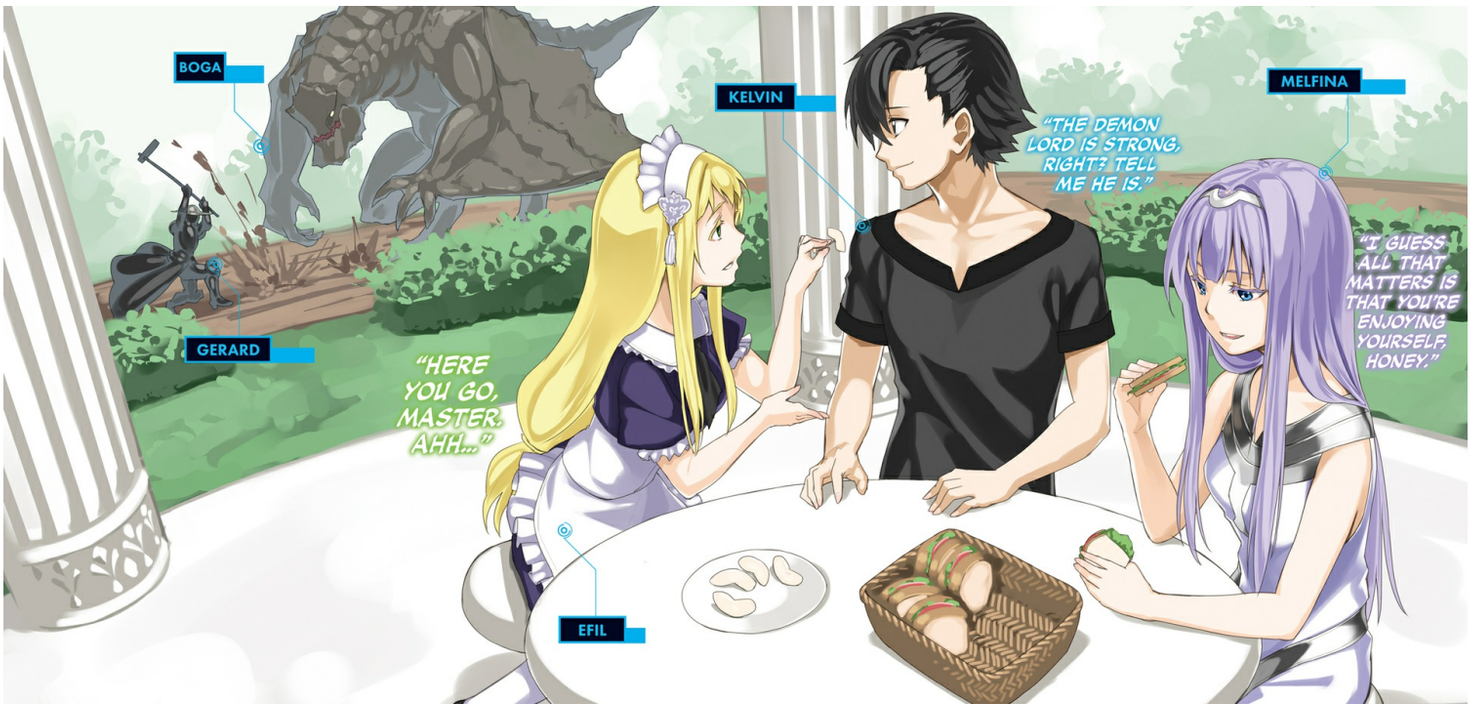

5
BLACK SUMMONER
THE DEMON LORD RISES
AUTHOR: DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY: KUROGIN (DIGS)


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BOGA
GERARD
KELVIN
EFIL
MELFINA
"HERE YOU GO, MASTER. AHH..."
"THE DEMON LORD IS STRONG, RIGHT? TELL ME HE IS."
"I GUESS ALL THAT MATTERS IS THAT YOU'RE ENJOYING YOURSELF, HONEY."


AZGRAD
"BLACK DRAGON, LET'S GO NUTS!"
"YOU'RE AN IDIOT. BUT WELL... I DON'T DISLIKE THAT PART OF YOU!"
DAHAK



Black Summoner

Characters

Outline as of the Previous Volume

Transmigrator from Japan, battle junkie, and Summoner. Kelvin, along with the staunch companions he experienced countless battles with, was finally promoted to the level of Rank S adventurer. He got to know Sylvia, another Rank S adventurer, through an exhibition match they had as part of the celebration for his own promotion. Shortly after that, the Warrior Nation of Trycen, which had been making suspicious movements for quite some time, finally declared war on the entire Eastern Continent. As the enemy launched their invasion, Kelvin and his party found themselves tasked with delaying the Dragon Knight Order as it closed in on Parth!

Kelvin
A Summoner who obtained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life. Constantly seeking battles with mighty foes. Alias: "Grim Reaper"

Kelvin's Companions



Efil
A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera
A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of a demon lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Melfina
Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Rion
A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho
The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Gerard
The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex
Kelvin's shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Ellie
A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.

Ruka
An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Every day's a blast!

Parth, the City of Peace

A city located right in between the four great powers of the Eastern Continent. Founded as a symbol of hope for longlasting peace.

Rio
Guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer's Guild.
Quite the schemer. Alias: "Analyzer."

Ange
A popular receptionist at the guild. May have feelings for Kelvin. Would like more screentime.

Toraj, the Country of Water

Faces the Sea of Dragons. Has very advanced shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Rooted in Japanese culture with staples like rice and tatami.



Tsubaki Fujiwara
Queen of Toraj. Has taken a liking to Kelvin and his companions. Constantly tries to solicit their services.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette
Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya
A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Heading for the Western Continent.



Shiga Setsuna
A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana
A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi
A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

Gaun, the Country of Beastkin

The home of the beastkin, who possess superior physical prowess. Its people believe that strength is all. Crowns the strongest person in the country as king.

Leonhart Gaun
The Beast King of Gaun. Served as proctor for Kelvin's Rank S promotion exam.

The Military Kingdom of Trycen

A militaristic country that touts human supremacy. Rumored to be kidnapping the citizens of other countries as slaves and up to similarly suspicious endeavors.

Zel Trycen
King of Trycen. Demon Lord suspect. Incited his citizens to violence and declared war on the rest of the Eastern Continent.

Azgrad Trycen
Crown Prince of Trycen. General of the Dragon Knight Order. A master of dragon-riding.



Shutola Trycen
Trycen's one and only princess. General of the Black Ops. Anxious about the future of the country.

Tristan Faaze
General of the Mixed Monster Order. Plotted Clive's downfall to usurp control of the Magic Knight Order. Seems to have ulterior motives.

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ILLUSTRATION: KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: The Dragon Knight Order

The Grand Scarlet Canyon was located to the east of Parth, its length serving as part of the border between the city-state and Trycen. Trycen had owned the area long ago but had ceded it to contribute to the territory of the City of Peace upon its founding.

The ravine that wound through the canyon, roughly fifty meters wide and flanked on both sides by precarious scarlet cliffs that soared high into the sky, was the shortest and most direct route connecting Trycen and Parth. Technically, the cliffs weren't entirely impassable, but the incline was so steep that they were almost perpendicular to the ground, and their highest points reached up into the clouds. Even if one had the power of flight, making it over such summits would be a feat in and of itself.

Furthermore, the summits were dotted by nests of Rank C bird-like monsters who were sensitive to other life forms. As such, it was far safer for large groups—armies, for example—to use the ravine instead.

It's such an obvious place to spring an ambush that I'm sure the Trycenians will be fully on guard against one.

"And...we've arrived. What time is it now, Efil?"

We had forged our way through violently blowing clouds of sand to reach the Trycenian end of the canyon. We had thought the bone-dry path at the bottom of the ravine bad enough until we saw that it opened into a wide, expansive desert.

If all of Trycen's land is like this, I can see why they'd be so desperate for food. Then again, they just declared war on Toraj, who they were supposed to be buying food from. How do their people, especially the merchants, feel about this war?

Efil drew a pocket watch from Clotho's Storage. "It's just after eleven o'clock in the morning, Master. Our travel time was as we predicted."

Ah, it's almost time for lunch.

::I’m sorry for the trouble, my king, but could you Summon me now, please?:: Gerard prompted me from within my magic pool.

The knight wasn’t slow by any measure of the word, but as his Agility stat was significantly lower than the rest of ours, I had been keeping him Unsummoned until we reached our destination.

“Right. I’ll do it now,” I replied, obliging straight away.

His familiar armored form soon emerged from the magical circle.

“It seems to be taking all I’ve got just to keep up with the rest of you these days. Is it because of my age? Maybe I should acquire the Riding skill and ask Alex to let me sit on his back.”

“*Arf.*”

“You hate the idea *that* much?! Even I would sulk, you know!”

Has Gerard forgotten how much Alex leaps all over the place? It’d be worse than a rodeo, I’m sure.

“Alex dives into the shadows quite a bit anyway,” Rion commented. “Do you know how to ride a horse? Is that part of being a knight?”

“I may not have the Riding skill, but I can still ride better than most! Want me to teach you someday?”

“Really?! It’s a promise! Pinky swear!”

“Mm, pinky swear.”

I’m really loving this heartwarming scene, but we need to get to work if we don’t want lunch to be delayed.

“All right, I’m going to assign everybody their roles now. Efil, you get started on lunch. Do you have all the tools you need?”

“Yes, Master. In fact, I have the entire set of tools you made for me stashed in Clo-chan’s Storage. Does anyone have any requests?”

“Mm! Pork cutlet bowl for me!”

“That’s so heavy, Gramps. Omelets for me please, Efil-nee!”

“I don’t mind what it is as long as it’s light.”

“I’m also fine with anything, as long as there’s a lot of it.”

“*Arf!*” (Meat!) “Guess I’ll have a pork cutlet bowl like Gerard.”

“All noted. Clo-chan, you’re fine with anything, right?”

Normally, being on the road would require all party members to agree on a single dish. Clearly, we had been spoiled by how readily Efil always cooked whatever we asked for.

“Sera, Rion, Gerard, Clotho, and Alex, please spread out and exterminate all the monsters in the vicinity. Oh, but leave the ones near the summit alone.”

“Why?” Sera asked, looking puzzled.

“On the off chance that Trycen actually tries to cross that way, the monsters up there will serve to slow them down and warn us of their presence. Your detection skills will be able to pick up any commotion that breaks out nearby, right?”

“Considering the level of the monsters in this area, it’d be a cinch.”

“And those monsters rarely leave their territories, which means as long as we don’t go up to bother them, they won’t come down to harass us. So we can just ignore them; it’s fine. Let’s all meet back here in an hour, all right?”

“What should I do, honey?” Melfina asked, raising her hand slightly. She was the only person to whom I had not assigned a task.

“You’ll be with me.”

“Oh, my! I’ll be ‘with’ you? Here?!”

Bonk.

Seeing how red Melfina’s face had turned, I dropped a hand chop onto her head before her thoughts ran away even more.

“We’ll be making a wall.”

◇ ◇ ◇

An hour later, Rion and the rest returned, having completed their respective

tasks. Mel and I had also reached a good stopping point.

There's an absolutely mouthwatering fragrance in the air, so let's wrap things up quick.

"Welcome back, everyone. Looks like Efil's just about done. Let's head over."

The first thing that each of my friends did was stare at my masterpiece.

"Um, Kel-nii, I remember you saying 'wall,' but..."

"Well, I, uh, did my best, and this is just how it turned out."

A massive black fortress—composed of a keep and walls—now sealed off the entrance to the Grand Scarlet Canyon. I had made everything using a new Rank S Green Magic spell that I'd recently developed under Melfina's instruction: Obsidian Fortress. It gave all the structures I built a pure black exterior and the durability of my Obsidian Edge swords.

My aim had originally been only to make stronger walls, but my control over magic had increased significantly thanks to all the special training I had done while mastering Death Scythe Boreas. This was just a happy, if unexpected, side effect.

"This is practically a castle. What's more, it's..." *BOOM!* "...stronger than the wall you erected at the Village of Elves."

"Can you not immediately try to destroy it, Sera? Please?"

My heart had skipped a beat when I saw Sera clenching her fist, but the wall appeared undamaged.

Thank goodness for Rank S spells. Although I suppose it's partly also because she wasn't serious.

"A spell that focuses strictly on, say, defense, is much easier to control, honey. You mastered that scythe move of yours—which is a bucking horse compared to this—so it makes sense for the end result to be so impressive."

"Is that how it works? Hm, never mind a One Night Castle, this is practically a One Hour Castle. Also, I can freely adjust the interior to customize things and—"

Growl.

Ugh, my stomach's just reminded me how taxed both my mind and magic are. I've got to dig into Efil's pork cutlet bowl ASAP!

We agreed to continue talking over lunch and headed for the table where Efil had set everything up. I'd already divided up the interior of the castle to create separate rooms for everyone, so we would be eating indoors next time. I was currently controlling the wind so that it wouldn't bother us, but the sandstorm was still blowing quite violently around us.

"After we eat, I'll start working on the golems."

"The golems again, Master?"

"Mh-hm, to bolster our forces when we clash with Trycen. At the moment, my stock of golems is only at fifty-three. Aside from the ones on guard at home, the rest are sleeping in Storage. The problem is, less than half of them are outfitted with Gatling guns. I could create entirely new ones that are already kitted out, but that would be a waste of mana."

The stronger the golem, the more MP it cost to create. It was far more economical to create them with a base design and then arm them with mass-produced equipment. As we were currently facing a time crunch, it seemed wise to go with the option that allowed me to save MP. I, for one, did not want to over-rely on downing recovery potions and end up vomiting in front of my companions. From my understanding of the required spell, I could create plenty of additional copies of this type of golem before hitting the limit. Numbers were a form of strength, and I wanted as much backup as I could get.

"I'll help you like I always do," Sera declared. "I raised my Black Magic to Rank S the other day, so I can channel more spirits to possess the golems now!"

"Uh...where will the spirits be coming from? The battle ghosts who're possessing One, Two, Three, and Four were native to that dungeon in Toraj, right?"

"Yep! I'll run to Toraj and come right back!"

"Hold it *right there*! We still have tons of other things that need doing around here, so can we please get those done first? Like...thinking of designs for new equipment!"

It’s true that there’s no time like the present, but Sera was liable to jet off the moment an idea came to mind.

“Oh, right, do you know when Sabato-san and his party are joining us, Kel-nii? Did you make sure to give them proper instructions?”

“I asked Ellie to pass on a message. You know how reliable she is; there’s no need to worry. And since they’re Rank A, I imagine they can get here whenever they feel like it.”

“Really? I’m not too familiar with what Rank A adventurers can do.”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll show up just as we forget about them or something. Anyway, about everyone’s jobs for the afternoon...”

It was not until five days later that Sabato and his companions finally reached the Grand Scarlet Canyon.

◇◇◇

It was the fifth day after Sabato and his party had set out from Parth. If Rio’s information was correct, the Dragon Knight Order could be arriving at any time.

After the Rank A adventurers had frozen in astonishment upon reading Kelvin’s letter, Goma had returned to her senses first and slapped the rest of her companions awake, roaring at them to get their things in order.

An important part of their preparations involved procuring rations, which usually meant dried meat and hardtack. Considering the normal traveling speed of their party, it was going to take them a week to reach the canyon. That was faster than a horse could run, but they still feared that they wouldn’t arrive before the Dragon Knight Order did.

“Dammit, guess we have no choice but to lighten our loads and push ourselves to go faster.”

Despite only carrying their rations, food for three meals a day for several people over several days still added up to quite a lot of weight. Therefore, Sabato instead chose to bring food for a fewer number of days and adopt a more grueling pace so as to arrive earlier.

Things would have been much simpler if their group had possessed a magic

item or a storage skill, but unfortunately, they had neither. Beastkin strongly believed in relying on their own bodies when it came to fighting, which led to a strong preference for incorporating relevant training into every part of their lives.

Sabato and his companions were no exception. As part of their training, they traveled while carrying much more luggage than they needed in lieu of stone weights. It had never even occurred to them to procure items or skills to help with storage or carrying. In fact, they didn't *want* to lighten their loads if they could help it.

As soon as Sabato and his party had finished scrambling to retrieve the equipment they'd left at various vendors for maintenance, and had restocked the bare minimum number of potions and basic necessities, they struck out. One thing they had going for them was that they were completely over-leveled for the monsters in the area and consequently did not need to waste time on battle along the way.

"Today is the fifth day," Sabato murmured, looking up at the sky. "At this rate, we should arrive before noon."

"I'm so tired! Count me out of any more forced marches in the future!" Guin complained.

"We never did manage to catch up with Kelvin-san, despite how fast we were going," Goma noted.

"And physical prowess is supposed to be *our* forte as beastkin!" Akgas chuckled.

When the giant cleft of the Grand Scarlet Canyon had come into view, Sabato and his party had stopped for a breather. They gathered burnable leaves and branches to start a fire in order to boil some water and grab an early lunch, consuming the last of their rations. Now that they were completely free of luggage, they planned on making the last leg of the journey in one go.

Guin gnawed on his food. "I'm pretty sick of dried meat and hardtack."

"Don't be spoiled. The real hard part's coming *after* we arrive at the canyon. If you don't want this to be your last meal, make sure you get your head in the

right place, Guin.”

“Ugh, that’s pretty harsh, Akgas-san.”

“Akgas is right,” Sabato agreed. “Kelvin-dono and his group probably have it even worse. The fact that they chose the Grand Scarlet Canyon as the battlefield means they plan on incorporating the terrain into their strategy. They must be scrambling around making preparations even as we speak.”

“Fair point. All right, everyone, we’ll be heading on as soon as you’re done. Let’s hurry.”

“You eat too fast, Goma-sama!” Guin protested weakly.

Once the group of six finished their meal, they took off again, running straight into the ravine overshadowed by towering cliffs. Nearly two hours had passed, but for some reason, they had yet to encounter a single stone golem—a Rank C monster that would often appear on this road.

“Could that mean Kelvin and his group are close?” Sabato wondered.

“They might have just passed through,” Goma agreed from her position at the front. At that moment, the ground erupted a slight distance ahead of her. “Well, speak of the devil!”

Masses of dirt and stone rose several meters high, taking on the form of four monsters that shared a humanoid appearance, albeit a slightly deformed one.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! What perfect timing! I was just starting to get bored!” Sabato whooped before pumping his legs even harder to rush past Goma, charging straight at the stone golems.

“Hold on! Don’t dive in by yourself!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you! You always charge ahead!”

In spite of their squabbling, the two were running in perfect sync. The stone golems were lumbering quickly towards them, and neither side was showing any sign of slowing down.

Akgas sighed. “Will those two ever grow up?”

“You seem kind of happy about it, actually,” Guin noted.

“You’re imagining things. It’s about time they—HEADS UP! INCOMING!”

A moment after Akgas’s shout, something came into view, approaching at an incredible velocity. From his position, Sabato could only make out two shadows—one big, one small—seemingly bouncing off the ground and walls of the ravine in zig-zagging trajectories, speeding towards them so quickly that his eyes couldn’t make out any details.

Within moments, the two silhouettes passed the group of golems. The monsters looked around in confusion, but instead of finding an opponent, they saw each other falling into pieces along evenly sliced lines that seemed to have been carved with a razor-sharp blade. Their consciousnesses faded away before they could even comprehend what had just transpired.

They reduced the stone golems to junk in a split second! Sabato thought, his amazement putting him even more on edge.

Stone golems were not particularly strong monsters. Forget Sabato and his group; even normal knights had more than a fair chance of beating one in single combat. However, these were, at the end of the day, three-meter-tall giants of stone. And yet these two mysterious entities had diced up four such creatures *in passing*. Even with Sabato’s entire group working together, they could not have pulled off such a feat.

“They’re coming, Goma!”

“No need to tell me!”

The two black streaks were almost on top of them. The argumentative pair from moments before had vanished, replaced by two warriors with their senses fully trained and their eyes staring dead ahead with intense focus.

The shadowy figures stopped abruptly in front of them.

“Hi! I’ve come to pick you up, Sabato-san!”

And one of them flashed one of the brightest smiles ever.

“Uh...you’re Rion-san, right?” Goma managed as the rest of her party remained frozen from the emotional whiplash of the tense atmosphere suddenly melting away.

“Oh my gosh, you remembered! Thank you! Just call me Rion. I couldn’t sit and wait when I saw your group arriving; I just *had* to come get you!”



Recognition dawned on Guin's face. "I *thought* I knew you from somewhere! I saw you during the promotion ceremony!"

"Of course you saw her," Goma snapped exasperatedly. "Rion-sa—Rion is Kelvin-san's little sister and party member."

"L-Little sister?" Guin stared closely at the girl, who finished sheathing the two black swords she was holding and returned his gaze with a cheerful smile.

Like brother, like sister. Both of them are absolute monsters. But she's cute, so it's all good! he thought, pumping a fist and crying "yes!" internally.

"*Arf, arf.*"

"Uh, what's with the gigantic wolf, by the way?"

"This is Alex, my best friend. He's a bit big, but he's a really good boy! I hope that everyone gets along with him!" Rion replied, rubbing the wolf's neck furiously. The way she had to stand on tiptoe to reach high enough only added to her cuteness.

The wolf closed his eyes in enjoyment, allowing her to do as she pleased. Goma found a part of herself secretly wanting to pet him as well.

"So, you coming out to meet us means that you and Kelvin arrived earlier?" Sabato asked.

"Mh-hm! We got here five days ago!"

"Huh?" he and Goma replied in a falsetto in perfect unison.

"Five days ago... That's the day we were summoned to the guild!"

"Ah, well, we were in a bit of a hurry. We arrived just before lunchtime and have been making preparations ever since!"

"Before lunch. A distance that took us five days...you finished in several hours?"

The entire party was flabbergasted. The fastest speed they were capable of—which had even required them to set aside their carrying creed—turned out to be a mere joke compared to the goal they were aiming for. They had come to help out with defending the border in hopes of learning something and

improving themselves, but now they wondered whether they were even qualified to observe.

Rion and Alex exchanged puzzled looks, unable to understand the awkward silence that had fallen.

“Rion-chan and Kelvin-san are outliers!” Guin suddenly blurted out. “And they’re related, so it makes sense that she’s as strong and fast as he is!”

Goma cocked her head. “I’m not sure how much sense that makes—”

“It’s best not to think too deeply about this sorta thing!” Guin insisted. He seemed a bit brighter than he usually was, likely in an effort to cheer up his companions.

“I...suppose you’re right,” Sabato said slowly. “I’m the one who’s aiming to become Rank S one day, and here I am being pathetic. I wouldn’t be able to face my old man like this. Okay, you guys, let’s make a bang in this coming fight; one big enough to give Kelvin a shock!”

Akgas burst into laughter. “Looks like you’ve taken another step towards maturity, Sabato-sama!”

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to play along every once in a while,” Goma conceded.

Thanks to Guin’s efforts, the group’s mood improved. Through this shared experience, the bonds between the members of their party were strengthened once again.

Did Rion-chan see how gallant I am?

All right, maybe there was no strengthening of bonds after all.

::I feel like this would be a bad time to mention that we’re the weakest members of Kel-nii’s party. Make sure you keep quiet, all right, Alex? Shh!:: ::*Arf!*:: (Okay.) Unbeknownst to the beastkin, Rion had also become a little more mature.

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After Rion and Alex met up with Sabato and his party, they all walked back together. According to Rion, the Trycenians were expected to arrive around

dusk the next day.

“We’re almost done with our preparations, so there’s no need to rush. Oh, wait, it’s almost time for lunch! Let’s actually walk just a bit faster!”

“If we’re going to hurry, we might as well run. We stopped to eat and rest not that long ago.”

“Oh, really? Then is this all right?”

With a slightly apologetic look on her face, the girl started running at a speed that the beastkin could barely manage to keep up with. She turned back to check on them every once in a while, as if trying to match their pace. The wolf brought up the rear.

Eventually, Rion seemed to get a handle on the appropriate speed for her companions and had fallen back to run beside Sabato and the rest.

“Sabato-san, you mentioned eating earlier. Does that mean you already finished your lunch?”

“Yep. We were planning to make that our last break and then run the rest of the way to reach you.”

“I see. Then I guess we won’t need to prepare extra portions for you?”

“We’re good, thanks,” Goma confirmed.

Guin, however, mumbled under his breath, “Why do I feel like we’ll seriously be missing out?”

After a bit more small talk, the desert expanse of Trycen’s border finally came into view, signaling the end of the path through the canyon. Kelvin was nowhere to be seen.

“Rion-dono, where is Kelvin-dono?” Akgas asked.

“Um, how do I explain this? Oh, everyone, stop here, please!” Rion suddenly spread out her hands as if to block the way.

The beastkin looked mystified but did as they were told. They were currently several hundred meters from the edge of the desert, and the only thing in view was the soaring range of cliffs that flanked the path. Nothing else seemed out of

place. Wondering if Kelvin was lying in wait somewhere, the party examined their surroundings closely. However, they could find no sign of human presence anywhere.

Rion looked slightly upwards, cupped her hands around her mouth, and shouted, “Mel-nee! We’re back!” like a mountain climber. But the only thing in the direction she had shouted was the clear, blue sky framed by scarlet rock.

“Rion, what—”

“Welcome back, Rion,” said a crystal clear voice, seemingly coming from nowhere.

A distortion appeared in the air at roughly the height of Parth’s clock tower. A teenage girl in blue attire emerged and nonchalantly leaped down, landing before Rion so gracefully that not even a particle of dust was disturbed. Melfina—for that was who it was—smiled in a welcome manner as blue feathers went flying.

