird centaur to them.*

It was easy to imagine, since Jean was the exact opposite of a cowardly man. He was so far on the other end of the spectrum he was more reckless than brave. Sei had forgotten recently for some reason, but he was now reminded that Jean had gone to the Grave of the Black-Winged King, had challenged golems over level 100, and had been saved by Aries, so he was quite reckless.

Wait, will they realize that Jean's not a real centaur? Sei wondered. By now he had to consider, *maybe somebody else should have been the centaur. It's too late now though.*

"Now, please, come in."

Eventually, the party reached the elder's house, but as expected, it was more like a stable as well. The room was bordered by simple partitions, and the inside had a pile of something like straw. The whole thing made them wonder how he was even able to live in such a place, but when they looked closer, they saw a poor excuse for the bare minimum of furniture in the corner. It seemed the centaurs weren't entirely horses.

"Okay, then... First, I'd like to ask... You're not the races you appear to be, are you?"

The first words out of the elder's mouth when they entered the small cabin

cut right to the core of the matter. The entire party gaped in surprise, and they looked at each other. *Did someone do something to give us away?* they wondered.

"The first one I thought was suspicious was you over there," the elder continued. "You certainly move like us centaurs, but I can't feel any caution at all."

The elder pointed to Jean. Sei's misgivings turned out to be right on the mark; he really wasn't like a centaur at all, but that strangeness alone wouldn't cement his suspicion.

"Once I thought he was strange, I started paying attention, and his footsteps didn't match his movements. He sounds like he's bipedal. That's when I figured that he must be disguising himself with magic or something."

I see. So it was the footsteps. Having understood the reason, Sei was impressed. It was true that the footsteps weren't disguised and could be discerned, but Jean always walked with the rest of the group. This meant that the elder had discerned his footsteps out of multiple people's footsteps at the same time.

Isn't that really impressive? Sei thought. *Apparently centaurs have really good ears, so I guess whispering won't do much good here. Now that I think about it, that conversation with Kross before might've been a mistake. That was basically telling him that we knew nothing about centaurs even though we were friends with one.*

Sei looked at the elder, who returned a small smile. *Ah, he totally knows.* Sei was convinced, and he hung his head in regret.

"And? If what you said is true, what're you gonna do? Report us?"

"No, if that was the plan, I would have done that way back at the entrance," the elder said, clearly laughing as he answered Jean's question.

It was true that it would have been much better for him to shout at the entrance for help rather than lead them all the way here, where he had nowhere to run, if that were his plan. The fact that he hadn't done that meant that the elder had no intention of being their enemy, and he wouldn't hand

them over to the other demihumans.

“This is just a conjecture of mine, but you’re all humans, aren’t you? Your goal is...to inspect the total strength of the demihumans you’re about to go to war with?”

“That’s surprising. As expected of a sage of the forest... If you’ve already figured out this much, I’ll just come out and say it. You’re right that we’re humans, but our objective in coming here is different.”

“You call us sages of the forest... Could you be an elf? That’s quite an odd look for you, no?”

Kross, who served as the brains of the party, was naturally the one to lead negotiations here, but since he looked like a grasshopper thing at the moment, his manner of speech clashed with his looks. In truth, Sei also felt that clash. With Kross’s looks, it’d actually suit him more to just thoughtlessly shout, “Damn you, evil organization! I won’t forgive you!”

“Our goal is to investigate why Sagittarius is aiding Leon. We determined the reason would be found in this village, so we came in disguise.” Kross spoke of their goal, revealing that it was already completed.

What the elder spoke of at the entrance to the village was the exact piece of information they had been looking for. Sagittarius was obeying Leon because he’d taken the centaurs and their village hostage. There were people watching the village as well, which meant that as long as they defeated the watchmen, the centaurs would be able to flee on their own, thus freeing Sagittarius to do as he pleased.

The choice after having come this far was now between two courses of action: meet up with Lufas to decide the next move, or free the centaurs on their own.

Normally, the second choice would be impossible for them, but right now, the party had the help of Castor of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars as well as Virgo, though she wasn’t as strong. Humanity’s strongest Sword Saint, Friedrich, was also there. Basically, they had more than enough power with them to make the second option happen.

“What?! Really?!”

“Really. And our objective is already complete. Now all that’s left is to get you all out of here somehow,” Kross said.

The elder centaur clutched Kross’s hand. “Then please, let us help. We can’t allow ourselves to keep being the shackles on Sagittarius’s legs.”

“Of course.”

Things went along smoother than expected, which made Kross smile broadly, but on the other hand, Sei’s expression wasn’t great. It was true that things were going well, but Sei thought they were going too well. According to his experience, every good thing came with its opposite. Of course, Sei had no basis or proof for this. It was a meaningless omen; he just had a bad feeling about things. But in moments like these, bad feelings unfortunately tended to come true.

As if to prove that point, a young centaur came bursting into the cabin, confirming Sei’s suspicions.

Ah, something bad really did happen.

14

“I’m sorry, Elder Derby! Sargess’s forces have appeared at the entrance!”

What the young centaur who’d barged in said drained the color from the elder’s face as he looked outside.

Apparently his name is Derby, but now’s probably not the time to focus on that. Looks like something pretty bad just happened.

“Sargess?”

“The bug person who’s in charge of this village. He’s an off-putting sort of spider demihuman.”

As soon as they heard that description, Sei and the others immediately thought of the spiderman that they’d encountered in Draupnir. Since his strength indicated that he had a fairly high standing, it wasn’t strange for him to

be leading soldiers.

Sei and the others were about to go outside, but Derby stopped them with a hand motion, indicating that he'd go out himself. "They might just be a patrol. You all stay here."

Leaving Sei and the others in the small cabin, Derby took several young centaurs with him to the entrance. There, he faced off with the force of bug people. The opposing side was led by the spiderman, followed by a lamia, a dryad, and a merman, along with a variety of other races of bug people behind them all wielding weapons. In comparison, there were only a handful of centaurs. If it came down to a fight, well, it wouldn't even be called a fight.

"What do you all want?"

"Humans entered the village. They should be here... Give them to us."

"I don't know anything about that. Nobody like that came here."

"They're disguised as demihumans. Don't you remember them?" the spiderman said, threatening them.

But Derby didn't break, replying sharply, "There're so many demihumans about. I can't be bothered to remember each and every one. Get lost."

The situation seemed like it could explode with even the slightest spark, and it wouldn't be strange for fighting to start at any time.

The dryad behind the spiderman puffed her cheeks out in displeasure as she glared at the centaurs. "You guys are so cheeky! Do you really think everything'll turn out fine, even if you defy us?!"

"Are you going to hurt us? Sure. Fine. Bring it. At least Chief Sagittarius will be free then."

"Aggghhhh!"

Making sure to audibly vent her frustration, the dryad extended her roots, but the spiderman stopped her with a hand signal before speaking with a cold tone.

"Stop with the meaningless provocations. This village has children in it too, right? I know that none of you will abandon the children. If that wasn't the case, you would have rebelled a long time ago."

The spiderman persisted in using cold logic and words, stopping any retort the shocked Derby had in its tracks. That basically signaled that the spiderman was right on the money, and what he said was the truth.

Seeing Derby frustratedly grind his teeth, the dryad seemed to suddenly be reminded of something, and she smiled. “Hey, Sarge, I thought of something good. Why don’t we kill one, just to set an example? How ’bout it?”

He quickly thought it over, silent, then said, “Hostages have meaning because they’re alive. It would be foolish to decrease their number so rashly.”

“Ha ha, stick in the mud. You say that, but you actually really want to kill one, don’t you? I’ll do it for you, you know?” the dryad offered lightly, extending some branches.

Her branches caught one of the young centaur boys who were standing in the back. The dryad’s branches retracted before the other centaurs could do anything about it, and she restrained the boy in a vice-like hug.

“I caaauuugghhht yooouuuu!”

“Eek!”

“What’re you doing?! Don’t hurt the children!”

“Aw, don’t worry. It’ll only be this one time... If you’re good boys, that is.”

“You scum!” the centaur yelled after a moment of silent shock.

In a rage, several of the young centaurs ran at the dryad, but her arms undulated like whips, repelling the centaurs.

“Well, ya reap whatcha sow for this one. Just let it be a lesson for next time.”

The dryad formed a wind element spell in her hand in order to cut the young centaur apart, but the spiderman grabbed her hand, stopping the lethal blow just before it happened.

She stared, silent, then said, “Hey, come on. Whadda ya think you’re doin’?”

“You are rushing to a conclusion. It’s true that the centaurs are only listening to us right now because we are threatening them, but even so, they are still demihumans, just like us... Once Sagittarius truly becomes one of us, they will

too. I cannot allow you to kill them recklessly and create grudges for the future.”

The dryad mulled it over for a moment. “You know, Sarge, you’re a real softie...”

The dryad gave the spiderman a glare, and a tense atmosphere spread. Eventually, it seemed like the dryad folded, as she averted her eyes and sighed. Seeing that, the spiderman also loosened up.

“Oh, fine. Whatever. I don’t wanna fight you, Sarge, so I’ll just let this one go,” the dryad said, picking up the centaur child in her branches and extending them all the way over to the other centaurs.

It looked as if she intended to return the child. Seeing this, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, but the instant everyone relaxed, the dryad’s branches swung the child high up into the air.

“W-Waaaaaaahhhhhhhh?!”

“Just kidding! We’ve got so many hostages here. Having one less to manage would actually be a good thing! Sarge’s way of doing things is so soft it makes me wanna puke!”

The dryad laughed cruelly as she swung down. She was probably trying to slam the child down on the ground as hard as possible. Since it was sudden, no one could react in time, and their faces paled as they easily predicted the tragedy that was about to happen.

Sei and the others leapt forward hurriedly, but there was no way they were in a position to make it. The next moment, however, there was a bright flash, and the dryad’s branches were slashed apart. At the same time, a black shadow flew forward and caught the centaur boy. It was perfect timing, befitting of a savior or a hero, almost like the person had aimed for just such a moment.

The dryad fixed the interrupter with a harsh glare, while the centaurs looked upon their savior thankfully. And they both screamed at the same time.

“Wagghh! Monster?!”

There stood a mysterious creature.

It had a tiger beastfolk's upper half, the lower half of a horse, horns, and moth wings. It was the Sword Saint Friedrich, sporting a form so horrific people doubted their senses even as they wondered what kind of couple could even make a creature like that. The one who'd caught the boy had an upper half that looked a lot like a gorilla—the female knight. Her lower half was that of a spider, and she too was an off the rails creature. The boy who'd been saved had fainted and was showing the whites of his eyes.



“Wai— What the hell is that?! Gross, gross, super gross! What the hell?! Ewwwwww!”

The female knight jumped at the dryad as it was busy being grossed out by their forms. With the sword that symbolized her pride as a knight in hand, she shuffled forward with her many spider legs.

“NOOOOOOO!”

The dryad, half in tears, ran away, but the female knight didn’t stop. The dryad had gone for the children first in order to force people to listen to her, and that went against the knight’s code. For that, she would not forgive the dryad.

The female knight swung her sword, her expression angry and breathing rough as she chased down the dryad. The dryad, almost in a frenzy, tried to ward off the female knight with vines, but they were all slashed apart. Then, the knight leapt. Jumping nimbly from tree to tree, she continued to draw closer to the dryad.

“GRROOOAAARRRR!” the tiger roared, as if to cheer on the efforts of the female knight as he slashed at the spiderman.

The spiderman blocked with one of his legs, and they entered into a contest of strength. But in the end, both the spiderman and the dryad were simply more powerful. While they had been momentarily surprised because of their opponent’s entrance and appearance, that wouldn’t last long. There was only one option for Sei and the others. They had to defeat the spiderman right here and now, and free the centaurs.

“We don’t have any other choice! Let’s go, everyone!”

“Yeah!”

“Awwwwriiiite! I’m gonna avenge Nick and the others right here!”

“And the guardian dragon too!” Sei shouted, trying to galvanize everyone to action.

Gantz, Jean, and Petto all ran forward at the same time. Behind them, Virgo threw a slash of light with her sword, and Kross sent out a magic bullet, though

he was a little slow on the uptake. The two attacks flew towards the lamia and the merman who were standing by, and though they dodged the attacks, Virgo and Kross succeeded in separating them. At the same time, Virgo flew, charging at the lamia. The merman tried to support the lamia, but Castor stood before him and blocked the way.

“Sorry, but I’m your opponent. Feel free to all come at me at the same time.”

“Y-You’re really pissing me off here, pal. Don’t get so full of yourself just ’cuz you’re a little good lookin’!”

“No, doesn’t that change depending on the race...? I’m sure you’re pretty up there as a merfolk...”

“J-Just a little while ago my crush told me that she liked pretty human faces and turned me down!”

The merman confessed something really sad as he slashed at Castor, who just defended against it silently. Sometimes, anything you said ended up hurting the other person. This was one of those times. In times like these, the greatest kindness was to be quiet and keep the person company.

Castor silently swung wide with his anchor, mowing down the merman as well as the bug-men soldiers that were with him. Then, he continued to knock people out of the fight one after the other with ease.

Virgo flew right past him, followed by several magic bullets.

“So we meet again, girlie! Did you come just so we could continue from last time?”

“Why are you people doing this?!”

“You wouldn’t understand how we feel, being treated like monsters day in and day out!”

The lamia continuously fired magic at Virgo while chasing her down, but unlike before, it was a one-on-one fight.

Virgo flew through the air, dodging the lamia’s magic and returning slashes of light. The lamia also quickly dodged Virgo’s attacks though, and the fight devolved into a long-distance shoot-out. Virgo flew around in the air to evade,

and the lamia slithered nimbly along the ground like a snake. The fight was completely even.

“Didn’t I meet you in Draupnir...? Oh, right, so you came to kill us demihumans, didn’t you?”

“Actually... Well, I guess I can’t exactly deny it...”

Sei, Gantz, Jean, and Petto were taking on the spiderman at the same time, and all four of them just barely made the fight even. By utilizing their numbers and taking advantage of combos, Sei and the others boldly attacked from all sides, but everything was blocked by the spiderman’s legs. In fact, he even managed to counterattack, slamming Jean back into a tree.

“Hey, you, spider asshole! It looks like you’re at least a little different from your friends over there, so I’ll tell you, just in case. Stop doing stupid things like siding with Leon! If you keep doing that, all the demihumans will be killed along with him!”

“Just when I was wondering what you would say... We have no other path than this!”

“I see. Looks like you made a bad choice in leaders then!”

Gantz’s war ax clashed with the spiderman’s leg and sparks flew, but the difference in level was a real pain for Gantz. Even without any special bug traits, opposing an ax with one’s bare hands was ridiculous.

“GRRROOAAARRR!”

“Hiyaaaahhh!”

“Why am I the one who has to deal with these monsteerrrsss?!”

Meanwhile, the dryad had ended up with Friedrich and the female knight, and she was running around with a desperate look on her face. In terms of pure power, she was on top, but because of the duo’s awful appearances, she had completely lost the will to fight. On top of that, she noticed magic flying at her for some reason. When she looked behind her, she saw a grasshopper monster had joined as well, and the dryad grew even more teary-eyed.

“NOOOOOOOOO!”

The dryad was almost full-on bawling as she ran away, and chasing after her were a tiger-moth-centaur, a gorilla-arachne, and a grasshopper monster. As things stood, it was impossible to tell which side was the hero's party. The comical, exasperated sweat of Sei and the others, who were watching from the side, was surely just a trick of the imagination.

"A-Anyway, we're going to stop you!"

"You're welcome to try, human child!"

Sei regrouped and took a stance with his sword, ready to intercept the spiderman. Then, Sei's sword and the spiderman's leg clashed.

15

Every time Castor swung his favorite weapon, the anchor lance, he scattered demihumans away. As a combatant of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars, Castor wasn't especially strong. In pure combat ability, he fell short of Aries, and he didn't have especially strong skills either. Even so, he was strong enough to be one of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars. Even the Twelve Stars' non-combatants, like Parthenos, were outside the norm, so just by qualifying to be in the group, Castor had the strength of a thousand men.

In sheer numbers, the demihumans came in at a couple hundred. Opposing them was Castor by his lonesome, but the demihumans were the ones at an insurmountable disadvantage in this fight. Castor's strength equaled a thousand men, after all, which meant that this fight was between a few hundred and a few thousand. The outcome had been decided before the fight had even started; this would just become a simple war of attrition.

The entire reason this was still able to be considered a fight was that Castor had the most moral fiber of anyone in the Twelve Stars, and he was holding back so as not to kill anyone. If it'd been someone like Libra, Aigokeros, or Scorpius fighting here, they wouldn't have bothered thinking about their enemy at all; they'd have just turned the entire group into corpses in a couple seconds.

"Storm Circle!"

Violent winds radiated out from Castor in all directions. That alone knocked

out all the demihumans in front of him, intimidating the ones that were left. If Castor had been going all out, then getting the back line would have been possible too. However, those in front might have died if he'd increased his power that much. The demihumans understood that, and they realized that they had no chance of victory.

"Wh-What're you all doing? Hurry and kick that handsome bastard's ass!"

"B-But..."

"I-If you won't go, then I'll just kill you all! If you don't want to die, fight him!"

"W-WAAARRGGGHH!"

Threatened by the merman who was their commander, the arachne who was in front raised a cry as she charged.

An arachne's upper half was that of a human woman, so if you only paid attention to that part, she was still young and could be considered adorable. But her bottom half was that of a repulsive spider, and the mismatched feeling that gave off only strengthened the repulsive effect.

Castor casually stole the spear the arachne thrust in front of her as she charged, easily rendering her powerless. With her weapon stolen, the young arachne firmly shut her eyes, preparing herself for death. Castor simply patted the frightened girl on the head kindly, though. Mystified, the arachne opened her eyes again and exposed herself to Castor's sparkling hot-guy smile.

"Stop this. A weapon like this doesn't fit a lovely girl like you."

"Ah... Y-Yeah..."

Castor smiled in an attempt to reassure her, and his teeth glittered in the light. When he smiled, the young arachne's cheeks flushed, and she froze. If this were a manga, her eyes would have been replaced by hearts at this point. Seeing that clearly incensed the merman, as he started to grind his teeth. If Lufas were here, she would surely have sympathized with him and made fun of the moment, saying, "What is this? A love at first sight rom-com trope?!"

The merman might have just become one of Lufas's comrades in cursing normies to explode. Having had Castor's hot-guy power shoved in his face, the

merman was full of resentment, and his hatred was only increasing. On the other hand, the young arachne had completely fallen for Castor, and she was looking up at him with both hands clasped in front of her like she was praying.

“It seems like you just don’t understand how to treat a lady. Men must always treat ladies with kindness. Dragging them out onto the battlefield like this is out of the question.”

A minor point, but Castor said this while his lord and master went out on the front lines all the time, could move faster than sound, was in general the strongest woman in the world, and tended to make bloodbaths out of her enemies. If anyone had pointed that out to him, they might have been able to stop him mid-sentence, but the merman wasn’t that smart, so Castor just kept on speaking.

“I heard that you have a one-sided affection for someone, but as you are now, it’s only natural that she doesn’t return your feelings. Listen here. I’ll tell you one of the world’s truths. Men aren’t just their faces! What’s inside is what’s important!”

“YOU DON’T GET TO SAY THAAAAAT!!”

The merman snapped. His face reddened in anger, and he charged harpoon-first. An ant soldier and a mantis warrior followed after him, as well as all the other men who weren’t blessed with good looks.

One of the tragedies that came with being a demihuman was a person’s sense of beauty. Sure, they had the traits of fish, snakes, and bugs as their names implied, but they held human traits as well. What did that mean? Well, that was the tragedy as well as the comedy. Part of their sense of beauty was inherited from humans. As a race, they juggled not only a standard of beauty particular to their race, but a human’s beauty standards as well.

Take, for example, a dragonfly-type bug person. While those outside of the race would only see them as having monstrous looks, they were able to tell who was beautiful and who was not among themselves. Even if no one else could understand it, the ones who were handsome were popular. This applied for females as well. At the same time, they could discern faces from a human perspective as well. For example, they wouldn’t look at a beautiful woman and

think they were ugly because they didn't have a face like a dragonfly's. They would think of her as beautiful, just like other humans.

This was where sad misunderstandings happened, because even if a person was earth shatteringly beautiful among dragonfly people, among regular humans, they'd just be monsters. If a dragonfly man confessed to a regular human girl, they'd just run for the hills. In other words, even to them, Castor was an annoyingly handsome guy! Not only could he attract human beauties who would never look at them, but he was beautiful enough to make demihumans fall for him too.

What absurdity! What unfairness!

In a sense, this was only natural. After all, the one who stood at the peak of this world was Alovenus, the Goddess of love and beauty. She couldn't very well be called that if she looked ugly to other races, which meant that all races saw Alovenus as beautiful. All races were born with that aesthetic sense imprinted on them. The basis for all beauty in this world was centered around Alovenus, and humans were close in appearance to Alovenus, so they also naturally stood at the center of the entire world's beauty standards. That was why human faces always looked beautiful, no matter the race.

"DIIIEEEEEEEEE!"

Right now, all the men's hearts were as one. There was an amazing, unprecedented feeling of unity that seemed to somehow generate a strong, primordial heat. It was the winds of jealousy, and it was surely and steadily blowing towards them.

Let's stop half-assing this. We're taking this all the way to the end. So many of us who weren't blessed with good looks are here. We aren't alone. Let's believe and fight together. With love, bravery, and hope in our hearts, we will take this evil handsome bastard down. Stand up, warriors!

"All hot guys must die!"

The war cry symbolized all the unpopular men's sadness and lamentation, and as they charged Castor, their sad, lonely lives flashed before their eyes.