::Mel-nee! Your wings! Your wings are appearing!:: ::Oh, whoops!:: In a fluster, Melfina quickly dispelled the pair of wings that were on the verge of materializing. Thankfully, her unexpected appearance had astonished the beastkin too much for them to notice. Or rather, they simply thought it to be one of the effects of the magic they were witnessing.

::They appear so easily when I let my guard down. It’s hard to maintain the spell.:: ::That was too close for comfort. You’ve got to be more careful, Mel-nee!:: ::Yes, ma’am.:: Rion’s warning left Melfina’s face slightly flushed. Since the exchange had taken place through the Network, however, Sabato and the rest were none the wiser.

“Is that a new outfit? Where’d you get it?”

“Where do you think? Efil made it for me, of course!”

“Awww, it looks so cute!”

Adding to the surreal feeling of the scene, the two girls promptly began talking about clothes, of all things.

“Kelvin-san has even *more* hidden aces?!” Guin muttered in marvel.

Catching on to what he meant, Goma gave him a quick rap on the head. “You shush. Um, Rion, is this woman also part of Kelvin-san’s party?”

Melfina lowered her head in greeting. “Yes, I am. You are Sabato-san and his party members, I presume? We’ve been awaiting your arrival. Please come in.”

“Come...in?” Sabato echoed in confusion. “Where?”

“Here,” Melfina replied, waving a hand behind her.

The distortion from earlier suddenly reappeared, this time at a much greater scale than before. Soon enough, it had spread to fit the width of the entire path and opened up like a mouth, revealing a startling sight within.

“Th-This is...”

“What the hell just—?!”

“Oh, phew, looks like being surprised by this sort of thing *is* normal. I’m glad I’m not the only one,” Rion giggled.

The beastkin were speechless as they stared up at the pitch-black fortress that had appeared out of thin air. Now that whatever had been blocking their perception of it had been dispelled, they could feel Kelvin’s presence within.

“You guys finished this in five days?!” Goma asked incredulously.

“Oh, no, this was done in an hour.”

Melfina’s correction left the beastkin with their jaws on the floor yet again. This sight of them looking so stupefied was quickly becoming the norm.

“Mel-nee, you’ve got to be more tactful—”

“No, it’s fine,” Sabato said, throwing a hand up. “There’s no need to soften things for us. I grew up in close proximity to a Rank S adventurer myself. I’m used to being surprised. This sort of thing only fires me up more! The greater my goal, the more it’s worth reaching!”

“Sabato-sama!” Guin exclaimed, impressed.

“That said, let’s move! There’s no point in standing around out here, so let’s get to where Kelvin is!”

Melfina nodded gracefully. “I shall lead the way. Follow me.”

“Please and thank you!”

As Melfina walked off, Sabato gave chase, followed by Akgas and Guin. The daily tempering from Goma’s fists seemed to be paying off. Rion was quite impressed by the beastkin’s mental resilience.

Even so, she could not help noting, ::It looks like he’s not aware of it himself, but Sabato-san’s moving the same side hands and legs while he walks.:: ::*Arf, arf.*:: (Leave the poor guy alone.) ::I know, I know... Wait, huh?:: Rion paused her conversation with Alex when she noticed that Goma was still standing outside. So were the remaining two beastkin whose names she did not yet know.

“Goma-san, everyone’s going ahead. Is something the matter?”

Goma started. “Oh, right, sorry. Let’s go.”

She was doing a good job of hiding it, but Goma herself had been even more shaken than the others. A gigantic fortress supposedly being built in a single hour already stretched the limits of her disbelief. The massive magic spell that enveloped the structure and so perfectly concealed it from visual and magical detection...that was something else entirely.

Judging from the conversation, it seems that girl Mel cast the spell. And clearly magic is not the only thing she’s good at, seeing as she managed to jump down from such a height without taking damage. Then there are Rion and Alex, who annihilated a group of stone golems in literally a split second. Are all members of Kelvin’s party this powerful? That would mean they are all *on the level of Rank S.*

Goma’s thoughts whirled furiously through her mind as she walked.

◇ ◇ ◇

The inside of the fortress was surprisingly well decorated. The paintings and ornaments on display weren’t quite on the level of something found in a royal palace but still looked like they would have fetched a pretty penny. The floor was covered by red carpeting, and knights in black armor patrolled the halls. Each of them was carrying an unfamiliar-looking weapon in their left hand that Sabato and his companions failed to recognize, despite having seen the basis for

it in the Shrine of the Puppets.

“Everything hanging here is fake. Just saying. They’re all created with the same spell that Kel-nii used to build the place.”

“Anything goes, huh?” Guin replied.

“Some of them might even be booby-trapped, so it’s probably best not to touch anything carelessly. Oh, Efil-nee!” Rion rushed forward in a small run and dove into Efil’s chest. “I’m back!”

“Welcome back, Rion-sama. Sabato-sama and company, welcome. How would you like to wash away the fatigue from your travels in a bath? It’s already drawn and readied for you right through here. Master is occupied at the moment and will be with you later.”

“A...bath? This place has everything! Are we really in the Grand Scarlet Canyon right now?”

“Why sweat the small details, Goma? Just be thankful and enjoy it!”

“Oooh, I’d love a bath too!” Rion exclaimed. “I’ll wait till Kel-nii gets back so we can take one together!”

“Huh?!” The beastkin were even more confused than they had been before. Guin’s eyes had become bloodshot.

Rion, in turn, looked taken aback by their reactions. “What’s wrong?”

“Um...” Goma said gingerly. “Aren’t you and Kelvin-san siblings?”

“Mhm, we sure are!”

“Ummm... Is it not a bit unusual to be entering the bath with him at this age?”

Guin flared up. “It is! It’s strange! It’s outrageous! I firmly oppose it!”

“What are you saying?” Rion asked, looking entirely mystified. “It’s normal for siblings to take baths together. And I love Kel-nii, so what’s the problem?”

Guin’s vehement protest fell on deaf ears. Having been deeply influenced by a certain subset of manga and light novels from a young age, Rion was entirely convinced that this was how brothers and sisters ought to act. Due to her persistent efforts, Kelvin had also started to think the same as of late. And there

was no one around willing to tell them otherwise.

Taking baths together? Sabato and Goma thought as they exchanged looks.

Yeah, so *not happening...*

Nope, that's not happening...

The two of them could not find it within themselves to agree with Rion's assertion.

"Uh, whatever. I'm gonna hit the baths, then!" Sabato said loudly.

"I shall join you, Sabato-sama. Guin, you're coming too."

"What?! No, I refuse to accept it! And I still want to stare at the cute maid a while lon— Don't pull my collar! Noooo, the cute maid!"

Guin was being dragged along by the back of his neck, his legs kicking in protest the whole way. It was all in vain, though, as his strength was nowhere near enough to break Akgas's grip.

"How about you, Goma-san?" Rion asked politely. "We have another one for girls. Want me to take you?"

"I would appreciate that; thank you."

◇ ◇ ◇

"Master, it is time," Efil announced after knocking on the door of the temporary workshop where Sera and I were enthusiastically creating our golems. If Efil had come to call for me, it could only mean one thing: lunch.

It feels like a split second ago I was watching the sun rise. Time sure flies when I'm having fun.

"All right, we'll be there soon! We're almost done with this one!"

And then we'll have reached our target number. Phew, I'm glad we managed to finish in time. Installing Gatling guns on this many golems was damn tiring.

"What's on the menu today, Efil?"

"Per Rion-sama's request, I have made burger patties using the white wolf meat in Clo-chan's Storage."

Since Sera and I had been busy in the workshop, we had told Efil to make us whatever Rion was eating.

Seems like Rion's still got the taste buds of a child. Then again, it's not like I dislike burgers. In fact, I love them. I love everything that Efil cooks.

"Additionally, Sabato-sama and his party have just arrived. They are currently using the baths."

"Oh, finally? They sure took their time."

"They seem to have eaten already. Will you be meeting them after lunch?"

"Hmm... All right, when they leave the baths, please show them to the drawing room so they can rest up a bit. They might be tired from the journey and all."

"Understood, Master."

We called it the drawing room, but it was filled with only simple sofas and fake ornaments.

I'm sure someone must have given them a heads-up, but let's disable the traps in the room just in case. And in the meantime, I'll be taking my time and enjoying that wolfburger.

Sera and I hurriedly finished up our work, then headed straight for the room we were using as a dining hall.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Ha! Ha! Ha! You never cease to amaze me, Kelvin! That bath was incredible! I haven't felt so refreshed in a long time!"

The first thing that Sabato did upon seeing me was wax eloquent about the bath. Although he had clearly taken a liking to it, whenever I myself took a dip, I couldn't help but remember the one that we had back at home. Comparing the two was like comparing a bathtub in an average house to an outdoor bath at a ryokan with decades of history.

Oh, right, even just having a bath is a luxury in this world. Ever since I installed one, I've been slowly forgetting that.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Um, Kelvin-san, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?” *This guy’s name is Guin, right? As I remember, he’s the youngest in Sabato’s group.*

“Is it true that you take baths with Rion-chan?!”

“What?”

“This is the one thing that I just *have* to confi—*pppffft*!” Goma’s straight right sent Guin’s face into the wall of the room.

Every time I see her in action, I’m impressed. The way she slides into it is just so clean and sharp.

“I’m sorry about that, Kelvin-san. Please ignore him.”

“Okay...” *What exactly did Guin want to confirm anyway? It’s normal for siblings to take baths together, so why bring it up?*

“Master, it is about time.”

“Ah, yes. Sorry to jump right in even though you just got here, but let’s go over the battle strategy.”

I manipulated Obsidian Fortress to create a small-scale model of our fortress and the surrounding terrain right there in the middle of the room. We could normally do all of this planning within the Network if we were by ourselves, but now that Sabato and his group were here, we needed to make sure they were on the same page.

“First, the Dragon Knight Order’s estimated arrival is tomorrow around dusk. If they maintain their current speed, they’ll be here around four or five in the afternoon.”

I generated several pawns that looked like dragons on the desert side of the model.

Akgas asked, “We heard Rion-dono mentioning the same when she escorted us here, but how can you be so sure?”

“Efil here is a master with the bow and has exceptionally sharp eyes.”

In fact, Efil had already provided visual confirmation of the enemy force. When I'd heard her report, I had used Skill Eater to borrow her Farsight to observe the forms flying over and running across the expansive desert myself.

"Sharp eyes? Don't tell me she can *see* them from here?!"

"I can indeed, Goma-sama."

"I'd heard that elves had good eyes, but it's my first time meeting someone with such incredible vision."

Sabato rushed to the window and squinted hard, only to announce, "Nope, I can't see a thing! All I see is desert!"

I mean, it isn't something you can do with willpower alone. "So, then... According to Efil's report, there are roughly three thousand dragons approaching."

"Th-Three thousand?!"

"The general breakdown is roughly twenty-five hundred subdragons and whelps, and about five hundred adult dragons," Efil clarified. "The four individuals who appear to be officers are each riding an ancient dragon."

I had used Analyze Eye on top of Farsight, so we were pretty sure of that estimate.

"Hold on a moment! Ancient dragons are classified as Rank S monsters and you're saying there are *four* of them?! That's enough to destroy an entire country!"

Oh, hey, Guin's recovered.

Goma looked down, frowning. "We knew they were expanding their military, but *that* many dragons? Gaunian operatives saw their Dragon Knight Order before, but it was almost entirely subdragons at the time, with only a few adults and no ancients at all."

"And the Dragon Knight Order is only one of their forces," Akgas pointed out. "Clearly, Trycen's been playing their cards close to the chest."

"Damn, this is no joke. But the fact that you look so composed must mean you have a strategy all planned out, right?" Sabato asked, looking at me with a

knowing smile.

It's nothing as grand as "a strategy," but—okay, stop looking at me with those eyes filled with expectation.

"Sort of, yeah. First, I want you guys to stay close to the fortress and act as a hit-and-run commando unit. Just do the best you can without overreaching. But stay hidden until we give the signal. As I'm sure you already know, this fortress is concealed by a spell. The aim is to launch the first attack as a complete surprise. That's the one thing we want you to be careful about."

"Understood. Then we'll move as the situation requires afterwards. Sabato, make sure you don't just leap out, all right?"

"I could say the same thing to you."

"Efil will be providing ranged support from the wall, and Gerard—this knight companion of mine—will be protecting the gate. Please cooperate with them as needed."

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

"Apologies for not properly introducing myself earlier. I'm Efil."

Both sides exchanged brief greetings. I had yet to mention it, but this was also where our fully armed golems were going to be stationed. Gerard had the Army Command skill, so it was going to be his job to...well, *command* them.

Of course, I doubt any of the non-ancient dragons will get close enough.

"What will you be doing, Kelvin-san?"

"Me? I'll be paying the enemy general a visit."

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The rest of the briefing lasted for about half an hour more, then it was free time for everyone to do whatever they wanted. I was pretty much done with all my preparations, so all that was left was to give my body a well-needed rest. Sabato and his party had been assigned individual rooms, where I hoped they would find everything they needed.

What's with the two men behind Goma anyway? They never said a thing.

“Huh, they’re probably the princess’s personal guards.”

“Did you say something, Kel-nii? I’m just done washing up.”

“Nope, nothing. Come on, I’ll wash your hair now.”

“Please and thank you!”

As a breather, I was taking my usual bath with Rion. I gently rubbed the roots of her glossy black hair until the shampoo frothed up, then thoroughly washed all the bubbles away. *Her hair’s grown a bit. It’s almost touching her shoulders now.*

“Mm! Kel-nii’s hair-washing feels so good. I think I’m about to fall asleep.”

“You’ll catch a cold if you sleep here. Does this help?”

I splashed some of the bath water at my sister to wake her up. She scrunched up her eyes in an effort to keep the drops from getting in.

“Towel, Kel-nii!”

“Here you go.”

“Hee hee hee, thank you. By the way, that strategy of yours... It’s not for delaying the enemy, is it?”

“Uh, excuse you, it sort of is. And it even includes an opportunity for you to go all out! I’m proud of it, actually.”

“Using that skill is tiring, but I guess I’ll just demand payment in pampering! Come on, let’s get into the water already!”

The two of us lowered ourselves into the bath. I sighed in contentment. *Bathing should be officially recognized as a fourth fundamental necessity.*

The bath here could barely fit three people, which made it quite a bit smaller than the one we had at home. Regardless, Rion claimed her usual position on my lap. For some reason, I had protested this when she’d first arrived, but now this was what felt the most natural. *Seriously, why* did *I argue about this at the start? Even I don’t get myself sometimes.*

“It sure doesn’t feel like the night before a big battle, does it?”

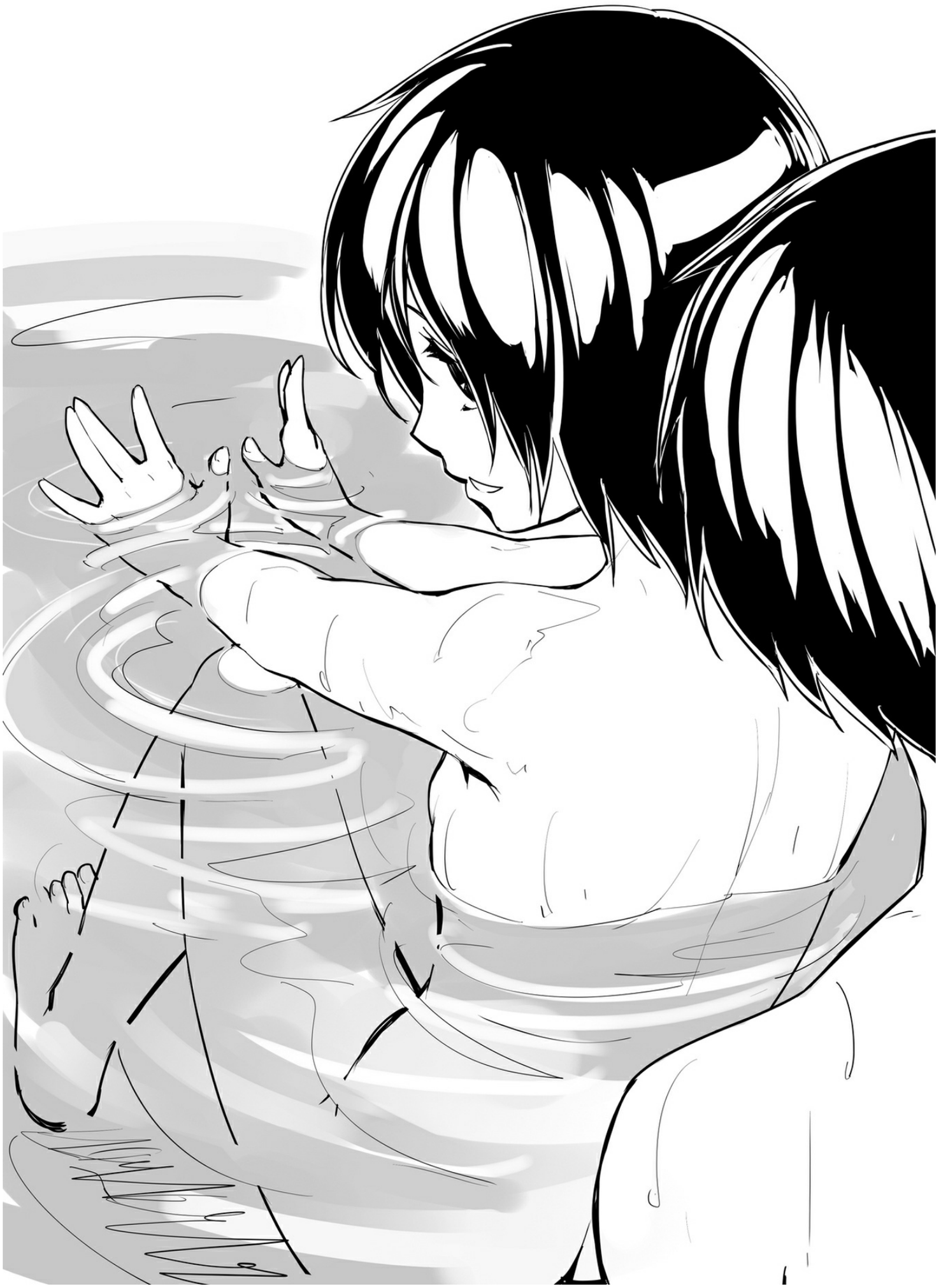
“Well, we *are* just relaxing right now. You know, if this fortress had been

smaller, I might have outfitted it as a portable base to use when we're on the road."

"That sounds like such a good idea. But for now, I can't think of anything but this water. I love baths so much..."

"You and me both, Rion."

The two of us fully enjoyed our warm and laid-back time together.



◇ ◇ ◇

More than a thousand dragons soared over the desert surface, their wings nearly blotting out the sun. Ground dragons also kept pace down below, kicking up a huge dust cloud with their passage and sending tremors through the earth. Among their number were four beasts that were particularly attention-grabbing: a gigantic rock dragon of immeasurable weight, a dragon with three necks bearing different colors, an exquisite white flying dragon, and at the very head of the army, a pitch-black dragon emitting an extraordinary presence.

"Reporting, sir! The Grand Scarlet Canyon has come into view! We will soon be in Parthian territory!"

"You're late. I've been looking at it for ages now," Azgrad replied from his position atop the black dragon as he suppressed the impatience roiling in his blood.

Back when the plans for the invasion had been drawn up, Azgrad had immediately volunteered to lead the force striking Parth. The reason was simple: there were powerful opponents gathered there.

Up until now, it's been the Gaunians who've shown the most resistance, but those were nothing more than small-scale skirmishes that the other side was half-assing. So damn boring. But Parth is looking pretty fun now! There's "Peach Ogre" Goldiana, who is supposedly the most powerful physical fighter among all adventurers. And "Ice Princess" Sylvia, who nobody knows anything about. And last but not least, "Grim Reaper" Kelvin, the rising new star who beat Sylvia! Going by his physical description, he's definitely the bastard who did Clive in. Ha ha ha, so much for Parth being a gathering of weaklings gone complacent with peace! Now it's practically bursting with thrills!

In short, this man, like Kelvin, was a battle junkie. For the sake of satisfying his greatest desire—to fight powerful foes—he had done everything he could to improve his abilities. His efforts had, without him even meaning to, garnered incredible respect from those around him. Admittedly, part of that respect was due to him being the only prince who fully subjected himself to the same rules that bound the other soldiers and never threw his weight around.

His career had begun with an assignment to the Mixed Monster Order, but

he'd had a falling out with them and ended up taking his subordinates along to form the Dragon Knight Order. A surprising exception in a country where disdain of non-humans was a matter of principle, his order considered the dragons true partners and went to great lengths to establish genuinely trusting relationships with them. Add that to their grueling training regimen and there were none who dared contest the claim that the Dragon Knight Order—with their deft wielding of longspears from fierce dragon mounts—was Trycen's most powerful force.

"General! The summits of the canyon walls appear too high to easily cross, but the ravine is a single path where an enemy force likely lays in ambush! Which way should we go?!" asked his lieutenant general—a man who had been with him ever since the founding of the Dragon Knight Order—in a shout from his position atop the white dragon.

Before them loomed cliff walls that clawed at the cloud layer. And coming up fast was a straight path right down its middle, a ravine said to have been created by the swing of a god's sword in times long past.

"Do you even have to ask? What, are we going to detour around the mountains? Can you even imagine how long that'd take? We're aiming to reach Parth as fast as possible, so we're taking the most direct route! Let's get this city conquered and this campaign squared away already!"

"General, we all know that your aim is not Parth itself, but to fight the Rank S adventurers *in* Parth. In fact, we're hurrying less because this is a surprise attack and more because you want to enjoy the fight before the other two orders finish off their own targets and come to interfere, aren't we?"

"Hah! Looks like you *do* get it. Then don't make me say it out loud, Huba!"

"How many years do you think I've served with you, sir? And all this time, this dragon's only taken to you and causes me no end of trouble!" the lieutenant general replied, giving the white dragon he was riding a few pats. The creature snorted with disgruntlement.

"Come on, Rosalia, be nice to Huba. You know I don't have a choice; I'm the only one who can keep this aggressive one in check."

Azgrad's previous partner, Rosalia, growled slightly and shot a resentful look

at the black dragon the general was now riding. No response was forthcoming, though.

Azgrad glanced down at his own mount. *He's not even reacting to Rosalia, huh? I really hate how I have to rely on this collar to control him. If only I had been strong enough to get through to him on my own...*

The black dragon's neck was sporting a collar similar to the ones worn by slaves. If Rion had been present, she would have recognized it as the same one she'd seen on Gigant Lord while dealing with the Mixed Monster Order. This collar, which could be used to enslave even Rank S monsters, had been a gift to Azgrad from Tristan.

Azgrad's creed was to obtain a dragon's acknowledgment by first defeating it in combat. However, he had failed to do this with the black dragon. Normally, he would not turn to using a collar like this for any reason, since he believed that being connected to a dragon by heart was the only way to draw out its full potential and would spit on anyone who said otherwise. It had been his stepsister, Shutola, who had convinced him to make an exception. Although the two of them were not particularly close, they deeply respected each other's abilities.

I'm not particularly smart, so there's no way for me to follow along with whatever she's thinking. She insisted that this was crucial enough for me to bend my beliefs for, so here we are. But still...

The idea that there were opponents in Parth powerful enough to merit such wariness from Shutola was enough to get Azgrad's blood pumping. While riding that high, however, something continued to tug at the back of his mind, but he could not quite put his finger on what it was or who was causing it. He even thought that he could feel a sort of coldness on his back, despite the fact that he was currently flying through a boiling desert.

"General, we're almost at the border!"

"All troops, we're rushing in! Follow me! For Trycen!"

Azgrad decided to simply enjoy the situation in spite of whatever was bothering him. Come what may, he was prepared to accept it and include it as part of his ecstasy. Feelings of foreboding were mere trivialities.

Cheers from the soldiers and roars from the dragons shook the ground and the air. With Azgrad and his black mount at the head, the Dragon Knight Order surged forward like a tide.

“Beware of ambushes! Keep an eye on the sky! Check for shadows behind boulders! Pay attention to everything you see!”

“Forward is clear! Behind is clear! Above is clear! Remaining vigilant!”

“Good! Once we’re through the ravine, the battle is ours! We’re conti—ROSALIA!”

Instinctively, Azgrad swung his lance and deflected...something. Huba had failed to register his shout in time, but Rosalia, who had been called by name, instantly caught on and changed the trajectory of her flight on the spur of the moment.

“Ugh!”

The soldier right behind Huba let out a grunt and collapsed in his saddle. He didn’t fall off because he, like all others in their order, had bound the lower half of his body to his dragon as a precaution against falling off. But he was bleeding from a gaping wound in his forehead, his eyes had rolled back in his head, and his upper body was swaying limply. He was clearly dead.

“Get a hold of yourselves! We’ve got company, Huba!”

“Sir, yes, yes!”

Dudududududududududu!

Explosive and metallic sounds the likes of which they had never heard before rang out not once, not twice, but incessantly from ahead of them, accompanied by several thousand projectiles of light flying at high velocity. Even the whelps could have dodged them in time—albeit barely—if it had merely been a few bullets, but these numbers were far too overwhelming. Dragons were shot full of holes and soldiers lost their lives by the dozens in the blink of an eye.

“Wh-What is going on?!”

“Calm down! You can dodge them if you remain calm!”

“Reporting! A gigantic ice wall has appeared behind us! Our path of retreat

has been sealed!”

“Unidentified enemies have appeared overhead! It’s one—no, two people! Shit, even the adult dragons aren’t slowing them down!”

“An unidentified knight order has appeared at the front! Their affiliation is unknown!”

“Don’t get separated! Maintain formation!”

The battle was whirling around every which way at a dizzying speed, with chaos generating further chaos. Within all this, Azgrad’s mouth turned upwards in a grin of delight.

“Surprise, havoc, insanity... Now *this* is the battlefield I’ve been thirsting for!”

◇ ◇ ◇

“They’re finally here!” Sabato gulped, his eyes glued to the approaching tide and his whole body vibrating from the thundering of their approach. All of his companions looked equally nervous.

Goma turned to me. “Kelvin-san, I don’t see Sera-san and Mel-san anywhere.”

“There’s something else I wanted them to do. They’re currently in hiding until I give them a signal.” *Inside my magic pool, that is.*

“I see.”

“Everything is going according to plan. I’m entrusting you guys with protecting the entrance to the fortress.”

“You got it!” Sabato replied. “The only way any of them are getting inside is over our dead bodies!”

“Uh, I’d much rather you ran away instead of dying. But in any case, I’m returning to the wall.”

Once I finished checking up on Sabato’s group, Efil contacted me over the Network. ::Master, it’s time.:: All right, send them a little greeting whenever you see fit. I’m coming up now.

I activated Fly to make my way over to where she was standing by on top of our fortifications. When I landed, she had just released her first shot.

::I’m sorry, Master. My arrow was deflected,:: my maid reported apologetically.

The enemy host had begun surging into the ravine. The bow that Efil was using, Merciless, was capable of shooting arrows that were both invisible and silent. This very bow had thrown the entire Mixed Monster Order into the depths of terror and confusion when we had been defending the Village of Elves, but her target this time was capable enough to sense the projectile and react in time.

Don’t let it get you down. This opponent is just that good, right? In fact, it’s cause for celebration!

The black and white dragons flying at the front of the invading troop seemed particularly noteworthy—the black one all the more so as its rider was the person who had managed to deflect Efil’s arrow. A quick look at his Status revealed him to be their general.

Efil, go ahead and start preparing for the next phase.

::Yes, Master.:: Gerard.

::Yes, my king. Commencing firing now.:: Although Efil’s sniping had failed, our surprise attack was far from over. In fact, it was only just beginning.

“All units, take aim! Fire!”

Dudududududududududududu!

In response to Gerard’s command, one hundred modified golems opened fire using their Gatling guns all at once, half of them aiming at the flying dragons and the rest shooting for the landbound ones. Although the speed of the bullets wasn’t all that impressive, they were powerful enough to deal damage to Rank A monsters, and a *lot* of them were being fired at the same time. Never mind the subdragons, even the adults succumbed after barely evading the first two or three volleys. As expected, this strategy was proving extremely effective against multiple targets in close proximity.

Melfina, I’m going to Summon you as we planned. You know what to do, right?

::Leave it to me, honey.:: I Summoned the goddess behind the enemy force, right at the border between desert and canyon. A few troops close to her sensed it and started to turn around, but it was too late. The entirety of their force had already entered the ravine.

"Sub-Zero Rampart!"

A wall of ice appeared out of nowhere, wide enough to seal off the entrance to the ravine and high enough to match the height of the canyon walls themselves. The top was all the way up in the clouds, far above the altitude at which the dragons were flying.

::And that's the birdcage done!:: A wall cast with Melfina's magic was even tougher than the one I was standing on. In any case, the enemy was now locked in.

Looks good! We're really doing our job of slowing them down.

::Kel-nii, the phrase you're looking for is not "slowing them down" but "preventing their escape." What we've set up is a death trap for annihilating them.:: Don't sweat the details, sister dear. They're not taking another step down the ravine, so technically they're being slowed down. And that's exactly what we were commissioned to do.

::Kelvin! Me too! Summon me out too!:: All right, all right.

To stop Sera from pestering me any longer, I Summoned her into the sky and behind the enemy. Currently, the Dragon Knight Order was spread out along the length of the ravine, so it would be her job to usher the ones in the back up towards the front.

::I'm also diving in, honey.:: Having erected her wall, Melfina rushed into the fray as well.

Poor guys at the back, having to face an angel and demon at the same time. I think I can almost hear their screams despite being too far away for that to be possible.

I switched to the Network. *I probably don't need to say this, but Gerard, don't worry about the bullets hitting Mel or Sera; they won't. Feel free to continue shooting at the ones in the sky however you see fit.*

::I figured. Oho, one is making a charge for the golems.:: Ah, the rock dragon.

The giant boulder in the shape of a dragon that had been leading the landbound force—according to Analyze Eye, it was an ancient rock dragon by the name of Boga—was thundering straight towards our line. The bullets from the Gatling guns were largely deflecting off its skin, with the few that landed at a good angle not doing much more than leaving it a little charred. Clearly, the beast had impressive armor and endurance levels. Its mass took up nearly half the width of the path, serving as a shield for many of the dragons behind it.

::Hey, Kel-nii, want me and Alex to take care of it?:: Efil, do your thing first.

::Yes, Master.:: Efil was already standing at the ready, an incredible amount of magic whirling around the tip of the arrow she had nocked with Penumbra, the other bow she possessed, which was specced for firepower. At my signal, she loosed a red-hot arrow which flew in a parabola that seemed about to pass over the rock dragon.

“What? Did they misfire?”

“You idiot! Don’t let your guard down!”

The instant Efil finished casting her spell, the arrow exploded into countless sparks that covered a significant area. What looked like a rain of red soon landed on the backs of the running dragons that were still on the ground.

“Fulmination Rain,” Efil murmured.

Ka-ka-ka-ka-boom!

What sounded like a chain of explosions went off among the enemy troops. Each and every spark from Efil’s spell was a bomb that went off upon contact. I had been a little worried about achieving enough destructive power from such a dispersed attack, but the explosions had no problem killing even the adult dragons. Almost half of the troops that had been hiding behind the rock dragon were obliterated in a single go, and the rain was still falling.

“MY ARM!”

“DON’T TOUCH THE SPARKS! THEY EXPLODE!”

“WE’RE DONE FOR! WE’RE—Ugh.”

“SHOOT DOWN THE SPARKS WITH YOUR DRAGON’S BREATH BEFORE THEY TOUCH ANYTHING!”

Wow, I feel like I’m looking at the work of a jet bomber.

::What is a jet bomber?:: Oh, don’t worry about it, I was talking to myself. Unfortunately, the sparks landing on the rock dragon don’t seem to be doing anything.

In spite of the impressive attack, we saw for ourselves why this order was considered Trycen’s finest. Some of them were already coming up with countermeasures and successfully threading their way through the rain of death. The rock dragon was still barreling ahead, not having so much as stumbled. *Seriously, how tough* is *that thing?*

I think Gerard would be better suited for dealing with the rock dragon, I broadcast to the others. *Rion and Alex, head for the three-headed dragon at the back. Finish off as many of the survivors as you can on your way.*

::Yes, my king!:: ::You got it!:: ::*Arf!*:: Two forms jetted forward, leaving behind a *whizz!* like you might see in an old-school comic. *Oh wow, they’re already right in front of the rock dragon now. She must have cast Lightning Enhancement ahead of time.*

::Mmm, it’d be boring not to do anything when it’s right there.:: ::*Arf, arf.*:: (Let’s give it a passing gift, then.) ::I like the sound of that!:: Just before the two of them passed by the rock dragon, they switched sides, drawing an “X” with their movements. Alex was holding Lethal Opiate Sword in his mouth, and Rion was holding the two new swords that I had forged for her, a pair of identical weapons that went by the name of Black Swords Aklama. The dragon’s skin, which had fully withstood the barrage from the golems, parted like tofu before the three blades.

“RRROOOAAAAARRRR!”

I clapped my hands over my ears against the dragon’s explosive roar. The swords had yet to see much use in actual combat, but now we knew for a fact that they were effective even against Rank S opponents.

::’Kay, the rest is all yours, Gramps!:: By the time I blinked, Rion and her

partner were already far in the distance.

::Goodness. Looks like Rion's starting to get playful in battle. Who do you think she takes after, my king?:: Uh, beats me.

::Master, what abilities do Rion-sama's new swords have?:: None.

::None at all?:: I made the Aklama blades after hearing her account of her fight against the white wolf. It was impervious to all lightning-based attacks, so she asked me for a sword that had no abilities at all. I focused solely on making these as sharp and unbreakable as possible, then optimized them for her personal use. They don't come with any bells and whistles, but their simplicity makes them useful for a wider range of scenarios.

My hope was that Rion would pick and choose the right weapon according to the situation. And from the glimpses I had caught of her and Alex training, I knew I didn't have anything to worry about.

::Master, you said that Rion-sama asked you for *a* sword, but wasn't she holding two?:: Hey, I've got to show my worth as a big brother every once in a while, don't I?

For some reason, Gerard looked at me like he had found a compatriot.

Hey, the rock dragon is still charging towards you. Look at it *instead of me!*

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"RRROOOOAAAAARRRRRR!"

"Calm down, Boga! They're just scratches!"

The rock dragon continued hurtling towards the black gates guarded by Gerard and Sabato's group, his rider's desperate admonitions having no effect on his frenzied state of mind. The distance between the two camps closed rapidly, with the dragon pumping out much more speed than his great bulk would suggest was possible.

"Hm, looks like he's going on a rampage because of Rion and Alex's attack," Gerard noted calmly. "Ah, did he lose a few of his senses because of Lethal? That might explain the agitation."

"Gerard-dono, there's no time to be leisurely examining the enemy! He's

about to reach us!” Akgas exclaimed.

Sabato also looked quite flustered. “Just to be clear, none of us have any long-distance attacks that are stronger than the weird light attack that didn’t work! We’re going to have to engage it in close combat, right?!”

As pointed out, the enraged rock dragon was showing no sign of stopping despite being subjected to concentrated fire by the golems. His rider had given up trying to control him and was instead hiding behind a protruding piece of his armor, fully resolved to riding out the charge.

As the two beastkin shifted into combat mode, Gerard strode ahead with his greatsword resting on his shoulder. “Cease firing! Interception formation!”

The golems jumped into motion at Gerard’s command. The ones shooting up at the sky continued to do so as they retreated. The ones that had been shooting at the ground stowed their Gatling guns on their backs, exchanging them for two-handed longspears as they fell into horizontal ranks. Every single movement had been frighteningly mechanical and in perfect sync without a single one breaking formation.

“Are you trying to stop the dragon with these troops?” Ema asked nervously.

Gerard shook his head. “Their role is to prevent any of the other dragons from getting through. After all, there’s no point in continuing the barrage as long as the big one is blocking the way. That said, I believe Efil and Rion have already taken care of the majority of the soldiers on the ground, so the action might not even reach us.”

“Are you serious?! You don’t have time to worry about the others; that thing is almost here!”

“You’re Guin, right? Lad, always maintain a calm mind while standing on the battlefield. I’ll take care of the big lunk. In the meantime, you focus on taking out its rider.”

After walking a distance in front of the golems, Gerard stabbed Dreadnought into the ground and bent his knees, bracing himself to intercept the rock dragon’s charge.

“How can someone just...”

“Hurry, Guin, let’s do as Gerard-dono asked.”

“Are you sure he can handle it, Akgas-san?”

“Can you not see the fighting aura he’s emitting? Like the rest of Kelvin-dono’s party, he is far more powerful than any of us. There isn’t much we can do even if we are worried about him.”

“I suppose so.”

“All of you back there, that’s enough idle chatter,” the knight warned them. “Here it comes.”

Guin pulled himself together and turned to look. The rock dragon was less than ten meters from crashing into Gerard’s position at the front. There was no way to properly determine the length of the creature’s body as he was running at a forward pitch, but it was clear that his sheer bulk was easily much greater than any common castle wall.

Due to his entire form being covered by armor that looked like rugged rock colored in patterns of gray, nobody had noticed there were actually wings sprouting from the back of his forelegs. The alarming thought, *Don’t tell me, he can fly?!* did flash through Guin’s mind, but he decided to not overthink it. The stout legs supporting the monster’s enormous form had more than proven themselves capable of swift movement. A simple body slam seemed like it would be more than enough to prove instantly fatal.

All in all, their foe was big, heavy, and fast.

No, no, no, it’s so not happening! Guin thought, losing heart almost immediately. Just as he was turning his back to run away, a huge crash rang out, accompanied by an incredible shockwave. Boga had collided with Gerard.



“Ugh!” Sabato grunted as he did his best to ride out the shockwave, making sure that he burned the sight of the wondrous spectacle into his brain.

Guin, who had fallen flat on his face and made a weird noise as he did, had no idea what was going on. Goma and her two silent companions relied on each other for support as Akgas stabbed his sword into the ground.

“Even though we’re so far away...” he marveled at the feat he was witnessing.

“Grrrrrrrrr!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! He blocked Boga’s charge head-on?!”

Dreadnought creaked and the rock dragon groaned. The feet of both sides created clefts in the bone-dry ground as they sank with the combined weight of the attack. This competition of strength lasted for several seconds before the rock dragon took one step back, followed by another. Gerard was gaining the upper hand.

“Hmph!”

“What?!”

Taking advantage of the opening, the knight let go of his greatsword and swiftly rammed his arm upwards into the dragon’s chin. The attack landed with perfect precision, sending the beast flying into the air.

Neither Boga nor the man who was riding him had ever dreamed of being surpassed in pure strength. Agitation and turmoil welled up inside both their hearts, the resonance of that further amplifying what the other was feeling.

“You can’t let your guard down like that. Now you know better than to over-rely on your sheer mass, I hope,” Gerard chided them as he grabbed the rock dragon’s head with both hands—even as the creature was still in the air—and slammed him into the ground.

The floor of the canyon, which had already been on the verge of giving way, caved in entirely. Fortunately, the walls on either side held strong, but there was now a huge hole in the middle of the road.

“Go on, Sabato-dono,” Gerard prompted, maintaining his grip on Boga’s head.

Sabato managed an “uh...right, thanks” as he and his party recovered their senses and remembered that they weren’t just there to spectate, each having their own jobs to do.

Goma dashed out first, jeering, “Sabato, you coming or what?!”

“Dammit! How many times do I have to tell you not to get a head start on me?!” Sabato roared as he, Akgas, and the others leaped down into the hole after her. Their target was the enemy commander who was hiding in the shadow of the dragon’s scales.

“That’s Goma and Sabato from Gaun! We’re in trouble! Boga, can’t you get free?!”

“GRRRRRRRR!”

Boga strained as hard as he could, ignoring his body’s protests of pain. However, everything from his head to the front half of his body was locked down firmly, unable to move an inch. In contrast to the rock dragon and his rider’s panic, Gerard seemed as cool as a cucumber. This served only to further fan his enemies’ distress.

“GGGGGRRRRRRRR!”

“Oh?”

Suddenly, the dragon’s front legs began pawing at the ground. In response to some strange power, his head, which was supposed to be pinned down, started sinking deeper into the hole.

Gerard looked slightly impressed. “The Burrowing skill? You’re more versatile than you look.”

“Th-That’s it, Boga! Drag him underground with you! It’s your territory down there!”

“You ain’t getting away, though!”

“You aren’t getting away, though!”

The man shivered at the voices that rang out on either side of him. “What?! Weren’t you two all the way over there a second ago?!”

“Try to understand, what you call ‘all the way over there’ is fully within the range we consider our battle zone,” Sabato replied as he thrust his sword forward.

At the same time, Goma’s fist caved in the left side of the Trycenian soldier’s chestplate. “But this was still worth doing. Dragons aside, at least we know we can contribute to the fight against Trycen’s commanders and soldiers.”

As beastkin, Goma and Sabato possessed a nimbleness and explosive power that were incredibly valuable weapons. At full strength, they were more than deserving of their Rank A status. They had just been comparing themselves to rather unreasonable standards as of late.

“Whoa!”

Having finished off the enemy rider was great and all, but the rock dragon was still alive and kicking. As Boga shook his huge body in his continued efforts to burrow underground, Sabato and his group nearly lost their balance.

“So, what’re we supposed to do with this guy? None of our attacks work against him,” Sabato commented as he stabbed down with his sword multiple times only to see the blade slide off the tough armor. Due to the thickness of the skin itself, the same was true even of the joints and the gaps between the armor pieces.

Recalling that Kelvin had asked him to do his best to keep the ancient dragons alive, Gerard warned Boga, “Stop struggling now.”

“ROOOAAAARRRRRRRR!”

Despite the knight tightening his grip, the situation remained unchanged. At this point, a third of the beast’s body had disappeared underground.

“You listening to me? I’ll have no choice but to kill you—”

Half of the rock dragon’s body was now out of sight. Fearing that he would head towards Parth and threaten the city if he were to get away, Gerard uttered his final warning.

“I said *stop*.”

Warning signals battered Boga’s anger-fogged mind in response to the blatant

killing intent, the black greatsword at his neck, and the grip that was now so tight it was caving in his head armor. He understood without a doubt that if he moved an inch more, he would lose his life. His anger gave way to fear and awe, and he shivered so hard that it was palpable even through the armor. For the first time since his birth, Boga understood what it meant to fear for his life.

"He actually stopped?" Sabato murmured, regaining his footing.

Guin shivered. "Hot damn, I think I felt a chill go down my back!"

"Remember that feeling," Akgas replied, clapping his shoulder. "It's going to save your life many times in the future."

Sabato and his party were rendered entirely speechless by the sight of Gerard dragging the now limp rock dragon out of the ground.

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"ARG!"

"Dammit, I can't see—UGH!"

"Where's the enem— ACK!"

After speeding past the rock dragon, Rion and Alex continued pushing forward, finishing off the troops that had managed to evade Efil's Fulmination Rain along the way. Just like when they'd faced the stone golems, they were moving much faster than what the average person's eyes could register. Dragons and soldiers fell one by one, none the wiser about what had stolen their lives.

::Kel-nii, these swords are amazing! They feel like extensions of my arms!:: I'm glad to hear that. Pay attention, though; you've got a big one right ahead. Don't let your guard down.

::Let my guard down? Why would I do that? It'd be such a waste to be distracted during a fight! Right, Alex?:: ::*Arf.*:: (Anyone who does so is a disgrace as a warrior.) Yeah... It's bad to be distracted during a fight...

Kelvin's tone made it sound as if some past trauma had just been touched on, prompting Rion and Alex to send puzzled emotions through the Network. However, there was no time to probe as, immediately after finishing off their

102nd enemy, they sensed danger drawing near.

Suddenly, they found themselves in an open area devoid of both soldiers and dragons. Right that moment, a ball of crimson flame crashed down, spreading out like a hellish tsunami.

“Hup.”

Luckily, Rion had Sky Walk and Alex had Shadow Travel. The two of them dodged the attack without slowing a beat, then shifted to running sideways along the walls of the canyon.

“They evaded *that*?!” exclaimed the colonel riding the three-headed dragon. Setting the entire stretch of ground ablaze had been his solution to the problem of not being able to see his assailants. Clearly, he had not expected them to start running along the walls. His plan had been foiled.

Rion studied the three-headed dragon, which had red, blue, and yellow horns decorating each head respectively. *This is the big one that Kel-nii was talking about, I guess? Using his troops as a decoy to buy time to prepare the wide area attack was a good idea, but he took a bit too long. And the unnatural way the soldiers all pulled back at the same time was a clear warning that something was coming. So, this is an ancient dragon?*

The creature’s size was somewhere between that of a normal adult dragon and the rock dragon. Aside from her horns, she was covered in deep blue scales the color of lapis lazuli and walked on four legs. The wings spreading out on either side of the soldier on her back indicated that she was possibly capable of flight as well.

My target’s come into view, so I’m going to move out myself. I’m leaving the Network for now.

::All right! Talk to you later, Kel-nii.:: After ending their conversation with Kelvin, Rion and Alex readied themselves for close-quarters combat. Behind the three-headed dragon, they spied remnants of the landbound forces all waiting in formation. The enemy numbers were less than half of what they had been at the start of the encounter, and, with their path of retreat sealed off, every last one of them looked tense and fearful.

“One more shot, Mdofarak!” the colonel shouted, using his loudest voice in an effort to boost morale.

As the three heads roared their acknowledgment, the horns on their crowns started to shine. The lights converged, then each head opened its mouth and unleashed a mixed breath of fire, ice, and lightning. As Rion and Alex continued to close the distance at an incredible speed, they found themselves the targets of a tri-colored beam of death.

This attack, Trinity Breath, possessed far more destructive power than the previous Flame Breath, covering not only the ground but also the walls of the canyon. Everything was swallowed up as the flames rushed forward greedily.

“Follow after the colonel and Mdofarak!”

“Make sure to cover the entire area with your attacks! Don’t leave even the smallest hole!”

The dragons being ridden by the knights in the back also unleashed their respective breaths. Together, the attacks looked like a solid wall of fire.

Rion leaped off the wall to return to the middle of the path and called Alex back out of the shadows.

::I know we can evade it if we want to, but it looks like it’ll hit Goma-chan and the others, doesn’t it?:: ::*Arf?*:: (Want to try using *that* move?) ::The one we’ve been practicing? Hmm... We’ve never made it work against Efil-nee, but sure! Let’s give it a try!:: Girl and wolf readied their swords as they continued charging towards the multicolored screen of flames. The two jet-black blades and the Opiate Sword with the alluring yet deadly gleam clashed against each other, then disappeared at the same time.

“Agito Chiribana!”

The three blades merged into one, unleashing a tempest of slashes that looked like petals from a proudly blossoming flower. The barrage of blades collided with the storm of fire, with the former fully negating every last scrap of the latter. What had looked like a wall of impending doom with no escape mere moments before rapidly vanished without a trace.

“That’s not possible! That was a simultaneous volley including an attack by an

ancient dragon, one of the most powerful races in existence! Is the enemy even human?!”

“How rude. I’m just as human as you are.”

“When did y—?! Mdofa—!”

The instant the colonel spoke, his vision went black. The next thing he knew, he was looking up at a strip of sky framed by the canyon walls. He could tell that he had suffered a great blow to his feet. A breath later, he realized that he was lying flat on the ground.

When he moved his eyes, he caught sight of a young girl clad in black. *We were led around by the nose by a girl my daughter’s age?* Her speed had been far beyond what was normally attributed to beastkin. In fact, even Mdofarak, an ancient dragon, had failed to react in time and was now looking on in astonishment.

The colonel understood that he had been disabled the moment his eyes had registered the girl. He attempted to move his hands and feet, then realized he could not sense any part of his body. Strangely enough, he felt no fear. If anything, the aura being emitted by the girl made him feel rather cheerful.

“I used Shock on you. You won’t be able to move your body for a while, but you should still be able to speak. Um, it’d probably be best for both of us if you surrendered. We have a pretty good idea of how strong your force is,” Rion said with a bright smile, holding up an index finger still wreathed in little sparks at its tip.

The man felt incredibly at ease as he looked at her smile, but the situation was certainly not one in which he should relax. He could see the black sword being held at his neck as a clear message: “You know what will happen if you refuse, right?” Even his reptilian partner was afraid of making any sudden movements.

“You...think you can stop my dragon just by killing me?”

Rion looked slightly apologetic. “Ah, that’s already taken care of. Lucky for us, unlucky for you. It’s twilight.”

“What does that mean?”

Thump!

The three-headed dragon, Mdofarak, suddenly collapsed where she stood. There were innumerable hand-shaped shadows extending from her own, which were tightly entwined around her body, dragging her down.

::*Arf. Arf arf, arf.*:: (I finally caught up. I stole all the ancient dragon's senses using Lethal, then restrained her with shadows just in case.) ::Good job! Yeah, I didn't think paralyzing magic was going to be that effective against the yellow-horned head, and we did make that promise to Kel-nii, so...:: ::*Arf arf.*:: (Capture complete. No problem.) A gigantic black wolf had appeared in between Rion and the Dragon Knight Order troops. In the soldiers' eyes, it had appeared out of thin air, just as Rion herself had. But unlike the dainty girl, this was a terrifying beast that was clearly a Rank S monster. The men and their dragons fell into a great panic.

"Mdofarak was defeated! What's with that monster?!"

"We can't win! Retreat! Retreat!"

"There's no room to retreat! The wall of ice is still there!"

"GAAAAHHH! MY ARM! MY ARM'S FROZEN!"

"You idiot! Don't have your dragon shoot a breath attack while we're packed so close together!"

The Trycenian force was no longer capable of fighting. Even if Rion and Alex were to leave them alone, they would have destroyed themselves in a growing cycle of hysteria.

::*Arf?*:: (What do you want to do with them?) ::They're out of control, so I don't really have a choice, do I?:: Rion sheathed her swords and grabbed the colonel by his neck, holding him up.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to kill you. Alex, back off a bit. This could be dangerous."

"How can I not worry after hearing th—?!"

Rion chucked the flustered man into the crowd. As he flew through the air,

she gathered magic in her hands.

“Shock Chain.”

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

A flood of sparks washed over the entire group of knights. This Rank A Red Magic spell had the benefit of boosting the paralyzing effect of Shock and spreading it over a large area. While a target that had been hit with Shock could still move their eyes and mouth, victims of Shock Chain would simply lose consciousness. When capturing targets, this spell was considered the go-to for many, as it did not actually deal much direct damage.

The girl, the wolf, and the ancient dragon shared a moment of awkward silence as they gazed at what *looked* like a plateau of corpses.

::Well, it’s finally quiet! Alex, can you use Creeping Darkness to drag them back to the fortress?:: ::*Awooo, arf.*:: (The skill is based on my Strength stat, so no problem. They’ll be literally dragged across the ground, though.) Just as he’d done with Mdofarak, Alex used the shadows to grab hold of all the soldiers and dragons, linked their shadows to his own, and stalked off with them in tow.