There was a village girl I always thought was cute. She'd come out to the

forest to pick herbs. Once she was lost, and I tried to help her, but she just called me a monster and ran away.

I tried to return something a woman dropped once, but all I did was scare her. There was nothing I could do about that, so I put it back where I'd found it. But a bear beastfolk found it and gave it to her, and for some reason, they started skipping and dancing together. In the end, she started spouting shit about how the road she met the bear on was full of flowers or something, and they married. Now she's the fourth queen of Draupnir, dammit.

Damn you, beastfolk, getting all uppity just because humans think you're cute.

Letting hatred, grief, and jealousy drive them, the men surpassed their own limits. They displayed a level of skill never seen before, becoming a single malign force aimed towards Castor.

In response to that, Castor turned his back on the men and raised his hand.

"Gemini Meteor Fist!"

His fist pierced the heavens, and the men all became meteors. Nothing special happened; it was just an uppercut. Castor had just applied some wind magic to his fist to blow them all away, no skill named Gemini Meteor Fist actually existed.

The men, defeated in a single blow, all fell to the ground face-first. Each and every one of them was knocked out. The moment before they'd passed out, they had a thought. *All hot guys...must die...*

* *

The fight between Virgo and the lamia had devolved into a long-range shooting match. This hadn't happened on purpose. It had just turned out this way before either of them had noticed.

Virgo flew through the air, but the lamia had no way of getting that high. She weaved her way between the trees, which meant Virgo couldn't get close either, since the trees were in the way. As a result, they had resorted to long-ranged attacks, but none of them could do any significant damage. It eventually devolved into repeated patterns of using the same attacks again and again, and dodging them over and over.

If Virgo had a little more experience, this might not have happened. She might have decided to let the level difference speak for itself, not minding being hit with some magic in order to cut through the lamia's neck with her blade. But that hadn't come to Virgo's mind. She still couldn't help but freeze for a moment when slashing at someone, and that hesitation bred openings. Repeating long-distance slashes over and over again wasn't a strategy. It was because Virgo was unconsciously avoiding slashing her enemy directly, so she'd chosen to fight from a distance.

"Haagghh!"

"Water Spear!"

La Pucelle unleashed another blade of light, and the lamia shot a spear of water, hitting the slash midair, but they didn't cancel each other out. The blade of light cut through the spear of water, but the lamia avoided it with movements that were literally serpentine.

The lamia in no way beat Virgo in terms of levels. In fact, her level was only 150. Virgo's level was twice hers, but it was also a fact that Virgo had a support build, and her stats were not suited to entering direct combat. Still, at twice her opponent's level, the difference in their power levels was basically absolute. Virgo should have won long ago, but for some reason, she still hadn't. She was having trouble in a fight which she should have won, as she doubled her opponent's level, because of the difference in their combat experience and motivation.

Virgo had almost no experience, and she just didn't have the hostility and desire to annihilate the demihuman that was opposing her. On the other hand, the lamia was on the edge of a precipice. She couldn't afford to lose no matter what. The difference in their will to fight managed to bridge the impossible gap in levels.

I...have to stop her somehow! I'll use that ability!

The look in Virgo's eyes grew sharper, and the lamia was assaulted with a feeling of pressure. It was the heaven-winged's racial skill, Pressure. Its effect forced those who were half the user's level or less to submit. It was a skill made for royalty that allowed for bloodless suppression. It allowed anyone with the

skill to avoid fights with anyone they didn't have to and to simply control them instead. Given the levels of Virgo and the lamia, this skill should have been effective against her.

The lamia glared silently. "Don't you dare underestimate me!" the lamia shrieked, shaking off the Pressure and resuming the fight. Taking advantage of Virgo's surprise, the lamia launched a water bullet that grazed her opponent and caused her to drop in altitude.

"What?!"

"Not good enough, girlie. I see your level certainly is above mine, though. I bet that would normally have ended the fight in one go, wouldn't it? But you're empty inside. You don't have the desire to make your opponent submit no matter what. You've got nothing... As if some superficial Pressure like that would work!"

Virgo was possessed of a shy, kind personality. But was she really just kind? Or did she lack self-confidence and independence, unable to step out front herself? Virgo was simply allowing herself to be swept along by the current around her; her heart wouldn't allow her to go against it. That was why her Pressure didn't have much power. Normally, it should have decided the fight all at once, but the fight still wasn't over. Her lack of willpower had been exposed, and Virgo was shaken.

"I can see it, you know. How you really look behind that illusion magic, that is. I can see those white wings of yours. They're almost too pretty... I bet you're royalty, or at least related to them, but don't think that the Pressure you put out can suppress us. The feelings that drive us to fight are just different!" the lamia howled as she landed a direct hit on Virgo with her magic.

Given their level difference, there was no way a spell of that level would end up as a fatal blow. It only scored a light wound, but even light wounds could add up into something more. The balance of the fight gradually shifted towards the lamia; Virgo was cornered.

Seeing this, Sei once again felt anxiety in his heart. *Crap. Virgo!*

He wanted to rush to Virgo and help her in her time of need, but he couldn't. He wouldn't be allowed to. The enemy he faced was strong enough that turning

your back on him would be fatal. The sheer agility of the spiderman Sargess was a true threat to Sei and the others. He not only moved across the ground quickly, but he could also leap agilely from tree to tree. He ambushed anyone the moment they showed an opening, gradually adding up the damage the team was suffering.

In order to combat this, Sei and his party took a circular formation, and while they were barely successful, that didn't change the fact that they were on the back foot. It could be said that the current situation was despairingly bad for them.

"Tch, this is bad... That spider bastard is stupid fast."

"I can barely follow him with my eyes. Damn."

Jean and Gantz were keeping a tight watch on Sargess's movements while complaining. As soon as they managed to catch sight of Sargess, he had already moved. Grasping his whereabouts was proving to be a Herculean task.

Did we make a mistake fighting him with this group? Gantz kept that thought deep in his heart.

Among their entire group, Virgo was the only one capable of high-speed combat. Only she had the ability to fly, which could keep up with Sargess's three-dimensional movements. But Virgo was currently tied up in a hard battle with the lamia and didn't seem to have the leeway to help them.

While Gantz was distracted by his thoughts, a metallic sound rang out from behind him, and he heard a cry of anguish from Petto. It seemed like he'd just barely managed to defend against Sargess's attack, thanks to the excellent kinetic vision granted to him as a beastfolk. But that wouldn't last them long either.

Just what should we do...? Sei tried to come up with a way to grasp victory with their lacking strength. He thought of the skills he had, as well as the abilities of his allies. Sei took all of that into account, but he still couldn't think of a way to take down Sargess.

Meanwhile, Sargess's threads had wrapped themselves around Sei's sword, further worsening the situation.

Crap! Isn't there anything we can do? Anything...?! Sei thought, desperate. Finally, he arrived at a single idea when he suddenly saw Virgo flying from the corner of his eye. *Right, there's one way to break out of this.*

"Virgo! Can you hear me?! If you can, I want you to shout the exact words I'm going to say to you!"

"What?!"

"You need to shout..." Sei hesitated for a second.

Honestly, I'm not sure about this. There's a possibility that by saying this, I'll seriously get killed. But as it is, we're just waiting to lose. I'll just have to work hard to undo the misunderstanding later.

He paused a moment, then continued, "'This person's a molester. Someone help me!'"

"Huh...?"

"D-Don't think about it. Just shout! Then you'll understand why!"

Sei had requested a line that seemed meaningless. Well, it had a meaning. While Virgo had never heard the term "molester" before, she could tell it was a cry for help. But a cry to who? Where?

Virgo's eyes widened. Sargess, the lamia, and Gantz, who had heard what Sei had asked of her, all made faces that asked, "Is this guy all right?" However, Sei was sure these would be the magic words to bring about their comeback. By saying those words, Virgo would summon "that" to come in their time of need.

"U-Uhhh... Then I guess I'll say it? Th-This person's a molester! Someone help me!"

While still unclear as to what Sei was going for, Virgo did as he'd asked and shouted the line.

There...was no change. That was what everyone thought, at least, but it wasn't true. The one who heard Virgo's shout was currently making their way there at incredible speeds in order to murder the scoundrel accosting her.

He had an order from his creator. If any villain were to ever lay their hands on Virgo, he was to attack them until they were on the verge of death!

“Y E S, B O S S!”

So he—Suzuki—ran. He fully accelerated, charging into the demihuman village at top speed.

As Suzuki ran, he changed forms. Accompanied by metallic clanking, Suzuki quickly reformed his own body. By rearranging several parts, his door became steel arms, and steel legs extended from his lower end. Suzuki had discarded his vehicle form to become a steel giant. Suzuki had twin eyes which looked a lot like an imitation of a robot’s eyes from some anime. They flashed red ominously as Suzuki ran as a giant with a beautiful form much like a marathon runner. He needed to fulfill his last and most important order given to him by Lufas, and in order to help him do that, Suzuki had been given this “Assault Form”! His right hand was equipped with a mana saber, an inferior copy modeled after Libra’s Left Scale. His right hand was equipped with a mana rifle that fired compressed mana instead of physical bullets.

Later, Suzuki’s creator, the Black-Winged Conqueror, had the following to say about him: “Honestly, We went too far.”

The bee demihumans at the entrance to the village were knocked aside, and trees that were in the way were all snapped in two as Suzuki ran through them. Finally, he found her! He found Virgo, the person he needed to protect.

Sei saw Suzuki and couldn’t help but stiffen for a moment, but who could blame him? He wasn’t the only one either. Everyone was struck silent by Suzuki’s sudden appearance, but Sei’s surprise was the most pronounced among them in the end.

Hey... Why is it a giant robot...?

Sei’s look grew distant as he tried to escape reality, but he managed to hurriedly bring himself back by shaking his head and reminding himself of his goal. Then Sei shouted, “You there! The one you’re looking for is me. Come on!” towards Suzuki.

That line seemed incredibly pathetic and uncool, even to Sei. If his father had heard him, he’d surely have cried.

After riling up Suzuki, Sei firmly gripped his sword. Currently, Sei’s sword was

entangled in Sargess's threads, so they were effectively bound together. By following the string, Sei could get an accurate grasp on where Sargess was, and their current relative positions meant that Sargess was caught between Suzuki and Sei.

As soon as Suzuki recognized the scoundrel he had to defeat, he locked on to his target and carried out a tackle with ferocious speed. That action snapped the tree that Sargess was on top of in two, slamming the spiderman into the ground. At the same time, Sei quickly dashed off, evading Suzuki's tackle and pinning Sargess's arms while he was knocked down.

"Wh-What...?!"

"Sorry, but I'll be taking you down with me."

The iron giant barreled towards them accompanied by a tremendous sound.

I'll be fine. I'll totally be fine, Sei told himself repeatedly. *I mean, Lufas definitely ordered the car to "tackle them just enough so they don't die," so I definitely won't be killed at least.*

Actually, wait. Is that really a tackle? Given the size, it's more of a full-on kick like you'd see in soccer, right?

"G O T O H E L L!"

"W-Woooaarrrgghhh?!"

Sargess, who was caught in the middle, screamed pitifully as Suzuki kicked him flying along with Sei.

See, I knew it'd be a kick and not a tackle! Sei might have been the meticulous type, since he was internally retorting a detail like that while he was flying.

The attack from the golem made by the Black-Winged Conqueror had shattered Sargess's exoskeleton, dealing enormous damage. By the time they crashed to the ground, he could no longer even stand up.

On the other hand, Sei had managed to avoid a serious wound thanks to the shield that Virgo had erected for him at the last second. On top of that, Virgo hurriedly flew in front of Suzuki to stop his charge, somehow managing to save Sei's life.

Wait, was that thing seriously aiming its rifle at me? His finger was on the trigger, right? Man, that was a dangerous bridge I crossed. Too dangerous. Then Sei realized that his plan had worked, and his last thought before losing consciousness was, *I contributed something, at least...*

16

"You pushed yourself way too hard there. Geez," Castor said, looking at the unconscious Sei.

However, he was smiling broadly. He honestly felt that, while Sei was still immature, he was a boy with a lot of potential. Not only did Sei know full well he lacked strength, but it hadn't caused him to give up. Instead, he looked for a way to get through the situation with what he had. That wasn't something just anyone could do. He completely lacked both strength and experience, but his mettle was top-notch.

Castor looked forward to seeing how Sei would grow, though now wasn't the time for that. Sei had sacrificed himself to give them a chance, so it was up to the rest of them to turn said chance into victory.

"Storm Pressure!"

The two waves of mana Castor emitted turned into wind directly above the lamia and the dryad. Then, they pushed down on their targets with incredible force, forcing the two ever closer to being knocked out of the fight.

The rest of the bug person forces had already been scattered by Castor, and the spiderman had been taken care of by Sei. This meant that the fight was over once the lamia and the dryad were taken care of.

"Wh-What the hell is this?! I can't...move..."

"Grk... Dammit... This..."

The dryad and lamia desperately tried to escape, but unfortunately, their levels were too low.

Castor went on to wag his finger, making invisible bonds of wind to restrain the two of them with, completely neutralizing them. "Well, that's that."

“Amazing! You aren’t one of the Twelve Stars for nothing, huh?” Jean praised Castor, who had just neutralized the last of their enemies like it had been nothing.

Castor tried to smile in response, but the next moment, his expression froze. There was no need to explain why. After all, Sagittarius had suddenly appeared. No, it wasn’t just him. Libra, Scorpius, Aigokeros, and Karkinos were all there, and they all bore fairly heavy wounds.

“Wh-What happened?!”

“E-Everyone...?! Just what...?”

Gantz was shocked at their sudden appearance, and Virgo likewise showed her surprise. Part of their surprise was because their appearance had been so sudden, but more than that, they were in disbelief over how hurt the Twelve Stars were.

The Twelve Stars were basically walking disasters. They were a group of monsters, and every single one of them had the power of an entire country’s military, so it was unbelievable that so many of them had been cornered at once.

Libra took in her surroundings, and after quickly processing the situation, she stood up. “This is...” she paused, processing. “The demihuman’s village, I see. It seems you’ve saved us, Sagittarius.”

Up until a moment ago, they’d been fighting Leon in Tyrving. The reason Libra and the others were here now was because of Sagittarius. By using his skill Al Nassr, which instantly teleported an arrow wherever he aimed, Sagittarius had saved all of them right before they would have been finished off by Leon. And that meant that he wasn’t obeying Leon out of his own will.

“Thanks, Sagittarius! We were all about to be annihilated!”

Sagittarius looked away when Karkinos thanked him, quietly saying, “I haven’t done anything that warrants thanks.”

He might have been feeling guilty in his own way for betraying Lufas and the rest of the Twelve Stars, but even if Sagittarius had only been acting in the spur of the moment, it showed that he was on their side. And he had to stay there

now. It was clear that Leon would take this as nothing other than a hostile action, at least.

“Chief Sagittarius!”

“It’s you, Derby. And it looks like the ones on the ground there are Sargess and the others... What happened here?”

After Derby called out to him, Sagittarius looked around the village, mystified. There were clear signs of battle, as well as captured demihumans. On top of that, he could even see the spiderman Sargess who could be said to be one of the top leaders in the demihuman alliance. It was obvious at a glance that something had happened here.

“That’s our line,” said Castor. “You all should have been heading for Tyrving, so why’re you all here? And Sagittarius is with you... Won’t you tell us what’s going on?”

Castor and the others also couldn’t figure out what had happened. The people who should have gone to Tyrving had suddenly shown up.

“Hmm,” Libra muttered as she sunk into thought, signaling that she needed time to process the situation. “Yes... Then first, let us exchange information.”

* *

Aries leaned against a broken wall and slid down until he was curled up against it. He honestly wanted to chase after Leon right away, but Aries knew he wouldn’t be able to win, and his legs wouldn’t let him. This was an issue of his bravery and will, but it was also more than that. Aries’s fear was instinctual, a feeling that couldn’t be shaken, something he felt every time he faced an apex predator like Leon.

Their statuses had been different since birth. Aries was a weak being who anyone could win against; he had been born to be prey. Aries challenging Leon defied the natural order of things. That was why this fight would normally be impossible. One was prey and the other was a predator. One was weak and one was strong. Even though they were both monsters, there was a big difference between them. A gap that had existed since birth was difficult to fill.

Aries was different from the other Twelve Stars. The Twelve Stars was a group

of monsters, and each one was crowned the strongest of their kind. They had all ruled their own large territories before becoming Lufas's followers. There was the Demon King of Hel, Aigokeros; the Empress of Poison, Scorpius; the strongest golem, Libra; the toughest monster, Karkinos; Parthenos, the keeper of the Goddess's Sanctuary; the Fairy Princess, Pollux; Pollux's other half and the strongest fairy, Castor; the world's top sniper, Sagittarius; Pisces, the Goddess's son; Taurus, the royalty of the labyrinth; the Empress of the Seas, Aquarius; and the Lion King, Leon.

Compared to them, what am I? Seriously. All the other Twelve Stars were strong from the start. They are people who took their seats because they were theirs. Lufas added them to the Stars because of what they already had, whether that was their strength or something else.

But I... I'm different. I'm the only one who was added for another reason. What Leon said was right; I was given this. I couldn't even think of anything to deny it. My strength, my skills, and even my status... All of it was given to me by Lufas. I didn't gain even one of those with my own strength.

In the end, a sheep is a sheep, and once weak, always weak. Even if I can deal with people on the level of the Seven Luminaries, my disguise is undone as soon as I'm up against someone strong. My natural weak self is exposed.

Aries wasn't the type of monster who had originally been able to fight, and his desire for combat was clearly less than everyone else's.

That's why there's nothing I can do. I can't win against Leon, and I can't do anything else either. I'm sure Aigokeros and the others are figuring it out even now. After all, they're all strong, unlike me.

"You aren't going to fight?"

Aries looked up when he heard a voice and saw Dina, who'd come back at some point. She'd been the first to run away in the middle of battle after seeing how threatening Leon was, but it seemed she'd just returned like nothing had happened.

Dina crouched down in front of Aries and looked into his eyes. "Leon went to chase everyone else."

Aries was quiet before saying, “I know.”

Did you come to lecture me for running? Aries thought but refrained from saying out loud. *It’s true that I’m a coward, and I’m not suited for fighting. So no matter what you say, it can’t be helped.*

“Even if I went...” he paused for a moment, defeated. “There’d be no point. I can’t do anything. It’s not like I could defeat Leon.”

“Oh my, that’s not true. I mean, aren’t you the person Leon’s most afraid of, Aries?”

Dina said something ridiculous, but Aries didn’t bat an eye. Flattery was an old trick and one that got exposed over time. It wasn’t amusing. It was almost child’s play... It was like how a strong-looking man would flinch backwards and say, “Whoa, amazing, amazing! Even the Devil King would go down in one shot!” when a child with a paper sword took a swing at him.

Even if Aries thought he was being made fun of, he didn’t take it seriously.

“The fire Miss Lufas gave you is a universal flame that changes strength depending on how tough the opponent is. No matter how powerful they are, they’re all the same to you. The stronger the enemy is, the stronger your flames are, and that will continue on indefinitely. What you have is a god-killing fire that Lufas invented to defeat much higher powers, and she gave it to you alone.”

Aries stared, silent. “It’s amazing how easily you can flatter people like that.”

“Because it’s the truth.”

Aries looked at Dina exasperatedly, but she just smiled like always. And, as always, Aries couldn’t quite figure out what she was thinking; her flighty, easygoing demeanor never changed. Once again, Aries thought, *She’s so mysterious.*

Even now, he had memories that said she’d been around two hundred years ago, but according to Libra, those memories had been made up and planted by Dina. If that was the case, then who was she? And why was she here?

“But it’s impossible. You saw how powerful Leon was, didn’t you? He was

always strong, but now something's weird with him... There's nothing I can do about that."

"Ah, the Goddess is such a one-trick pony, isn't she? It's certainly annoying, but...it'll be okay. He hasn't gotten as powerful as he seems, you know."

Dina grinned wide as she said something ridiculous.

"After all, that type is... The Goddess hates that type of man the most. The kind who think it's only natural to be given or blessed with things. The type with no sense of gratitude, with enough hubris to think that getting things is his right. Truly a fool. It's because of people like him that the Goddess gave up on saving people and had to instead think of something new. There's no way she'd seriously give him power. She would never give him her love."

That sounds like you know the Goddess's preferences.

"It'd be better for the Goddess if Leon won and Lufas were defeated, so that's why she gave him power, but..." Dina paused, considering the situation before continuing. "I'm sure that she's actually conflicted about it internally, and she wants to reject him. That's why she only gave him a little power, like a scrap off the table. While it'd be better for her if he won, she also wants him to lose. She's hoping that'll happen."

And that makes it sound like you know what she's thinking.

"That man isn't worthy of winning. There are others who are better suited for that, ones who won't shame the title of hero. There are brave children who would suit the role of a protagonist... So taking things to the extreme, she doesn't mind if Leon loses. Best case, he loses after taking out one or two of the Twelve Stars. The Goddess isn't hoping for more than that. At worst, the strongest member of the Twelve Stars becomes so hated that he gets ganged up on and is killed without doing anything. That would be okay too. Nothing was expected of him in the first place, so the Goddess only gave him a little power."

That would mean you know what the Goddess's goal is...

"A man like that... He's not needed."

You sound just like the Goddess when you say that.

For the first time, Aries was wary of Dina. Up until now, he'd gotten warnings from Libra, but somehow, deep in his heart, he'd still thought optimistically. He couldn't seriously think of Dina as an enemy. But now, things were different. His thoughts were confused, and he felt as if she could seriously be an enemy. His suspicion of Dina was growing.

"Dina... Who are you?"

"Who? I'm not really worthy of that question. If I had to answer, I'd say that I'm someone who's not able to become *someone*, I guess."