::*Awooo.*:: (The ancient dragon wasn’t all that strong.) ::So much for having three heads, huh? Our training is usually much tougher than this. And I didn’t even have to use my Unique Skill. Oh, speaking of training, there’s Efil-nee!:: Rion pointed up at the elven maid who was standing on top of an eight-headed flame dragon that had appeared abruptly in the sky above the castle walls.

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“General! We’re being shot out of the sky!”

“I can see that! That’s why we’re busting our asses here, ain’t it?!”

“I’m not sure how much longer I can hold out!”

The barrage of unidentifiable projectiles was showing no sign of letting up. Huba and I were trying our best to knock down as many as we could from our position at the front of the force, but the overwhelming number of shots continued to whittle down the troops behind us. The closer we pressed towards the enemy base, the more fierce the attacks became and the more casualties

we suffered.

“Shit! The black dragon is fine, but these projectiles are shredding our adults. Their penetrative power is unbelievable.”

“Rosalia! Please fly a little slower!”

“Grrrr!”

Rosalia will take care of Huba, so he’ll probably be fine. I know my former partner is nimble enough to evade this sort of attack. The veteran dragon knights are also holding on, albeit barely. But it’s probably only a matter of time before...

“Reporting! The enemies who appeared at our rear are too powerful for us to deal with! We formed ranks and bravely faced them, but more than two hundred knights have fallen!”

“Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place! What a merry battleground this is!”

As my black dragon zigzagged around to avoid being hit, I brushed away large swathes of projectiles with my lance. Those of us in the Dragon Knight Order prided ourselves on being Trycen’s most powerful force, and yet here we were, being handled like chaff.

The only people I can think of who’d be capable of this type of attack are those who’ve surpassed human limitations—Rank S adventurers. Namely, Sylvia, Goldiana, and Kelvin. They’re probably all here, lying in wait for us. And we’ll have the exciting job of bringing them all down!

“Ignore the enemy at the back, and fly straight up to the summit of the canyon! I’ll take care of the guys down here myself!”

“What are we supposed to do about those balls of light?!” Huba exclaimed. “General, the front line is going to crumble in no time at all without your help!”

“You’ve got this, Rosalia?”

My trusty ex-partner nodded wordlessly.

“Hold on, what? I feel like something was just decided, but I have no idea what it was!”

“Huba, I appointed you my lieutenant general for a reason. You can do this!”

“No, seriously, what are you talking about?!”

“You and Rosalia are going to draw the barrage away from the main force. All right, off you go!”

“Wait, wh—”

Rosalia rushed towards the enemy camp at top speed with Huba still on her back. Despite being an ancient dragon, my former partner’s appearance was similar to that of an average adult of her kind. The one thing that set her apart was her speed. She was the fastest among the dragons in the order, hands down. When she got serious, her speed exceeded even that of the son of the Darkness Dragon King, the very creature I was currently riding. It would be nigh impossible to lure all the attacks away and remain entirely unhurt, but her chances of survival would still be higher than if she stayed down here.

“Wow, that silver dragon’s fast. She’s dodging pretty much all the bullets.”

“That is my prided dragon and trusty subordinate, after all. So, who are you?”

“What?! When did he—?! Name yourself!” my runner shouted, bringing his spear up and adopting a battle stance. His weapon was pointed towards a man who was floating in midair and who, with his black robe and giant scythe, seemed like the embodiment of an ill omen.

Looks like he’s using the same spell the Magic Knight Order likes so much. I sensed a powerful presence closing in as soon as Rosalia took off. Turns out staying behind was the right move. Jackpot!

“That black robe and the scythe... You’re ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin, I take it?”

“Damn, I’m famous now. I’m not sure whether to feel happy about or bothered by that.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of you, all right. You’re the one who did Clive in, aren’t you?”

The tip of the guy’s scythe wobbled a bit. After a slight pause, he asked, “By ‘Clive,’ you mean *that* shithead?”

“Yep, *that* piece of shit.”

“Hmm. So, you’re here to take revenge for him?”

“As if. I’m just interested in you as the guy who beat him. I’m sorry, but you’re gonna have to keep me company for a bit!”

“I’ll lend you my aid, General!”

“No, you dolt! You’ll just get in my way. Go to the summit with the rest of them. Head for Parth!”

“But...”

“What do you think Rosalia’s putting her life on the line for? Don’t forget what we’re actually here to do. Go!”

“I... Godspeed, General!”

Kelvin waited with me as I watched my runner fly into the sky.

“You sure about letting him go?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“It’s fine. Between you and me, I personally wouldn’t recommend that route. But we’re going to fight, right? You good to go?”

My black dragon, which normally never paid attention to anything, was staring straight at “Grim Reaper.” It was my first time seeing the beast react in such a way. *The guy is* that *dangerous, huh?*

“All right, let’s get started! Sorry it’ll be two-on-one!”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s actually two-on-two!”

A huge grin came over the man’s face as something gel-like poked out from inside his robe.

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Rosalia continued to dodge the projectiles that were being fired by the enemy troops on the ground, and I continued to repel them with my lance as we pushed on. I found myself wondering idly whether my men had managed to reach the summit yet. As time passed, the assault became ever more intense. The pipes that were likely the source of the balls of light seemed to have doubled in number, with every last one being pointed directly at us. I couldn’t have been more terrified.

No...I'd *thought* I couldn't have been more terrified.

"A castle?"

Just as Rosalia and I decided we were done for, the barrage abruptly let up, and we found ourselves staring at a giant fortress that blocked the entire width of the canyon where there had been nothing but air a split second before. What's more, that wasn't the only thing lying in wait for us.

"Rosalia, is that a *dragon*?"

I only had a second to stare at the pitch-black fortifications before a dragon enveloped in raging flames appeared in the sky overhead. And it wasn't just any dragon; it was an absolute nightmare of a monster with *eight* heads.

I think I'm going to piss myself. I'm eighteen, and I'm about to piss myself!

"That's a spell in the shape of a dragon."

"What?! Did you just speak?!"

"You're the one who asked a question. Do you know how long I've been an ancient dragon for? Don't lump me in with Boga and Mdofarak."

"Uh...sorry."

I've heard the general mention it before, but this is my first time actually hearing Rosalia speak our language. And she sounds so collected! I suppose that's to be expected of the general's former partner. Apparently, she can even take on human form while the other ancient dragons seem to have trouble doing so. But the general's the only one who's ever seen her do it. Her voice is so nice; I'll bet she's a real beauty in human form too.

"Huba, there's no time to lose yourself in your thoughts. Focus if you don't want to die."

"Umm...so, that eight-headed thing is strong?"

"It's going to be a handful, yes, but there's a greater threat..."

"Welcome, visitors."

A clear, crystallic voice that seemed extremely out of place on the battlefield rang out from the fiendish beast above.

I must be tired. Honestly, I just want to go home and sleep. When the general's not around, I can't seem to get motivated enough to fight.

"Look at its head."

"Oh..."

When I did as Rosalia instructed and really looked at the heads of the flame dragon, I noticed a figure sitting atop one of them. It was an extremely cute elf in a maid outfit.

Uh...isn't it kind of hot up there?

"With the circumstances being what they are, we will skip the introductions," she announced. "I ask for your kind understanding."

"Um, right, of course." *Wait, why am I answering her?*

"While you are within the vicinity of this fortress, you will not be attacked by the troops on the ground. Considering you've managed to get this far, we expect any further bullets to be wasted on you. In exchange, I will take it upon myself to give you the greatest hospitality we have to offer."

At that moment, the maid drew her bow, and the eight heads of her dragon, which had been looking every which way until then, all turned to look right at us.

So, you're the spellcaster. Of course you are.

"Here I come," the maid declared. She let her arrow fly with the loudest explosion of the day, signifying the start of the worst predicament I had ever been in.

Before the shuddering reverberations in the air had subsided, the eight-headed dragon split into eight distinct creatures, which opened their maws wide and rushed at us from every direction.

"RRROOOAAARRRRR!"

"RRRRAAAWWWRRR!"

"WHAT?! THEY SEPARATED!"

"Huba! Make sure you don't bite your tongue! I'm going in at full speed!"

Even individually, each of the beasts was bigger than Rosalia, so much so that they could have swallowed her whole. And if that were to happen, we'd be burned alive.

Rosalia exploded into action, dodging the incoming missile and weaving her body through the ensuing storm of snapping jaws and roaring flames. Again and again we evaded by only the thinnest of margins, barely avoiding what was certain to be a fatal encounter. It was clear that in speed, at least, Rosalia still held the upper hand.

"Don't focus on the dragons alone, Huba. Pay attention to the maid as well."

"I know. She's the bigger threat, isn't she?"

It was, in fact, the cute maid that I was most wary of. Every time there was anything more than a pinhole opening between the flame dragons' twisting bodies, an arrow would thread through it with unerring precision. The shots weren't as powerful as her opening one had been, so I was able to deflect them all, but I could have done without her persistent aiming for my head and chest. Even without directly taking damage, my heart felt like it was going to give out what with all the close shaves.

How is she able to be so accurate under such chaotic circumstances anyway?!

"Uh, is it just me, or are her eyes totally keeping up with your movements?" I asked Rosalia apprehensively. After deflecting the fourth arrow that suddenly flew in from behind me, I was feeling dispirited.

"*Now* you notice? The situation's only going to get worse the longer this drags out."

"Yeah, you're right. Please buy me a bit of time. I'll activate Cataract Lance."

The weapon in my hand had been given to me by the Black Ops before our order set out. It had originally been mine, but I had passed it on to my direct subordinate, Ado, as a parting gift when he'd left Trycen in the company of the false champion Christoph, whom our government had been propping up.

During the so-called Black Wind Incident that followed, Ado and Christoph had both been caught by Toraj, and Cataract Lance had been seized. Luckily, Princess Shutola had pulled all sorts of strings and managed to return it to me.

She'd even gone to the trouble of powering it up with magic before handing it over. I sincerely believed that she, like General Azgrad, possessed some sort of extraordinary hidden ability.

"Pierce, Cataract Lance!"

As Rosalia desperately continued to evade the relentless barrage of attacks, Cataract Lance released a large quantity of water into the air around me, which quickly took on the form of many lances. I directed them towards the flame dra — "HUBA!"

"Wh—?! Hngh!"

In response to Rosalia's cry, I hurled all my water lances upwards. Unbelievably, the maid had leaped off her flame dragon and into the air far above us, an arrow already nocked and pointed our way. She was in an extremely unstable position, being upside down and in midair, but my instincts knew without a doubt that her shot wouldn't miss.

"Blaze Arrow."

The red arrow—something completely different from what she had been using so far—howled as it hurtled towards us. Its trajectory made no secret of its intent to bore through both me and my dragon. If we tried taking it head-on, the only future we would have was death.

Will my water lances be enough to block it? Uh...nope, impossible!

Despite using water against fire, which should have given me an advantage, I instinctively knew that I would lose the exchange.

"I'll alter its cou—"

"HOLD ON TIGHT!"

Just as I lifted Cataract Lance to shoot more spears of water directly from its tip, Rosalia turned abruptly and unleashed an Ice Breath that, despite containing only a single element, proved infinitely more devastating than Mdofarak's Trinity Breath. If someone had told me at that moment that Rosalia was the Ice Dragon King, I would have believed them. The beam of frost clashed with the fire arrow that had penetrated my water lances with ease, inducing an

explosion of steam that enveloped the entire area in an impenetrable fog.

“That’s amazing! You canceled it out!”

“No, I’m afraid...we lost that exchange...”

“What?”

In stark contrast to my cheering, Rosalia’s face was clouded. I looked over and realized that there was a hole in one of her wings. She was currently exerting herself to maintain our speed, but to no avail. We were getting slower with each flap as the bleeding grew worse.

The only silver lining was that there was now zero visibility around us thanks to all the water that I had filled the air with. Conversely, it was easy for us to see where our opponent’s forces were. Their glowing silhouettes were wandering around aimlessly, which meant they had lost sight of us.

“I believe it was the same attack that assaulted Azgrad at the start of this battle. The recoil from using a breath attack prevented me from evading in time.”

“So she shot *two* arrows in that split second?”

“I have no way of confirming it, but I believe so. A covert follow-up attack within the shadow of the flashy first one.”

“In any case, tending to your wound takes priority now! Oh no, the bottom of my bag’s been torn...”

The bag that I had secured to my saddle had been ripped apart without me even noticing. The recovery potions and other useful items that I had packed into it were long gone. *Was it from the barrage of those balls of light? Or did a flame dragon’s teeth get close enough to tear through it? Ugh, I can think of way too many opportunities where this could have happened.*

“R-Rosalia, I’m so sorry—”

“*Fffff*!”

Rosalia blew a controlled Ice Breath towards her own wing, which left a thin membrane of frost on its surface and stopped the bleeding.

Looks like she doesn't need my first aid, after all. "Talk about creative uses for dragon breath..."

"How long do you think I've been an ancient dragon? We won't be able to go as fast as before, but this is better than nothing."

"That's a relief. Should we hide ourselves and wait for an opportunity to launch a surprise attack?" *It's probably a dumb idea to rush head-on towards the maid. That would definitely not go well. So perhaps we should resort to slightly shad—* "Fire Storm."

A large wave of billowing flames suddenly rushed towards us, eating up the mist in its path and effectively smoking us out.

Seriously, what is with *that elf?! Aren't elves supposed to use Green Magic?! And is it just me or does she possess even more power than Clive, the idiot who died not that long ago?!*

"Ah, this direction is no good."

"It's an ambush, isn't it?"

"Have you resolved yourself to seeing this through, Huba?"

"Not by choice, but I suppose so."

While chatting with Rosalia, I had been stocking up on water lances. A burning light that was undoubtedly one of the flame dragons was looming just ahead.

Is it even possible for them to calculate our actions and *circle around in front of us so quickly?* I shot a quick look over my shoulder at the surging flames that were closing in on us from behind and sighed. *I'm so sorry, General. Looks like this is the end of the line for me. I really wanted to tell you these feelings of mine before I died, but I guess that's not happening after all.*

"Huba, you are the only warrior aside from Azgrad that I allow to ride on my back. Make sure you get through this alive. I have no intention of letting anyone else partner with me, do you understand?"

I started, then chuckled. "That so?"

Rosalia had given me a push, and I was now done with my preparations. We had bought ourselves enough time, which meant the only thing left was to

return to the general with all our limbs intact.

"Let's do this!"

We burst out of the mist to find, as expected, the maid lying in wait for us. The entire area was surrounded by what I recognized as the Red Magic spell Flame Rampart, which had likely been set up for the purpose of preventing our escape. The instant I took everything in, the now-familiar sound of an explosion went off, and Rosalia dodged the arrow by a hair. However, one of the flame dragons finally caught up with us, clamping its searing teeth onto my dragon's leg. She grunted in pain as a horrible burning smell assaulted my nostrils.

"Pierce!"

I slammed one of my water lances into the face of the flame dragon, but it showed no sign of letting go. I threw more and more lances in rapid succession but to little effect. *Dammit, the other flame dragons are already closing in while I'm still dealing with this one! Let go of her, already!*

Rosalia mustered the last of her strength to unleash one last Ice Breath. The attack collided with all three approaching flame dragons in front of us and obliterated them. The breath even managed to create a bridge of ice that stretched towards the maid.

"Go!"

"You really *are* creative!"

I quickly unstrapped myself from the saddle's safety harness and leaped out onto the makeshift path of ice. The moment my feet landed, an explosion rang out. I swung Cataract Lance with a do-or-die spirit, continuing to press forward. On and on I charged, deflecting incoming attacks a few more times until I finally reached the maid.

My mind and body were as spent as my stock of water lances. In contrast, there wasn't a single bead of sweat on the maid's face. She wasn't even out of breath.

"Why didn't you attack Rosalia with the other flame dragons?" I blurted out, overcome by a burning desire to know. Aside from the first beast that had bitten Rosalia and the three that had been hit with her Ice Breath, the rest were

showing no indications of moving to attack. Even now, they were simply hovering a distance away, watching.

The same was true of the flame dragon that the maid herself was riding. She could have easily moved away, leaving me stuck on top of a road that went nowhere. But instead, she had remained in place, focused only on intercepting me.

What is she thinking?

“Because I already accomplished what I set out to do.”

Clank.

The sound of metal sliding against metal rang out behind me.

I heard Rosalia ask, “Your goal was not to kill us, but to capture me?”

I turned around to see her entangled in chains. I realized with a shock that the four dragons surrounding her were each holding one end of a chain in their mouth.

“That is correct. Unfortunately, I am not very good at restraining others on my own. That is why I had to resort to using these Sealing Chains. You displayed a truly wonderful level of mobility, so I had no choice but to wound you first. And with the chains being what they are, I needed you to come to me.”

“I see. So you attached these to those invisible arrows of yours and shot them at me,” Rosalia observed. “Oh dear, it does not seem possible for me to break out of them. I feel my strength being drained...” She was having trouble remaining aloft.

“Dammit, let Rosalia g—”

“Clo-chan.”

I felt a hand land on my shoulder from behind. Something instantaneously wrapped itself around me before I could register what it was.

“Would it be possible to spare her life?”

“Don’t worry...”

I lost consciousness as Rosalia and the maid spoke with each other.

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The earsplitting sound of metal clashing against metal rang out again and again in the skies above the Grand Scarlet Canyon. Clotho, from its position inside my robe, was assaulting the black dragon with multiple tentacles that had formed into spears. Because it used Metalicize on the tips only the moment before contact, the slime had complete control over the trajectory of its tentacles. By fully utilizing its body's characteristics, my buddy's attacks were as supple as whips and, when necessary, as hard as adamantite ore, the hardest material it knew of.

However, the black dragon's defensive strength was not so easily overcome. Whenever Clotho landed an attack with an adamantite speartip, all it did was cause a shrill metallic sound, generate some sparks, and leave a tiny scratch. This dragon's scales were even tougher than those of the rock dragon. I had given Obsidian Edge a try, but the result had been much the same. It wasn't hard to deduce that the dragon possessed some type of Endurance-related skill.

Our attacks were turning out to be a terrible match-up with this particular opponent. Clotho *was* slowly sucking up his magic, but the dragon had so much that it was barely making a dent. And of course, the beast in question and his rider, Azgrad, weren't just sitting there nonchalantly taking our attacks. The dragon flapped his giant wings and charged towards us, not faltering in the face of Clotho's spear-like thrusts.

In addition, not possessing the Flight skill myself was definitely a disadvantage when it came to midair mobility. The enormous black form soaring through the sky at blinding speeds was a sight to behold. At the same time, he also had a very sharp ability to detect danger. He was constantly keeping an eye on my scythe and made sure to retreat at the slightest hint of trouble.

Bwoooohhh!

Halfway through the fight, Azgrad unleashed a fire attack similar to a dragon's Flame Breath from the conical lance that he was holding. We had been in close proximity at the time, but I managed to react quickly and redirect the trajectory of his attack with a powerful gust of wind.

"You really *are* good!" he cried. "Nice job dealing with that on the spur of the

moment!”

I was expecting some sort of gimmick from the lance based on how complex its structure is, but I’ll admit that spouting flames from the holes on its side caught me off guard. That’s not the only thing special about it either, I’ll bet. Holding your own against my four-meter-long Obsidian Edge is impressive, sure, but that lance itself must be of a pretty high rank in order to withstand those clashes.

“But it ain’t time to relax just yet!” he continued.

A pitch-black tail burst through the flames that I had just deflected and slammed Clotho and me into the far canyon wall. I barely managed to deploy Helix Barrier in the nick of time.

“Ugh, I really should practice my flying more.” *I thought I’d gotten the hang of it, but I can’t compare with those who can truly* fly*. Sera and Melfina would have been able to dodge that with ease. I’m gonna have to work harder.*

“Look at you, wounding my black dragon in a split second without taking any damage yourself. Your strength is even more impressive than the rumors say, Kelvin,” Azgrad spat as he checked out the bloodied tail of his mount.

Oh well, no harm, no foul. Although my Helix Barrier was almost completely spent, it had succeeded in shredding the black dragon’s tail during our brief moment of contact. And thanks to Clotho’s Blunt Damage Invulnerability skill, the wall slam didn’t even hurt. The copy of the slime that was currently within my robe was its combat-ready version and it had been given the vast majority of Clotho’s overall stats. Rapidly deploying a shield to protect me was as easy as pie.

I stepped out of the newly opened hole in the wall and brushed the dust from my clothes. A quick look around revealed that the other soldiers of the Dragon Knight Order were gone, probably having headed up towards the summit. Once again, Azgrad and I faced each other, sparks flying furiously between our gazes.

Just as we were about to kick it up a notch, I received messages from Sera and Melfina through the Network.

::Kelvin, all the enemies flew upwards! Can we chase them?!:: There’s no

need. Rion's left a whole bunch of Residual Slices up there. They'll come back down eventually.

::That's troubling, honey. Sera and I are currently tied for the number of troops we've brought down.:: ::Oh, I know. How about we help with the troops on the ground while waiting for the ones above to return?:: ::Sorry, Sera-nee. I just finished down here.:: ::Aw, c'mon!::

::And I've already captured the ancient dragon in front of the fortress. That only leaves Efil. How are things going on your end, lass?:: ::I am wrapping up here. Melfina-sama, perhaps you can help out somewhere el— I have an attacker incoming. Please excuse me.:: ::Efil's done too?! Mel, what are we gonna do?! We have no more enemies to fight!:: ::There's not much we *can* do, is there? How about we stay out of the way and spectate Honey's fight while we wait?:: ::I guess you're right. Sure, let's do that. Good luck, Kelvin! We'll be watching!:: With that, the conversation ended. From start to finish, it had sounded so relaxed that we might have all been on a stroll instead of in the middle of a battle. And during that time, Clotho had finished making its preparations inside my robe.

That black dragon's really glaring at us. Guess we should get back to the fight.

"What is that?"

"What do you mean? It's been there in front of you this whole time. This here's my buddy."

I cast Fly on Clotho, then hopped on top of the slime. My partner's body rapidly expanded until it was as large as the dragon before us.

"Whoa, hold on, it looks like the spitting image of my own mount! You're getting pretty fancy there!"

As Azgrad had noted, Clotho had taken on the general form of the very creature we were facing. It couldn't quite reproduce things like color and texture, being a slime and all, but at this size, such details were irrelevant. It didn't change how much of a threat my companion now posed.

"I love it! Encounters with fresh opponents that I know nothing about sure get my heart pumping! First that mountain-like sword of yours, and now a powerful

slime! This fight is thrilling! Don't you agree, Black Dragon?!"

There was an awkward pause.

"Ha ha ha! So you agree with me!"

What is with this pair?! Azgrad seems weirdly excited while the black dragon's just been silent this whole time. The contrast is intense, to put it mildly. Are they actually understanding each other? Are they capable of telepathic communication like my party and I are?

"Whoops, sorry for keeping you waiting," Azgrad said, looking up at me. "So, how about we get started?!"

"I'm good if you are. Bring it."

"Hah! Here I come!"

Responding to Azgrad's cry, the black dragon opened his mouth wide to build up for a breath. The roiling fumes billowing out in advance made it clear that this was going to be one hell of an attack.

Clotho, match it.

It didn't matter that we had lost the initiative. Clotho picked up on my command instantaneously and shifted into action without missing a beat. With motions that precisely mirrored those of the black dragon, my partner also gathered magic in its open jaws.

The slime shot out a Mortality Beam at the same time the black dragon fired off a jade-colored breath. The two attacks collided in the middle, neither making headway in pushing the other back. With nowhere else to go, the two torrents of power sprayed off in random directions, with the rays from Mortality Beam boring deep holes into the walls of the canyon as splatters of the jade-colored breath melted rock and emitted foul-smelling fumes.

The speeds at which rocks were being reduced to goop and the caustic smell made it abundantly clear that the dragon's breath was pure, deadly poison. *I bet one graze is enough to slap a person with some horrific debuff, if not an outright game-over.*

The clashing attacks eventually petered out, leaving the canyon in a miserable

state. Silence reigned for a short time.

“Nope, this ain’t it. There are demerits to this stupid collar that bastard Tristan didn’t tell me about,” Azgrad growled, lifting his lance. Instead of directing it at me, however, he used it to sever the collar on the dragon’s neck.

If that’s the same thing Gigant Lord was wearing during the assault on the Village of Elves, it’s supposed to force monsters into submission, isn’t it? How is Azgrad going to control the beast without it?

“What is the meaning of this?”

The black dragon finally spoke!

“I finally get to hear your voice, Black Dragon. What do you *think* I’m doing? I took off your restraints, that’s what. You weren’t this weak when you fought me. The collar was suppressing your abilities, wasn’t it?”

The dragon remained silent and watched as Azgrad proceeded to melt the collar using the flames from his lance.

“This way of doing things really doesn’t sit well with me; not at all. A *real* dragon knight is one who’s truly acknowledged by his dragon, with the two being connected in spirit. I don’t mind if you include me as your enemy. All I ask is for you to rampage to your heart’s content for now. This time, I’ll beat you into submission with my own hands and make you my partner!”

Uh, this is the kind of thing I shouldn’t interrupt, right?

“What an idiot you are, creating *more* enemies for yourself in the middle of battle. But... Well, I don’t dislike that kind of manliness. Fine, out of respect for you, I’ll tell you my name. I’m Dahak! I’ll cooperate with you only for as long as it takes to defeat this Black Robe!”

“What? You have to fight me too!”

“You serious right now?”

Yeah, I think the dragon’s in the right here.