For an instant, Dina wore a self-deprecating smile. Then, she stood up and held a hand out to Aries. A number of buffs were then applied to him, raising all his stats.

"This is...?"

"It's not as strong as the Goddess's buff, but this is the strongest heaven-arts I can manage. This should make things a little easier. Now, please go. Your battlefield isn't here."

"What about you, Dina?"

"I won't fight. I'm just a weak girl, after all," Dina boldly declared with a smile before summoning a rift in space. Apparently, she was fully intent on slacking off, but that seemed just like her.

Aries was assaulted by a feeling he couldn't quite describe.

"Okay, then. Best of luck." With those last words, Dina completely disappeared.

Aries, having been left behind, made a face like he'd been tricked by a tanuki, but eventually, he looked in the direction Leon had gone and leapt after him.

I don't really get why, but I'm a lot less afraid of Leon now. Maybe Dina did something.

Anyway, I can think later. Right now, I have to join my friends on the battlefield. Honestly, even now I'm not sure I can match him in a fight. But even so, if my power will work even a little... No, I don't believe in my power. But I do believe in Lufas's, and I have a power that Lufas gave to me. So... So it should

work. There's no way it won't. This fire is something I got from my master, just like Leon said, and it won't lose to the Goddess's power. I believe that without a doubt.

So Aries leapt. He hated the idea that his master's power would prove to be lesser than anything just because he was afraid.

17

"I see. So that's what happened."

Libra and the others had just finished exchanging information at Derby's house, and they all now at least somewhat understood each other's circumstances. The overall conclusion that'd been reached was that Sagittarius had not betrayed Lufas of his own free will. Leon had taken the centaur village hostage, forcing Sagittarius to obey.

Even so, Sagittarius hadn't been totally obedient. He'd warned Libra under the guise of a declaration of war and had gotten them to come to Tyrving. His goal had probably been to draw in enough total strength to defeat Leon; Sagittarius couldn't do it himself. However, there had been one miscalculation. Sagittarius had meant to use Lufas's overwhelming strength to bring Leon down, but Lufas had been sidetracked by Benetnasch's intrusion, leaving only the members of the Twelve Stars to continue forward.

Still, they should have been enough to defeat Leon anyway. The situation was different now, though. Because of the Goddess's untimely intervention, Leon had gotten too strong for them to deal with. Even Karkinos, who should have been a good matchup, hadn't been able to stand up to Leon's new power. Right now, four huge pillars of power were gathered here in the forms of Libra, Scorpius, Aigokeros, and Karkinos. Added to them were Sagittarius and Castor, which made it a six-on-one fight... But they knew painfully well that, even then, it would be a tough battle.

Setting a normal Leon aside, Leon as he was now was extraordinary. He'd already slipped Lufas's control and had gotten back his original power, but now he had the Goddess's power on top of that. There were only about three people

in the world who could defeat someone so ridiculously strong, and they were Lufas, the Vampire Princess, and the Devil King.

“At any rate, he’ll probably reach us soon. And he’ll massacre every centaur here regardless of whether or not we’re present,” Castor said in a serious tone while looking over all the centaurs gathered there.

Sagittarius nodded in agreement. Now that he had saved the other Twelve Stars, no excuse would save them. Leon would definitely attack the village in retribution for Sagittarius’s actions. The centaur himself was aware of that as well, so he’d come here to protect them.

“I’d bet on that. He’s a small, short-tempered man. He’ll definitely come and crush this village to make an example out of it. That was why I had no choice but to obey him, at least on the surface.” He paused, then said, “Though, I doubt that’s a good enough excuse.”

“Of course it isn’t. Anyone who betrays Lady Lufas deserves nothing less than death!”

Sagittarius had already spoken self-deprecatingly, but Scorpius used harsh words to beat him down further. Yet while her words were hostile, she never took action.

“Well, you’ll probably be needed, so I’ll let you go. It makes me angry, but if we’re going to take Leon down, then we need as many hands as we can get right now.”

“Thank you.”

She was still angry at Sagittarius, but his punishment could be decided by Lufas. Beating Leon was more important right now, and Sagittarius was needed for that. Scorpius was at least calm enough to decide that it was better to settle for glaring while shaking hands. As long as she wasn’t in the midst of a hysterical rage, and as long as Lufas wasn’t directly involved, she was pretty capable of making normal decisions.

“Our fight with Leon will center around Karkinos, who’ll be the one in front. Virgo and Castor will aid Karkinos, while Sagittarius and I provide supporting fire. Aigokeros will confuse Leon with illusions, and Scorpius will try to poison

him however she can whenever she sees an opening.”

They all listened, faces grave, as Libra explained their strategy for fighting Leon and everyone’s roles in it. The plan ended up being basically ganging up on him, but there was no room to hesitate. After all, the opponent was Leon. If they pulled their punches, then they’d be the ones killed.

The forest started to shake as if it had been waiting for the exact moment their strategy had been decided. There was no one present who would’ve suggested it was anything as tame as an earthquake at this point.

Libra and the others leapt out of the little cabin to look outside of the village, and what they saw was a giant lion coming their way, trampling the trees in his path.

The hero’s party was struck silent before such a threat, and Gantz’s ax slipped out of his hands. *He’s huge. Ridiculously huge. Too huge!* Gantz had faced Aries in his giant form when defending Svel, but Leon was an even more abnormal size than Aries had been.

Sei was still unconscious, and staying that way might have been better for him. The tiger rolled over on the floor as if to imitate Sei and played dead. Petto’s fur stood on end, and he couldn’t move an inch. Jean was the only one who didn’t immediately notice the difference in their strength, and he charged forward, but the size difference was so great no one noticed.

“So he’s here... Let’s go, Sagittarius!”

“Yeah, I know!”

Libra had Astraia equipped as she fired a full salvo, and Sagittarius unleashed an arrow of his own into the sky. The destructive beams Libra unleashed hit the enormous lion dead-on. On top of that, a rain of countless arrows of light came down from the sky on top of Leon, stabbing into his large body. But the arrows only pierced Leon’s tough hide, just barely breaking through his skin, his expression not even changing.

One of the arrows impacted near Jean, who’d reached Leon’s feet, and the shockwave its impact generated sent him flying.

“Ha! Acting crafty, are you? It looks like none of you understand yet... Attacks

like those won't work!"

Leon opened his large mouth and sucked in a deep breath. The attack he was about to unleash didn't have any fancy power or effect. Basically, it was just a simple roar—a simple act of expelling the mana in his body along with his breath. In theory, this move was even possible for low-ranking monsters. In terms of skills, it was a low-ranking, very simple skill. When used by Leon, though, even such a simple skill became a weapon with enough destructive force to blow away a capital.

To think that just a single breath from a living thing could cause enough destruction to erase a city; ridiculous didn't even begin to describe it, but in this world, that was what being the strongest meant. It meant being able to destroy the world if the person wished. That was the first condition for joining the category.

Lufas, Benetnasch, and the Devil King each had so much power that they could quickly and easily turn Mizgarz into space dust if they felt like it. Erasing a country was child's play. Even erasing a continent was just a matter of course. That ability was what made them powerful, and that power was what made them the strongest.

The breath Leon was about to unleash would most likely easily annihilate the centaurs' village—no, the entire demihuman settlement along with the forest. It would kill many demihumans as well as Jean, since he was unfortunately in the breath's path, and even deal massive damage to the Twelve Stars. And none of the combatants had a way to stop Leon. Leon had enough attack power that canceling the breath out was impossible, though there might have been a way to avoid it.

In an attempt to at least shave away some of the breath's power, Karkinos stood in front of the attack in his giganticized form, prepared for the massive damage he was about to take.

But right afterwards a rainbow-colored meteor came flying in, kicking Leon's jaw upwards and forcing his mouth closed.

"Gah?!"

A small figure wrapped in rainbow-colored flames slammed another kick into

Leon’s closed mouth. When the kick landed, Leon’s entire giant body was lifted upwards as the figure emitted flames from its hands to accelerate. The entire sequence was like a joke. The figure maneuvered above Leon, and this time, it kicked him downward.

Leon quickly attempted a counterattack...but unfortunately, his target was too small.

Size meant strength. Being bigger naturally meant having more weight behind your attacks while also spreading the force of your enemy’s attacks along a greater surface. What was a huge boulder to a human looked like nothing but a granule of sand to Leon. This applied to the gigantic forms the other Twelve Heavenly Stars could take as well. Though their stats didn’t change, they gained not only an intimidating form, but also extra power that wasn’t expressed in pure stats.

Being small also had its merits, and this was one of them. Attacks were harder to land on those who were smaller. The rainbow-colored flames dealt damage based on the target’s toughness, which was a skill for bringing down those stronger than the user. The difference in size meant nothing to that skill.

The small figure—Aries—landed in front of Libra and the others and he turned around with an embarrassed look.

“Um... Sorry I’m late, everyone.”

“No, that was good timing, Aries. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Leon’s strength was already off the rails. Now that even Libra’s full salvo did almost negligible damage, there were very limited ways for them to pierce through his defenses. His toughness even exceeded Karkinos’s, whose only redeeming feature was his defense. At this point, the crab no longer had a role.

Aries alone was different. His flame was unique; it ignored all defenses. In order to combat Leon’s massively inflated vitality, what was needed wasn’t Brachium, which couldn’t be repeatedly fired, but Aries’s flames, which changed strength depending on the opponent. At this point, the firepower Aries was uniquely poised to bring to bear exceeded even Lufas. In other words, with Lufas not in the picture, Aries held the potential to defeat Leon in his hands.

Still, he didn't stand a chance in a one-on-one fight, so Libra and the other's help was needed for him to win.

"You weaklings...! How dare shits like you do this to meeeee!"

Leon flared with anger as he glared at Aries, and Aries made sure to meet his gaze, even though he was afraid.

The Lion King Leon was the strongest monster. Aries had admired him. He'd wanted to be like Leon someday. He'd envied Leon, thinking, *how nice would it be to be strong like that?* After all, Leon had always been strong, and it seemed to Aries that he lived in an entirely different world.

But right now, what Aries felt for Leon wasn't respect or envy or yearning. It was pity and disappointment. Now that he'd been reduced to the Goddess's puppet, he was nothing but laughable. This form didn't suit him at all...and Aries felt disappointed from the bottom of his heart.

"Mesarthim Version One!"

Aries cloaked his entire body in rainbow-colored flame, and his hair billowed. If Lufas were to see him, she'd probably react with "I said Mesarthim's not that kind of... Oh, it is that kind of skill."

Aries chose not to use his giant sheep form to fight Leon. For this fight alone, Aries wanted to fight in the human form given to him by Lufas.

Resonating with his will to fight, Scorpius and Aigokeros took their gigantic forms simultaneously. This time, the main attacker would be Aries, so they needed to stop him from being attacked as much as possible. That was exactly what their gigantic forms were for. The situation called for more targets. In an instant, they'd resolved themselves to become walls for Aries for the sake of victory.

"OOOOOOARRGGHHH!!!"

"HIIIISSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!"

Both Aigokeros and Scorpius jumped at Leon at the same time, trying to pin him down with their bodies. Karkinos jumped in a beat later, starting a scuffle between four gigantic monsters.

Irritated, Leon bared his fangs, but that just allowed Karkinos to stuff his pincer inside Leon's mouth. Karkinos added his counter skill, Acubens, to the claw, causing Leon to bleed. But Karkinos wasn't completely fine either. His claw had been crushed in Leon's jaw, and he even took a headbutt from Leon on top of that and was sent flying.

That was when Aries jumped in with a kick, snapping off one of Leon's fangs and sending his giant body flying backwards. Aries followed up by launching fire from his palms, continuing his combo from afar.

Leon opened up his huge jaw, but a black tentacle appeared on the ground under him, binding him and delaying his attack. Even though he escaped his bindings quickly, it was already too late for Leon to unleash his roar.

Aries generated jets of fire towards the ground in order to ascend straight upwards. Next, he turned his jet towards the sky to rapidly descend, ramming a fist into Leon's head. That single strike embedded Leon's head in the ground, causing the earth to shake.

But as expected, the Lion King's stamina was a cut above the rest. He'd already taken five hits from Aries, which should have dealt almost 500,000 HP in damage, but he still stood back up and opened his mouth. Right before he could unleash his roar, Suzuki aimed at Leon's eye and fired his mana rifle. Leon closed his eye reflexively, allowing Aries to escape Leon's aim.

Even though he'd avoided a direct hit, Aries had still been grazed, which sent his slim body flying. However, Aigokeros jumped in before Leon could follow up, lifting him up from underneath and throwing him.

"Grk... Urghh..."

"Aries! Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah. I can still fight... I'm fine."

It had only been one hit, and just a graze at that, but Aries was covered in wounds. His clothes were in tatters, and though it was all right since he was male, his appearance would have been so lewd he'd have been forced to retreat if he were female. His white skin was covered in wounds, and it looked even worse, because he was so cute.

But the will he still harbored behind his eyes hadn’t weakened in the slightest, and he once again wrapped his body in rainbow-colored flame. If it weren’t for the defensive buffs cast on him by Dina, he might have been done after that one hit.

Meanwhile, Aigokeros, Karkinos, and Scorpius were all putting up a hard fight. Sagittarius and Castor had relegated themselves to ranged support fire, and Suzuki persistently aimed at Leon’s eye with his mana rifle, since he wasn’t able to deal damage anyway.

Virgo quickly rushed to Aries’s side and healed him with heaven-arts, while Libra hit Leon with full salvos from her cannons whenever she found an opening. As for poor Sei, he screamed along with Sargess, both of whom had woken up because things had gotten so noisy and frantic.

“M-MONSTER FIGHT?!”

18

“Storm Harpoon!”

Castor swung his beloved anchor, launching an invisible wave of wind pressure aimed at Leon’s head. Castor was only using magic, but the magic he used was powerful enough to carve a fissure into the ground several hundred meters long. Even then, it was nothing more than a light punch to Leon. It wouldn’t do much more than distract him, but that was enough. Distracting him was good.

“Luna Tentacle!”

Aigokeros followed up by summoning a set of tentacles of darkness that mobbed Leon. It would be wrong to question him as to why he’d created this lion x tentacles scene. Aigokeros was fighting seriously, but the binding only lasted a moment. Leon easily ripped apart his bindings before charging at Aigokeros, who’d been marked as a huge annoyance, but Leon never reached his target.

Karkinos stepped between them, forcing a clash between a giant crab and lion. The aftershocks of their collision snapped trees in two and shook the

earth. The Acubens counter sent Leon flying, but Karkinos once again immediately fell to the ground. He'd reached his limit and wasn't able to continue defending against Leon's attacks.

Karkinos's defense was the highest among all the Twelve Heavenly Stars; it even exceeded Leon's when he was in a normal state at level 1000. Adding his defense buffing skill, Tegmine, on top of that made Karkinos's defense stat reach over 20,000, which would invalidate most attacks made on him. But at the moment, Leon was abnormal. He had enough power to force his way through Karkinos's defenses, allowing Leon to defeat Karkinos, who specialized in battles of attrition. On top of all that, Leon was still on a rampage, even after all this, so it was clear he'd gone berserk.

"Grafias!"

Scorpius threw her deadly poison breath at Leon. The poison she unleashed was different from normal poison in that it could stack.

Just as Lufas had stated before, the hardest part about dealing with this scorpion was the fact that she could poison you more when you were already poisoned. Normal poison worked by dealing 1 damage per second, and that was it. But Scorpius was different. By applying more poison, she could add even more instances of poison, turning 1 damage per second to 2, 3, 4, or even 10. However, even that threat was nothing but a small decrease when taking Leon's massive vitality into account. Poison that wouldn't disappear would surely kill him eventually, but that eventually was going to take a long time. At the very least, it wouldn't happen within the time frame of this battle.

"Cheeky bitch!"

Leon jumped, landing on top of Scorpius's giant form. Now that the shield named Karkinos was out of the picture, there was no way to stop Leon's attacks. Just one attack put Scorpius out of the fight, and a follow-up stomp crushed her exoskeleton.

Aigokeros leapt at Leon from behind, but he didn't even turn around. He just swiped his tail to disperse Aigokeros's giant phantom clone.

"You...!"

“Stop, Aries! If you jump in recklessly—”

Aries used Leon’s blind spot to jump in and unleash a kick, but it seemed as if Leon had predicted that, as he simply moved his head a little to dodge the attack. Then, he turned around and instantly captured Aries using his tail.

“Gah! Agh!”

“I finally caught you... You’ve been buzzing around for too long... Letting small fry like you do as you please for this long hurts my pride. Looks like it’s time this small fry started acting like one and shut up,” Leon said, irritated, as he strengthened the grip of his tail.

When he did so, an ominous creaking could be heard coming out of Aries’s bones, and his face twisted in anguish.

Even though Libra and Sagittarius fired at Leon, he was able to dodge by jumping with his giant body. Unlike what his size suggested, he was incredibly spritely.

“I’ll finish you off later... Other people’re first. Just sit there and wait quietly,” Leon said without even looking at Libra and the others as he gripped with his tail even harder.

He probably intended to squeeze Aries to death just like that. But no, it didn’t turn into something as simple and easy as that. Leon moved Aries in front of his face and exposed his fangs.

“I’ll give you the end you deserve. I’ll eat you like the trash monster you are!”

It was no longer even clear if Aries was present enough to listen. There was a blank look in his eyes as he’d lost consciousness.

In the end, this was the difference in their strength. Percentile damage was all well and good, but it was still only natural for the side with an overwhelming stat advantage to win. Leon, sure of his victory, opened his mouth wide.

“Hermes Thrice-Mighty.”

A voice rang through the air and mana gathered. Right afterwards, three magic circles appeared at the same time, surrounding Leon’s huge body on three sides and exposing him to a flooding torrent of water. The pressure of the

unleashed water was comparable to the deep sea, and the water eventually transformed into a fixed pyramid shape. Now that the enormous mass of water had condensed and compressed into a fixed shape, the internal pressure of the water easily exceeded tens of thousands of tons.

Such a sudden attack caused Leon to let Aries go, but the attack from the sudden interloper still wasn't over.

"Exgate!"

Time and space wavered. Leon's surroundings transformed into a pitch-black space with nothing in it, and a single blue-haired girl appeared in front of the Lion King, who was trapped in a pyramid of water. There was nothing else there—neither the forest, the centaurs' village, nor anything else. The only things still left were living beings like Aries, Castor, and Sei. Nothing non-living, including Libra, was around.

The girl looked down upon Leon, smiling scornfully as several hundred magic circles deployed simultaneously in the void.

"Morning Venus!" The girl declared.

At the same time, a storm of meteors rained down in the void.

In order to avoid causing a disaster to the planet and still use this spell, Dina's countermeasure was exceedingly simple. She merely caught everything in a wide area—a radius of several kilometers—in an Exgate. As a result, everything that made up the world had been ejected into a subspace created by the Exgate, leaving behind only living things that hadn't consented to using the Exgate. Dina hadn't forced Leon somewhere with an Exgate. She'd just gotten rid of everything else with an Exgate, creating a unique point in space where nothing would get damaged.

The shining, golden meteors directly impacted Leon one after the other from above the pyramid, causing a chain of explosions. Just like that, Dina attacked Leon while sealing his movements. At the same time, she put up a shield to protect herself and the others from the aftereffects of the impacts. She didn't stop there either. She also pointed a finger at the unconscious Aries, fully healing him with heaven-arts.

Dina was maintaining an Exgate, using two spells, and two heaven-arts all at the same time. Such abnormally superhuman technique had Kross's draw dropping so far it nearly separated from the rest of his face as he muttered, "Impossible..."

Then, the magic ended, and the world returned to the way it had been.

Dina confirmed that her surprise attack had worked before noticing that she was being stared at very harshly by Libra. Breaking out in a cold sweat, Dina thought, *I might have revealed too much...* While reflecting on that, she opened a crack in space and ran.

"The rest is up to you, Aries. It'll be okay... You can win."

With those last words, the storm abated. After that, Aries opened his eyes dazedly, wondering what happened. Meanwhile, Leon stood up and looked for the interloper, but she was nowhere to be found.

Dina knew her own limits. She knew how weak she was, so she never made the mistake of lingering on the battlefield for too long. She was the fastest in the world at running away, after all.

"Dammit! Who the hell was that?! Come out here. I'll devour you!"

Leon had flown into a rage, while Aries only vaguely realized that he'd been saved.

From the looks of things, it was probably Dina. I'm fully healed, and there aren't many people who can pull off such a brilliant ambush while healing people. But if that's the case, she could have fixed my clothes, too, while she was at it...

As before, Aries's clothes were still in tatters, and he was only looking progressively lewder. He sighed, though he had no way of knowing that Dina had left him like that on purpose so that she could get a good eyeful.

Now the situation had gone back to square one, except for the fact that Leon had lost a lot of health in that ambush, though that wasn't technically correct. Dina had just dealt a massive blow in pure numbers, but in the face of Leon's incredibly bloated HP pool, one of Aries's fire-wreathed punches would still have done more. Aries was still the only reliable attacker in this situation, and

the gap in their abilities was still the same.

As it is, things'll just be a repeat of before.

But in the midst of Aries's worries, he felt someone putting their hand on his head. He quickly turned around, and for an instant, he felt as if he saw his master, Lufas. Her expression was that of days past, back when she had been feared as a great conqueror and was full of self-confidence.

"What are you scared of, Aries? You are one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars We've personally approved of. You don't fall short of him in any way. Have confidence. You are strong. Now go teach that idiot a lesson or two. Show him the strength of the one he called a small fry." Lufas laughed, fearless, before disappearing in a haze.



Aries's body immediately swelled with power. It wasn't added power, like the effect of heaven-arts. It felt like his base stats had grown explosively. Aries looked around and noticed that everyone other than Libra, such as Castor and Aigokeros, were looking at their bodies and seemed surprised.

Could this be...? Aries thought as he looked over to everyone else for confirmation.

"Um, it feels like my level suddenly went up..."

"Indeed. Me too."

The change had happened to all the Twelve Stars other than Libra and Leon, which could only mean one thing.

"Ah, looks like Lady Lufas is finally serious. Good work, tiny vampire," Scorpius said, delighted.

That in itself answered the mystery of the current changes. The Twelve Heavenly Stars were all limited to level 800 with the exception of Libra, who had been created by Mizar. That limit was because of Lufas's skill limits as a Monster Tamer as well as her combined level of 1000. As long as her class level remained at 100, this wouldn't change. But if their levels had changed, that meant one thing—there'd been a change in Lufas's level.

The level limit was 1000. This was the ceiling set by the Goddess, and thus common sense in this world. However, Lufas had long overcome that wall, and if she were to go all out, her level would jump to over 4000. All the Twelve Heavenly Stars knew this. Thus, when Lufas got serious and only then, the level limits of the Twelve Stars were raised, and they were able to return to their original strengths.

"We've won," Libra said confidently, and the rest of them all expressed their agreement.

Apparently Benetnasch had put up quite the fight. She'd gone too far and had forced their master to get serious. But now, the fight was over. At this moment, the battle had been decided. No one could stand against Lufas Maphaahl once she'd decided to go all out. If a person really wanted to win, they'd need at least one or two full-on dragons. At least, that was what Lufas herself had once

told Parthenos. It wasn't even a bluff, and the fact that she was serious showed just how overwhelmingly powerful Lufas was.

"W-With this, M E will have a role too..." Karkinos said, still having not gotten up.

The rest of the group all shot him down at once, though. Even Dina took the trouble to pop her head out of a gap in space just to pile on, saying, "Even if the tank goes up in level, they won't exactly get more things to do."

Dejected, Karkinos's head drooped. The rest of the group left him alone as they looked up at Leon and took up fighting stances.

"You understand, right, Aries? Right now, our power is at its maximum, but this won't last for long."

"Yeah. Now that Miss Lufas is going all-out, the fight won't last long... It wouldn't be weird if the fight was settled in the next second."

Lufas's fighting style, while serious, surpassed a normal person's understanding. The time she experienced was compressed to the limit, since the fight would be conducted at incredible speeds. She would ratchet up her gears, shifting her experience of time up by several stages and leaving everything else in the world behind. It would have been easy for her to exchange several dozen rounds of attacking and defending in an instant.

In other words, it was entirely possible for a serious Lufas to completely annihilate her enemy in a single second before releasing her serious mode. That was just how strong and fast she was. It was enough that the word "fight" would no longer apply. The only one who could last at least several seconds under those conditions was Benetnasch. But unfortunately, even Benetnasch was no match in the end. It wasn't as if Benetnasch was particularly weak. It was just that Lufas was so incredibly strong.

"Go, Aries! Hit him with everything you've got!"

Sagittarius unleashed an arrow, and Aries grabbed onto it. The next moment, Aries had teleported directly above Leon, his fist wrapped in flames.

Aigokeros and Castor used magic to hinder Leon's movements, and Libra commenced support fire to disorient Leon. Scorpius also wrapped her tail

around Leon’s leg, and the crab who once thought he had nothing to do suddenly seemed to have hit some sort of inspiration as he activated a skill.

“Accept this, Aries! Altarf!”

Altarf was one of Karkinos’s fringe skills, which could only be activated once when he was knocked out of the fight. It was less a counter and more lashing out spitefully from the grave. It would only take effect once. The skill doubled the damage of the very next attack, allowing that attack to exceed the single hit damage limit of 99,999.

Aries screamed as he became an avatar of fire. A shining rainbow meteor crashed down onto Leon’s head.

If Lufas were around, she would have been able to use her Observing Eye to see the amazing moment when Leon’s remaining HP, which numbered over 800,000, was reduced to 1 in a single hit.

19

Many of the skills that existed in Mizgarz came with restrictions, such as the number of times that skill was usable. Skills that were too powerful were only usable once every twenty-four hours. Another example was racial limits; some skills could only be obtained by those of a specific race. This applied to magic as well. Combinations were another example; some skills only revealed themselves once someone acquired a specific combination of classes. The last example was levels; some skills required a certain overall combined level to be used, if not obtained.

“Hamal,” one of Aries’s attack skills, was one of those. This skill boasted the highest attack power out of all of Aries’s skills, and once it was activated, it could turn the tide of battle all on its own. However, he normally couldn’t use it even if he wanted to, as its use was restricted. Its condition for activation was that the user had to be level 1000; it was a skill with a level restriction. On top of that, it could only be used once every twenty-four hours. In return for such strict restrictions, its power was tremendous. Its effect was to deal half the target’s total HP in damage, no matter how much HP the target currently had.

Of course, Lufas would say that Brachium was far more powerful than Hamal. After all, Brachium had a damage ceiling. It didn't matter if the opponent's HP was 200,000 or 100,000,000. Brachium would simply deal up to 99,999 damage. It couldn't deal more than that. If the opponent's HP wasn't above 200,000, Hamal wouldn't even deal enough damage to hit the ceiling. Since that was the case, Brachium, which always dealt 99,999 damage, was far more powerful and easier to understand.

But that was only assuming Aries was alone. By adding Karkinos to the mix, Aries's skill had the potential to far outstrip Brachium. Combined with Karkinos's Altarf, Aries's skill would be literally unbeatable. The flame would even destroy gods. In other words, Aries was able to exhibit the most firepower out of anyone in the Twelve Heavenly Stars once he was level 1000 and under the strict condition that Karkinos sacrificed himself in order to use his incredibly niche skill.

Aries could instantly defeat any enemy by doubling half the target's total HP in damage and breaking through the damage ceiling, regardless of how much HP they had. Though in the end, percentile damage was still percentile damage; it literally couldn't finish anybody off. Its weakness was that it always left the target with 1 HP. But right now, that was to their advantage. Given that they wanted to stop Leon without killing him, this move was literally perfect for the job.

In the end, the fight was decided, and the lion fell to the sheep. No matter how humiliated Leon felt, it wouldn't change the outcome. The victor had been decided.

"Well done. You did it, Aries."

"E x c e l l e n t! I knew you could do it, Aries!"

"Aries, you're amazing..."

Libra, Karkinos, and Virgo all praised Aries, who'd just landed in front of Leon. Aigokeros and Scorpius once again returned to their human forms, praising Aries's good fight themselves while patting his shoulder as Karkinos also hurriedly returned to human form.

On the other hand, Sei and the others were still dumbfounded after

witnessing a fight that had been so far out of their league. The demihumans were also in shock after seeing their leader, whom they had believed to be invincible, defeated. As soon as Scorpius walked out in front of them, though, the demihumans' faces turned from shock to despair.

"Now, then... All that's left is to clean up all these fools who followed Leon. It isn't worth much next to Aries defeating Leon himself, but these weaklings are still Lufas's enemies and need to be erased," Scorpius declared, her tone cold. Her hair-tail wriggled as she set her sights on the spiderman who seemed to be their leader first.

But that was when Sei suddenly got in the way, stopping her tail with his sword. The sword snapped in two as a result, and Sei himself was thrown backwards, rolling over the ground. Still, the unexpected interference made Scorpius miss, her tail instead piercing through a tree which happened to be beside the spiderman.

This in no way meant that Sei was strong. Scorpius's attack had just been so laid-back it was like she barely even cared about killing him. If Scorpius had actually been serious... Well, even if she weren't serious but had decided to use even a tenth of her full power, Sei would have been pierced through along with his sword, and the spiderman behind him would have died as well.

"S-Sei?!"

Virgo rushed over to where the panicked Sei had been knocked over.

Scorpius simply gave him an exasperated look. "Hey, now. What do you think you're doing, boy?"

As soon as Sei managed to get himself up, he looked straight at Scorpius. "That should be my line. What do you think you're doing all of a sudden?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm killing them."

"B-But they can't even fight anymore. They've lost all will to resist. Any more violence and it'll just—"

"That doesn't matter."

Sei paused. "Huh?"

“Whatever’s going on with them doesn’t matter to me. They’re the underlings of a fool who made an enemy of Lady Lufas, which means they’re my enemies. That’s more than enough for me. I don’t need or care to learn anything more about them. Who cares about an enemy’s circumstances or beliefs or tragic pasts? None of that matters.”

Sei had made a single mistake. Well, it was more of a misunderstanding. He’d thought that all of the Twelve Heavenly Stars were as kind as Virgo. Castor had seemed like a good, reliable young man, though he was a little off in some ways. Not to mention, Lufas Maphaahl was much more reasonable than had been expected. So Sei had held the optimistic opinion that the Twelve Heavenly Stars weren’t as scary as others made them out to be. He’d had a hopeful outlook that they were only so feared because of the Goddess’s interference, and they could be reasoned with normally.

But he had been wrong. Dead wrong. The Twelve Stars were a group of beings who had originally been monsters. Aries and Karkinos could be reasoned with and would consider others’ circumstances, but Aigokeros and Scorpius wouldn’t. Those two were like a monster’s pure brutality and cruelty stuffed into human form. In the end, the way they thought was just different than normal humans, and they would have no truck with reason. A ferocious beast that had been tamed might come to love its master, but it would still act like a ferocious beast towards anyone else.

“Okay now, get out of the way. You don’t want to get killed along with them, do you?”

Scorpius’s tone was kind, but there was no emotion backing it. It didn’t matter to her if Sei got out of the way or not. In a few seconds, her tail would mercilessly reap the demihumans.

Or it would have, if Leon hadn’t managed to get up...

“O-O-OOOOOOAGGHHHH!”

“No way! Again...?!”

Everyone instantly fell into wary stances as they looked over at Leon. Scorpius prepared herself for Leon’s next attack as if she’d totally forgotten about the demihumans.

“Wait a second. Something’s off.”

The whites of Leon’s eyes were showing, and he was roaring while drooling. He was no longer capable of fighting. It didn’t matter if he was the Lion King; he’d taken too much damage.

While everyone else was surprised, Libra remained calm as she coldly analyzed the situation. “This is...” Libra paused to process the data. “I see. This is the result of selling his soul to the Goddess.”

Leon could no longer fight, so he was now nothing more than a marionette of the Goddess. It didn’t matter if he couldn’t go on. As long as the Goddess ordered him to fight, his body would keep moving until he died, regardless of his will. If they didn’t manage to do something about this, nothing would be solved, and Leon would continue his rampage until death.

Scorpius’s poison fought against the forced recovery due to the Goddess’s powers. Leon foamed at the mouth, and his eyes were bloodshot as he wavered painfully between life and death. According to Libra’s Observation skill, Leon’s HP was constantly going back and forth between 0 and 1. He was literally in a position where he could neither live nor die.

“I see. I wonder if I was like that too?” Scorpius paused, thinking. “So, can we even do anything about this?” she asked, reminded of her past mistakes.

Dina popped halfway out of a crack in space to answer. As always, she was already making preparations to run as she looked up at Leon and shook her head. “No. Now that he’s totally sold his soul to the Goddess... This isn’t simple thought guidance anymore.”

“Hmm. Then there’s nothing we can do. He got what he deserved, but this is just a miserable sight.”

Scorpius heaved a sigh as she formed a pair of scissors with mana, opening and closing them noisily. Following her example, Aigokeros created black balls of mana in both hands, and Libra readied her cannons.

Seeing their reactions, Aries quickly stepped in front of Leon, protecting him. “W-Wait! What’re you gonna do?!”

“Now that it’s come to this, there’s no choice but to kill him. It hurts to lose

the strongest of us Twelve Heavenly Stars, but considering how much damage he'll cause, killing Leon here is the best option," said Scorpius.

"I hate that I agree with you, but I do," said Aigokeros. "We have to kill him now."

"That's just the way it is. Step aside, Aries, or you'll be caught up in it too," said Libra.

Even on the brink of death, Leon was still moving. Dina couldn't help him, though, so there was only one option—reap his life and stop him for good. There was still the question of whether or not they'd be forgiven for killing one of the Twelve Heavenly Stars, who were Lufas's subordinates, and taking away their single strongest source of power, but there was no other choice. They had to believe that their master would understand. Having made that decision, the three of them made to finish off Leon simultaneously without hesitation.

"Is there really...no other way?"

"There isn't," Aigokeros answered, heartless.

If they were to leave him alone, Leon would rampage until he died. Not only would he completely decimate the centaurs' village, but the number of other casualties Leon would cause and the amount of destruction he'd sow until he could do no more would be immeasurable. No matter how childish and immature his thought processes were, it couldn't be forgotten that he was still the strongest of the Twelve Heavenly Stars. If he couldn't be saved, then he should at least be finished off before he did even more damage.

Sagittarius and Castor came to this conclusion a little after Libra and the others had, and they pointed their weapons at Leon as well.

Aries bit his lip, frustrated at his own powerlessness, but he couldn't object. He knew Libra was correct. No one there had the ability to do something about Leon's state. Well, no one *should* have been there who could do so.

There was a moment of silence. "Fall back."

A voice so deep it seemed to come from the depths of the earth rang in Aries's ear. At first, he misunderstood and thought the command had been directed at him. Aries thought that the voice wanted him to get out of the way,

just like Aigokeros and the others, but something was off. The voice didn't belong to anyone present, but it was strangely familiar. That was why he hadn't immediately reacted to the voice, instead wondering who it was. It was a voice he'd heard many times before, but it was still strange. After all, they hadn't met up with the speaker yet. There was no way he should've been there.

"Did you not hear me?" There was a pause. "I said to fall back." The voice resounded once again, demanding a retreat for the second time, but it wasn't directed at Aries specifically.

Aigokeros and the others turned around at the same time, looking at the person who'd spoken. They hadn't just told Aries to fall back. They'd commanded everyone to do so.

The figure who stood there had feet clad in steel boots, and the gauntlets they wore were similarly of steel. They had a very fitting black trench coat, and a one-handed ax was readied. The figure's face was hidden behind a mask, so it was impossible to see their expression, but Aries recognized them anyway.

"You're..."

"You are... Taurus the Ox. Why're you here...?"

Taurus was the Ox of the Conquering Twelve Heavenly Stars. It was also the name of the person who should have been in Helheim maintaining the seal on the Dragon of Earth.

The man Libra had identified passed her and Aries as he approached Leon, completely unafraid. Looking up at the rampaging Lion King, the man muttered in a monotonous tone, "This is quite strange... He's probably been tempted by the Goddess. I'd be speaking the truth if I said this is just like him, but I can't stand to watch this. So I'll be taking the liberty of destroying that idiotic power. Someone using the Goddess's power in a place like this might affect the seal."

Taurus clenched his steel-clad fist, making a creaking sound as the metal scraped together. Even though Leon had lost his mind, he must have still deemed Taurus a threat upon seeing this. With a crazed shout, the giant lion leapt at the man, but Taurus wasn't moved in the slightest. He simply watched the lion from behind his mask, eyes cold.



“Aldebaran,” he said, declaring his skill as he pounded his left fist into the Lion King’s snout.

For a moment, it was as if time itself had stopped. The entire area was frightfully still and dead silent, but that was just the quiet before the storm. The next instant, everybody could tell that something was happening.

crack

The sound of something cracking apart rang out as a fissure appeared in space. The sound didn’t just happen once; it happened multiple times in rapid success, growing ominously louder. The fissure widened into something that resembled a spider’s web. Then it burst, sounding as if something hard had just been hit with an even harder hammer, crushing it.

That single hit sent Leon’s huge body flying, expelling him from the forest. The trees in his path were ripped out of the ground entirely, roots and all, before snapping, which showed just how powerful that one attack was.

“W-Wait! If you hit him that hard, he’ll die! Leon only has 1 HP right now!”

Taurus paused, then said, “It’s no problem. Aldebaran does not break physical objects, but power itself. He won’t be killed by my blow. Did you forget that over these two hundred years?”

“Ah. Oh, right.”

No, don’t “oh, right” that! Out of reflex, Sei internally retorted to Aries’s satisfaction at Taurus’s explanation. *So this is what people mean by “the fear of not having a straight man.” “He won’t be killed by my blow,” my ass! Look how far back he flew. Anybody would be killed!*

But no one else thought this was weird. They were completely on board with that explanation.

Am I the weird one?! Am I the one getting caught up on something dumb?! Sei wondered, hounded by the urge to cry. Only the stupid dog tried to comfort him as it rubbed up against his legs. *Oh, wait. No. It’s just playing. It’s clinging to my pants.*

“A-And what about Leon?”

Taurus was silent, then spoke. “I have just removed the Goddess’s power that bound him. I do not know whether he’s a big enough fool to accept her temptation again, but he should be all right for now.” Taurus paused. “By the way, is Lufas present?”

“Ah. Uh... No, she’s doing something else.”

“I see.”

Taurus lowered his fist and turned his back as if to signify that he no longer had any business there. He didn’t hesitate as he walked away, clearly showing that he really did intend to just leave.

That was when Scorpius, in a fit of hysteria, shouted, “Hey, stop right there! Are you really going to come out of nowhere, not explain anything, and then just leave?! Do you really think we’re just going to let that happen?!”

Taurus considered her words silently before answering. “You were fighting near the seal, making a huge ruckus. Not to mention, one of you was waving around the Goddess’s power. So I came to stop you. Now that it is over, I am leaving... Is there a problem with this?”

“There’s a huge problem! You haven’t seen us, your comrades, in two hundred years! Are you seriously not even going to say hello?!”

“I see. You have a point... Yes, you may be right.”

Taurus unexpectedly admitted his wrongdoing, easily agreeing with Scorpius. Scorpius seemed somewhat satisfied at that, nodding and saying, “Right?”

“It has been a while. Nice to see you.”

Taurus’s greeting to everyone was extremely brief, and just like that, he turned around once again and started walking away.

That had Scorpius falling over herself. “HEEEEYYYY!” she shouted, angered, as she picked herself up.

Taurus was merely silent. “Is there more?”

“That’s all?! Seriously?!”

There was a pause before he spoke. “You pointed out that I had not greeted

you, even after all this time, so I responded to your request. Was I wrong?”

“You were, you unsociable fruit! You know what I’ve always wanted to ask you? Why the hell are you allowed to refer to Lady Lufas so casually?! What’s up with that?! Are you really even loyal to her?!”

Taurus was completely silent in the face of Scorpius’s questions, but she could somehow tell the look in his eyes had become slightly sharper behind that mask.

“She is a comrade and a friend to me as well as a benefactor and the lord I accepted and swore to give my everything to. Are you satisfied with that response?” he said in his usual monotone.

He did manage to convey his seriousness about the answer, however, and even Scorpius was mentally overpowered for a moment. In truth, no one actually doubted Taurus’s loyalty. Scorpius may have said as much, but she knew the truth. She knew that man’s loyalty was ironclad, the real thing, and she couldn’t help but be jealous.

Taurus’s relationship with Lufas was second in length only to Aries among the Twelve Stars. He was the second monster Lufas had ever captured. The difference between him and Aigokeros or Parthenos was that Lufas had yet to become the absolute pillar of strength that she was now when Taurus had been captured. Aigokeros and the others had met Lufas and bent their knee in the face of her power. Taurus had been her servant from the beginning. When he had met Lufas, she hadn’t quite been the monster she was now, so the relationship between him and Lufas was less that of a master and servant and more like comrades in arms who walked the same path. That was why his belief in Lufas was so strong, and why he alone among the Twelve Heavenly Stars was treated like a friend instead of a subordinate.

That fact also made Scorpius jealous enough to want to kill. It had always been that way. Lufas had sent the Twelve Stars forward to defeat her enemies countless times, but the one she always had standing behind her was Taurus.

“O-Oh, that reminds me. You couldn’t destroy the Goddess’s power two hundred years ago, could you? How did you learn to do that?”

Aries noticed Scorpius’s irritation growing at an increasing rate, so he

hurriedly stepped in to sidetrack the conversation. Taurus looked down at the sheep, who was trying to smooth over the situation admirably, and decided to play along with what he was doing. Taurus didn't especially care about Scorpius's mood, but he respected Aries enough to change the subject.

"You ask me how...but it is not something I can explain. None of you can explain how your skills work either, can you? I just wished to be able to do it... Two hundred years ago, I was unable to destroy her power, and it led to that result. I then desired to destroy something even as absolute as the Goddess's power so that would not happen again, and I started putting effort into polishing myself. That is all."

"Um... Do skills really evolve like that?"

"No idea. I do not know about anything difficult like that. The one hiding over there should be more knowledgeable about it than me, no?"

"Huh?"

When Taurus finished speaking, he clenched his fist, once again making a creaking sound. Then, he unleashed his destructive skill Aldebaran for a second time. His fist traveled fruitlessly through empty air, but it still sounded as if it had destroyed something.

What had been destroyed was space itself. Empty space crumbled, dropping Dina out of thin air, making her fall to the ground.

"Wagyaaahhh?!"

"So you really were there. I thought it odd that I felt two sources of the Goddess's power... It seems quite the strange one has joined you all."

He stood in front of Dina, whose eyes had gone wide thanks to being suddenly pulled out of thin air, and looked down at her, displaying his steel will before the self-proclaimed advisor.

Dina finally caught on to the situation, and she stiffened, looking up at Taurus. She tried to hurriedly manipulate his state of mind, but it had no effect. It was as if she were face-to-face with a golem; he didn't waver, not even a little. Even though the stupid dog had come over and started messing around at his feet, he didn't move.

“It is no use. Your tricks will not work on me... There is only one person in this world who can move my heart. So speak truthfully—who are you?”

Dina stared, silent. *Huh? Am I...really in trouble? Like, incredible, unprecedented trouble?* Dina thought as she broke out in cold sweat. Her face twitched, but a single expression was frozen in place as she looked up at Taurus dazedly.