“You know you’re supposed to just accept it when someone is making you an offer out of the goodness of their heart, right?” Dahak growled. “Am I supposed to retract the offer now? What does that make me look like? Huh?”

“Unfortunately, Shutola taught me to always doubt so-called ‘kind offers,’” Azgrad returned. “I can’t accept any favors from you until we’re truly connected.”

“When that white dragon brought you fruit, you ate it without thinking twice!”

“Rosalia is different.”

Azgrad and Dahak’s quibbling continued with no sign of ending. *Have they forgotten they’re in enemy territory right now? Hmm, I want to get the fight started already, so how about I help them out a little?*

“Why don’t you two cooperate to defeat me first, *then* fight each other as much as you want?” I cut in, looking Azgrad’s way. “Then you get to enjoy both the tag team match against my slime and me *and* a one-on-one fight against each other. That’s what, three birds with one stone?”

“Looks like we have no choice but to join forces temporarily,” Azgrad admitted without missing a beat.

“Yeah, you really *are* an idiot,” his mount replied.

This conversation’s finally going in the right direction. I love me a good battle royale as much as anyone, but it’d be the lamest outcome ever if the two of them knocked each other out first. I’ve got to make sure that I get in on the action too.

Dahak turned to me. “Black Robe, if you think me the weakling I was a moment before, you’re in for a world of pain. I’ll show you what my real powers are like!”

“My name is Kelvin. And this has all been too much talking already. Come at me any time you...want?!” I hurriedly dodged as I sensed something sharp rushing towards me from both sides. A quick look revealed several giant tree branches protruding from the canyon walls.

“*There* we go! Keep that up and you just might get me!” I whooped.

“You think you’re such a hotshot?!” Dahak shouted back.

The branches that I’d evaded had been only the beginning. Entire trees

suddenly sprouted from every available surface until the ravine had been converted into a luxuriant forest. Needless to say, the sight of such growth rapidly sprouting from the ground and walls of a previously barren land was extremely unnatural.

Is this Dahak's special power?

"I've heard that high-tiered dragons are prideful creatures. Beating you into submission *after* pissing you off and making you get serious sounds so much more fun than just fighting normally!"

It sounded like I was provoking him, but I genuinely did want him to go all out. The reason for that? Obviously, I planned on Contracting with him. If he lost to me without exhausting every card up his sleeve, his heart might not fully submit to me. The sentiment "I might have won if I had been serious about it" could potentially cause the process to fail.

Of course, I would have welcomed it if he'd asked for a rematch; in fact, part of me hoped he would. However, I had three other ancient dragons to approach after this. As such, it was simplest to go the extra mile and properly break his spirit here and now.

"Ha ha...ha ha ha...HA HA HA! Azgrad, here's someone just as idotic as you!"

"Don't you underestimate us idiots. And make sure you go all out when you fight me too!"

"Seriously, what do you two even think I am? Well, you asked for it. I hope you don't regret it!"

In response to Dahak's roar, the giant trees of the newly born forest sprouted countless growths that snaked towards me all at once. I unleashed Boreas Death Scythe again and again, but a new sprout would appear on the bisected surfaces and take the place of the previous tree in almost no time. The net of greenery encircled me, slowly but surely closing in to strangle me to death.

Seeing giant trees move like this sure takes me back to the Evil Sage Tree in Sangria Forest.

I switched to the Network. *Clotho.*

At my command, my partner fired a sustained Mortality Beam into the foliage. As expected, the charred surfaces of the trees toppled by its attack showed no signs of regenerating, proving that Dahak's attack was weak to fire or heat.

The forest is still swelling in size, but it looks like we can press this elemental advantage. Oh, hey, I just had a good idea...

Clotho, can you create more heads? Through the Network, I indicated the three-headed dragon that Alex was dragging along the ground. Immediately following my question, two more heads burst out on either side of the slime's faux dragon head.

Nice, just what I wanted.

"Whoa, seriously?!"

"Dammit! This is gonna hurt!"

A colossal tree with gray leaves and branches burst up from the ground, covering Dahak's entire body. *So, he can generate multiple kinds of trees!*

Clotho, you focus on the gray tree. I'll handle the rest.

Now that I understood the nature of Dahak's power, I was no longer afraid of it. While Clotho gathered magic in its three mouths, I gathered magic in my own fingers. The two of us took aim as one.

"Radiance Crossfire!"

Ten beams of light shot out from my hands, each changing trajectories sharply to make their way to randomly selected targets. After destroying the first one at high speed, the attacks promptly selected new targets, again and again, altering their courses as needed each time. The end result was streaks of light flying up, down, left, right, and every which way, crisscrossing each other repeatedly and inexorably burning down everything in their wake.

It's been a while since I last used that spell, but man *has it gotten a lot stronger. And each Radiance Lance is much thicker than before.*

During this time, Clotho was, of course, also on the offensive. Mortality Beam had become so much more powerful with the addition of the extra heads that

Dahak's shield was already on the verge of collapse.

No, it's the other way around. I should commend that gray tree for holding out for so long, but what surprises me most is the potential suggested by Mortality Beam being three times as strong as a result of Clotho having three heads. Then again, doing so does deplete the magic within its Storage at three times the rate.

"Shit!"

The instant Dahak's shield fell apart, he poked his head out to shoot his jade-colored breath. However, his output was only equal to Clotho's original Mortality Beam, which put him at a significant disadvantage. The plane of collision between the two attacks was slowly being pushed towards him.

Noticing Azgrad's absence from Dahak's back, I activated Presence Sensing.

Aha! He's trying to circle around behind me. I discovered a powerful aura underneath the area where Clotho was hovering in the sky, in a spot that was in the slime's—and, by extension, my own—blind spot. The nearby trees were making it impossible to see him, but the general wasn't even using Concealment. *Huh, he's riding on something*.

"Take th—"

"Impact."

"Oof!"

As expected, Azgrad had been standing on top of a giant growing tree. His plan had likely been to launch a surprise attack using the surrounding foliage as cover. I seized the initiative and shot Impact at him in an effort to knock him off his perch, but he managed to stab his lance into the tree in the nick of time and leaned on it to regain his balance.

Rather than looking panicked, he was grinning widely. "I'm sure you know, but this tree burns really well!" he shouted as his lance, which was still stuck in the wood, spurted out jets of fire.

The entire tree that Azgrad had been riding was suddenly engulfed in flames, burning brightly and furiously. It had turned into a massive burning stake that

was now heading my way, with the man himself having escaped into the air successfully by using the recoil of his attack.

You're still within range of Radiance Crossfire, man. And those beams have already locked on to you as their target.

"HHAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!"

With another tree serving as his foothold, Azgrad parried five Radiance Lances in quick succession. He even had the spare energy to throw a sharp look in my direction every once in a while in hopes of finding an opening to catch me. He was clearly well practiced in close-quarters combat, and his stats indicated that he was at least as strong as Clive.

Good, he'll be able to survive the Radiance Lances, no problem; the last thing I want is to finish things quickly. As for the tree...

While maintaining its "push-of-war" with Dahak, Clotho released part of its dragon form to expand its body even more until it was big enough to create a giant mouth, which subsequently swallowed the burning tree in its entirety. Thanks to having the second-highest Endurance stat in our party—with Gerard being the top—devouring the flaming stake was the same as gobbling down a piping hot bowl of porridge for the omnivorous slime.

Snaps and cracks rang out as my buddy "chewed" by applying pressure within its body. As soon as the fire was extinguished, the tree's magic was sucked away a split second before it was dissolved entirely.

"Wh—AHHHHHH!"

And while Clotho was at it, I'd asked the slime to secretly extend a tentacle towards Azgrad and throw him back at Dahak. The black dragon managed to catch the general in time, thanks to Clotho calling off their breath showdown moments before. And with that, we were back at our starting positions.

"So, what else you got? Show me your next technique or strategy!"

"This condescending asshole..."

"You'll regret being so patronizing afterwards!"

Didn't he say that earlier? And here I am, asking nicely with the best smile I

can muster. Was it all for nothing? Well, no matter. It doesn't change what we have to do: thoroughly crush everything they throw at us. Wait a moment... Does this already count as a rematch?

"Oh, poison this time?"

A purple mist started to fill the air around me. I looked down at the ground and saw flowers that I didn't recognize now in full bloom, oozing toxins like normal flowers would ooze nectar. *But won't this affect Azgrad too?*

"Am I imagining it or did the air suddenly turn really clean?" the general asked.

"I'm growing plants specialized for purifying air on my back right now," the dragon explained. "Don't leave this time. You'll die if you do, all right?"

Or not. Looks like Dahak's got this all figured out.

"Divine Aspect."

I dispelled Boreas Death Scythe, replacing it with a divine aura.

I can't wait to see just how big their repertoire of attacks is! Come on, let's get the next round started!

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Heavy panting could be heard, interspersed with a "Shit!" every once in a while.

At the same time, a low voice rumbled in a tone of disbelief, "Are you kidding me? He's even impervious to poison?!"

Ten minutes had passed since my first clash with Azgrad and Dahak. During that time, Dahak had continued to sprout plants that were poisonous, carnivorous, and all manner of dangerous. At the same time, Azgrad had disengaged the limiter on his Flame Lance Dragoon, the name of which I had picked up through Analyze Eye. In short, the two of them were doing everything in their power to give me a great time.

Clotho and I, for our parts, utterly crushed every attack they threw at us, leaving our opponents spent and wounded all over. I lost Fly a few times due to Divine Aspect but pulled through by casting it repeatedly.

Now the dragon was on the ground—probably having grown too tired to fly—and the general was on his knees. *Still, Dahak remembered to sprout plants that would purify the air for Azgrad's sake. Seems he's quite attentive to details.*

::Kel-nii, you guys are blocking the way with all the poison in the air! I might be fine, but Alex is pulling a yucky face!:: I received a sudden telepathic message from Rion, who was on her way back to the fortress. Efil had contacted me earlier to say that she too had wrapped things up on her end, and from what I could tell, our efforts to delay the Dragon Knight Order were going quite well.

It's about time. All right, let's start negotiating.

I landed in front of Azgrad and Dahak. "Looks like you're both pretty much out of MP. Are you satisfied yet? Or do you still have something else up your sleeves?"

After a slight pause, Dahak let the tension leave his body and collapsed to the ground. The purple poison surrounding the area dissipated at the same time, indicating that he had dispelled his power.

"Nah, I got nothing left. I surrender."

"What?! Black Dragon, you can't seriously be giving up! We can still—"

Clotho.

Before he could continue, I instructed Clotho to restrain the Trycenian. My slime buddy complied by wrapping its tentacles around him and then hardening its body with Metalicize. There was no way to break free—not from adamantite.

"Dammit! These restraints...I can just..."

"There's no point in dragging this out any longer," Dahak growled. "We have no more abilities to use, and that lance of yours is as empty of MP as we are. Besides, Black Robe there can kill us any time he wants. Am I right?"

I shrugged. "You tell me."

"Don't sidestep the question. Honestly, the last time I felt so out of my depth was when facing my old man. But what I don't get is why you're doing this.

What do you want from us?”

Great, so he’s acknowledged the difference in strength between us. Let’s send him the Contract request now.

“So *that’s* what’s going on. Why’re you even fighting with a class like that? You must have a screw loose.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Upon learning that I was a Summoner, Dahak’s eyes had narrowed. *How does a dragon’s face manage to be so expressive, anyway? And is it actually* that *rare to see Summoners like me? I guess it makes sense that the majority of us choose to stay in support positions... Wait, no, just being a Summoner in and of itself is a rare thing. The only others I know of are Colette and Tristan; my sample size is far too small. I’m sure there are more like me out there somewhere. Probably.*

Azgrad, of course, had no idea what we were talking about. He looked extremely confused.

“So, your answer?”

“I would be honored. Please accept me as your Follower.” To my surprise, Dahak lowered his head of his own accord and accepted the Contract. One of my Follower slots was promptly filled in with his name.

“Black Dragon?!”

“Sorry, Azgrad. I can’t be your partner. I do think highly of your bravery and conviction, but someone greater than you has shown up.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s a bit like what your army is doing. We dragons are prideful, but we are loyal to those we’ve acknowledged. I fought beside you with everything I had and was still defeated. My brother is saying that he needs me. I can’t help but answer the call.”

“That makes sense, but... Wait, when did you two even have that conversation?!” The prince could not accept what was happening.

Hold on, what did Dahak just call me?

“Oh, the poison’s gone! Looks like Kel-nii just finished up.”

Rion and Alex appeared from the far side of the passage. The latter had successfully taken a significant portion of the enemy troops into custody with Creeping Darkness.

“Uh-huh, pretty much,” I answered nonchalantly. “You’ve got a lot of people there. They’re all Paralyzed?”

“Yep! Look, there’s even an ancient dragon with them!”

The three-headed beast that Rion had fought, Mdofarak, was lying limply in the crowd. Seeing as none of its heads were moving, it had likely met the same fate as the rest of the group.

Looks like trying to form a Contract with her will have to wait.

“Just as I asked. Well done!”

“Hee hee hee.”

Rion thrust her head before me, so I patted it even more than I usually did. I would have loved to continue doing so forever just to preserve the smile of bliss on her face, but I was unfortunately in the middle of something.

“Mdofarak...” murmured Azgrad.

“So then, General. I’ve got to decide what to do with you next. Can I convince you to surrender as well? I promise to spare your life if you do.”

“We haven’t lost yet! My men—the ones who went by air—are probably already on their way to Parth by now. You can’t possibly think I’d surrender while they’re still fighting!”

Azgrad’s shout was loud enough to reverberate through the canyon. *Ugh, this type of guy gets extremely stubborn in situations like this. He’ll probably stick to his guns no matter what I do to him.*

At that moment, something fell from high above. It raised a huge cloud of dust, then we heard a faint cry of, “General...” emanating from within.

“My runner?!”

It was Azgrad’s subordinate who had landed. Thanks to me deploying a

barrier to cushion his and the dragon's fall in the nick of time, they didn't end up as splatters on the ground. Regardless, they bore severe cuts from head to toe.

Ah, they ran into Rion's trap.

"What happened up there?! Answer me!"

"Just when we...were nearing the summit...we found something...set up all over... I ended up like this...when I touched it... The ones who went before...probably..."

"Those wounds look like cuts from a sword." Azgrad whirled towards me. "Is this your doing?!"

"Well, not mine per se."

Rion was the one who had left a bunch of Residual Slices up near the summit. Her Unique Skill enabled her to fix slashes made by her sword in place in the air. While we had been waiting for the Dragon Knight Order's arrival, she had been up near the summit from dawn until dusk leaving them everywhere and in such density that slipping through unharmed simply wasn't possible.

What's more, the slashes frozen in midair retained the properties of the sword used plus her own abilities. She had used one of the Black Swords Aklama and Lethal Opiate Sword. That combination of one of the sharpest weapons I'd ever forged and a blade that robbed victims of their five senses was a rather nasty setup, to put it mildly. There was no way to break through the barrier of blades, not without the presence of a powerhouse who could deal with Rion's slashes head-on.

Melfina, Sera, what's become of the ones who took to the sky?

::We rounded up those who turned back,:: Sera replied. ::Or, to be more specific, I controlled them.:: Controlled how?

::I made a small cut on my palm and slapped all their foreheads.:: You...went around smearing your blood onto every single one of them?

::They'd have fallen straight down if I'd put them to sleep or knocked them unconsci— Ohhh, you're worried about me! Don't be; I have Auto Healing! The

cut's already healed by itself!:: I...see.

::I also retrieved the ones who fell down, honey.:: Someone just fell right next to me.

::I thought it would help your negotiations to go more smoothly.:: It was on purpose?!

In any case, we had clearly demonstrated to Azgrad the situation that his forces were currently in. But considering his personality, I foresaw negotiations taking more time regardless, so I decided to return to the fortress first. I had Clotho pick up the general, the runner, and the runner's dragon, and knock them all unconscious by draining their MP. Lastly, I instructed everyone to withdraw to the fortress.

"All right, let's head back before continuing this. The other ancient dragons should be there already, which should make it easier to finish everything up in one go."

"Umm...brother?" Dahak asked hesitantly.

So, I didn't hear him wrong! Why the heck is he calling me that?!

"Hold on right there. I don't remember ever becoming your brother."

"The fact that you accepted me as your subordinate means that we've exchanged sake cups and pledged ourselves in brotherhood! It's only natural that I address you as such."

What are we here, the mob? Why did you suddenly turn into a delinquent character?! I thought, then sighed. "All right, fine, call me whatever you want. So, what do you need?"

"I have two questions. First, who's this young girl?"

Rion cut in before I had time to answer. "I'm Rion, Kel-nii's little sister. Nice to meet you!"

"I'm sorry for being disrespectful! It's an honor to meet you, sister!"

"Sister?! That's a bit..."

Whoa, it's rare seeing Rion wince. But I agree that "sister" is going a bit far.

“Then ‘m’lady.’”

“That’s still kinda...”

“All right, all right, let’s leave the discussion of what to call everyone for later. What’s your second question?”

“Oh, right. Uh, would you prefer that I morph into my human form? I can do that if you want.”

“You...wouldn’t end up naked after the transformation, right?”

“No worries! I will be in what I was last wearing before taking dragon form.”

“That works. Then sure, show us.”

“Yes, sir!”

For a split second, Dahak’s form shone with a bright light. A moment later, his gigantic reptilian form had been replaced by a man who was a head taller than me. He had long white hair, tanned skin, and gallant features that seemed both fierce and recalcitrant. I had no idea how age worked for dragons, but his human appearance seemed to be roughly twenty years old. The outfit that he was wearing was that of a farmer’s.

Why a farmer?

“This is how I look. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure what to say...” *Mainly because of the outfit. The disparity between his looks and what he’s wearing is* way *too extreme. Seriously, what’s going on there?* “Uh, in any case, let’s head for the fortress. I’ll introduce you to the others.”

“Yes, sir.”

With that, we started walking. As Dahak passed by the unconscious Azgrad, he murmured, “Sorry things didn’t work out, General. But I had my complaints too, y’know. How do I put it? The food, man...”

What’s this? Did Azgrad give him cheap food?

“Feeding me meat for every meal is way too cruel, man. I’m a vegetarian.”

A surprising confession from a dragon, of all creatures!

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All in all, I thought the strategy we had taken to delay the enemy troops was a resounding success. We'd managed to trap the Dragon Knight Order within the canyon and had captured or killed every single member, including their ancient dragons and officers. Furthermore, we hadn't taken a single casualty on our side. It was safe to say we had clinched ourselves a great victory.

The number of enemies that we had managed to take alive was a lot higher than expected, but thankfully, it wasn't too much trouble carrying them back to the fortress. The ones that Rion had Paralyzed were rendered immobile for the day, but that was where the ones under Sera's control came in.

Blood Dominion was a skill that enabled the demon to take control of anyone she got her blood on. According to her, she only needed to smear a single drop on someone's head—which I took to mean their brain—in order to control their entire body. The duration of her control depended on the amount of blood involved and the mental willpower of the target, but Sera boldly claimed that she only needed a single drop to control "troops of this level" for several hours.

Thankfully, the numbers captured from the sky and ground troops were about the same. So we had the blood-controlled soldiers carry their allies into the cells beneath the fortress, lock each other into the restraints created by Clotho, and then walk into their own cells. It made for a rather surreal sight.

While the majority of the prisoners were simply crammed together in large cells, Azgrad and Rosalia had been placed into some of the solitary chambers that I had spent extra time working on. I was confident that neither of them would be able to so much as leave a mark on the bars in their current restrained state.

At the moment, Rosalia was remaining cooperative, and Azgrad was likely to regain consciousness in the next hour or so. During that time, my companions and I gathered in the large living room of the fortress, resting up after all the fighting we'd done. None of us had taken a single scratch, so it was mainly a matter of fatigue.

We had also invited Sabato's group to join us, but they seemed strangely fired up and were off in the training hall. At least, most of them seemed to be fired

up. For some reason, Guin was crying as Akgas dragged him away.

Did something happen out there?

"I'm relieved that Boga and Mdofarak both agreed to the Contract so easily. Considering how quickly they were knocked out, I'd expected a word or two of protest."

The two of them had yet to grow enough to take on human form and speak in human tongue, so they were currently sleeping within my magic pool. After all, we couldn't let them inside; their bodies were simply far too big.

I'll have to consider what to do with them once we get back to Parth. Would they enjoy going on walks?

"Ah, that's 'cause they only Evolved recently," Dahak explained. "The soldiers who were riding them didn't know how to take advantage of their newfound strength, so those two were probably dissatisfied with the arrangement, same as me. Then out of the blue, they encountered Rion-sama and Gerard-san, both of whom completely overwhelmed them in strength. Of course they would turn over to show their bellies and surrender. I'm different, though; I hung in there and kept fighting until I was fully convinced!"

"And in doing so, you exposed every last one of your aces."

"Ugh..."

Back when I'd first met him, I had mistaken Dahak for a reticent and standoffish character. That turned out to be quite far from the truth—he had already settled in well with our group. Although his way of speaking was brusque and his mannerisms rough, he had a warm and caring heart. Despite having spread poison everywhere during our fight, he had kept an eye out for Azgrad until the end.

Is he like this because he's acting out against his parents during some sort of rebellious age? Nah, I've got to be reading too much into it.

"My power's full potential can only be tapped into in a place with fertile soil. There's no way for me to perform at my best in an arid, barren land like this."

"I see, so you can't be counted on to fight at full strength if you don't get to

carefully choose the location! That sounds inconvenient!” Sera exclaimed.

“Augh!”

What’s more, he was extremely weak at verbal tête-à-tête. Sera hadn’t meant to be sarcastic—she was simply saying what she thought—and yet he’d still taken mental damage.

He cleared his throat. “W-Well, the food probably also played a big part in their decision. The instant they took a bite of what sister Efil made, the look in their eyes completely changed.”

“Is that so? All I did was toss a few ingredients into a pan and fry them together,” Efil noted as she walked in, pushing a cart loaded with finger foods.

Efil, when it’s your food, no one *can resist, all right? After the meal, they looked at you with even more respect than they did me, and I’m supposed to be their new master!*

“Just goes to show that everyone loves good food,” I conceded. “As for Dahak’s meal...”

Rion finished my sentence for me. “Fresh vegetables only. Right, Hak-chan?”

“That’s right! You really do get it, m’lady!”

Apparently, this badass dragon absolutely couldn’t handle meat at all and only ate vegetables. Back in the barracks of the Dragon Knight Order in Trycen, he had somehow made do using his own powers. However, the collar had greatly restricted what he was capable of, so much so that it took all his effort to procure the bare minimum of food in terms of quantity and quality to sustain himself. He’d wanted to protest, but the collar didn’t allow him to speak, and Azgrad had just kept shoving meat in front of him.

That sounds like a pretty rough time, all right.

“As the request was for fresh vegetables without seasoning, all I did was cut them up. I’m not sure whether that can even be considered cooking, but here it is,” Efil said, placing a glass filled with vegetable sticks onto the table. To her credit, it was a very colorful glass, containing radishes, carrots, red bell peppers, and more.

“Thank you so much. This is an absolute feast for me, so it’s all good! I’m digging in!” Without further ado, he bit into a carrot stick. Then he fell silent.

“Dahak?” I asked apprehensively.

“THIS IS SO FRESH AND JUICY!” he cried before taking another big bite. “This is just as good as the crops I pour my heart and soul into tending! No, it’s even better!” One more bite. “My tongue—my stomach is crying with delight!”

Whoa, he’s started offering commentary between bites. I stared as the sticks disappeared at an incredible pace.

“Sister! Where did you get these vegetables from?!”

“Our usual grocery store in Parth.”

I remember that place being an ordinary market. The produce is fresh because we throw everything into Clotho’s Storage as soon as we buy it, but I don’t think they’re particularly high-quality or anything.

“You’re telling me that vegetables of this quality are being sold commonly?! Brother, I’ll live in Parth for the rest of my life!” the dragon declared with a straight face, pieces of vegetables all around his mouth.

“Dude, calm down.” *Is this the rebound from his appetite having been suppressed for so long?*

“Allow me to explain.”

Oh, here comes the great professor of gastronomy, Melfina-sensei!

“Efil’s well-honed cooking abilities have already taken one step into the realm of the gods. Her technique is such that she breathes life into ingredients just by applying a knife to them, reviving them to full freshness and drawing out every last particle of savoriness within. She can now hear the voices of the spirits that dwell inside the ingredients, so to speak.”

Dahak whirled around. “Can you really?! You’re amazing, sister!”

Efil shook her head and stated clearly, “No, I cannot hear anything.”

“Mel?” I asked with a pointed look.

Melfina stuck out her tongue. “Just a goddess joke, tee hee.”

She made it sound so realistic, I almost believed her! Okay, but joking aside, considering how good Efil already is, I wouldn't be surprised if she does manage to do something that incredible. Regardless of how, it seems certain that she's raising the rank of the ingredients she processes. Then again, can the technique of drawing out such flavor by cutting something with a knife even be considered a "cooking technique"? Is there a word for a method that goes beyond "cooking"?

"Well, I definitely get Boga and Mdofarak's feelings now. All that stuff about our pride as dragons is nothing before this masterful cuisine. Oh, may I have more, please?"

Knock, knock.

Just as Efil was about to get Dahak seconds, someone rapped on the living room door. A moment later, Gerard walked in.

"Excuse me, my king. Azgrad has come to. The golems are still keeping an eye on him, but will you be seeing him now?"

"Oh, that was pretty fast. Time to do some negotiating. Mel, is the thing I asked for ready?"

"Here you go." Melfina passed me a collar decorated with ancient runes along its length, which were pulsating with a faint light.