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After the fight with Benetnasch, I finally arrived at Tyrving, still feeling down. For some reason, though, no one was there. Actually, there were demihumans present but not the Twelve Stars, whom I was looking for.

There were signs of destruction everywhere, as well as signs of fighting, but the combatants themselves were nowhere to be found. I was sure they had all been here at one time, but at some point, they’d probably moved the battle somewhere else. With the forces arrayed against Leon, I’d thought there was no way he could win—or at least I’d like to think so—but I couldn’t be sure. I wanted to regroup with the Twelve Heavenly Stars as fast as possible.

I was wandering around the destruction, hoping to find some sort of clue as to where they’d gone, when I found some words written on a crumbled wall.

“We are all fighting in the demihuman village.”

It was a short, concise message. A map had been drawn beneath it, easily conveying where I was and where I needed to go. It had probably been left by Dina. *I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.*

They weren’t that far away. I’d probably be able to get there in a flash.

I spread my wings and finalized my direction before crouching down for a moment. Then I jumped, using that momentum to take flight. When I jumped, I left a huge crater... *Sorry, nearby residents.* In this body I ended up breaking things when I got even a little serious. *Forgive me.*

The scenery flew past me at high speeds, and I was unable to hear. It wasn’t that there was anything wrong with my ears but sound could no longer keep up

with me. After flying for a little while, I saw what seemed like a forest below me and descended sharply before landing.

As for how much time that'd taken... *Well, it couldn't have been more than five seconds.*

The difference between the time I experienced and normal time was pretty big, so sometimes even I had difficulty telling how many minutes had passed in a given time frame. Now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure it'd only taken a couple minutes to get from Laevateinn to Maphaahl Tower. But had it really been a couple minutes? It might have been only a couple seconds in real time.

I looked around where I landed, and for some reason, I saw Dina on the ground and a masked man standing over her.

He's...

Ah, right... He's Tauros. ...Wait, maybe it was Taurus? Which was it?

Unlike before, I could now remember people from my past just by looking at their face for a little while (though I couldn't exactly see his face because of the mask). I wasn't sure whether I should have been happy about that or not, though. I'd been told by Parthenos that the Ox was maintaining the seal in Helheim, so why was he here? And cornering Dina on top of that?

At any rate, the situation seemed dangerous. *I should probably stop Tauros.*

Everyone in the area noticed my arrival and was looking my way. This included Tauros, who'd fixed me with a silent stare.

"Lufas, I see."

He used no title or show of respect when using my name. *I see. It seems as if he doesn't worship me nearly as much as the others. Still, this nostalgia's weirdly strong.*

If I were to separate the Twelve Stars into groups, I'd put Scorpius and Aigokeros into the fanatics group; Aries, Virgo, Parthenos and Libra into the normal group; Dina and Karkinos in the weirdo group; and I suppose Leon and the one in front of me would be in the rebellious group. There was no doubt that, as a whole, they were a bunch of weirdos, though. Lufas sure did gather a

bunch of different types.

“Tauros, We see. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah...” he said. “It has. It truly has. And my name is Taurus.”

Ah, Taurus was the correct one. Man this guy’s name is hard. But I think I remember Parthenos calling him Tauros too. It sounds like I’m not the only one who misremembers his name. Still, this is hard... The convo just stops.

Taurus’s reply ended the conversation. It was dead silent after that.

Uh, yeah. This is a new pattern. I’m surprised it hasn’t come up before.

Whether it was good or bad, Aries and Aigokeros had both had a reaction to meeting me. Libra had been no exception to that either, and at the very least, we’d had no problems conversing. Yet Taurus hadn’t reacted at all. He’d just noted that it’d been a while and stopped speaking. *At any rate, he doesn’t seem to see me as an enemy at least. I suppose I should hurry up and save Dina.*

“Yes, first thing’s first. Don’t bully her too much. She may be new, but she’s quite useful.”

“...”

Huh? What happened to her being my advisor from two hundred years ago? Well, whatever, I guess. Let’s just have that be over. Everyone knows it’s a lie anyway.

I couldn’t read Taurus’s expression through his mask, and a creepy silence took over.

Hmm... He’s hard to deal with but in a different way from Scorpius. How should I put it? It was like he was constantly trying to put out an aura of pressure. *Pressure is one of my skills, though, not his.*

Taurus was quiet, then said, “If you say so, I do not mind letting this go. If you yourself are saying it, that is.”

I eyed him silently. “What does that mean?”

“That is anyone’s guess. In truth, it is not something I can judge myself. I do feel it’s strange, but you are the one who predicted a situation like this in the

first place, which means your current state might be your own will as well... And if that is the case, then I have no objections."

I was stunned. *He... Did he see through me immediately? Does he know that I'm someone else who was shoved inside of Lufas? That's why he said that he has no intention of asking if what I said is the will of the real Lufas, right?*

But I'd faintly noticed that Lufas herself had once predicted that I'd be in here too. Not to mention that fight with Benetnasch. *That means he's trying to get the measure of me. He's trying to figure out if this is Lufas's will coming through my own or something else.*

Taurus paused. "Well, no matter... It seems you have your own situation to deal with. If that is the case, deal with your own matters first. I will always be in Helheim...waiting for your arrival."

Apparently he was going to obey me and leave Dina alone in this instance.

As soon as Taurus stepped away Dina crawled over to me and quickly took refuge behind me. *Huh. It's rare for her to be so obviously bad at dealing with someone. Oh, I should check Taurus's stats first.*

【Twelve Heavenly Stars: Taurus】

【Level】: 800

【Race】: Minotaur

【Attribute】: Earth

【HP】: 230000

【SP】: 2000

【STR (Strength)】: 50000

【DEX (Dexterity)】: 3695

【VIT (Vitality)】: 500

【INT (Intelligence)】: 100

【AGI (Agility)】: 100

【MND (Mind)】: 500

【LUK (Luck)】: 10

【Equipment】:

・Head: Mask of the King of Minos (no effect)

・Right arm: Heretic Slayer's Ax (doubles STR, Defense counts as 0 when receiving damage from enemies)

・Left arm: —

・Body: Helheim Coat (HP regeneration in areas with mana)

・Legs: Bovine Boots (Enemy accuracy against wearer 100%, accuracy when attacking is doubled)

・Other: —

Is he an idiot? I almost voiced reflexively, barely managing to swallow the words out of desperation.

When I saw his stats, I realized that he was specialized for attack and HP. This meant he was the type to tank using his HP pool and just punch things out. As far as the system of this world was concerned, you could withstand any attack as long as you had a high enough HP pool, which meant Taurus could tank at least two attacks from literally anybody.

Well, it'd be really hard to produce max damage in the first place unless the opponent was at least somewhat overpowered, so although his defenses were minimal, he could tank unexpectedly well. That in itself was fine. The problem was that his stats had somehow gotten even dumber compared to what I remembered. In the game, he'd had no equipment, and his attack power had been 25000. But now, his stats had gone in a weird direction due to some strange equipment in the mix.

This is why you don't give monsters equips. It ruins game balance.

Well, anyway. Almost no one'll be able to take Taurus's HP down all the way with stats that insanely specialized. Instead, he'll probably be the one knocking them out. But, I guess this is the trade-off for specialized types? I can clearly tell what he's good and bad against.

For example, Taurus wouldn't be able to touch Benetnasch, even with her

level limited to 1000. She'd run circles around him and beat him up at her leisure. It was unfortunate, but Benetnasch would tear slowpokes like him to pieces with thousands of hits, and she'd be absolutely untouched.

Actually, I think he'd rank pretty low amongst the Twelve Stars if they were to have a one-on-one tournament. He'd get downed before even managing to make his first move. I doubt he'd be able to take down Aries, let alone Libra, especially since his high HP pool was a terrible matchup against Aries's skills.

That was only true as long as Taurus was alone, though. By cooperating with even just one more person, he would quickly become too much to handle. For example, if he were to attack while Aries or Aigokeros had the opponent pinned down, Taurus's stats would produce a huge swing in his favor, not to mention if Karkinos were to use his skill to allow Taurus to ignore the damage limit. Even as a wild monster, Taurus had been an attack specialist, but I leaned into it even more after capturing and training him because I'd thought that was fun. Obviously he boasted enormous damage potential; in terms of single-hit damage, he even outstripped Leon.

Unfortunately, his stats meant using him necessitated cooperation. In the game, I'd filled that role by stopping the enemy so he could hit them. His true worth wasn't in attack power but a unique skill that was so powerful it screamed foul play... *But that can be explained another time.*

Taurus walked away. After seeing him off, I turned my attention to Aries and the others. The first thing I noticed was that Aries was looking...not safe for work. His clothes were all ripped, and he was basically half naked. There was some cloth left, and he was a guy, so there might not have been much reason to care. But some people, starting with the boy Sei, didn't seem to know where to look, so they just looked away.

Oh, right. I never told them that Aries is a man. Anyway, I can't just leave him like this. Even if they know he's a man, there might be someone who'll still try something.

I snapped my fingers and repaired Aries's clothes using alchemy. *Let's make him something with tougher materials that's harder to rip this time... Ah, right. This guy's wool is the best material for cloth.*

“So, Dina. When are you planning to stop clinging to our back?”

“B-But...! He was really scary, you know?! What the hell?! Why did he break open space with just a punch?!” Dina cried out with tear-filled eyes, having a rare breakdown.

Apparently, the situation just now had been quite dangerous. I’d thought her aloof and impossible to read, but it seemed that even she had her natural enemies.

“Now then... First, We’d like to hear about this situation. Would someone explain what happened?”

“Understood. Then I will start with when we reached Tyrving,” Libra said, quickly responding to my request.

According to her, they’d immediately commenced battle when they’d reached Tyrving, managing to defeat Leon once. But as was becoming familiar, he had received the Goddess’s blessing and powered up. He’d turned the fight around after that, and next, they’d been the ones in a pinch.

“The Goddess again? She sure sticks to a template.”

“Stories are like that. Things such as suddenly getting stronger due to anger, or receiving a huge power-up by unlocking latent talents and abilities, or the bonds of your comrades, or saying that you’ll protect everyone and then suddenly being able to fight evenly before overtaking the villain... All of that is just assistance given to the protagonist by the author, or god, to make them win. That is the easiest and simplest way to intervene for gods. Protagonists are just their puppets.”

“Well, that’s...inevitable, isn’t it? If that didn’t happen, then the villain would win.”

“Yes, that is true. And the Goddess is doing all this because she doesn’t want the villain named Lufas to win.”

Now that Taurus had gone, Dina had regained her confidence and returned my sarcasm with even more sarcasm. But she was still clinging to my back, so it seemed as if she had yet to fully recover from the shock of meeting Taurus.

“Lady Lufas a villain?! Preposterous! Lady Lufas is justice itself! She is this world’s one and only law!”

“Hear, hear!”

“Would you all just be quiet for a while? You are making things more complicated.”

I had Aigokeros and Scorpius, who was fully indulging her delusions, quiet down. The two of them seemed to have experienced some sort of shock, as they slumped to the ground where they’d stood with the appropriate expressions.

They’re making such a big deal out of it...

“Sorry, We got derailed. Please continue.”

“I suppose I should say ‘serves you right, Scorpion’ here?”

“That’s unnecessary,” I said, lightly scolding Libra.

Seamlessly and with no change in expression, Libra went to kick Scorpius as she was down before continuing, “Serves you right, Scorpion.”

Geez. Why does this group have no coherence at all? I said you didn’t have to...

21

“That comprises everything that has happened.”

“Hmm.”

The biggest thing I learned after hearing Libra’s summary was that I was completely late. Everything—the fight, the problem with Sagittarius, all of it—had been settled before I had arrived like a clueless fool.

Well... I understood why I was late... It was because I’d insisted on sightseeing in Benetnasch’s capital; I’d watched the monsters battle, and I’d gambled and stuff. The fight with Benetnasch probably hadn’t lasted that long, honestly. It actually had lasted a while from my point of view, but I was sure it’d only been a moment in objective time.

I burst into a cold sweat while making sure to maintain outward calm. “We seem to have forced you all into a difficult situation. You’ve done well wearing Leon down.”

“H A H A H A. Awww, it’s no problem at all, since you’re the one who ordered it, Miss Lufas.”

“Oh? You sure can talk for a tank who couldn’t even do his job properly.”

“Look, the shield that instantly got KO’d is spouting nonsense.”

“Aries is the one who beat Leon in the first place. None of us did enough to be smug about it.”

“W H Y?! M E did a lot this time too, right?!”

Karkinos responded to my praise, but that only caused Libra, Scorpius, and Aigokeros to straight-facedly rib him for it. *Looks like Karkinos is firmly in the role of being teased, isn’t he? Yep. Poor guy.*

“We see. So Aries was the one who defeated Leon. Well done.”

I patted Aries on the head lightly, and he turned red, flustered. *He...doesn’t hate it. He kinda looks happy. I’m sure he just feels embarrassed. Yep. Splendidly cute. Except he’s a guy.*

“By the way, where’s Leon? You said you rendered him incapable of fighting, but you shouldn’t underestimate how tough he is. We should hurry and tie him up or something while he’s still unconscious.”

“You needn’t worry about that, Miss Lufas.”

I had been told that Aries had reduced Leon’s HP to 1 before Taurus blew him away. So right now, Leon was most likely unconscious somewhere outside the forest, and there was a chance he would just go back on a rampage once he woke up. My thinking was that we should prevent him from doing so before he had the chance.

“My poison is still in him. That traitor should be at 0 HP by now, so there’s no need to bind him at all,” Scorpius continued, trying to put me at ease.

“...”

LEOOOOOOOONNNN?!?!

Panicked, I took flight and found a huge lion lying on the ground outside the forest. The whites of Leon's eyes were showing, and he was twitching and foaming at the mouth. He was clearly in danger. *This isn't just stopping him. This is overkill!*

"Dina!"

"R-Right! Star of Asclepios!"

I gave an order to Dina, who was still clinging to my back and had thus come with me.

Star of Asclepios was a Water element heaven-arts of the highest rank. It was a revival art which had many effects, from healing friendlies in an area to removing status effects, and even reviving the dead. However, *Exgate Online* had a time limit for revival. If Star of Asclepios wasn't quickly used after death, then the player would be transported to town and given a death penalty. Of course, death meant death in this world. Death wasn't so kind as to simply give a small penalty and then throw you into a town. Actually, if a monster lost all its HP in the game, it was forcefully removed from battle, but it wouldn't die. In this world, they'd probably just die like normal, though.

A formation like a star floated before us and encapsulated Leon before manifesting a rod with five snakes entwined at its center. The rod then dispersed, becoming particles of light which were sucked into Leon's body. For a while, there was no change in Leon, but eventually, he started breathing calmly.

I stared at the sight before me. *Th-That was dangerous... Normally, this would have been way over the time limit for revival, but I guess this is one of the few good points of this not being a game.* Either that or this just showed how abnormal Leon's vitality was.

"You're going to let that traitor live, master? I can lop off his head in a flash. You just have to say the word," Libra said after she'd caught up, transforming one of her arms into a blade.

"Stop that."

“I see,” Libra muttered, seeming to have come to some sort of conclusion on her own. “So you’re going to leave him alive on purpose so you can deliver his punishment for betrayal yourself, yes...? Understood. Then I shall prepare the tools for torture.”

“Why are your thoughts always so violent?”

“If you’re going to torture him, Lady Lufas, please let me do it! I’ll make this traitor regret ever being born!”

“I’ll join too.”

“Would all of you stay quiet for a while? You’re just making things worse.”

The idiot duo of the scorpion and goat followed up after Libra, but I shut them all up. They stared at me in shock, but I just pointed at Leon. “Photon Chain,” I said after a moment of silence.

Dozens of magic circles appeared behind me and launched chains of light all at once, binding Leon. Dina looked surprised, but that was to be expected. What I had just used was magic, after all, not heaven-arts...something which a heaven-winged normally never had access to. I’d used magic during my fight with Benetnasch, and I still remembered the feeling.

My level was gradually returning to 1000, but it still wasn’t all the way there yet. Currently, I was at level 1300. It’d probably go back to normal in time, but right now, I still had my class levels as a mage. So I thought I’d try a little magic out, and I had no problems using it.

“Miss Lufas... Was that...magic just now?”

“Indeed. Benet hit me over the head rather hard... We’ve woken up quite a bit thanks to her.”

Actually, I’d remembered *something else* on top of magic, but trying that out could wait until later. It was a power that was a little too strong, and if I were to do it, the Twelve Stars would be powered up too. Well, it probably wouldn’t be as ridiculously powerful as it was during that fight with Benetnasch, anyway.

The skill name is... Let’s see. Why not “Alkaid”?

“This should be enough for Leon. For now, We should talk to Sagittarius.”

I left Leon outside of the forest while the rest of us returned to Sagittarius. I'd already heard why Sagittarius had been helping Leon, so I wasn't going to punish him. Instead, we'd be talking about the future and not just the future of Sagittarius and the centaurs, but the future of all demihumans.

"Sagittarius."

He was silent, head bowed apologetically, before answering, "Yes!"

"First, We will ignore everything that has happened. Raise your head."

I never had any intention of punishing Sagittarius. It was all my fault for adding someone clearly dangerous, like Leon, to the Twelve Stars and then disappearing for two hundred years without even putting any countermeasures in place for his inevitable rampage in the first place.

This was something I understood, since it was about myself, but I hadn't actually been thinking or planning anything all that deep when I'd captured Leon. I'd simply done so because it had seemed interesting... I had thought it'd be amusing to tame the strongest of all monsters and that squandering so much power was wasteful. In the end, I had pulled him into my ranks on a lark.

What the hell was past me thinking...?

"More importantly, let us think of the future not just for the centaurs but for all demihumans. You all should listen as well," I said, sweeping my gaze over the demihumans who were still bound and strewn across the ground.

There was a spider-person, a merman, a dryad, and a lamia. Apparently these four were the leaders of the demihuman alliance. *Their levels are around 150, huh? That's pretty strong for this day and age. I guess the people who can pass the level 300 wall are surprisingly few, considering there's just the Seven Luminaries and Virgo, huh?*

The demihumans didn't show any signs of resisting. They were actually quite meek and quiet. The looks they gave the Twelve Stars and me were filled with fear. They probably weren't resisting because they could sense the difference in our strength. I could understand why. They'd seen Leon, Aries, and the others fight before their very eyes. It'd be impossible to expect them to maintain their will to fight after that.

“First, let’s start with what happens next. As everything stands, all of you will fall under concentrated fire from the principal powers and be destroyed along with your villages.”

Sei and Virgo seemed surprised at what I said. On the other hand, Gantz and the elf bore serious expressions like this had been expected. The demihumans themselves didn’t seem particularly surprised either, since they had probably been prepared for this from the start, but their expressions were still ones of despair. Their powerful leader, Leon, had been defeated, but that hadn’t changed the fact that they’d seriously harmed Draupnir’s guardian dragon. In fact, it was easier than ever for humanity to assault the demihumans now that they weren’t backed by Leon.

In terms of picking fights with entire countries, Aries and Scorpius had done worse, but we moved often and were basically very hard to get a hold of. Not to mention the fact that the most important countries were basically led by Megrez, Merak, and Mizar. They knew the power of the Twelve Stars and me, and none of them were idiots stupid enough to waste valuable firepower trying to chase us down.

However, they had no way of knowing the plight of the demihumans, so other countries currently just saw them as enemies. It was entirely possible these countries were sending their armies this way even now. If that was the case, there would be a war between humanity and the demihumans, though the demihumans had no chance of winning... Svel had the Wise King Megrez and the Guardian Deity Levia. The mobile capital, Blutgang, had its mass-produced Libras and golem corps. Lastly, Gjallarhorn had Merak. Draupnir’s guardian dragon should have been fully healed by now as well, and the entire country was probably thirsting for revenge.

If any one of these nations took action, the demihumans would be checkmated. If they were to face off, even all the demihumans together would barely be able to trade their lives for the guardian dragons’, and that was disregarding the fact that the demihumans had managed to beat up the guardian dragon thanks to Scorpius weakening it beforehand. If Leon had been around, the demihumans would have been able to fight the guardian dragon more than satisfactorily, but Leon had been dealing with Benetnasch, so it

probably would have changed nothing.

Benetnasch had been able to hold Leon off by herself, so the other demihumans would've stood no chance. That was how easily things would have been settled. Or rather, Benetnasch would have been able to completely decimate the demihumans and their village all on her own with a wide-area AoE spell. In the end, she was in a whole other dimension in terms of strength.

However, I was the one responsible for sowing these seeds in the end. It wasn't just Leon. The reason why the demihumans had been able to attack the guardian dragon in the first place was because Scorpius had weakened it. Scorpius was also one of my subordinates, and her indiscretions were my responsibility as well. I couldn't just abandon the demihumans. At the very least, I needed to show them the path they should take, though they were free to refuse or otherwise do whatever they wanted afterwards. This was my duty.

"So how would you all like to take refuge in Maphaahl Tower until the dust settles? We will not force you to join us. In the end, that tower is going unused at the moment... There's no problem with you living there as long as you don't steal anything. It's uselessly tall, too, so there is enough room for all of you."

The only building capable of sheltering all of them would be either Blutgang or Maphaahl Tower. I now understood why Maphaahl Tower was that tall. It was probably also due to my own preferences, but I'd bet the biggest reason was so it was able to fit all my followers. I'd captured so many monsters, made so many golems, and welcomed people of all races and creeds. As a result, I had needed something that could fit a large number of people, so Maphaahl Tower had just kept getting taller and taller.

In the end, it had become tall enough to reach the heavens. This meant it could easily fit these demihumans, if I so felt like it. I'd told them not to steal, but it was almost impossible to do so anyway. All the important weapons and items were stored at the top, and as noted before, only those who could fly as high as I could were able to get there.

"Y-You're telling us to abandon this village...?" the lamia muttered, her expression bitter.

But it seemed she also understood they had no other choice. This village was

probably a cherished home to the demihumans. It was only natural they'd resist abandoning it, but if they stayed, they'd share the village's fate. I wasn't heartless, though. I'd thought of a way to solve that.

"No need to worry. There is something We can do."

"Something...?"

"Indeed. We are counting on you, Dina."

"Ah, as expected."

The method I'd come up with was to have Dina use an Exgate to move the entire village somewhere else. I'd leave the exact location to her, but luckily, this world was filled with places humans could not reach. After all, most of Mizgarz was under the control of the devilfolk.

However, that was when the elf and the cat beastfolk chose to object. I simply turned my gaze to them without much reaction. To be honest, I'd expected them to react this way. *Now then... How should I convince them? I'm not really very good at this kind of thing, though...*

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"W-Wait, please, Lord Lufas! Are you seriously going to give them refuge?!"

"N-No! This cannot happen! Please allow Draupnir to handle them!"

The elf and the cat beastfolk both raised their voices at the same time, so I turned my attention to them.

What were their names...? I kind of feel like I've heard them before, but I forget. Uh... Oh yeah. It should be Kross and Petto. Yep. I was right.

Observing Eye was extra-useful because it would also display names if the target had one. Of course, if they had more than two names and I didn't know all of them, it would apparently only show the name I knew them by, so it wasn't completely omnipotent. Take Dina for example. She had an alternate name, Venus, but even if I were to use Observing Eye on her, it would only tell me she was Dina. This was most likely because I knew her as Dina. Not that this detail was important at the moment.

“Leave them to Draupnir... Meaning you plan to execute them when they have lost the will to resist? How belligerent. Will you not be satisfied unless they are all slaughtered?”

“I’m not saying this out of personal emotion. They attacked us first, so they need to be punished for their crimes. If they were allowed to get away with assaulting us so one-sidedly, we would be thought of as a weak country. Even if you allowed them to escape here, things would not be settled... Armies will definitely be sortied, and they will go in search of demihumans.”

I looked down at the cat beastfolk, and he in turn looked up at me with round eyes. I felt he had a point, but I felt more strongly that I wanted to scritch his neck and cheeks. *I mean, I know we’re having a serious conversation...but he looks like a bipedal cat. Any cat lover would understand. Your hand just itches for it. I want to floof the hell out of him.*

“We see. This means you do not wish to execute them yourself due to your personal feelings?”

“Indeed.”

“Then what about everyone else? Are there any of you who desperately want these demihumans dead?” I questioned everyone else as well, including the boy, Sei, but no one said anything.

Scorpius did stand up to indicate that was what she wanted, but I wasn’t asking her. *Sit down. Why are you so murderous all the time?*

“So all you require is for it to be known that these demihumans were massacred?”

“What? Yes, well...”

“Then that is no problem. We have considered that.” I paused. “Dina.”

Petto had a point. The demihumans had basically declared war, and just allowing them to go free with no punishment would hurt both the dignity of the state as well as cause worry and unrest among its people. In Earth terms, it would be as if an Aegis warship had launched a missile at something, which was basically a declaration of war, but the targeted country did nothing about it and just let it go. *If it were Japan, they really might just let things go after expressing*

how deplorable the action was... But that's beside the point.

The problem was that it wasn't just Draupnir. Other countries were probably gearing up for war as well. Mjolnir was especially dangerous. With Leon now gone, it was quite possible that they'd come pouring in all at once, so having the demihumans die was the fastest way to solve things. That was why I'd given Dina an order and had her teleport the village first.

"Understood. Exgate!" Dina raised her hands, starting the process of sending the entire forest somewhere else.

The reason why I hadn't specified a destination was simple; I was less knowledgeable about the layout of this world than Dina. I only knew about the places we'd stopped at so far while she knew about many more. Leaving things up to her was for the best.

The entire forest was swallowed by a tear in space, and all that was left were various demihumans who didn't understand what had just happened. From their point of view, they had been spending the day like normal when the forest had suddenly erupted in a battle of giant kaiju, and now the forest had disappeared entirely. *I almost feel sorry for them.*

"Next is... You there. You four demihumans and Sagittarius. Sorry, but you'll have to explain what's going on to the other demihumans."

I snapped my fingers and undid the demihumans' bindings. Jean raised his voice in reproach, but undoing their restraints wouldn't cause any problems. *Sorry, but there's nothing that the demihumans can do with us here.* Even if they went for the weaker ones, like Virgo or Sei, I'd just jump in. *If you want to escape me, you'll need to at least be able to move freely in a world that ticks by at fractions of a second.*

As long as they were stuck in this time frame, people who could accelerate to smaller time frames like Benetnasch, the Devil King, and I would be untouchable, no matter what they did. That being said, worrying about such a thing would just be paranoid.

It seemed as if the demihumans had realized this and knew that they had no other choice, so they simply quietly did as they had been told and started talking to one another. I could hear them occasionally say things like, "Definitely

don’t oppose them,” or, “You saw those monsters fight, didn’t you?” or, “If you don’t want to die, just behave,” as they looked at us with undisguised fear. As expected, the shock from seeing the monster battle between the Twelve Heavenly Stars was too much, I suppose.

Eventually, the demihumans seemed to understand, and they all started moving in droves, leaving only an empty wasteland behind. Once I worked my magic, I could make a convincing argument that the demihumans had all been killed.

“Now then. Stand back, everyone.”

I slowly raised one hand to the sky. Mana gathered in my palm, eventually turning into a giant fireball. It might have seemed like a Fire element spell at first glance, but my attribute was Sun. As such, I’d created fire, but it wasn’t attributed to Fire. It was the power of the sun.

The fireball, which shined the color of the sun’s rays, grew at an accelerating rate, generating scorching winds. If I were to leave things like this, the fireball’s scorching winds alone would cook all the demihumans a thousand times over before I even fired the thing. When I cast the spell, I also put up a barrier to contain the fireball so there wouldn’t be any such casualties.

“Solar Flare.”

I’d used a high-ranking Sun element magic spell, Solar Flare. It could also be called an explosion of the sun’s surface. Of course, it wasn’t the real thing. A real solar flare is tens of thousands of kilometers in diameter, and its destructive power is said to be equivalent to a hundred million hydrogen bombs. In the end, this was just an imitation made with mana; it would get nowhere near that powerful. That was why the spell’s diameter was only a couple hundred meters, and its power only ranged from several dozen to several hundred hydrogen bombs.

I paused. *My standards have gotten really warped, haven’t they? Man, my own thoughts just scared me.* To think I thought of several hundred hydrogen bombs in terms of “only.” *I’ve finally crossed a line.* My common sense was disintegrating before my very eyes.

Before I launched the ball, I made sure to have a heaven-arts barrier up

around everyone. On top of that, I disseminated divine power around the area that was about to become a scorched wasteland, circulating it at high speeds. That was the process of the Sun-attribute heaven-art “Heliosphere.” It was an absolute anti-magic field that worked by making divine power circulate at high speeds in several layers within a certain area.

In the game, I was able to use skills however I liked without thinking too much about it. As one might have expected, if I were to just straight-up launch a Solar Flare in this world, the damage to the surroundings would be catastrophic, no matter how much I tried to hold back.

With my preparations done, I lightly flicked my wrist. By doing so, I sent the fireball that had been above me in motion, and it landed in the area that used to contain the demihuman’s village. There was a huge explosion upon impact.

The first result was a flash. The overflowing light was strong enough to literally burn out one’s eyes, and it dyed the entire surrounding area white. Looking at this would definitely blind you normally, but thanks to the anti-magic field I put up earlier, the light that actually reached us was only about as strong as if one looked directly at the sun for a while. All it did was cause people to instinctively close their eyes. I didn’t close my eyes, though, since this body was truly overpowered. Even the endurance of my eyeballs was absurd. It was ridiculous.

Next, the whole place went up in flames, resulting in a mushroom cloud. *Yeah, this is ridiculous even for me. I managed to produce the equivalent of a nuclear weapon all by myself. That’s stupid.*

But even this spell was only a small toy firework compared to Benetnasch’s Maiden Who Shoots a Silver Arrow, if you could believe it. Her arrow could seriously destroy an entire planet, after all... I didn’t even want to think about how many times the strength of a nuclear weapon it had.

I kind of understand now... It was only natural for the people back then to fear me and want to get rid of me. Yeah. Shit like this is scary. The day the Devil King and I trade blows with magic will probably turn all of Mizgarz into a scorched field, won’t it?

I took a quick peek behind me to find that everyone’s reactions were totally

varied. Most of the Twelve Stars looked at me with expressions of respect, like they wanted to congratulate or praise me. Only Virgo looked like her soul had flown right out of her body. The entire hero's party was the same as her; they all showed the whites of their eyes. *Ah... When I look closer, I can see the tiger's already making a mad dash to get away.*

After a moment of silence came a voice. "Hey, Sarge... Were we really trying to fight that?"

Sargess didn't answer immediately. "Mm... Yeah... I suppose that's what following Sir Leon would have meant."

"We'd be killed by the aftereffects alone."

"We were way too reckless, weren't we? It makes me not want to see any fights at all anymore."

The four members of the demihuman leadership were muttering amongst themselves. They looked like they'd given up, and all they could do was laugh.

Eventually, the explosion was over, and all that was left was a great crater of scorched earth. To be fair, it had already been barren beforehand, so all I'd really done was melt some rocks. At any rate, this completed everything necessary for our lie. Looking at the state of the place, anyone would think that I'd burned the demihumans along with their village, especially since all the other countries had probably seen that explosion themselves. All that was left was to have the demihumans move.

"Now then, your name was..." I paused. "Petto, correct? We understand your feelings, but would you allow the demihumans to leave for us? We would like you to tell your country that the explosion just now wiped out the demihumans."

"Yes, gladly!"

"Hmm? Oh, you're awfully helpful."

"Yes, gladly!" Petto repeated.

I paused. "Ah... Yes. Then, please? That goes for the elf there as well."

"Yes, gladly!" Petto repeated once more as Kross simultaneously chimed,

“Yes, ma’am!”

I had thought I’d still meet some resistance to the idea from Petto and Kross, but contrary to what I had expected, they were very cooperative. *But, uh, are these guys all right? Their faces are deathly pale, and their legs are shaking. I don’t get it. It’s not like I’d attack them if they weren’t acting so afraid. In fact, I like cats a lot and want to get along well with them.*

I looked over at Petto, who squeaked out a scream as if he were about to cry. I said nothing. It was just plain shocking to see.

“Next is the problem of leading the demihumans...”

“Miss Lufas, please leave that to me.”

The next role was quite important. I needed someone to lead the demihumans to Maphaahl Tower. If any humans were to see them at this point, all the effort of dressing up this lie would go up in smoke. Whoever took the job had to be sensitive to nearby presences while also able to see long distances. Libra would’ve been perfect for this, but Sagittarius had just volunteered.

“You?”

“I see. Master, Sagittarius is certainly perfect for the job,” said Libra.

“Really? Well, if you say so, then We suppose it must be true.”

Sagittarius, huh? It was true that he had good eyes. In my opinion, he’d probably be best after Libra. I was quite a bit more worried than I would’ve been if the task had been left to her, and that worry probably showed in my voice.

Sagittarius suddenly pulled out his bow. “My arrow can be used for this. Please watch. All of you, join hands! The leader must grab on to me!”

I looked on curiously. *What the hell is he doing?*

The demihumans obeyed Sagittarius and joined hands. The last one, being the leader of the line, grabbed onto Sagittarius. Whatever they were doing seemed really weird. I couldn’t grasp the meaning of it. *Maybe they’re just going to head to the tower in a straight line like this while holding hands like friends? Wouldn’t that make them stand out too much?*

“Then let us be off. Al Nassr!”

Sagittarius launched his arrow and grabbed it immediately afterward for some reason. *What in the world is he thinking...?*

But the next moment, I understood what was going on. Sagittarius, who had grabbed onto the arrow, disappeared. Furthermore, the demihumans who had been holding onto him had disappeared as well.

“Were you surprised, master?”

“Y-Yeah. What did he just do?”

“His skill, Al Nassr, is a skill of absolute accuracy that teleports the arrow to the enemy right after being launched. Of course, you already know that, master, but he developed a technique to teleport himself along with it by grabbing the arrow. Thanks to that skill, we were saved as well.”

I pondered this silently for a moment. “Wouldn’t that make it an absolute avoidance skill more than an absolute accuracy skill?”

“It just means Al Nassr can be used as both.”

I was impressed by the new way Sagittarius had found to take advantage of his skill, as explained by Libra. By grabbing onto the arrow, which could transcend time and space, it would be possible to instantly move through space or absolutely avoid attacks. It was totally busted. If he felt like it, Sagittarius could go basically anywhere in an instant. *What an overpowered skill.*

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“...”

Far above in the heavens, a single gaze pierced downwards. She looked down at the miniature garden she’d made, watching a battle that was going on, and sighed with melancholy. *No matter what I do, it doesn’t turn out well.*

A mistake from long ago she hadn’t managed to fix had crossed generations to revive and was now threatening the balance of the world. She was... Lufas Maphaahl was a bug in the code.

My next mistake was allowing what I once eliminated to come back, I suppose. I thought that if I sealed that annoying ideology and ego, she'd then move as a beneficial, convenient existence to help maintain the balance of the world. I knew that if I left her alone, she'd regain her senses at some point, but at the same time, I didn't have any pieces I could use to finish her off. I thought I might as well make the first move and revive her myself in a way that was beneficial to me, but...that was a mistake. In the end, a bug is a bug. It can't be fixed just by doing something on the surface.

I was thinking she could get rid of and replace the Devil King as this world's "Evil" since the man recently stopped listening to me, but by the time I'd noticed, she'd become my "Evil." How ironic. Just what did I do wrong? Was it bad that I revived Lufas in the first place? Did I pick the wrong temporary personality? Or...

The being paused. *At any rate, I have to admit I made a mistake. My plan is now off the rails, and Lufas is looking around for a trail to me. The more I try to fix this messed up script, the worse it gets, and Lufas makes it worse just by existing.*

This is no good. People can't become happy like this. In order to be happy, they have to experience corresponding sadness. The larger the difference, the more happiness people will feel. But Lufas is a bug that is trying to destroy the unhappiness itself. People won't feel happy in a world with nothing but happiness. They can't. That's why... Yes. My lovely children need misfortune and despair but on a level where they won't be destroyed.

Having made a decision, she resolved to move the strongest piece she had at the moment.

It's a bit drastic, but there's nothing else for it... Lufas must be eliminated with an infinite army. There's no other way.

*　　*

The demihumans were all sent to the tower starting with the centaurs, after which Sagittarius safely rejoined us. The spiderman was the only one left, but it seemed as if he had something to discuss with the boy, Sei. This solved pretty much all the problems here, but there was one last thing I had to do.

I left Aries and the others in the forest as I headed for Leon, who was still sprawled on the ground. The giant lion looked at me with eyes brimming with murderous intent, but it seemed as if he couldn't break free of the chains in his exhausted state, so he simply struggled uselessly.

"Hmph. We suppose We should say...it's been a while, Leon."

"Lufas...!"

Leon's gaze was filled with nothing but hate. In a sense, it was fresh and also completely to be expected. This was actually kind of funny since most of the people I'd met had acted favorably towards me in some way.

While actually feeling charmed by the way Leon desperately glared at me, I activated Observing Eye to check his stats.

【Lion King Leon】

【Level】: 1000

【Race】: Lion of Nemea

【Attribute】: Sun

【HP】: 1/1500000

【SP】: 8250/10000

【STR (Strength)】: ?????

【DEX (Dexterity)】: ????

【VIT (Vitality)】: ?????

【INT (Intelligence)】: ??

【AGI (Agility)】: ????

【MND (Mind)】: ????

【LUK (Luck)】: ????

Well, I expected this. He had yet to return to the fold, so I still couldn't see anything other than his level, HP, and SP. His name was also "Lion King Leon" instead of being prefaced with "Twelve Heavenly Stars," so he was still rebelling against me.

Still, though. Damn he's got a lot of HP. If anything was worthy of being called "on a different scale," then it was his HP stat, and he'd had the Goddess's blessing added on top of that. Even though I hadn't fought him, I could tell he had been incredibly strong.

Aries and the others did really well to win, huh? Even I'd have some trouble if I were to fight him one-on-one.

One of Leon's other features was that he didn't have any outstanding skills like the other Twelve Stars. On the other hand, however, it just meant he didn't need any fancy tricks. His strength was truly just the force of pure stats. Without needing any tricks, he simply faced his opponents head-on and tore them down, making them submit.

If the gap in power was too large, it didn't matter how outstanding a person's skills were or how much magic they had. By using their skills to the fullest, a normal attack from a high-leveled player could easily surpass any attack from a level 100 player. *That's just what RPGs are like.* Well, there were people who would do restricted playthroughs, such as trying to beat the final boss while at a beginner level, so it wasn't a fast rule.

I can't see his stats, so I can't really say much, but... Hmm... I'd say his strength exceeds Benetnasch in her normal state overall.

"We finally meet... I haven't forgotten you even once in the past two hundred years. My soul whispers in my ears night after night, reminding me of the humiliation of that day...and telling me to eat you alive!"

I watched Leon in silence.

"Now, undo these chains! Fight me!"

While listening to Leon, I thought about the best course of action. *The best thing would be to... Let's see... Maybe I should do as he says and fight him myself? I could beat him here and show him the difference in our power, forcing him to obey me and return to the fold. That would put him back down to level 800, so he can't do anything stupid. Yeah, that seems best.*

It was a simple answer that didn't need any hemming and hawing over. But the Lufas inside me put forth a different answer, and I agreed with it. That

answer was...

“No.”

“Wha—?!”

“This fight is already over. Aries and the others have won. That is all. We have no intention of coming out of the woodwork to throw mud on their victory.”

Exactly, this fight had been between Leon and the Twelve Stars, including Aries. It was already over. I wasn’t interested in brazenly coming out of nowhere and restarting a fight that’d already been finished. More than anything, it would have been rude to Aries and the others who had tried their hardest and had managed to win against stats like Leon’s. In the end, I would be overturning the results of Aries and the others’ hard-won battle to beat up Leon once again and claim that I’d managed to win by myself. *Isn’t that just incredibly lame?* Not to mention that Aries and the others were my followers, so their victory was also mine. I wanted to bask in that pride. I didn’t want to ruin it.

“DON’T FUCK WITH MEEEEE!!! You’re going to just leave everything to your underlings and watch from on high?! I... I!” he stuttered before pausing. “Are you saying that I’m not even worth fighting yourself?!”

“You... We hear that you clung to the Goddess’s power.”

Leon howled, but was shut up by one line from me. He’d been cornered by people he considered lower than him, and as a result, he had resorted to the Goddess’s power and still lost. He must have found that fact extremely humiliating, and it was something he probably wanted to forget. But I wouldn’t let him. If I did, he’d probably let himself get used by the Goddess again, after all.

“We aren’t going to tell you not to desire power. Using everything available is what We would do as well. In that sense, the Goddess’s power is no exception. We probably would have highly praised you if you weren’t controlled by it, but instead managed to steal the power and make it yours.”

After all, I myself had basically suddenly inherited the powers of my overpowered game character, so in that sense, we would have been the same. Because of that, I didn’t feel like judging others for how they got their power.

That'd just come right back and hit me in the face like a giant boomerang, after all.

"But by being manipulated as easily as you were... You are no longer the one fighting. Even if we did fight, it wouldn't be a fight between us, but a fight between us and the Goddess. You would just be a tool for the Goddess, used like an item."

That was exactly why Benetnasch, who had managed to reject the Goddess's temptation, seemed so bright to me. Even the Goddess was someone Benetnasch had seen as a nuisance, and she had managed to impose her own will over the Goddess's. It was because Benetnasch had been like this that Lufas had recognized her as a rival.

"We will answer your question from before."

The moment I said that... I could no longer tell who was speaking. I knew it was me, and I knew I wanted to say that. But at the same time, it felt as if someone else were speaking through my mouth... But the lines still came from my own will. For the first time, it felt like Lufas and I had completely united.

"You are not worthy of fighting us."

I was only met with shocked silence.

I had said what I'd had to say, so I turned on my heel and left Leon alone. I might have gone too far, but if I hadn't said that, he might have gone back to clinging to that power too easily. Leon was a simple fool, but that foolishness could sometimes be a weapon. Saying that just now had probably cemented the fact that using the Goddess's power meant Leon couldn't fight me. So he would no longer use her power. His greatest goal was me, after all. He would never choose a method that brought him farther away from that.

In a sense, he was a cute and very easy to understand fellow. *People say that a lot, don't they? That dogs and cats are cuter the stupider they act?* It was true that Leon was a troublesome guy, but it wasn't that big a deal to me.

How should I put it? I pondered it for a moment. Yeah, if I had to force an analogy, it'd be this: Pretend there was a cat. Imagine the cat wanted your attention, so it jumped onto your laptop and sat on the keyboard. Thanks to

that, it hit the power button. Given no other choice, you play with the cat until it gets bored, and it scratches your hand and walks off like it's lost all interest. That would be very troublesome and selfish, and you might curse out the cat in your head. But you as the owner would think of all of that as cute and forgive the cat.

Leon was exactly like that to me. At the very least, he wasn't scum on the level of the Dragon King I'd once fought. It was true that he was true to his desires and very arrogant, but frankly it wasn't much different from a wild lion hunting and eating a zebra. The scale was just different.