Chapter 2: The Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance The jail beneath Obsidian Fortress was entirely silent. That was to be expected, of course, seeing as the cells were filled with soldiers who were either still entirely immobile from the Paralyze debuff or under Sera's control. The golems on guard were also immobile aside from lowering their heads when we passed—as a result of us focusing on quantity while creating them, they were only capable of simplistic movements.

Seeing the soldiers and dragons constrained by Blood Dominion sitting there with their heads bowed and their eyes devoid of light made me feel a little bit like a villain.

"Sera, how much longer will your ability last?"

"Hmm...it'll hold for another two—no, three more hours!"

Damn, that skill of hers is brutal. The fact that it's fully usable even in close-quarters combat makes it more formidable than Clive's Charm Eye. And even without relying on her skills, she's been beating me in every practice match we've had since her Evolution. I think my losses are almost in the double digits now. She's probably powerful enough to be a Demon Lord already, isn't she? Not that I know how powerful past Demon Lords have been. Oh, hey, if I learn Colette's barrier spell, does that mean I can enjoy no-holds-barred fights with Sera as many times as I want? Yes, that sounds like a genius idea.

"Shouldn't I just control him too?" she asked, nodding towards Azgrad. "If it's

information you want, Blood Dominion works much better than Hypnosis.”

“Let’s leave that as a last resort.”

Azgrad and Rosalia, the only prisoners who were currently conscious, were located in special rooms at the far end. I pushed open a heavy door as sturdy as the walls of the fortress itself, revealing three cells and a simple chair.

The chair was where Gerard had been sitting. There were a few golems standing guard as well, but I didn’t expect them to be capable of handling these particular prisoners. As such, we had done rock-paper-scissors to decide on a lookout schedule, and Gerard had been the first to lose. Naturally, Efil had been exempted, since she was already on cooking duty.

When I peered into his cell, I found Azgrad sitting cross-legged and looking straight back at me. His eyes were burning with fighting spirit, without a speck of resignation to be seen. He wasn’t saying anything, although that might have been due to the fact that his mouth was still covered by Clotho’s adamantite restraints.

“Clotho, remove the gag.”

The slime obediently de-Metalicized the tentacle over Azgrad’s mouth and withdrew it. The general looked somewhat grossed out by all the slithering that was happening across his body.

The first words that he said, however, were, “Why did you take me alive? Kill me, already.”

“Come on, don’t be so combative right off the bat,” I replied disarmingly. “I’m here to strike a deal with you.”

“What kind of deal?”

“Well, that’s what I’m really here for, but let’s shoot the breeze a bit first. How’s Clive-kun doing?”

“What kind of sick joke is that? You killed him!”

Although Azgrad frequently used words like “bastard” and “piece of shit” when talking about Clive, his incensed reaction to my question suggested that he did hold a certain amount of respect for the guy.

But that doesn't add up. "I didn't kill him. I messed up and let him get away."

"Bullshit."

"I was really close, but then this asshole named Tristan interfered. He's the general of your Mixed Monster Order, isn't he?"

"You ain't fooling me. Tristan said you turned the tables on Clive and killed him."

He's being surprisingly responsive. Maybe this negotiation will be smoother than expected.

"Well, he did try to lay hands on my woman. I would have *loved* to get some closure by finishing him off. But after I cut off both his legs, Tristan appeared. He used the power of one of his Followers and the effect of his own Summoning skill to spirit both of them away right under my nose."

At least I've more or less figured out how he did it, so I've already prepared countermeasures for next time. He won't be able to do the same thing here.

"That's why I want to know where Clive-kun is. You know, so I can finish the job. But now you're saying that Tristan—the one who rescued him—reported that he died. Is that right?" Azgrad remained silent, so I continued. "I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

I heard Dahak asking Efil, "Who's brother's woman?" in a whisper at the back.

Stop it; Efil's face has turned all red. And we're going for a serious mood right now.

"Considering how badly Clive-kun was bleeding, he might have succumbed on the way back. But even so, he's a general, right? Wouldn't Tristan have brought his body home?"

"There...was no body. All we got was the report that you'd killed him."

"So you're saying there was no evidence. Where's his body now, then?"

"Hold on a moment," interrupted a voice from the cell directly across. "Azgrad, this man has offered no evidence to support what he's saying either."

The new voice was, of course, Rosalia. Despite being an ancient dragon, her

size was much closer to that of a normal adult dragon, which was why we had managed to fit her into the cell she was now occupying. I had removed her bindings a short while ago.

"An equally likely scenario is that this man had killed Clive by the time Tristan showed up. Tristan decided against making contact with him and prioritized returning to deliver his report, but this man is now trying to foist the blame onto him."

I hadn't truly expected them to take my word for it, but hey, Rosalia's pretty sharp. More so than Azgrad, at least.

"I guess it makes sense for you to think so. Looks like I failed to pull one over on you two."

"Are you frea—"

"So, has the Charm debuff he cast on the members of the Magic Knight Order been dispelled?"

I couldn't read Rosalia's expression all that well, but Azgrad's eyes widened noticeably.

So, it hasn't been dispelled. Knowing Clive-kun's personality, I'm sure he used his skill on the female knights in the order. But when the caster dies, the effects of any spells they cast should also vanish. That's a universal truth. In other words, Clive-kun is still alive somewhere in a location the other Trycenian generals aren't aware of.

"Well, all right, let's talk about something else. Judging from your reactions, you know the effects of a spell should be dispelled when the caster dies. The question is, why didn't your common sense kick in until I pointed it out to you?"

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It was time to sort through the facts a bit. First, Azgrad and Rosalia's failure to question why Clive's Charm had never faded. That could very well have been an indication that they themselves were under the effects of a similar power. However, the two of them seemed very much in control of their mental faculties. Therefore, whatever was affecting them must have been selectively acting on their unconscious mind as opposed to a total-control power like

Charm. At least, that was my impression.

When I pressed further, I discovered that they thought nothing of the rumors of the appearance of the Demon Lord and somehow had no misgivings about the act of invading the rest of the continent, which was strange. True, they had been rapidly expanding their military as of late, but invading the continent meant making enemies of the Adventurer's Guild, which had worldwide influence; Gaun, which was ruled by the Beast King, a Rank S adventurer; Toraj, which was under the Water Dragon King's protection; and Deramis, which was blessed by the goddess Melfina.

Every last one of those groups was a force to be reckoned with, and the very idea of inviting their combined ire was entirely insane. Yet—just as with the matter of Clive's supposed demise—it was only when I specifically asked Azgrad and Rosalia about this plan that they first began to show doubt.

Is this eagerness to go to war also because of whatever power is acting on them? Though I also feel like half of what's driving Azgrad is his appetite for fighting strong opponents. In any case, the rings that Melfina made for us as a precaution against Clive-kun just might come in handy.

The most obvious suspect for this apparent spell was, of course, Tristan. After hiding Clive away somewhere, he had usurped the other's position as general of the Magic Knight Order. He was also backed by a suspicious merchant—the same one who had supplied the three collars that were effective even on Rank S monsters.

We're going to need to identify that merchant. Hmm, considering it was Tristan who recommended Clive for the position of general in the first place, it's almost one hundred percent certain that he's guilty. Could the Demon Lord in fact be Tristan rather than the King of Trycen? No, but he didn't have Mara Pisuna—the skill that identifies a Demon Lord—when I checked his Status.

The next likely candidate was Zel Trycen himself. Suspicions that he was a Demon Lord had been coming from multiple sources for quite some time. However, there was still a possibility that he was merely being manipulated by Tristan. Even so, Zel was questionable in his own right. According to the soldiers we'd interrogated during our defense of the Village of Elves, his current

personality and preferences were a rather marked departure from earlier years, and he would emit a strangely coercive aura every once in a while.

Yep, he is definitely suspicious.

"We were being manipulated?" Azgrad murmured to himself, palpably shaken.

Looks like we're almost there. "So, what do you two want to do now?"

"What do you mean? We're *your* prisoners," Rosalia responded.

Azgrad snorted. "If I genuinely had a say, I'd like to properly thrash whoever it was that set Trycen up."

"Well, you know, I'm a Rank S adventurer," I mentioned. "Both the guild and the alliance of the three countries have granted me a certain amount of authority. If needed, you can all stay with me—with certain restrictions—under the pretext of us keeping you under guard. There aren't many places that can accommodate ancient dragons, after all. If you don't like that idea, I *can* hand you over to the relevant authorities according to standard procedure. No idea what would happen to you from there, though."

I drew the collar Melfina had made from a pocket and flashed it before the prince and the white dragon's eyes.

"That collar is... But I burned it!"

Unsurprisingly, Azgrad was the first to react. He'd clearly mistaken the object in my hand for the collar that Dahak had been wearing before. It was true the appearances of the two were quite similar, but the function of this one was entirely different.

"Hold your horses. This is the one we seized during the assault on the Village of Elves," I explained. *Then again, both of these collars came from the same source: Tristan.*

"The Village of Elves?" Azgrad repeated in a puzzled voice before it hit him. "You mean Gigant Lord from the Mixed Monster Order!"

"Even so, it should serve the same function. Is that what you were referring to when you mentioned restrictions? You want one of us to wear it?" Rosalia

asked.

“You’ve got the general idea, but we fiddled with this one a bit. Mel, the floor’s all yours.”

“Thank you.”

I handed the collar to Melfina as she stepped forward.

Azgrad, who seemed to have sensed something about her, twisted his gallant face into a frown. “That woman’s bad news. I can’t gauge her strength.”

“How rude! Can you not pry into a maiden’s secrets as you please?!”

“Mel, the explanation.”

“Right, right. Ahem. This collar is, at its base, the type that slaves are forced to wear. However, its output was previously boosted so that its effects would activate instantly and be effective even against Rank S monsters. I was very impressed when I first opened it up. The person who worked on it must have spent a staggering number of years researching and developing their craft.”

The collar that Mel was praising so profusely even included a feature to curtail any efforts by the wearer to remove or destroy it. Add to that the ability to wrestle absolutely any target into submission and you had a truly frightening item.

Three of these had been made and used: one on Gigant Lord of the Mixed Monster Order, one on Dahak, and the last on one of Tristan’s Follower monsters.

“It greatly weakens the wearer and robs them of the ability to speak. And of course, it places them under the control of the one who put it on them. At least, that’s what it used to do.”

“Past tense?”

“Well, it wasn’t ideal. So I used my Accessory Craftsmanship and Alchemy skills to overwrite almost everything about it. The inability to speak and the weakening effect have been removed. Consequently, it should not unduly affect the wearer’s day-to-day life in any way. In exchange, it forbids them from attacking and betraying us and our allies. The way that it activates is similar to

the way in which a normal Slave Collar works."

To be honest, I'd wanted to grab Dahak's collar too, but no point crying over spilled milk.

"If you agree to join me, you won't come to any harm, and I'll even guarantee you a certain amount of freedom. I'll also cooperate with you to take down the mastermind who's been brainwashing your people. And if you're interested, we'll even train with you. I'm not the strongest fighter in my party, if you catch my drift."

"Really?! Uh, no, never mind."

Heh, I knew that would pique his interest.

"Unfortunately, we can't trust you outright, not when your country and the alliance are in the middle of an all-out war. I'm sure you understand."

"So, those are your terms? I don't doubt that collar will prevent me from opposing you. But what I want to know is: why're you going to all this trouble? I'm a prince—hell, I'm the crown prince. There are any number of ways you could use me without taking such roundabout measures."

Sure, if all I want from you is information, I can just let Sera do her thing. But I've got other plans.

"As I said, I'm here to strike a deal. This collar is nothing more than a safeguard. What I really want..." I turned my head. "...is you."

Noticing my gaze, Rosalia looked over. "Me?"

Azgrad immediately flared up. "Hold on right there! What do you want with Rosalia?!"

"Hear, hear! Why do you want her when you already have me?!"

I expected Azgrad's resistance, but why is Sera getting on my case about this? You're definitely twisting the meaning of my words on purpose, aren't you?!

"Ah. So sister Sera is brother's woman!"

"Um, I'm also, kind of..."

Aw, Efil shyly raising her hand is super cute. But okay, I'm tuning out the

conversation taking place at the back of the room now.

"Hang on, let's dial this back a little. I think everyone's misunderstanding what I'm saying. Look, we only have this one collar. Naturally, that means we can only let one person wear it. By extension, that means only one person can stay with me and be a part of defeating our common enemy. Do you understand what that means?"

"The other will be handed over to the alliance?"

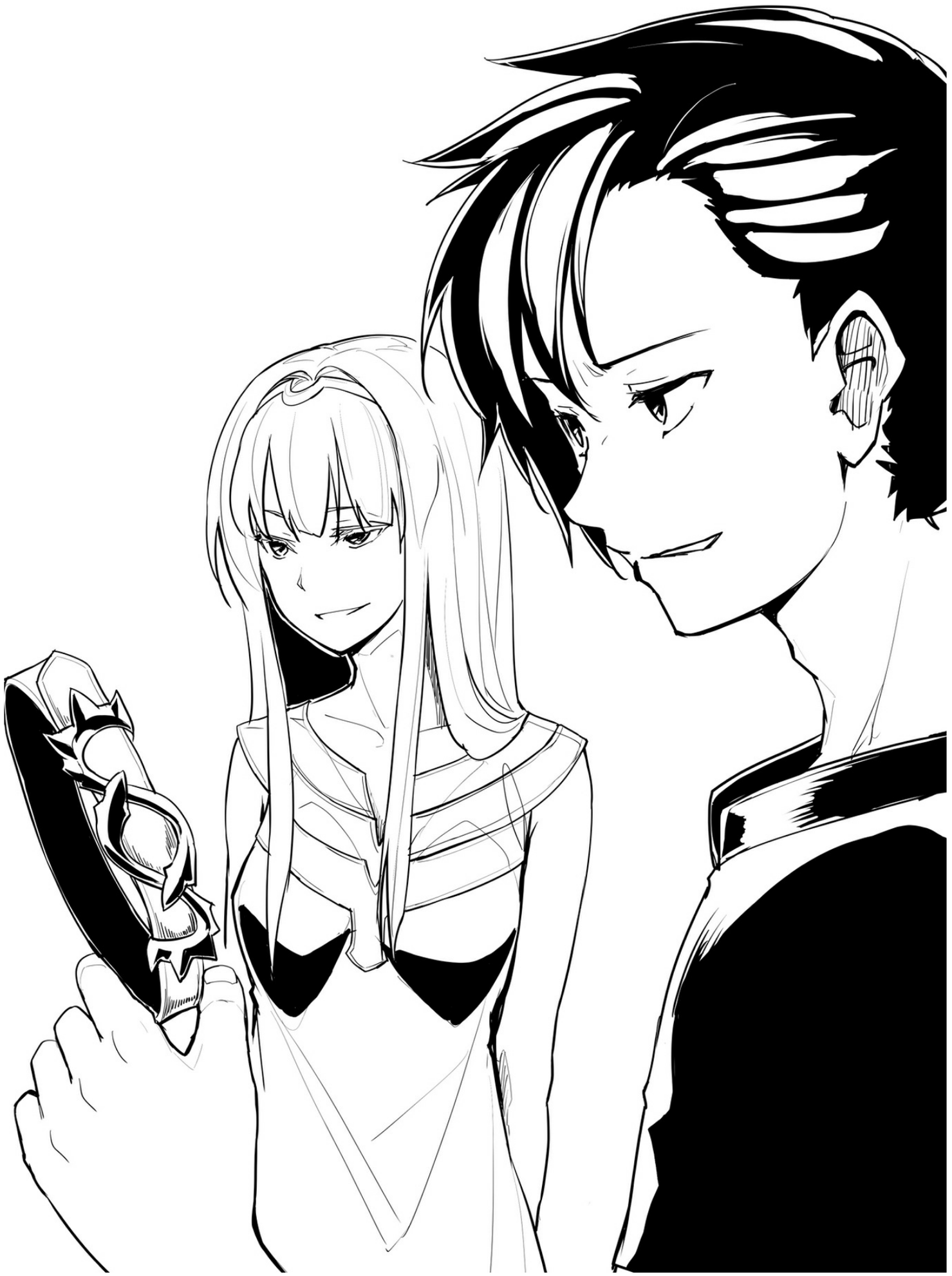
"As you can see, this collar is human-sized. It won't fit on a dragon's neck anyway. However, there is an alternative way for Rosalia to stay with us as well."

I sent Rosalia the offer of a Contract. After taking a moment to read the message, she closed her eyes and murmured, "I see... A Follower Contract. You are a Summoner."

"Did you say Summoner?!"

"That's right. I'm a Summoner, just like Tristan. But I treat my Followers well. Both sides stand to benefit from this deal. My party gains a powerful new member, and you're both guaranteed our full efforts in helping to take down the culprit manipulating Trycen. The other ancient dragons, Boga and Mdofarak, have also joined our side. And, as you can see, so has Dahak."

"Once the war is over, we will remove your collar, Prince Azgrad," Melfina added. "Depending on how it turns out, you may be held partially responsible for the entire ordeal, but we will strive to give you as much support as possible in light of you having been brainwashed. What do you say?" She held out the collar, her face bearing a smile so angelic that it blotted out every last speck of doubt in the hearts of all beholders.



Azgrad turned to me. “What will happen to Rosalia after she Contracts with you?”

“I will not undo her Contract, if that’s what you’re asking. She will remain my Follower.”

Upon hearing my answer, Azgrad sighed deeply. Then he lifted his head high and declared, “Then we have no deal. I will never sell out my companions. Put the collar onto Rosalia. She can adopt human form, so it should fit. Then turn me over to the alliance. That’s the only way.”

“What are you saying, Azgrad?!” Rosalia exclaimed.

“That’s what will happen to the other members of the order who were captured anyway, right? They’ll get uneasy without their commander. Rosalia, you join Kelvin’s group and make whoever’s turned Trycen upside down pay.”

“There’s no telling what the alliance will do to you! Everything will work out if I simply become his Follower!”

“Are you out of your mind?! Then *I’ll* become Kelvin’s Follower! Don’t you *dare* accept the Contract!”

Man and dragon began to argue furiously, with neither willing to budge an inch. Of course, I had no intention of Contracting with Azgrad. Having a member of royalty as a Follower sounded like all kinds of trouble.

All of a sudden, a voice rang out from a third cell that was out of their line of sight. “E-Excuse me! I offer myself to be turned over to the alliance in the general’s place! Can you allow them both to stay with you?!”

“That voice... It’s Huba!”

He was right. The occupant of the last special cell in our underground space was Huba Rockway, the lieutenant general of the Dragon Knight Order and Efil’s earlier opponent. She had been restrained just as Azgrad and Rosalia were, but halfway through, I had telepathically ordered Clotho to free her mouth.

Looks like she’s doing exactly what I’d hoped she would.

“Yes, General! I’m Huba! I apologize for speaking out of turn after having been captured!”

“I don’t care about that! What the hell did you just s—”

This time, I had Clotho cover Azgrad’s mouth back up. Ignoring his “Mmm!” and death glare, I turned to Huba. “The thing is, you, as a mere lieutenant general, are nowhere near what the other two are worth.”

“Please, I beg of you! I’ll do anything you ask me to!”

“*Anything*?” I approached her cell. “What if I asked you to drop your disguise as a man and come to my room wearing something that will please me?”

“I-If that would change your mind, then yes!”

As Azgrad frowned in confusion and tried to speak through his gag, Rosalia exclaimed, “Huba, do you know what you are agreeing to?!”

I ignored the ruckus that Rosalia was raising to stare straight into Huba’s eyes. Although she was wearing her hair short, had an androgynous face, and was clad in a man’s uniform, she was undoubtedly a girl. That fact was backed up by her Status window. She unflinchingly returned my gaze, albeit with a few tears welling up at the corners of her eyes.

Looks like she’s resolved herself.

“Okay, you all pass! Clotho, release them.”

The Clotho clones promptly withdrew their restraints and bounced up to perch on the respective shoulders of the three prisoners.

Huba could only manage a bewildered “What?” while Azgrad asked slowly, “What is the meaning of this?”

“Sorry, we had to test you guys. We needed to see if we could trust you or not.”

And with that, I proceeded to explain the farce. In short, this had been less of a negotiation and more a test of how much Azgrad and his companions could be trusted. Things would have been over immediately if the prince had sold out Rosalia. Instead, he’d firmly rejected my appeal to his battle junkie side and dodged the trap.

Rosalia and Huba had also done well. Unlike the other Trycenian forces I had encountered so far, these three truly cared for each other. As such, I

determined them to be trustworthy individuals.

Still, making it clear through the Network beforehand that this was just an act was definitely for the best. Our dialogue sounded exactly like what a villain would say. Worst case, Sera might have protested with her full strength instead of mere words, and that would have been an instant KO for sure.

Rosalia sounded slightly impressed. “You were testing us? What a bold strategy.”

“B-But then how *are* you going to deal with us? Will you just let us all stay here?” Huba asked apprehensively.

“Yes, but with certain restrictions. Oh, and Azgrad, you’ll still be wearing this collar.”

Specifically, I would be assigning a Clotho clone to each of them with only one-way communication. That way, I would be able to check in on them any time I felt the need to. It was the most sensible course of action.

“What? Didn’t you only have one collar?” Azgrad asked.

Collar, yes. “Efil.”

“Yes, Master,” my maid replied before proceeding to take something out of Clotho’s Storage. “Here are two maid uniforms enchanted with the same effect.”

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While Huba and Rosalia were led away by Efil to have their measurements taken and be outfitted for their maid uniforms, the rest of us moved to the large living room. Before long, the trio rejoined us, revealing the women’s new looks.

“Wow! It suits you two!” I commented.

Dahak roared with laughter. “The clothes make the man, as they say! Or make the maid, in your case! Ha ha ha!”

“You shush, Dahak! Ugh, why a maid outfit...”

Rosalia’s human form, in contrast to Dahak’s, had glossy black hair and

porcelain white skin. She looked similar in age to Ellie back home and gave off a “beautiful big sister” aura. Despite wearing the maid outfit, she still seemed to exude a sense of poise and dignity. According to Rosalia herself, this was her first time showing this appearance to anyone other than Azgrad.

“It...feels so breezy down there.”

Huba, on the other hand, after ditching her male uniform, had been transformed into a cute girl who looked her age. The toned, healthy legs she had developed—probably thanks to all her training with the Dragon Knight Order—were on full display below the hem of her miniskirt. For some reason, she was the only one wearing the uniform in this style, while the rest of the maids, Efil included, wore traditional long skirts. It was a nice surprise, to be sure. But let me clarify: I was not the one who’d asked for it.

::I referenced the outfits in your mind and tailored hers to the style that suits her most. I’m quite proud of how it turned out!:: Ah, so this is the result of Efil’s hard work. Nice.

“Umm, why a maid uniform in the first place?” Huba asked.

Because I like—Ahem. There’s a proper reason, of course. I shall explain.

“It’ll help you two to stay under the radar. Aside from Azgrad, Rosalia has never shown anyone else her human form before, and Huba has always been dressed as a man. Anyone who sees you two the way you are now would never imagine your true identities. It probably wouldn’t even occur to them that you’re connected to the Dragon Knight Order. Now that we’ve successfully delayed—well...captured your order, we’ll be heading back to Parth. Until we’re dispatched for the next battle, you two will be employed at my house.”

“Wonderful explanation, honey. Still sounds a bit like an excuse, but at least the logic is there.”

Heh heh heh, I know, right? And that degree of sarcasm isn’t enough to hurt me!

Rosalia closed her eyes. “So, it’s a predetermined matter. I will not object any further, then.”

“But I don’t know how to work as a maid!” Huba protested in a fluster.

“Not a problem,” Efil replied. “I will make wonderful maids out of both of you in a week.”

“Whaaaat?!” cried Huba.

I had no doubt that Perfect Maid Efil could keep that promise. Even Ruka, who had never touched a knife in her life before she came to our place, had shown incredible growth. *As long as these two aren’t disastrous at cooking, I’m sure they’ll turn out just fine.*

Azgrad rubbed his chin as he studied Rosalia and Huba seriously. “It’s still kinda fifty-fifty whether this will be enough to pull the wool over Shutola’s eyes. But more importantly, I want to ask—”

“Sorry, man. Seriously, we don’t have any maid uniforms for guys. I don’t even want to see you in one.” *I’m not going to be part of creating another Goldiana. Gerard’s and my nerves don’t need any more fraying, thank you very much.*

“That’s not what I was going to ask! I’m fine with this collar!”

“Really? Phew. That was a close one.”

“Why did you look so worried about it, anyway? What I wanted to ask was: will my subordinates be all right?”

“Oh, that? Don’t worry. I don’t know how prisoners are treated in Trycen, but your men are being sent to Parth, the City of Peace. I can promise you they won’t be mistreated.”

This was something that Guildmaster Rio and I had discussed ahead of time. The alliance had determined that it was up to each country to choose how they would treat the POWs they captured, as everyone wanted to avoid any friction related to dictating how others should handle their affairs. The nations in the alliance were permitted to do anything they deemed necessary to extract information from prisoners, be it interrogation or torture. Unlike its allies, however, Parth was largely run by the Adventurer’s Guild. And the guild, being an international organization, preferred not to do anything that might cause long-standing grudges. Consequently, prisoners taken by Parth could expect a certain standard of humane treatment.

Azgrad looked into my eyes for a moment, then sighed. “Guess I have no choice but to take your word for it. So, heading back to Parth is fine and all, but what’re you going to do about this fortress? Trycen might send another force this way when they receive word of our defeat.”

“The fortress and golems are largely automated, so I’ll just leave them here unattended. Their cumulative power should be enough to take care of a Rank S monster or two. What’s more, Parth is going to be receiving reinforcements from Deramis pretty soon. When they get here, I’ll have the Deramisians man this place.”