I paused, confused. *Huh? Who's the Dragon King?*

* *

The light of mana illuminated the trees of the forest. Plants that couldn't move on their own instead used their divine power in the form of heaven-arts to create a heaven-arts life-form, a spirit, to innocently fly around. Some among these spirits gained a sense of self, and those that had become completely independent of their true plant bodies became fairies and were sometimes worshiped as holy beings. Likewise, those who had been affected by fairies became known as the fey, or elves. That was why they had an affinity for heaven-arts even though they'd been mutated by mana.

A single man wearing white armor was walking in that forest. He was known as the Devil King's son, Terra, and boasted the second most authority and power amongst all the devilfolk after the Devil King himself. With bold steps, he walked towards the deepest part of the forest while the spirits and fairies watched his progress with interest, sometimes flying around him playfully. Terra smiled at them, making sure not to lay a hand on any of them.

Spirits and fairies took on a wide range of forms, but they generally turned out to be adorable boys or girls about twenty percent the size of a normal human. That was not a hard and fast rule though, and most powerful fairies ended up being indistinguishable from humans. There were even some men with uselessly firm and sturdy builds with pirate-like looks.

Eventually, Terra reached his destination, where he found a girl standing there as if she'd been waiting for him. She had fluffy honey-colored hair that

reached down to her shoulders and wore a headband. Her eyes were green, and the dress she wore was tricolor, a nice red, blue, and white. Next to her stood an armored heroic spirit whom she'd given a temporary body to serve her with.

"What a rare guest we have here. I'm afraid I won't welcome you, though."

Residing in the deepest parts of the fairy paradise of Alfheim was the Fairy Princess, Pollux, who stood at the top of all fairies. As the one who stood at the peak of all life forms made of divine power, she was, as implied, equal to the Devil King. If the Devil King and his devilfolk were the symbols of darkness encroaching upon Mizgarz, then Pollux and her fairies were the symbols of light. They would never mix, but they would also never clash. Instead, many long years had been spent simply glaring at each other. The light and dark always remained balanced as if they were communicating behind the scenes, preventing one side from completely sweeping up the world.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, oh great Chief of the Light. My name is Terra. Please, let me first apologize for my sudden rude visit."

"He—" Pollux paused. "Hmm? Aren't you him? The Devil King's son? I'd heard that Orm had a son, so I'd imagined a miniature version of him, but you seem to be quite well-mannered."

Pollux observed Terra. From the look of it, he wasn't hostile. His sword was still sheathed, and Pollux could see respect hidden within his gaze. Still, he was a devilfolk. Unfortunately, he wasn't trustworthy.

"So, why have you come here? If it isn't incredibly important, I'd like you to leave."

"I want you to teach me more about avatars, and, if possible, how to make them."

When she heard that term come from Terra's mouth, she fell silent. Pollux's look grew cold, and she narrowed her eyes.

Avatars could be said to be the spirits and fairies themselves. They themselves were nothing more than temporary bodies of their original plants. While there was a difference between magic and heaven-arts, spirits and fairies were similar

to devilfolk, who were made of mana.

Taken to the extreme, spirits and fairies were just heaven-arts being used by plants. Plants, which couldn't speak or move by themselves, split down two paths in order to be able to achieve this. One was mutation. By mutating into a monster, they'd be able to move. This was how demihumans like dryads had come to exist. The other was by creating an avatar. This was how spirits and fairies were born.

The only ones in the world who knew how to make those avatars were the Goddess, the Devil King, and the Fairy Princess. Even plants needed permission from Pollux to make an avatar, since they wouldn't be able to do so without her help. This left the question of when Pollux herself was born, but no one around could answer that question. After all, Pollux had been around even before humanity existed.

"And what do you plan to do with such knowledge?"

"I have someone I want to release from the fate of all devilfolk, and I have a friend who died in order to make that happen. I want us to have a life not as a puppet of the Goddess, but one we own ourselves."

Pollux pondered for a moment, then said, "I see." For an instant, her gaze upon Terra became kinder, but at the same time, it turned into a look of sympathy and pity. The next moment, her gaze became icy. "Sorry, but that knowledge will never be shared with anyone else. No matter the reason, I cannot tell you."

"I know. But I will not give up no matter what. I swore to my dead friend that I would see this done."

"Then what will you do?"

"What do I have to do to get you to tell me?"

"Let's see..."

The Fairy Princess waved her arm. That moment, over a hundred heroic spirits manifested, standing in Terra's way. They were all over level 700. There were even those at level 1000 scattered around the crowd.

“Dance, my beloved children. Argonautai!”

Generations of guardians of the sanctuary showed themselves. Heroes from the past who had wiped away the dark clouds that had gathered over Mizgarz when it had still been shrouded by darkness descended. Soldiers of the first heaven-winged army, from before one of them had eaten the forbidden fruit, were recreated in droves.

Ale, the valkyrie who had gifted the poor with fruit, appeared. So did Brunehilde, the noble warrior who had guided people to the Goddess’s side. Notable individuals from history revived one after the other in a show of force that almost mocked the difference between their total power and Terra’s.

“If you win, I won’t mind giving you a hint. Though that really just means I have no intention of telling you anything,” said the Fairy Princess as she adopted a cold sneer.

The Dragon King Made a Challenge

There were five continents on Mizgarz as well as some islands. People named the five biggest masses of land “The Five Large Continents.” Each of those five continents had its own ruler who spent their time glaring across the water at the others, barely holding together balance.

Those who ruled the northwestern continent were the nobles of the night, vampires. At their top stood the Vampire Princess Benetnasch. The devilfolk occupied the northeastern continent with their leader, the Devil King. The central continent was home to the most fearsome monsters in the world, with the Lion King Leon at the top, maintaining the rule of survival of the fittest.

To say that those who lived on the southwestern continent had a leader would be misleading. The Fairy Princess Pollux lived there, yet in no way did she rule anyone. The power she wielded as the opposite force to the devilfolk couldn’t be ignored, though, and even the Lion King or the Devil King couldn’t easily lay their hands on her domain.

Then there was the southeastern continent... This was where the dragons, hailed as the strongest species, lived along with their royalty, the Dragon King Ladon. There was a problem in the southeast that no other continent had to deal with. The Crown Empire, which represented humanity’s largest country and thus largest piece of land, was in the middle of a battle for survival against the dragons.

In the past, the dragons and humanity had coexisted based on mutual agreement...or rather, they simply didn’t bother each other, but the Dragon King Ladon had broken that balance. He was born with even more power than those said to be the strongest species and believed that dragons were the ones most deserving of ruling the world as the strongest, so he set out to eradicate humanity.

In response, the Crown Empire desperately tried to resist, but the difference between people and dragons was clear. Even a dragon child could be matched up against a country’s entire military force, and the outcome would still be up in the air. Against a mature dragon, people stood no chance. This was no bluff; it

was common sense and showed just how cruel and merciless the law of strength that controlled Mizgarz was.

Even passing level 100 was rare for members of humanity, so passing level 200 or 300 made one able to defeat entire countries by oneself, and the average level of a dragon was over 400. Their numbers were few, but some dragons were even over level 600 or 700. If they felt like it, they could turn all of Mizgarz into scorched earth within a couple of days. Among them, the Dragon King reigned the strongest at level 1000. With him, it was no longer a question of winning or losing. He had ten heads, and each had enough power to equal ten dragons, which was why he was said to have “a hundred heads.” It was almost like ten level 1000 dragons had merged into one. Simply meeting the Dragon King meant death.

However, even in front of such monsters the Crown Empire was still holding on and resisting. In the past, the Crown Empire has built four fortresses in four different directions some distance away from the capital in order to intercept the dragons. Three out of those four had fallen and only the western fortress was left. The lines of battle had now reached the capital of the empire, and every day the dragons invaded with more vigor and ferocity.

It could actually be said that the Crown Empire had done exceedingly well to hold on for so long. Even if they were the world’s largest country, scholars all over the world had predicted that they wouldn’t last a night against the dragon’s strength. Yet it had already been two months since the fortresses fell...and the country was still standing.

What was the reason for that? Their national power? Well, they certainly had some power. It was true that they could fight and shelter their citizens because of their plentiful stores.

Was it the quality of their soldiers? That was also true. The Crown Empire’s soldiers were very well-trained down to the last man, and the army was comprised of strong veterans.

Was it their excellent tactics? This also couldn’t be ignored. Captain Alphecca and one of his subordinates, the mage Meridiana, both used their wealth of experience gained over long years of battle to always come up with the best

answers in order to defend the western fortress.

However, even combined, those answers would only result in the dragons easily crushing the Crown Empire. Even so, the dragons couldn't. Why was that?

There was but one answer. Because there was a monster that could even repel dragons.

"Transmute: Winter of Swords!"

A woman's voice reverberated through a wasteland currently serving as the front line of the war with the dragons. At the same time, countless giant swords burst out of the ground, skewering wyverns and lifting them up into the air one after the other. The one who watched over and controlled so many swords was a single heaven-winged woman who was currently floating in the air. Her large black wings were spread wide. Lufas crossed her arms as she declared, "Shoot straight through them!"

As soon as she'd spoken, a storm of swords brewed, skewering even more dragons in droves. A dragon's scales were definitely not brittle or soft. They could deflect swords, spears, and even cannons without a scratch. This natural defense was a dragon's pride. Their scales could withstand the heat of magma, wouldn't burn when exposed to lightning, and could even withstand high-pressure water strong enough to cut diamond. The fact that they were being pierced through as if they were paper was like a bad joke.

"Aqua Tornado!"

Next, a man's voice rang out. Mana condensed in the air and turned into water before swirling and becoming a waterspout. The waterspout stuck itself into the head of a nearby dragon and only came back out the other end after wreaking merry havoc inside the thing's body. The user of such excessive magic, Megrez, turned his spell onto another dragon, but it was struck from the side by the dwarf blacksmith Mizar and was sent flying.

On top of that, Alioth leapt into the storm of swords that Lufas had whipped up, easily scoring a kill and continuing on to leap around freely, cutting apart dragons.

While watching her reliable friends' exploits out of the corner of her eye,

Lufas snapped her fingers and gathered the mana that was the source of the dragons' power to her fingertip. Eventually, it came to form a shining golden apple, which Lufas wasted no time biting into.

"We did it, everyone! The dragons have been decimated! All that's left are several wyverns!"

"Lufas and the others have grizzly strength. They're almost too reliabear."

Seeing the four adventurers' exploits, the empire soldiers Phecda and Dubhe heaped praise on them. Lufas and the others' fight was truly one of mighty warriors; each member of Lufas's party could take on thousands. The imposing figures—as they destroyed dragons of all things—were now the hope of the entire empire.

But Lufas herself wasn't happy. In fact, everyone around her could tell she seemed unsatisfied. She was seeing the bodies of several soldiers that were lost to the battle. Lufas was unmistakably a hero. No one else could fight like her. However...

Even she couldn't keep the losses at zero.

* *

"That can't be! What are you thinking, my liege?!"

Alphecca's shout echoed off the walls of the throne room.

After finishing the battle with the dragons, Lufas and the others had been invited to have an audience with the king, who was supposed to praise them for their hard work. This had been happening almost every day for the past few days, so by now all the soldiers knew that maintaining the battle lines without Lufas and the others was impossible. That was why everyone was convinced that they would be seeing the same boring scene they'd been witnessing for the past two months. But that day, what Lufas and the others received wasn't praise.

"It is as you heard, Alphecca. We will be handing Lufas, Alioth, Megrez, and Mizar over to the Dragon King."

"Wh-Why...?! If you do that, our country will be destroyed!"

The four people who comprised Lufas's party were now a necessary defense for the Crown Empire. Without them, the Empire would be trampled over in an instant. War was about numbers, but that was only true as long as the individual's strength was limited to what would be sensible for humanity. As soon as a person stepped outside of that, this theory no longer applied. No matter how many tens of thousands of level 100 humans you gathered, they wouldn't hold a candle to a single dragon. Opposing someone who completely outclassed you wasn't about numbers. What was needed was someone else who also transcended common sense.

"We have been contacted by the Dragon King. Our losses in this war have gotten too high..." Emperor Borealis, the Crown Empire ruler, continued, coldhearted. "Continuing to lose our beloved brethren like this would be a loss to both of us, so he has said that he will stop his invasion. However, Lufas Maphaahl and her friends have killed too many dragons. They will not be satisfied until Lufas and the others are dead... We've been told to hand them over."

"A-And..." Alphecca trailed off. "You're just going to accept that?! That cannot happen! There's no guarantee the Dragon King will honor his promise!"

This was a trap. There was no need for Alphecca to put it into words. Everyone knew it was a trap. The Dragon King was the one who had attacked them in the first place, thinking that the current arrangement was too passive. It was impossible to believe that he would change his tune now. This was undoubtedly a plot to dispose of Lufas, who'd been a thorn in the Dragon King's side.

Borealis simply shook his head, seeming tired. "It is as you say, Alphecca. But there is also no guarantee that he will break his promise either."

"W-Well, yes, but... You should know of his cruelty and brutality as well, my liege! Even if he were to honor his promise and withdraw here, he will simply come back! That's just how the Dragon King is!"

"You might be right, but... We're already exhausted from fighting. Our forces, which used to be in the tens of thousands, now are only a measly ten thousand. All our captured monsters have also been decimated... Our people have

suffered untold losses. Even if we continued to fight, we would only be drawing out our destruction."

The war with the dragons had caused many losses on both sides, but in terms of pure numbers, humanity had suffered much more. No matter how strong Lufas and her party were, just four people were not enough to protect everything. If the enemy were to split up, Lufas and the others would have no way of protecting everything at once, and their allies would be killed while they were still running to save them.

Of course, Lufas and her party didn't simply take that lying down. While using Megrez's barriers and Mizar's alchemy to their fullest to defend as wide an area as possible, Lufas and Alioth would run like the wind across the battlefield to destroy the enemy faster than they could destroy the country. But even with all that, they couldn't completely prevent casualties, though it was possible to lessen them.

If Lufas and the others wanted to prevent casualties entirely, they'd need to obtain strength that far outstripped the dragons. As long as they didn't break through the barrier and reach the world beyond level 1000, they would never be able to achieve such a miracle. In other words, it was completely impossible.

"W-We need their power so that doesn't happen!"

"Think about it, Alphecca. It's true that humanity might be able to win with their power. But..." The emperor hesitated. "Does that victory have a place in our country? Do our people need victory? You see, I thought about it... I thought about it and despaired. The scene of victory I imagined... It was one where only those four survived, and everything else had been turned into a barren wasteland. This country, its prosperity, its people... All of it was gone. Only four victors survived. It was a sad scene with everyone dead..."

Alphecca couldn't deny Borealis's vision of the future because his imagination told him the same thing. It was true. If things continued, they might be able to win as long as those four were around, but surviving such an ordeal was also something only those four people were strong enough to do. For weak people like Alphecca and everyone else, their numbers would dwindle during the fight until, eventually, none of them were left.

“You understand, don’t you? The Crown Empire wouldn’t be the victor. It would just be four adventurers.” Borealis paused. “I want to protect my people even if it makes me a traitor who sold out the heroes.”

“B-But...to even consider giving the enemy the people who fought so hard for our country... That would be...!”

“It is all my decision and my sense of self-defense. If we ever come to see a peaceful time again, then put my head on the chopping block as the villain of the era who sold out the heroes. I won’t ask you to understand... Feel free to insult this foolish king who recklessly went off on his own.”

Borealis knew full well how shameful and foolish what he was about to do was. He’d probably worried about it greatly. His face, which used to be full of vigor and majesty, now simply looked like that of an exhausted old man. Even with all that effort, he couldn’t see another answer. The only two choices available to him were a victory with no one left or a miserable defeat from trading in the heroes. He had chosen the option that had a higher chance of saving his people, even if it was only by a minuscule amount, despite the possibility of it being a trap set by the Dragon King...

“Restrain them.”

Under Borealis’s orders, the knights that were stationed to the sides of the throne room all drew their weapons and surrounded Lufas and her party. Alphecca, Dubhe, and Phecda tried to protect them, but they were outnumbered.

“Hey, you bastards! Are you really okay with this?! What happened to your pride as knights?!”

“You’ve gotten this bear pawsatively riled up now! You idiots bearly pass as human!”

“Calm down, Dubhe! Your tic’s going wild!” warned Phecda.

Dubhe agreed, settling for a roar.

After hearing their words, the knight’s faces twisted as they gritted their teeth. “Shut up! Stop talking!”

“No, I’m going to keep going! You all should be ashamed of yourselves!”

“Of course we are! But pride won’t protect the people... I hate my own weakness! There’s nothing more shameful than the miserable feeling of having to capture the heroes we owe so much!”

“The price of betrayal must be repaid with our lives... Eventually, we must take our own lives and go to Valhalla.”

The soldiers’ faces were all twisted in anguish down to the last man. There were even those who were biting their lips. They were desperate, already at their limits.

Only four heroes could not protect an entire empire. If things kept going as they had been, the soldiers would lose the country, people, and family they should have been protecting for a single word: victory. In order to avoid that, they only had one choice. They had to place all their hope on the small chance that the Dragon King would actually keep his word. They had to sell out the heroes they owed a debt to and cling to the mercy of the detested Dragon King... They knew that such a wretched method was the only way they could protect their country.

While that topic was still swirling around the room, Lufas met Megrez’s gaze and laughed. “Megrez.”

“Yeah... It’s time. Of all things, the chance came from the enemy himself.”

Lufas and the others were about to be betrayed by the country they had protected and be given to the enemy, but they showed no signs of panicking. In fact, it seemed as if they’d been waiting for this to happen.

The corners of Lufas’s mouth tilted into a smile right in front of the knights, who seemed confused at the situation, as she boldly walked right past them. The knights managed to react and tried to grab Lufas, but the next moment they were forced to the ground as if by some invisible, insurmountable pressure. It was the unique skill that all heaven-folk had, Pressure. In front of Lufas, no weakling was even allowed to move.

Just like that, Lufas composedly approached the throne and looked down at the emperor, who was still sitting. “You sure have fallen. I’d heard that Emperor

Borealis was filled with vigor and drive and was himself an accomplished Grappler. But you seem more like a withered tree as you are now."

"Do you disdain me?"

"No... You must have your own worries. A ruler's worries and pain are not something I'm equipped to understand. But if you're going to sell us out to the Dragon King anyway, Emperor, you could have at least been a little clever about it."

Lufas's expression wasn't the angry or grief-stricken look of someone who'd just been betrayed. This was because she understood that the decision was something Borealis had made after much worry and lament, that it was a decision he had been forced to come to while at the end of his rope. However, Lufas still wasn't so kind as to allow herself to just be presented to the Dragon King and killed without resisting.

"I will allow myself to be offered to the Dragon King as a sacrifice as you so wish. I won't resist. But... I have no intention of giving you my life for free." Lufas proceeded to whisper her plan into the emperor's ear.

* *

The wasteland seemed to go on forever. A large number of dragons stood there, positioned as if they were under the leadership of a single dragon. Though, single wouldn't exactly be correct. There were ten dragon heads, so it would be more accurate to say that it was ten dragons in one body, as the Dragon King Ladon had one body but ten heads. He rocked his body, which was three times bigger than the other dragons' bodies, and looked towards the horizon.

"Hey, First Head. D'you really think the humans'll actually send out the sacrifices?"

"Of course they will, Eighth Head. They are weak and unsightly. Humans will sell out however many of their comrades they must for even the smallest chance to live."

Ladon was holding a conversation with himself. Having ten heads meant having ten brains, so each head had its own ego and personality. That was why

he was both ten dragons and one dragon at the same time. The Dragon King Ladon was both an individual and a swarm.

“I’m so excited... I love this so much... Like when those humans come and offer up the sacrifices with those bitter, sorry faces... You love that stuff too, right, Seventh Head?”

“I see you have taste, Second Head. I suggested this plan exactly because I wanted to see that. Humans have so many emotions and expressions. It makes them that much more fun as toys.”

The fifth head butted into the seventh and second heads’ tasteless conversation. “Neither of you get it, do you? The best thing is the moment they are betrayed. That’s when they wail things like ‘That’s not what you told me,’ or, ‘That wasn’t the deal,’ or, ‘Damn you, you tricked me!’ And when it comes to crying and screaming humans...!” The fifth head started imitating humans with a pathetic voice.

The other heads all laughed seeing that impression, cheering on the fifth head and saying that it was spot-on.

“The best is when the sacrifice ends up being the fiancée or lover of the person who had to bring them here. Then we get to eat her in front of the idiot who came spouting some nonsense like ‘I want to at least be together until the end.’ That’s when the idiot starts crying and attempting to fight us.”

“Humans are trash, but they’re so fun to play with, aren’t they? And they’re so numerous, so the fun just never ends.”

The third and fourth heads seemed to get along well as they talked. Their proximity seemed to have had them mesh well. Even their bad tastes matched.

The tenth head spoke up, chiding the others. “Hey now, all of you. Enjoying ourselves is fine, but don’t lose sight of our goal.”

“We know. The point is to hurry up and unite this continent so we can take the fight to other places, right? The closest continent would be the central continent...the Lion King Leon’s place.”

“Hmph. It makes me laugh that he calls himself the strongest monster while forgetting about us. As if some huge cat could win against us,” the ninth and

sixth heads replied to the tenth.

Ladon had but one goal: to make the world his and to reign over everything from above. In order to do that, he had to first deal with the Lion King, the Vampire Princess, the Devil King, and the Fairy Princess. He didn't have time to waste with this single continent, and he should have been able to overrun a weak race like humans in a moment. But Lufas and the others had prevented that, so Ladon had sent a message to Borealis with the purpose of eliminating said party.

"Oh, they're here. They're here! That's them, right?" the third head called out, delighted.

The other heads all faced the same direction. Ahead of them, they saw a cart with four adventurers on it, as well as four knights driving the cart. Eventually, the cart stopped in front of Ladon, and one of the knights raised his voice.

"Oh Dragon King Ladon! We have brought the adventurers as promised!"

"I see. You've done well to capture them, weak as you are. Did they not resist?"

"We mixed sleeping medication into their food! Now, we've fulfilled our end of the promise. It is time to fulfill yours."

At the knight's words, Ladon's heads looked at each other and all at once, they started laughing.

"What's so funny!"

"He he he... Good work. Well done, small one. We're done with you."

"Go back and tell your emperor that we'll be taking down your puny country in a bit."

"What?! That wasn't the deal!"

"Iiiidiot! Did you really think we'd honor a promise with a human?!"

Ladon had no intention of honoring his deal from the start. He just wanted to get rid of Lufas and her party. His goal was to control the entire continent and erase all those annoying humans in the first place. He never had any intention of allowing humans to live.

“This will be your reward for bringing them here. You get to see the death of your precious heroes.”

The third head grinned widely as he brought his face closer to the cart and swallowed the four adventurers. Then the head chewed, making an elaborate show of crushing meat and bones alike before swallowing. The head looked down to see the knight’s face drenched in despair, but something was off. None of the knights seemed affected by the show. In fact, they were smiling.

“Fool,” one of the knights muttered.

That was when all the knights stripped off their armor in unison, revealing the four people who should have been eaten: Lufas, Alioth, Megrez, and Mizar.

“Ha ha ha!” Mizar laughed heartily. “It was a great success! They took it hook, line, and sinker!”

“I was the one who used magic to make dead bodies look like us, though,” Megrez said, making sure to remind everyone of his contribution.

What the third head had eaten wasn’t Lufas and her party but wyvern corpses. Megrez had disguised the corpses with magic to make them look like Lufas and the others.

“Y-Yooouuu... Damn you. How dare you fool us!”

“You cowards!”

“Have you tried looking in a mirror?”

Ladon was incensed at Lufas and the others’ trick, but Lufas herself simply turned their indignation right back at them. She didn’t want to be told that by the one who just showed they had no intention of honoring a promise.

Drawing her favored sword, Lufas walked in front of Ladon fearlessly. “I’ll leave the small fry around us to you three. That one is mine.”

“You sure? Even you should find it difficult to take him on alone...”

“No problem. Thanks to fighting so many dragons here, I’ve gotten stronger myself. As I am now, I won’t fall short of even this Dragon King,” Lufas declared, sounding full of confidence as she spread her wings.

When she’d first arrived on this continent, she wasn’t even level 600, but now Lufas’s level was at 1000, which was the limit in Mizgarz. Lufas’s unique ability to make golden apples allowed her to take in mana far more efficiently than normal, and she’d been fighting consecutively with the strongest species, dragons. As a result, she became strong enough to match the Dragon King.

However, her opponent was also a monster at level 1000, so Lufas couldn’t let her guard down.

“You seriously plan to win against me by yourself? You, a mere human?!”

“Of course I plan to win. That’s why I’m here.”



“You impudent thing.”

Lufas laughed fearlessly while several of Ladon’s heads unleashed their breath attack.

Each of Ladon’s heads had a different attribute, and they could move independently as well. It was basically like being exposed to attacks from ten different dragons at the same time, and the density of the attacks could probably be said to be higher than the Vampire Princess or the Lion King.

The breath attacks that had been unleashed gouged the earth, traveling past the horizon, but Lufas wasn’t there. She’d already taken to the air and was now making a sweep with her whip sword. The sword extended like a snake and the blade wrapped around Ladon’s third head.

“How’s this!”

Just like that, Lufas pulled on her sword, returning the blade to its original size. Of course, the third head that had been trapped inside it had been taken off, separated from the body at the base of the neck. But just being severed wouldn’t stop the head.

“DAMN YOOOUUUUU!” The third head, which had been separated from its body, roared in hatred before unleashing another breath.

A dragon’s vitality could not be underestimated. The third head wouldn’t die just from being separated from its body. In fact, Ladon’s regeneration had already started, and he was trying to grow a new head from the stump.

Lufas avoided the breath and flew flush to the ground, grabbing the severed head and neck and throwing it at its original body. However, Ladon didn’t even hesitate to crush what used to be a part of his body underfoot. What used to be his third head didn’t even have time to let out its death throes before its life was extinguished.

“Hey now, have you ever tried hesitating a little? You know that used to be a part of you, right?”

“Absurd! We only believe in ourselves. As soon as it was separated, it was no longer part of us!”

“That’s how it is. Third Head let its guard down too much in front of a mere human... The rest of us won’t be doing that,” Ladon said.

This time, all ten heads, including the one that had just regenerated, all used their breaths at the same time. The breaths clashed in front of Ladon, mixing together and changing into a giant ball of light. Lufas felt impending death in that ball, making her spine grow cold, so she ascended quickly.

Right afterward, a destructive ball of light touched down that seemed to erase everything in its path, even space itself, leaving behind nothing but a crater in the earth radiating out from the point of its impact. Other dragons had the misfortune of getting caught up in this merciless attack. None of them could maintain their original forms, and any part that came into contact with the breath disappeared as if it’d never existed in the first place.

Lufas watched the destruction silently before muttering, “What power...”

Seeing that scene gave Lufas the chills, and she broke out in a cold sweat. But she didn’t have the time to be taken aback forever.

Ladon had already lifted his faces up towards her and was attempting to launch his next attack. This time, every head unleashed its breath separately. They all missed Lufas but still managed to box her in. It wasn’t a simple miss, of course. The breath attack continued, slowly creeping closer to the center and constricting Lufas’s options of escape.

A breath cage. I see! My surroundings are... No, there’s no gap big enough for me. What about above...? It looks like this attack keeps going into the stratosphere... Lufas had been completely enclosed, and she realized she had no place to escape to in any direction. However, she wasn’t the type to let this cow her. As soon as Lufas realized she didn’t have an escape route, she rapidly descended towards Ladon.

Ladon moved as if he’d been waiting for her to do exactly that. He clashed his breaths together in front of Lufas, creating the same destructive light as before.

In response, Lufas stuck out her sword and flew straight into the light. One of the Swordmaster’s skills, “Armored Assault,” was a skill to harden the Swordmaster’s own body as they advanced with an attack. When the skill was activated, the user’s defense rose. Skilled users would take any attack without

even flinching. Swordmasters were very poor in terms of ranged attacks, so it was one of their treasured skills that allowed them to forcefully close the distance with any enemy.

Lufas pierced through empty space and broke through the dragon's destructive light before coming to stab her sword into Ladon himself. Added to that, she spun on the spot and swiped her sword, taking off several heads at the same time.

From there, she seamlessly started a multi-hit skill, "Quick Raid." Lufas carved into Ladon's body.

Ladon's remaining heads bit at Lufas. Not one to lose, she kicked the head that had managed to bite her and forced her way out of his jaws.

She was silent for a moment. "As expected. He's tough."

Though Lufas's fearless smile never faded, she'd taken more damage than she'd ever had before. Even though she'd managed to forge her way through the destructive light, the price of taking a direct hit was high. Part of her equipment was ruined, with her cloak being completely destroyed. She hadn't had her left arm completely torn off, but it wouldn't stop bleeding, and it didn't seem like she'd be able to move it anytime soon.

When was the last time I had a battle this hard...? I don't remember any time like this, even all the way back to when I was still weak and had just become an adventurer.

"Damn you... DAMNYOUDAMNYOUDAMNYOUUUUU!"

"You puny human! How dare a mere human with wings do this!"

"This is the first time I've ever felt such insult... I'll never forgive you!"

Ladon was also covered in wounds. He'd lost half his heads, and the Dragon King's body had been carved into like a slab of ham. Lufas could tell he was enraged with the amount of pain and humiliation he was feeling. Seeing Ladon like that, Lufas's smile only widened.

The title King of Dragons isn't just for show. This monster in front of me is truly a strong challenger, but that's exactly why I can reassess my own strength.

Lufas was truly happy about that.

“I have half my arms, and you have half your heads... I guess we’re evenly damaged. Now let’s continue, Dragon King. You couldn’t possibly want to stop fighting, could you?”

“I’ll kill you! Kill! KIIILL!”

Once again, Lufas and Ladon clashed, and the whole world shook.

* *

“Is... Is it over...?” Phecda muttered from his position in front of the gates to the Crown Empire’s capital.

Next to Phecda were Dubhe, Alphecca, and Emperor Borealis. They, who had been unable to participate in the fight against the Dragon King and had thus been left behind, were all waiting for the return of Lufas and her party in front of the capital’s gates.

They all held their breath as they watched the horizon. The loud clangs and roars of battle that had been happening so often before had stopped. Phecda gulped. If Lufas and her party had lost, Ladon would surely be attacking them very soon with his dragons in tow. If that happened, they felt they had the duty of at least dying here first as the ones who had sent Lufas and her party off.

Eventually, they spotted something coming from the horizon. What they saw was a dragon. It was no ordinary dragon; this one was absurdly large. Everyone waiting in front of the gates had their hearts drowned in despair... But then they noticed something was off.

Is it just me or is that giant dragon...not walking straight? It’s like it’s not actually walking but being dragged...

“A-Ahhh... H-Hey! Heyy! Look, Dubhe! Am I dreaming...? Ha ha ha! I can bearly believe it!”

“Calm down, Phecda. That’s my tic you’re stealing. If you do that, I’m going to lose my individuality and just become a regular bear.”

“Maybe I should add ‘alphecca’ as a tic from now on too. Man they did alpheccably well! It’s a superb alphecca day... No, never mind. It’s just hard to

say.”

What Phecda and the others were seeing was Lufas dragging along a dead Ladon. Next to her were Alioth, Mizar, and Megrez, all safe and sound. The sunset lit them up from behind wonderfully as if it were celebrating them.

A Citizen Speaks

Mjolnir was hit with aftereffects from the fight between Lufas Maphaahl and Benetnasch. Of course, this concerned ordinary citizens as well. There were earthquakes and aftershocks with the intensity of typhoons, as well as tornadoes and good old shockwaves. Even though they had never been directly attacked or dealt any direct damage, the people had seen something straight out of an apocalypse. It was only natural that people started to panic, thinking just that.

The military police asked around, investigating what was going on, and as a result, they ran into a certain vampire. This vampire had just happened to have been on guard at the highest point in Mjolnir that day. This vampire, Laggart (age 560), had seen Lufas Maphaahl and Benetnasch fighting. This was what he had to say:

You're talking about that day? Yes, of course I remember. I mean, there's no way I could forget it. Even an unimportant vampire like me's heard of the monstrous strength of the Black-Winged Conqueror and the Vampire Princess... Oh man, they aren't just monsters.

What is it called...? A phenomenon...? An event...? Hmm... It's hard to describe, but it's like they're no longer even in the same dimension of just "fighting," you know?

That day, I was on guard in the clock tower, Mjolnir's tallest building. And you see, to tell you the truth, there's a really nice mansion near the castle, and no one knows what it's even used for. No one. I mean, no one was living in it or using it as, like, a vacation home, but for some reason, it was still made out of Mizar steel. It was so uselessly tough. Well, among us guards, we thought it was supposed to be like a shelter if monsters attacked or something. Turns out we were wrong, though. But that's only to be expected, right? I mean, what normal person would expect people to fight in there?

So anyway, I was just watching the mansion as usual, without any real purpose in mind, you know?

Laggart paused.

I mean it. There was basically no reason to be looking that way. It just happened to be in a really noticeable place... Anyway, I just happened to be staring off into space in that direction.

Huh? “What about your job?” Oh, well... Yeah, uh... I wasn’t really skipping, you know? It was just a little diversion.

Anyway, as I was watching it, the wall was sent flying all of a sudden. The next thing I knew, a stone fist came falling down to the ground a little ways away from Mjolnir.

As I was saying, vampires have pretty good eyes, right? So when I squinted and looked, I could see a black-winged girl and the Vampire Princess talking about something. I couldn’t see them move at all, but judging from the situation, I could somehow tell that they were fighting inside the mansion. And that fight had moved outside.

As for the fight itself... Sorry. To be honest, I couldn’t see it at all. As a vampire, I’m pretty confident in my kinetic vision myself, though. I was just barely able to surmise that something was moving at unbelievably high speeds.

Do you get what I mean by that? It’s the difference between being able to “tell,” and being able to “kind of guess.” My eyes couldn’t even follow the afterimages, and that’s from watching from that far away. If I was closer, I wouldn’t have been able to understand what was going on at all.

Moving on, explosions and lights and all kinds of stuff just kept happening one after the other... Well, they were probably using magic.

Sorry I couldn’t be of more help.

Anyway, seeing a fight between two high-leveled people just looks like that from a normal person’s perspective. That... The world at level 1000 isn’t a place that people should be allowed to enter. I’m serious.

With that, the normal person, who was lauded for being level 65 and had gotten a glimpse into the other side of the world, laughed dryly.

After that, the military police realized that what they were doing had no

meaning, so they stopped their investigation efforts immediately. Investigations like this were for fights between people or monsters. There was no point in investigating a fight between two natural disasters.

Afterword

Thank you all very much for reading this book. I am the author, Firehead.

Right now, I'm so hot I can't help myself. And it's not because my head of fire is hot; it's because it's summer right now. Things might have gotten cooler by the time this book reaches all of you, but at the time I'm writing this, it's very hot.

So, summer is an absolutely awful season. I'm sorry to everybody who likes summer, but I hate summer the most out of all the seasons. Bugs are everywhere, I can't stop sweating while I have to work, the cost of everything I drink drains my wallet, I get ruined by mosquitos, I find dead cicadas on the veranda, and as soon as I try to clean them up they fly at my face in their last spurts... Anyway, it's a horror show.

That's how I am now, but back when I was a kid, I loved summer the most. Why? Because of summer vacation. I didn't have to go to school, and I could play every day. I could start gaming right in the morning, and they even started to sell shaved ice. Back when I was a kid, the feeling of invincibility I got during the summer was amazing and strange. And it always came as a set with realizing I didn't get my summer homework or free research done.

Eventually, I became an adult, and the season I had liked the most became the season I liked the least. Summer vacation melted away, and the cicadas were having their last spurt of life on my veranda.

But that's so weird, isn't it? As far as I could find online, cicadas can only fly up to around ten meters high, and I live more than ten meters off the ground. I'm in a condo. Even then, I get cicadas on my veranda. Just how and why do they fly all this way...? Oh cicadas, just so you know, even if you come up here there won't be any females waiting for you.

But still, I'm really impressed that I could go out to play even in this kind of heat as a kid. Running around under a blazing sky... I can't even imagine that now. If not for work, I'd want to stay inside my house all day in the cool. Even going to the nearby convenience store to get some ice cream on the occasion I

want one is tough. Staying outside would be impossible. Recently, I've even started thinking going out to buy ice cream is too much trouble, so I bought a shaved ice machine.

But somehow I didn't think the heat was a problem at all as a kid, and I went outside anyway. I even ran around out there. If I were to try that now I'd definitely lose all motivation to keep going after five minutes. Running around under a blazing sky is just torture now. I remember thinking that swimming in a pool was really fun, but now I don't really get it. I just end up thinking, *Why not just take a bath?*

Now that I'm thinking about it, I realize that I've changed a lot, but I'm still not going to return to my childhood and start running around in the summer. I'm a person who wants to take it easy at home.

Still, there are times where I have to go outside. When I do, I often stop by a family restaurant on the way back. You can probably already guess, but I'm after the drink bar. I just pick the cheapest thing and get access to the drink bar as a combo. Guzzling drinks while basking in the cool is one of the few pleasures I have in the summer.

If you ever see a guy going back and forth between his seat and the drink bar for over an hour, that might be me. Of course, there's a good possibility that it'd be someone completely different and unrelated as well, so don't just call out to that person, please.

Anyway, a lot of my money goes to drinks in the summer since if I ever get thirsty while I'm walking somewhere and there just happens to be a vending machine in the right spot... Well, you know the rest. Their placement is so tempting, since I always think, *I'm thirsty, but if there's no vending machine nearby I guess I'll just deal with it.* But as soon as I think that, there's a vending machine right there. It's like they meant for this to happen. I have no doubt that the vending machines have legs or something, and they follow after me. And I, the easy mark, just keep throwing money at them. Even if I know there's a convenience store nearby selling the same drink for 100 yen, I'll still end up paying 130 yen for it at a vending machine. Then I'll suffer buyer's remorse before doing the exact same thing the next day.

And it’s all summer’s fault.

Damn you, cicadas! Even as I’m writing this, there are cicadas outside my window. They’re crying out as they cling to my window screen. If I shake the screen they go away, but they always return after a while. And tomorrow they’ll turn into near corpses. Seriously, what do they even want...?

By the way, apparently cicadas are delicious. These days cheapo gourmet adventures are a popular genre in the light novel world, and not only online either. But even then, I haven’t seen a protagonist eat a cicada. Maybe if I actually try one and start writing, I could create an unprecedented cicada gourmet series...?

No, of course that’s impossible. It’s not like I don’t have a very slight urge to take one of the cicadas crying outside right now and boil it for a taste test, but when I take a good look, cicadas just don’t look appetizing at all.

And to be honest, I don’t think that series would be popular. There’s a limit to how far you should go for a hook. And I don’t think I can cross that line just yet.

Anyway, I’ll stop writing for now. I think I’m going to go catch some cicadas.

All right then. See you next volume.

-Firehead

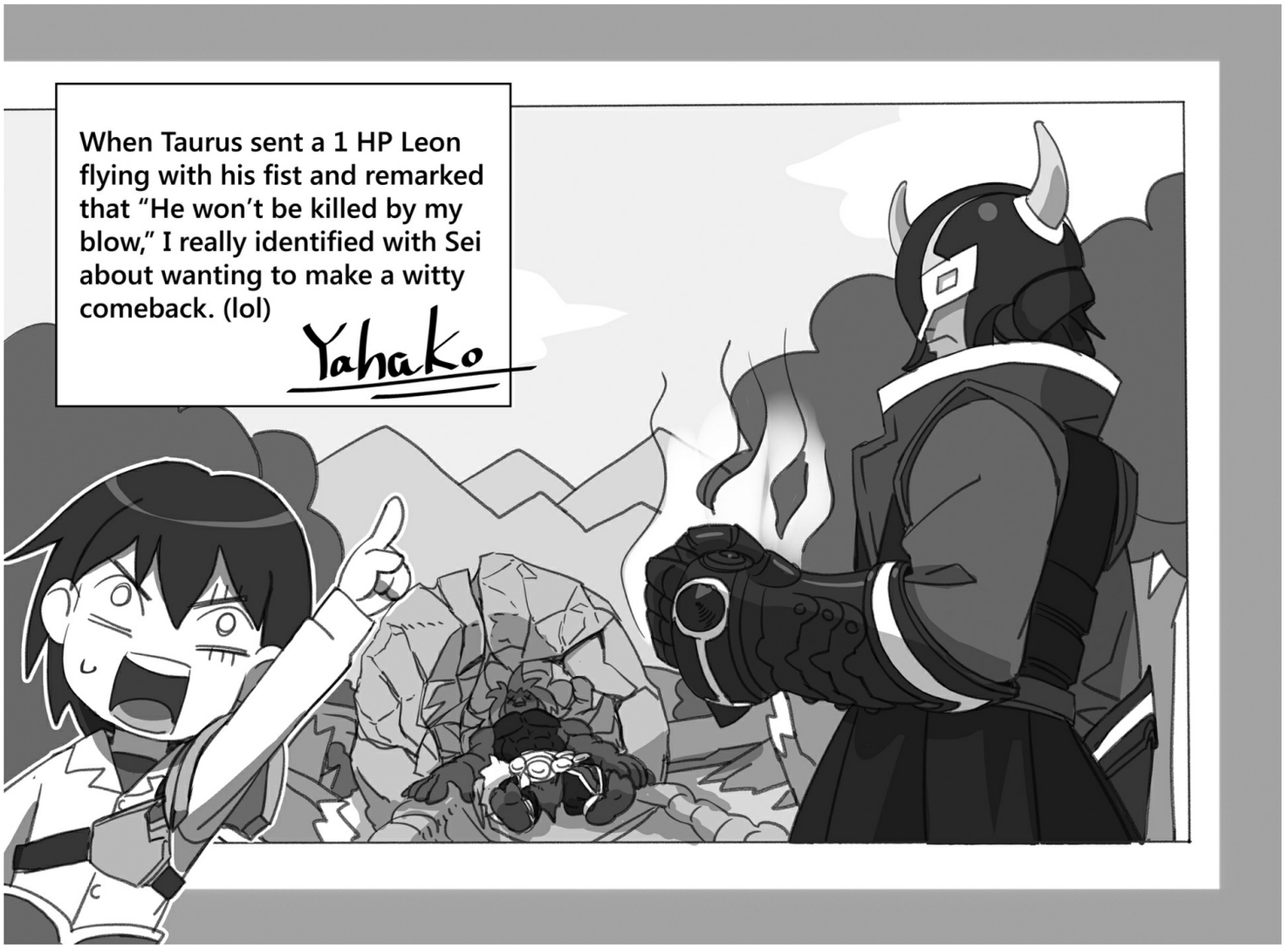

When Taurus sent a 1 HP Leon flying with his fist and remarked that "He won't be killed by my blow," I really identified with Sei about wanting to make a witty comeback. (lol)
Yahako

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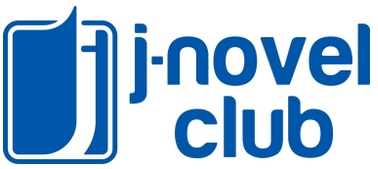
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A Wild Last Boss Appeared! Volume 5

by Firehead

Translated by Kevin Chen

Edited by Kathleen Townsend

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Earth Star Entertainment

This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2021


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