And anything after that will depend on how the war goes. If I recall correctly, Tristan’s Magic Knight Order was sent to Toraj and the Steel Knight Order led by an older general has gone to Gaun. Tristan seems like the one most likely to spring a trap, but I should probably learn as much as I can about the overall situation.

“I don’t know much about the general of the Steel Knight Order. What can you tell me?”

“Are you serious? Man, he’s *the* Dan D’Alba.”

Oh, he’s that famous?

“For starters, he’s my own teacher. He’s gotten on in years, but in terms of sheer power, that old geezer is still at the top of Trycen’s pecking order. You really haven’t heard the saying ‘If Gaun has the Beast King, Trycen has Dan D’Alba’? Captain Cliff of the Holy Order of Knights in Deramis comes close, but only close. As for Toraj... Well, they’ve got their guardian dragon king and all. In many ways, that place is pretty whack. But that’s why I want to have a go at them some—”

Whoa, he got talkative all of a sudden. But I do appreciate the list of the strongest fighters in each country. Gotta take some notes.

“So, in short, I should keep an eye out for the general of the Steel Knight Order.”

“I doubt he’s involved with the mastermind, though. I didn’t notice him doing anything unusual. But his son... He’s been acting a bit suspicious lately, come to

think of it.”

“Is his son in the same order?”

“Yeah, he’s his lieutenant general. His strength is, uh...about even with Huba, I’d say. He’s not superhumanly strong, but I wouldn’t call him weak either.”

I looked in Huba’s direction and saw that Efil had already begun training her two newest subordinates. *“About even with Huba” means around Level 70, then? There’s a significant difference from one person to another in how their stats grow as they level up, but let’s just keep that number in mind as a general benchmark.*

I then asked about Azgrad’s younger sister, Shutola, the princess who served as the general of the Black Ops. He couldn’t tell me much about her, though. According to him, he had never been able to figure out what she was thinking, so he couldn’t tell if she was behaving differently or not.

Guess I’ll have to put her on hold for now. But still, she has the same mother as Tabura*? Is she actually as capable as Azgrad makes her out to be?*

Determining that I had learned what I could, I decided to wrap things up for the moment. “All right, let’s get going. Efil, I’m sorry to bother you while you’re busy, but can you inform Sabato’s group? They should be in the training room.”

“Yes, Master. Now, you two, it’s time to put what you just learned into practice.”

“Wait, already?!”

“Already. Off you go. Making a guest wait is a cardinal sin for a maid.”

At that moment, Sera and Melfina suddenly looked in the direction of Parth. The former simply said, “Hm?” as the latter went, “Guh,” and pulled a face for a split second.

“What’s wrong, Sera-nee, Mel-nee?”

“A group’s entered the canyon from the Parthian side,” Sera replied. “Their number is...twenty-eight. I failed to sense them earlier because I let my guard down.”

Melfina nodded. “I feel them too. They must be the reinforcements from

Deramis.”

“They’re here already? So fast?” I asked in surprise before it clicked. “They used the teleportation gate.”

Considering the number, Deramis must have selected a small group of elite soldiers. Are they sure they left enough fighting strength at home on the Rizean front?

To confirm, I climbed up to the top of the fortress. After borrowing Farsight from Efil using Skill Eater, I peered into the distance.

“That’s...a pegasus?”

“What a beautiful white horse.”

First dragons, and now we’re seeing pegasi? We’re sure meeting a lot of supposedly legendary creatures lately.

“Master, the person riding the pegasus in the front...”

“Yep, that’s Colette, all right.”

The Oracle of Deramis has come to the front line herself.

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After the conference in Parth concluded, Colette immediately returned home using the teleportation gate and proceeded to gather all the fighting strength she had scattered throughout Deramis. To be exact, she was gathering her own Followers, which meant that it was only a matter of Unsummoning and then Summoning them next to her. At the same time, she got back in touch with Guildmaster Rio to confirm the situation in Parth and request that he send her updates if anything happened on his end.

With an eye constantly trained on the City of Peace, Colette secured an audience with the person who held the most authority in Deramis: the Pope. The fact that Trycen was also pushing towards their neighboring city, the place with supposedly no real defenses, was common knowledge, and an expeditionary force unrelated to Colette’s efforts had already been dispatched.

However, Parth would be facing the Dragon Knight Order, which was famous as both Trycen’s most powerful order and also the one with the greatest level

of mobility. Colette was afraid that by the time the Deramisian host reached their destination, they would find the place razed to the ground. And the closer the front moved towards Deramis, the more chaotic and costly the war effort would become.

Or at least, that was the idea Colette fervently pitched to her father, the Pope, leaving him no choice but to allow her to arrange another wave of reinforcements and join the fight herself.

After receiving the Pope's permission, the Oracle wasted no time in forming a select group of elites, then brought them all back to Parth through the teleportation gate. With the entire group riding pegasi, the fastest mounts in Deramis's stables, they hurried towards the Grand Scarlet Canyon where Kelvin and his friends had gone.

All in all, it had been ten days from the start of events to the arrival of Colette's forces at the Grand Scarlet Canyon. She had utilized every bit of authority and power at her disposal to arrange for the swiftest reinforcements she was capable of.

"Oracle, the Grand Scarlet Canyon is in sight," reported Cliff, captain of the Holy Order of Knights, who was riding the pegasus directly behind hers. As the person with the best eyes in the group, he was the first to spot the natural landmark that was coming up.

Instead of straining her eyes, Colette closed them, seemingly focusing her senses as if in meditation. After a short pause, she confirmed his announcement. "So it seems. There are traces of Kelvin-sama and his party having passed through here. We're getting close."

There was no hesitation whatsoever in her words. Despite not being able to physically see that far, when she reopened her eyes, she turned her face in the precise direction in which the canyon lay.

She's able to pick up traces of adventurers who passed through here days earlier? Looks like I still have a long way to go to catch up. Colette-sama really does live up to her role as the Oracle.

This expedition was a bold move made with a thorough understanding of both Deramis's and Trycen's respective military powers. If not for Colette's

fervent efforts, it wouldn't have happened at all. And clearly, her abilities were not limited to being behind the scenes engaged in tabletop strategizing—she was more than capable of contributing on the scene as well.

Shutola Trycen, the princess of the enemy nation, might have been famous for her brilliant war tactics and stunning appearance, but Colette Deramilius, the Oracle of the Holy Empire of Deramis, was in no way inferior, possessing both resourcefulness and absolutely divine beauty in her own right.

Or so Cliff, who deeply respected Colette from the bottom of his heart, thought. Naturally, he was completely in the dark regarding her idiosyncrasies.

"By the way, Oracle, are you sure it was a good idea to pull the Guardians away from their respective posts in Deramis? The frequency of monster attacks is still climbing, is it not?"

"You are worried? I can see how you would be. However, I assure you that the forces left behind are more than sufficient to handle whatever occurs, including any action that Rizea might take. What's important here is the big picture. Parth, the symbol of peace on this continent, is at great risk at the moment. Melfina-sama does not wish for us, as adherents of the Holy Order of Rinne, to keep her blessings to ourselves. No, she wants us to share them with all people, and I, as her agent in this world, have a duty to realize that wish. You might think me a little girl who's deluded and overestimating herself. But that is why I am begging you, Captain Cliff: please lend me your strength."

The sight of his superior lowering her head sent Cliff into a fluster. "Please don't say that, Oracle! All knights of the Holy Order have sworn to dedicate our lives to serving you and the goddess. Please use us in any way you see fit!"

Once again, he found himself in absolute awe. The Oracle possessed not only prodigious ingenuity but also a pure heart filled with sympathy and affection for the people.

The rest of the Holy Order shared his conviction. *What a luminary she is!* they thought as one.

But Colette was, at the end of the day, a girl of only seventeen years of age, a mere two years beyond the age of adulthood. Behind a composed facade that she maintained through an iron will, she had her own worries. So...what was

this paragon of a saint so occupied with and distressed about?

Oh my Goddess, this refined mellow fragrance! No matter how much time has passed, be it days, weeks, or even months, I will never, ever mistake it! Oh, Melfina-sama! I was not granted the honor of beholding you in person the other day, but oh how wonderful your physical self is! What's more, you're here in our world with your divine husband, Kelvin-sama! The fact that I have more targets for worship is enough to help me ascend to the heavens! Now that we've come this close, I can generally tell where you two are. Please be patient a short while longer. Your loyal servant shall be by your side soon!

She was not composed at all. As a general rule, her mind was only ever occupied by the two names "Melfina" and "Kelvin." That, and thoughts of what she could do to serve Melfina—a cause that she fully dedicated her heart, mind, and body to.

Before long, the group reached the entrance to the Grand Scarlet Canyon. According to Colette's calculations, battle should have broken out by now. And yet their surroundings were eerily quiet. A sliver of unease shot through the Oracle's heart.

Then, at that very moment, three individuals appeared before her in a gust of wind.

"Hey, there, Colette. Uh, why are you here on the front line?"

"Along with the Holy Order, no less."

"Whoa, look, Kel-nii! The pegasi are real! It's actual pegasi, Kel-nii!"

The moment Colette laid eyes on Kelvin and Melfina, her unease dissipated and blood nearly jetted from her nose in a fountain.

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Sabato was standing in front of the door to the living room, completely at a loss. Being summoned by a maid he had never seen before was one thing. But when he peeked into the room, he saw Azgrad, the enemy prince who was supposed to be in custody, sitting at a table with Kelvin and Colette Deramilius, the Oracle and symbol of Deramis.

What the hell had happened in the short time he and his party had been busy training? He was incapable of comprehending the situation, his head so filled with confusion that it seemed ready to burst at any moment.

Goma shot him a look of exasperation. “Sabato, what’s the point of trying to figure it out with your peabrain? Just get in there already.”

“Ditto to what Goma-sama said! I want to see what the Oracle looks like!” Guin chirped, his eyes sparkling.

“*Think* about the situation, you guys!” Sabato returned in a soft voice filled with agitation. “We’re dressed like this, and we’re here as adventurers, but we’ve *met them before*! We’re going to be exposed the moment we step inside!”

“You think I don’t know that?” Goma retorted. “But there’s no point wasting time out here. All right, in you go.”

“Bu—*psssshhh!*”

The moment Sabato turned around, Goma’s fist made contact with his face. With perfectly coordinated movements, Akgas opened the door, allowing his companion to sail into the room unimpeded.

“My apologies for keeping everyone waiting,” Goma said as she entered with a cool and collected expression, wiping Sabato’s blood off her knuckles.

Kelvin looked over with a slightly troubled expression. “Uh, we don’t mind, but...Sabato, training even *here* is kind of taking it too far, man.”

After a brief pause, Sabato managed, “If I’m not serious about it, reaching your level will remain a dream.” He grabbed the hand that Akgas was offering and staggered to his feet.

The moment Azgrad and Colette saw him, their eyes widened in surprise.

“Dude, aren’t you a Gaunian prince?”

“I believe I have made your acquaintance at a social event in the past. And is that person behind you not Princess Goma as well?”

“Prince? Princess? What’re you guys talking about?”

Although he had learned the two beastkins' identities quite a while earlier after viewing their Statuses, Kelvin chose to act like he had been taken entirely by surprise.

Sabato sighed. "I *knew* we'd be exposed."

"Allow me to provide a simple explanation. But in exchange, please tell us what is happening here," Goma suggested.

She then shared that she and Sabato were indeed children of the Beast King, and that they were currently in the middle of journeying for the sake of training themselves as warriors, which was a rite that all members of Gaunian royalty had to undergo. Only after they tangibly achieved something in each land and safely made it back home would they be formally acknowledged as members of the family and allowed to take on the royal name. Akgas and Guin were members of Gaun's knight order and technically their bodyguards.

Kelvin, in turn, brought the beastkin up to speed on Azgrad's cooperation and Colette's arrival with reinforcements.

"My brothers have all finished their journeys by now. Being a part of this battle is the mark that we were hoping to leave on Parth," Sabato confessed.

Kelvin nodded understandingly. "That explains why you seemed so eager. And wow, even princesses have to do this?"

"Our gender doesn't matter—we are all treated equally," Goma replied. "In actuality, I'm stronger than Sabato."

"And Goma-sama is also stronger in verbal jousting!" Guin added.

Sabato seemed to have taken mental damage from that introduction, but the rest of the room largely ignored him as Kelvin moved on to sharing his plans.

Once the discussion was over, Cliff said, "Very well, as Kelvin-dono has asked, the Holy Order and I shall remain here. Along with the golems that will be left behind, we will be more than enough to hold this position."

"We will also remain," Sabato confirmed. "At the very least, we now know more about this terrain than Captain Cliff. It's better for us to be here than not, right?"

“In that case, I will also—”

“Oracle, please accompany Kelvin-dono back to Parth. The Trycenian forces will soon be reaching both Gaun and Toraj. Please use your strength to save as many people as possible!”

“Captain Cliff... Very well, I will do my best!”

The sight of Colette’s face bursting into a smile of pure joy prompted Melfina to heave an internal sigh.

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Once each group’s role had been decided, Kelvin set off for Parth with his party members as well as Colette, who had only just arrived; Azgrad, temporarily under his command; and their new maids, Huba and Rosalia.

Rion was riding with Colette on her pegasus after making an impassioned plea to do so, while everyone else had piled onto Dahak’s and Rosalia’s backs, the two having retaken dragon form. Naturally, the effects of Efil’s enchanted uniform remained in effect even after the transformation.

As Sabato and Cliff were part of the group staying behind at the fortress, Kelvin had transferred them limited control of the golems. The return-to-Parth team had said their farewells and was now on their way.

“Still, are my men going to be okay? They look like they’re unconscious or something,” Azgrad commented out of the blue.

The Trycenian captives were all riding their own dragons, keeping pace behind Dahak and Rosalia. However, they were in the same state they had been while locked beneath Obsidian Fortress. All had the same blank looks on their faces.

Sera sniffed. “Didn’t take you for such a worrywart. But don’t worry. They’ll follow my commands to a T as long as my skill is in effect. That’s why I went to the trouble of painting more blood on them. It’ll definitely hold until we reach Parth. Though I’m now entirely spent because of it!”

Regardless of how capable Sera was, draining her own blood and smearing it on all the soldiers and dragons in custody had been a laborious task. For every drop of blood that her body lost, her HP ticked down. The lost HP was quickly

recovered thanks to Auto Healing, but as it healed, she had already been applying her blood to the next target. The vigorous back-and-forth had continued until she'd finished going through all the captives. She was fine in the physical sense but mentally quite exhausted.

"So, Kelvin, lend me your back. I need a nap."

"Go on."

Sera snuggled up against Kelvin's back and fully leaned into him. Soon enough, her breathing grew slow and measured, indicating that she had drifted off. Kelvin might have hesitated if it had been Melfina making the request, but he knew he didn't have anything to worry about with Sera. She was a very peaceful sleeper, after all.

If Kelvin was, based on his personal experience, to list his female party members' names in order of how peacefully to how restlessly they slept, it would have been: Efil ≥ Sera > Rion = normal person >>> Melfina.

He had learned by now that anytime Melfina was sleeping next to him, he would be taking at least one punch to the face at some point. And yet despite being the most violent in her sleep, the goddess was the deepest sleeper *and* the fastest to nod off. These last points only served to increase the danger to Kelvin's body when they slept together.

"Honey, you're thinking something really rude right now, aren't you?"

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about. What's this, a lead-in to one of your goddess jokes?"

Although his thoughts seemed on the verge of being seen through, Kelvin managed to keep a straight face thanks to Nerves of Steel. Even so, he couldn't help but think that Melfina's usual smile looked a bit scarier than normal.

::Brother, I understand that you're lovers with sister Sera and all, but can you not flirt while on top of me? It makes my back feel really itchy.:: We're not flirting.

::Aha ha, Kel-nii, that was definitely flirting.:: As part of his training to get used to the Network, Dahak was only allowed to communicate via telepathy during the trip. And it was clearly paying off as he had already gotten so used to it that

he felt comfortable cracking jokes. Communicating this way required no verbalization whatsoever, though, so in Azgrad's eyes, it seemed like the black dragon had reverted to his earlier reticent self.

"Colette-san, this pegasus is so stable! And for some reason, I don't feel the headwind at all!"

"That's because he is using magic. On top of using Sonic Boots to buff his own Agility stat, he's also maintaining a barrier around us for our comfort. He's such a kind and considerate boy, right?"

"So that's what's happening! Hey, you're pretty smart!"

Their mount chuffed a few times in response. As Rion's body was quite small, she was currently sitting in front of Colette, with the latter reaching around to hold the reins. The sight of Colette warmly looking over Rion, who was excitedly chattering nonstop, made them seem like two sisters enjoying a moment together.

"By the way, Rion-sama, I heard in passing that you are Kelvin-sama's younger sister. Is that true? Last time we had dinner, I did not have a chance to speak with you much in person."

"Mm-hm! Yes, I am! Oh, and just call me Rion without the honorific!"

"The blasph— Ahem, sorry, please just consider it the way I speak. Don't let it bother you. But in exchange—although it isn't really an exchange—can you simply call me Colette?"

"Sure! Nice to meet you, Colette!"

In spite of her calm outer appearance, what was going through Colette's mind was: I've heard the rumors, but Kelvin-sama's younger sister is such an angel! What an absolutely adorable smile she has! I almost can't contain my excitement! And this floral scent wafting up from her hair—I'm so ecstatic that I just might fall into depravity! And Melfina-sama's been keeping an eye on us for a while. Ah, is this a test? Is she intentionally assessing my fortitude?! But...ugh! I can smell Melfina-sama's scent coming from Rion-sama's back, her behind, and even the back of her thighs! This is definitely proof that she was sitting on Melfina-sama's lap while being cuddled— Reality is, at times, quite cruel. Not

everything that glitters is gold.

Looks like Colette's going full throttle today as always, Melfina thought. *I entrusted her with Rion because she's generally got a good heart, but...will that illness of hers ever get better? There's the phrase "Goddess only knows," but in this case, even the goddess doesn't know.*

Colette's condition was such that Melfina herself was on the verge of branding her a lost cause.

"My king."

"Yeah?"

"Is it just me or has almost everyone we've met recently been rather off-color?"

"I've been getting that impression too."

Rosalia and Huba, who were flying nearby, could not help but think, "Have you two looked in a mirror?" in response to the exchange between the battle junkie and the black-armored knight.

◇ ◇ ◇

Several days after Kelvin's procession left the Grand Scarlet Canyon behind—they had to go slower on the way back to match the pace of the dragons—they finally saw Parth on the horizon.

"It's about time. Send the signal, Efil," Kelvin ordered.

Efil bowed in acknowledgment. "Yes, Master."

The sudden exchange left Colette confused. "A signal?" she echoed.

Kelvin nodded. "We're bringing the captives of the Dragon Knight Order with us, and Dahak and Rosalia are also here. From the city's point of view, we could easily look like an invading force. That's why we're sending a signal that we decided on beforehand, to let the people know that we were victorious. The residents of the city saw Efil's pyrohydra during my match with Sylvia, so we settled on that."

Understanding dawned in Colette's eyes. "Ah, you are referring to the flame

dragons that melted Sylvia-san's meteor of ice. I can see how it would be memorable in the minds of the local residents."

"Everyone, please cover your ears. This will be quite loud," Efil warned as she drew Penumbra—which she had just taken out of Clotho's Storage—and aimed it skyward. A moment later, a roar that sounded like a tank firing exploded through the air, and a pyrohydra shot off to soar over Parth. Shortly after, cheers of celebration erupted from the city. The residents had understood the meaning of the signal.

::Damn, that's quite the welcome. They must be relieved,:: Dahak noted.

Well, can't really blame them, considering how desperately the city was lacking in fighting strength until recently. Oh, let us down around here.

::Yes, sir.::

Sera offered, ::And I'll make the dragons under my control continue circling in the sky. I imagine it'll cause a panic if they land all at once, right?:: Beside the guild building, Dahak, Rosalia, and Colette's pegasus—which had grown quite attached to Rion during their journey—each landed in turn. Entering the city in a parade of triumph sounded like a great idea, but there was a concern that the dragons' large sizes might endanger the buildings and inhabitants. So Kelvin chose to land on the guild's turf, and they quickly scurried inside as if seeking refuge. The hope was that the staff would help to prevent the ecstatic mob of Parthians from flooding in.

"KELVIN-CHAAAN! GERARD-SAMAAAA!"

There was a limit to what the staff could and couldn't keep out, though. The Rank S adventurer who had volunteered to be part of the city's defense effort, Goldiana Prettiana, came barreling towards them at top speed. The two who had been called by name nearly jumped out of their skin and armor, respectively. Even Azgrad, who was beholding the behemoth of muscle for the first time, could not help but leap into battle mode.

As for Dahak, who was currently in human form...

"B-Brother...who is that drop-dead gorgeous babe?!"

Three voices exclaimed, "What?!" in unison.

◇ ◇ ◇

Has something gone wrong with my sense of hearing? Did Dahak just say what I thought I heard him say? "Gorgeous babe"? He said "gorgeous babe," right? Efil, Melfina, Rion, Colette, and Huba are each more aptly described as cute girls. So the only ones present who might be referred to as "gorgeous babe" would be Sera and Rosalia. Around us...yeah, there's only Sera and Rosalia. I see, Dahak must be tired from the long journey and hallucinating. Ha ha ha, what a silly dragon.

"I'm so glad you're back, Kelvin-chan. And all you other dearies too. Hm? Why does everyone look so dazed?"

"You're acquainted with this gorgeous babe, brother?!" Dahak cried loudly, shaking my shoulders vigorously as he pointed at Prettia, who had reached us in the time it took my mind to reboot.

And there goes my attempt to deny reality. Now there's no doubt that Dahak is referring to Prettia.

"Aww, how sweet! It's been so long since a pretty boy's been so straightforward with me! Thank you, dearie!"

"AUGH?!"

Prettia winked heavily, sending a supersized heart flying towards Dahak, which pierced the dragon's chest. It was super effective!

Or at least, that's what I hallucinated. I didn't feel any magic being used, but for some reason, I still saw the surreal visuals.

"How can I... I've gone and... I've fallen in love at first sight!"

Seriously? Dahak, you... Really?!

"I'd thought sister Sera to be, hands down, the world's most beautiful woman, but...to think there's someone above even her!"

Oh, so Sera ranks that highly in his eyes. Wait a moment... It sounds like he's complimenting her, but comparing her to Prettia seems more like an insult! Take that back! You take it back right now!

"I've never seen such a perfect human body before!"

“Oh my, is this dearie on the cusp of realizing a basic truth of the universe?”

God, I can’t follow their conversation anymore. Perfect human body? Is he talking about muscles? Could it be that in Dahak’s eyes, strength equals beauty? Is it the Strength stat? But by that logic...

“Dahak, how does Mel look in your eyes? She’s a beauty without equal, isn’t she?”

“Wha—?! Honey! I’m flattered, but people are watching...”

“Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama is only speaking an objective fact.”

Hey, religious fanatic over there, nobody asked you.

“Sister Mel? Mm...” Dahak seemed to think about it, then continued telepathically, ::It’s true that she’s very pretty, but her beauty seems kind of...uh, artificial? How do I put it? It’s as if she’s put on makeup using self-strengthening magic. Oh, but please keep this off the record!:: I...see. Just make sure you never say that to Melfina or Colette in person. You won’t live to see another day.

::Yes, sir! I don’t want to die yet!:: Within our party, Melfina had the highest Strength stat. But it was the result of a skill, which apparently invalidated it in Dahak’s eyes. Not only that, he seemed to view it as being akin to plastic surgery.

Mel, show him up when you descend in your actual body and not as an avatar, all right? You got this! But still, I did not *expect Dahak’s sense of beauty to go in this direction. It seems pretty clear that it’s based on stats, which means it’s not really the physical muscles he’s attracted to. Wait a moment. Rosalia’s also a dragon. And come to think of it, Azgrad’s also pretty buff...*

The realization prompted me to send Rosalia a pitying look.

“I’m clarifying just in case, but different dragon races have different ideas of beauty, all right? Dahak is a black dragon. I am an ice dragon. His preferences have *absolutely nothing* to do with me.”

“Oh, I see. Sorry.” *Whoops, that annoyed her.*

“I’m so sorry, dearie. I already have someone that I’ve set my heart on. Right,

Gerard-sama?”

“Wha—Me?!”

“After sister Sera, now Prettia-chan too?! ARRRHHHHH!”

While I was busy going through my thoughts, Dahak had apparently confessed and been turned down in no uncertain terms.

“I... No, I cannot give up this love! You old suit of armor, I won’t give up! You mark my words!” Dahak cried as he suddenly ran off.

Dude, where’re you going? I can’t have you causing trouble here in town.

The moment the dragon turned a corner and disappeared from sight, I Unsummoned him to fetch him back.

“Ahh, youth,” Prettia sighed with one hand on his cheek.

“Uh...I would actually like to withdraw from the list of candidates, if possible,” Gerard protested weakly.

I cleared my throat. “All right, are we done with whatever this is? Prettia, you were in a hurry, right? Did something happen?”

“Oh, right! Yes, I was! I got a bit sidetracked. First, good job, everyone! Thanks to your efforts, Parth’s peace has been protected. And forget delaying the enemy, you actually brought them over to our side! I was a bit surprised when I heard your suggestion, but let’s just say that Rio-chan is very happy with how things have turned out.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Guildmaster Rio happy about anything.”

“Oh, he’s just a klutz like that. It’s all too obvious to me, though. So, is this handsome man Prince Azgrad?” Prettia rotated his head ninety degrees to stare straight at the Trycenian. Huba, who was standing next to Azgrad, started with fright.

“That’s me. And judging from your well-trained body, you must be Goldiana Prettiana. I’ve heard the rumors. You’ve defeated many Rank S monsters and cleared out numerous dungeons, right? You feel like having a match?”

“Oh dear, it’s so busy being a popular woman. Sure, I’ll take you up on that

offer sometime, dearie. But for now, Kelvin-chan... About the situation on the battlefronts at Gaun and Toraj...”

“Has the fighting begun? Who’s got the upper hand?”

◇ ◇ ◇

“They’re here,” murmured Queen Tsubaki Fujiwara from her position at the front of her forces.

They were currently standing at the bank of the great river that served as the border between Toraj and Trycen—known as the Water Dragon’s Tail—and waiting for the arrival of the Magic Knight Order.

“Kagenui.”

“Here.”

As soon as Tsubaki called out his name, a man in black outfit appeared. His face was covered by a hood, he was wearing chain mail beneath his clothing, and he had short swords on his waist. To put it simply, he looked like a textbook illustration of a ninja.

“Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary regarding the force that is approaching us?”

“Their general does not appear to be here in person. Furthermore, all the female knights are equipped with weapons that are likely cursed, judging from the ominous auras they are emitting.”

“You mean everyone in the host? Has their general gone mad?”

The Trycenian force was filing into position on the opposite bank. It was composed entirely of gallant-looking female knights riding noble white horses, but the air surrounding them seemed disturbing in some way.

“Regardless, what we have to do remains unchanged.”

Tsubaki raised a hand. In response, several arks rose from the river, creating giant waves that displaced massive amounts of water. These ships, which bristled with cannons on both sides, were already turned with one broadside directly facing the invading army. At the same time, the Torajian soldiers waiting on land raised magic items that were shaped like guns, taking aim.

“This is but the preliminary skirmish! It is time to show the enemy the folly of engaging Toraj in battle so close to wat—”

“Tsubaki-sama.”

“What is it, Kagenui? I was at a good place in my speech.”

“The enemy is retreating.”

“I see, so they are—” She stopped short. “They’re *what?!*” Tsubaki whirled around to look at the opposite bank.

Sure enough, the knights who had been advancing just a moment before had turned one hundred and eighty degrees and were now retracing their steps.

“We haven’t even shown them our superiority in strength yet. Hmm, could it be that something has happened in Trycen? Or is this a trap? Kagenui, look into Trycen’s movements, including how they’re faring on the Parthian and Gaunian fronts. Don’t chase the retreating force.”

“As you command,” the other replied before his figure melted into the shadows and disappeared.

“I did notice a single bird flying up from the enemy host. Was that a messenger? Well, no matter. Men! We will continue to hold this position! And keep a steady eye on the sea as well!”

Tsubaki plonked herself into her chair as she watched the arks sink back under the water.

◇ ◇ ◇

A short distance from the eastern edge of the Forest of Crests was the border between Gaun and Trycen. After the assault on the Village of Elves, Gaun had erected a fortress in the area, which was now manned by three of the Beast King’s sons and their men.

These siblings had previously gone on their own adventures and come back stronger, wiser, and accompanied by trusted companions. Having been acknowledged by their father and allowed to adopt the royal family name, they and their comrades had gone on to form and lead their own forces, all of whom had now built up reputations for being highly trained and formidable in battle.

It was two days ago that the Trycenian soldiers advancing on Gaun in ranks of sparkling platinum armor had been spotted. The scale of the attacking force was far beyond that of an expeditionary troop on a recon mission. What's more, at its head was none other than Dan D'Alba, the man who, in spite of his years, remained Trycen's greatest fighter.

There was little doubt that this was the Steel Knight Order. The moment news of their arrival reached the fortress, the Gaunians sprang to action. They immediately set up a defensive line, with the three princes riding out to the front in person.

"Stop! Any farther and you will be entering Gaunian territory! You have not been granted permission to cross the border! Turn back at once!"

This was a one-time warning. The instant a Trycenian boot touched Gaunian soil, it would be considered an act of invasion, and the war would begin. Naturally, the Gaunians did not expect their enemy to heed the warning. The announcement was nothing more than a formality for the sake of appearance. Many skirmishes had broken out between their two nations in the past, and the diplomatic conclusions afterwards were sometimes affected by whether this kind of verbal warning had been delivered first or not.

To the beastkins' surprise, instead of advancing, the invading army parted to allow a single man in heavy armor through. He had a helmet on over his white hair, and his armor reflected the light of the sun. It was General Dan himself.

"What a big welcome for a single old man! Well, let's not get so wound up, eh? Come now, I've brought wine made in our country as a gift. How about sitting down and—"

The general crossed the border while holding up a bottle of wine, still chattering. Two stone monoliths had been erected there at the end of the Great War to demarcate where the border between the nations stood. The moment the Trycenian veteran passed one of them, an arrow flew out from the fortress and pierced the bottle in his hands, spilling what was surely very expensive alcohol everywhere.

"And here I was, hoping we might settle this peacefully," Dan sighed, still proceeding.

“We said, stop!”

The first to leap forward with his squad was the eldest, Jereol Gaun, who possessed exceptional battle prowess as befitted the first son to receive the name of Gaun. In fact, he was such a master at barehanded combat that he had been the one to serve as Goma’s teacher. Although his adventurer rank had never passed A, he had experience taking down a Rank S monster on his own.

As his subordinates formed a perimeter with their spears raised, Jereol burst forward with the explosive characteristics of beastkin strength. Closing the distance to Dan in a split second, he launched his most powerful move...and missed. The old man easily dodged the incoming attack with a speed that seemed to defy the heavy armor he had on, absolutely unfazed by the many spear tips pointed his way.

“This stuff’s a bit strong, but bear with it,” Dan murmured as he threw a palm strike with a small handful of the wine still cupped in his palm. Jereol’s face was met with both palm and wine as he lunged past.

“HNNNGGGGG?!”

A pain beyond words assaulted him. The palm strike felt like colliding with a boulder and the alcohol had gotten into his eyes. Even a master athlete couldn’t take that without reacting.

“Jereol-sama!”

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Still, Jereol managed to overcome the pain and grab Dan’s outstretched arm, successfully locking it in a hold. Although perhaps “successfully” was not quite right. It was a submission hold that was supposed to cause all victims equal pain, regardless of how strong or weak they were, yet Dan seemed entirely unperturbed. Instead, he calmly lifted the arm that Jereol was gripping straight up into the air.

“Don’t worry about me! Stab him!” the prince shouted, still holding on.

The elite troops of Gaun dutifully thrust their weapons forward. They accurately aimed for the weak points in their opponent’s armor, such as the fasteners, joints, and neck. One after another, the spearheads made their way

in. However...

“What?! My spear...isn’t budging!”

The spearheads did indeed pierce Dan’s armor, but the weapons seemed to become locked in place by some incredible power. At least, that was the sensation felt by all the spearmen on the other end of the shafts.

The riffraff aside, this beastkin’s Strength is around six—no, seven hundred, the general thought. *About equal to Azgrad-sama’s, I’d say. But he’s still got quite a ways to go.*

The old soldier grabbed one of the spears piercing his neck—with the other man still clinging to it—with his left hand and started brandishing it at the troops surrounding him.

“Guh!”

“Ack!”

Every time Dan swung, Gaunian troops fell like dominoes, filling the air with groans of pain. When the spear snapped, he forcibly tore Jereol off his arm and proceeded to swing *him* around like a weapon. Soon, there was no one left holding on to the weapons that were stuck into his armor. The spears all fell out at once, clattering hollowly. There wasn’t a speck of blood on any of the tips.

When the Gaunian men got back to their feet, they found Dan with his greatsword already drawn. Just like his armor, it seemed to be made of platinum and bore a simple, functional design. All it took was one horizontal swing to generate a gust of wind powerful enough to send his surrounding opponents flying into the air, all the way back to the fortress, slamming them into the fortifications.

Jereol was among their number but happened to be the one who collided with the closed gates. The momentum was so great that he actually burst through them and landed in the courtyard beyond. The sight of the first prince lying unconscious on the ground greatly whittled down the morale of the Gaunian force. By simply swinging a spear and sword around—in a way that did not seem to involve any technique whatsoever—General Dan had already rendered a portion of his enemy’s troops unfit for battle.

“That can’t be! Jereol got done in?!”

“Don’t falter! Archers, fire!”

A cloud of arrows descended from the fortress like a rain of death. However, General Dan did not move. In fact, he had stabbed his sword into the ground before him to show that he did not even need it.

There he stood, entirely still, comfortably waiting for the torrent of projectiles to let up.

“Why?! Why isn’t he taking damage?! Why isn’t he going down?!”

Finally, the old general ordered, “Heavy infantry, forward.”

Troops wearing full body armor and equipped with large shields and halberds clanked forward in unison.

“How much easier my job would have been if they’d just surrendered. But since they’ve chosen to fight back, I have no choice. In accordance with His Majesty’s orders, I will crush them.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The subsequent fight was one-sided. The remaining princes did everything in their power to repel the invaders, but they failed to break out of the encirclement set up by the Steel Knight Order. Soldiers specialized for defense stood at the front of the formation while those in the back fired siege weapons similar to catapults and ballistae at the Gaunian fortress. It was an extremely simple battle strategy, but it proved shockingly effective thanks to how well-trained the Trycenians were. And of course, General Dan D’Alba himself foiled all attempts to turn the situation around.

The Gaunian side ultimately had no recourse but to hole up inside the fortress. Their troops retreated to wait out the pounding of the siege weaponry. However, the fortress itself was well-built, and the sun set soon after. During the night, the Trycenians only kept the siege weaponry running without making any further moves. Both sides took the time to rest up and ready themselves for the major battle that would surely occur the next day.

It was at this time that a certain report reached Dan.

“The Dragon Knight Order was obliterated?!” the old general roared in anger from the tent that served as his personal quarters.

The female servant who had brought the message flinched, then answered in a quivering voice, “Y-Yes, sir. A messenger arrived to deliver the news and told me to bring it to you immediately, sir. He said he had ridden three days and nights without rest. His horse died from exhaustion and he himself is currently unconscious.”

“I thought they had enough of an advantage with Lunoir long gone, but it looks like I underestimated the strength of the adventurers.”

Dan had been under the impression that the only noteworthy powerhouses remaining in Parth were the Rank S adventurers Goldiana and Kelvin. He had gauged the abilities of the latter while observing his exhibition match with Sylvia, but it had never crossed his mind that Kelvin’s party members possessed equal or even greater strength.

“A-And there is another report...”

“What else is there?”

“Th-That’s, uh... The Magic Knight Order...r-retreated from Toraj w-w-without fighting.”

CRASH!

“Eep!”

Dan’s fist had shattered the table. *What the hell was that damn snake Tristan thinking?! The crux of our strategy is to push fast and push hard! The more time we waste, the more disadvantaged we become. Now that we’ve lost on the Parthian front, we* need *to take down both Gaun and Toraj. In the first place, the person who suggested this plan wa—?!*

Clang!

Abruptly, Dan grabbed his greatsword from where it was leaning against the wall and blocked the dagger that his servant had swung at him. Sparks flew as the two weapons ground against each other. The general was not out of the woods just yet.

“Well done! I’d perfectly suppressed my hostility and taken you completely by surprise and yet you still managed to block in time. Just what I would have expected from Trycen’s greatest warrior.”

“Who *are* you?” Dan knew that his assailant’s appearance was indeed that of the servant woman who had been taking care of his everyday needs for some time. However, the fearful look on her face from before had vanished, and she was now emanating an immense fighting spirit.

“I hear you did quite a number on my good-for-nothing sons. I’m here to repay the favor.”

“You’re the Beast King!” Dan cried in realization as he heavily parried his opponent’s dagger. The woman retreated with a few backflips. “I’d heard about your hobbies of disguising and crossdressing, but I never imagined it would be done with such a high degree of perfection. I didn’t catch on until the attack itself.”

“Surprising people is one of my very limited number of pastimes. Come on, let’s let bygones be bygones.”

“What happened to my real servant? Did you kill her? She’s served me well and is stronger than a run-of-the-mill soldier, believe it or not.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’s just taking a nap right now. I haven’t given her so much as a scratch.”

Without a shred of hesitation, the Beast King bared his chest to prove that it remained entirely unblemished.

“So then what are you doing here? The dagger in your hand tells me you didn’t come to share a drink.”

“Oh, come now, don’t be so belligerent. I’m here to tell you something interesting, Dan.”

The “servant” proceeded to speak with him, and Dan felt himself grow quite uncomfortable at the words coming from her mouth as she smiled the smile he was so used to seeing.

◇ ◇ ◇

The day broke and sunlight peeked through the gaps in the mountains, glinting off ranks of soldiers in their platinum armor. The host, headed by General Dan D'Alba, was marching westward in perfectly maintained formation.

"I can't believe it. The Steel Knight Order really is going back to Trycen!" exclaimed Kilto Gaun, the kingdom's third prince. And he had every right to be surprised. The Trycenians had overwhelmed them in both morale and fighting strength just the day before, yet they were now withdrawing of their own accord all because of a clandestine conversation.

While the princes had been hunkered down in the fortress, bracing themselves against the barrage from the siege engines, their king had infiltrated the enemy camp. This was clearly beyond the purview of a head of state. The ministers had clutched their heads in consternation, but the problem was, they couldn't rebuke the king, not after he'd come back safe, sound, and *successful*.

"Father...how did you manage it?"

"Hm? I only talked with General Dan about some possibilities."

From the roof of the Gaunian fortress, King Leonhart Gaun looked out at the retreating enemy force. His answer to the question posed by his second son, Yujil Gaun, seemed to have been purposely vague, strongly implying that he wanted his children to think for themselves. Leonhart was the kind of parent who would push his young off a cliff as a trial and only acknowledge them once they managed to climb back up. Each of the three princes present had accomplished that in their own way, but this battle had reminded them once again just how comparatively powerless they were and how incredible their father was.

There was just one thing that the brothers were slightly bothered about... *Can he not do this while adopting the appearance of a female servant?*

Of course, they had no knowledge of the fight that had taken place inside Dan's tent, and it was hardly their first time seeing their father in disguise. But there was still some part of them that wished he would deliver his meaningful words with his own visage.

"There you guys go worrying about the little stuff again. Still, that was quite the thrashing you suffered. Your cute little wife might just abandon you if you

remain like that, Jereol.”

“Father, please don’t bring Risa into th—” He stopped. “Why’d you transform into her?!”

“Hmm, the moment you first fell in love with her was...” Leonhart’s appearance had morphed into that of a beastkin woman with an elegant, noble bearing, wearing a passionately red dress. “Jereol-sama, I have no interest in weak men. I’m sorry.”

“Wh-Why the appearance from that banquet?!” Jereol stuttered, clearly shaken.

“Wait, bro, so that time you got really excited about ‘going training’ was...”

“Yujil, Kilto, that’s not what it is! You have to believe me!”

Behind the flustered figure of his eldest son, Leonhart once again transformed. This time, he adopted the image of a more mature-looking version of Risa. “Dear, I told you before, did I not, that I have no interest in weak men? I’m afraid we must break up.”

“WAAAAAHHHHHH!”

It was a terrible blow, to be sure. Jereol somehow found the strength inside his wounded body to run into the depths of the fortress, howling loudly as he went. His father watched him go, then went back to looking like the Trycenian servant.

“Great, that should push him to train himself even harder. He’s grown complacent ever since receiving the name of Gaun, that rascal! Now, Kilto. I’m told that you really pushed yourself after the siege began. You do the limited number of Gaunian mages proud. You’ve been smart since childhood. In fact, *I’m* proud of you!”

“Y-Y-Yes, sir, th-thank you...” Even though he was being praised, Kilto was stuttering heavily and trembling like a leaf. A sense of foreboding flooded every part of his being.

“But big brother Kilto, studying all the time isn’t good for your health. Big brother Jereol has been teaching me how to fight recently. Why don’t you join

us?”

Kilto blinked and found a young Goma standing before him. At this point, his back was drenched in a cold sweat.

“N-N-N-No, I’m g-g-g-good...”

Trauma from his past flashed through Kilto’s head. He backed away, trying to banish the terrifying memories that were returning to him. He would never turn down an invitation from his beloved younger sister, but his brain was telling him that this was one he definitely should not accept.

“What?! You can’t be serious, big brother Kilto. Aren’t you a boy? Wow, I’m kind of disappointed in you.”

“WAAAAAHHHHHH!”

The look of scorn on Goma’s face sent him pounding down the corridor much faster than he normally could have managed. His father watched him go, then returned to looking like the servant again.

“As a beastkin, physical prowess is important, after all! But honestly, will Kilto’s sister complex ever be cured?”

“F-Father, we all have subordinates and are in positions of authority. Please don’t tease us so—”

“Ha ha ha! It’s just a little father-son fun! Look at that, you’ve become such a funny guy, Yujil! Now, you’re both great at archery *and* humorous. Those shots you fired were impressive. You have perfect aim and can take down any target you set your eye on, right? But now, about your love life—”

That day, cries reverberated throughout the halls of the fortress a total of three times.

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“Hm?”

“What’s wrong, Sera?”

“I’m not sure, but I feel like I heard someone up north screaming after having their past trauma dredged up. And it’s not from just now but quite a while

ago...”

“Well, that’s surprisingly specific. I didn’t hear anything.”

“Mmm... Nah, I probably imagined it!” She shook her head, seemingly dismissing whatever it was she thought she’d heard.

Today was our second day back in Parth. Prettia had told me about the situation in Toraj and Gaun—namely, that both countries had successfully repelled the Trycenians. For some reason, the Magic Knight Order had retreated before even exchanging blows with Toraj, so there were agents looking into that at the moment. According to Azgrad, Clive was being treated as KIA back in Trycen, and his order had been assigned to Tristan.

I’m not the only one who thinks this is suspicious, right? That bastard with the glasses seems to be the key to everything.

“Brother! Can I really use the land up to where Boga is?”

“We’re not really doing anything with our backyard anyway, so go nuts.”

“Hell yeah! I’m not holding back now!”

Dahak had undergone a one-eighty from being depressed about Prettia’s rejection to practically bursting with energy the moment I gave him permission to cultivate the land behind our house. I’d used Green Magic to fine-tune the pH level of the soil beforehand, then given him free rein. He was currently in dragon form, barreling up and down the length of our empty backyard while deftly tilling it using his claws. He was making such quick progress—well, he did have a huge body—that he was doing fine without any heavy machinery. And Sera’s attention was currently focused on this unusual sight, all thoughts of strange voices gone from her head.

“Roar...” Boga was trying to copy what Dahak was doing, but it wasn’t going so well as he always accidentally dug too deep.

Just to be safe, I had informed the people of Parth that we were now taking care of dragons at my place. I’d thought I would need to spend time convincing them that it was okay, but they’d pretty much just shrugged and nodded. Thanks in large part to Rio giving his permission, everyone was mainly like, “Well, it’s Kelvin-san, so sure, why not?”

I know I shouldn't be the one to say this, but you guys really should be more cautious...

"Hey, hey, Hak-chan. Why can't you just use your skill to grow the plants you want? Why are you going to all the trouble of making a farm? It takes more time, doesn't it?" Rion asked.

"You don't get it, m'lady. It's true that I can easily make vegetables sprout on the spot with my ability. However, doing it that way makes its freshness and taste go down by *several* ranks! And it really wears out the soil. I only use that skill when I'm fighting."

Before I knew it, Dahak had shifted back to human form, now dressed in a farming outfit and holding a hoe. Apparently, this was how he preferred to do the more detailed parts of the farming process.

Oh, right, this seems like a good time to go over the Statuses of our newest party members.

Dahak (162 y/o, Male, Black Dragon (Ancient)) Level: 88

Title: Darkness Dragon King's Son HP: 1,833/1,833 (+100) MP: 480/480 (+100) Strength: 969 (+100) Endurance: 733 (+100) Agility: 471 (+100) Magic: 737 (+100) Luck: 288 (+100) Equipment (Human Form): Iron Hoe (Rank E), Work Clothes (Rank E), Work Boots (Rank E), Towel (Rank F) Equipment (Dragon Form): Dragon Saddle (Rank B) Skills: Gemmation (Unique Skill), Black Soil Scales (Unique Skill), Green Magic (Rank C), Black Magic (Rank F), Breath (Rank B), Flight (Rank A), Agriculture (Rank S), Horticulture (Rank S), Construction (Rank A) Passive Effects: Blessing of the Darkness Dragon King, Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

Boga (103 y/o, Male, Rock Dragon (Ancient)) Level: 81

Title: Dark Knight's Favored Mount HP: 1,987/1,987 (+100) MP: 197/197 (+100) Strength: 995 (+100) Endurance: 1,001 (+100) Agility: 619 (+100) Magic: 183 (+100) Luck: 340 (+100) Equipment (Dragon Form): Dragon Saddle (Rank B) Skills: Breath (Rank E), Armored Skin (Rank S), Flight (Rank D), Burrowing (Rank A), Thunderous Voice (Rank C) Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

Mdofarak (63 y/o, Female, Three-Headed Dragon (Ancient)) Level: 74

Title: Encounter with Sweets HP: 1,416/1,416 (+100) MP: 907/907 (+100) Strength: 520 (+100) Endurance: 489 (+100) Agility: 418 (+100) Magic: 634 (+100) Luck: 631 (+100) Equipment (Dragon Form): Dragon Saddle (Rank B) Skills: Multi-Elemental Constitution (Unique Skill), Breath (Rank A), Flight (Rank A), Magic Attachment (Rank C), Magic Conservation (Rank C) Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

When all three screens were lined up side by side, it was clear that Dahak really was several heads above the other two. As expected of dragons, their ages were all quite impressive. *And Rosalia is supposedly older than all of—cough, cough.*

"I see, so it's not just about the convenience," Sera noted in response to Dahak's protest, nodding with an intrigued face.

Gerard walked out just then, also gripping a hoe. "How about I give you a hand?" For some reason, the straw hat and towel he was wearing didn't seem out of place on his armored form.

Dahak whistled. "Hey, looking good, old man!"

"Oh, right, you were a farmer before you became a knight."

"Thank you for remembering, my king. It's been quite a while, but I can handle something of this level, no problem."

In regards to why we were taking it easy in the middle of a war, that was because the three countries, after having repelled Trycen's advance, were now busy rearranging their armies to go on the offensive themselves. Small groups like ours could be ready to move out at pretty much any time, but actual armies were hundreds or thousands larger in number. Understandably, they needed much more time to move such troops and set up supply trains, communications, and so on. They were rushing, but the process would still take more than a week.

I had considered the option of us going ahead on our own, but Rio had sternly stopped me, saying that because we were the only party besides the Heroes

who included otherworlders—otherworlders being the only ones capable of dealing damage to the Demon Lord—he wanted to be deliberate about when and where he dispatched us.

So, in short, we ended up with a whole chunk of free time while the armies were busy preparing. And because we had been holed up in the Grand Scarlet Canyon for a while, I'd thought it would be a good idea to get some rest back at home sweet home.

At the moment, I was lounging on top of a picnic blanket with Efil and Melfina, enjoying the sight of our backyard being transformed.

We're not wasting time. Let's call it "recharging our batteries."

Melfina sighed. "So, you'll still end up having to fight the Demon Lord. Even though it was supposed to be the Heroes' purpose..."

"Where's the harm? And the Heroes are busy on the Western Continent, so there's nothing to be done about it. More importantly, is the Demon Lord that strong? How strong?"

"I guess all that matters is that you're enjoying yourself, honey."

Did Melfina just suck a sandwich into her mouth while she sighed? She's gotten even more skillful than before! Anyway, the Demon Lord is strong, right?

"Master, I've finished peeling the apple. Here you go. Ahh..."

The slice of apple that Efil held out to me was astonishingly sweet. *Yep, having days like this every once in a while is good too.*

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"Excuse me."

"E-Excuse me."

Our two new maids, Rosalia and Huba, entered the living room, pushing serving carts loaded with tea and snacks. Efil was standing behind the couch where I was sitting, maintaining her usual demeanor but with an extra sharp look in her eyes.

I was glad to see that these two had grown accustomed to their new jobs

during the few days that had passed since our return to Parth. Unlike a certain trio of girls with catastrophic cooking skills, our new employees were not particularly crippled in any of the duties required of maids and were improving at a respectable pace.

Today, I had invited Azgrad to my house to show him just how well Huba and Rosalia were doing. Usually, the hopeless battle junkie would have made a beeline for our underground training facility to fight my companions as soon as he arrived. I was letting him fight the members of my party by order of ascending strength, but although he'd managed to beat Boga and Mdofarak, he had lost to Dahak in every match so far. In short, he had yet to progress far enough to fight an opponent other than his own former subordinates.

Looks like Alex and Rion's turn is still quite a ways off.

"You two...actually went and became maids," Azgrad sighed, deeply moved. By no means was he drawing back. Probably.

"I've lived quite a number of years as a dragon, and this is the first time someone's made me do something like this," Rosalia replied with a wry smile as she filled our cups.

"I feel like I'm even busier now than when I was in the order," Huba added, slightly teary-eyed.

"Back when she was serving me, Huba actually had a habit of slacking off when I took my eyes off her. Did you guys have trouble training her?"

"No worries. Efil is the one in charge of her instruction. I promise you we'll make her into a splendid maid."

"I-Is that so? I kinda feel like the goal has shifted, but, uh, you go get 'em."

"It's all the food's fault! The staff meals are just too delicious..."

Once we had all been served tea, I picked up a cookie and took a bite. Although it was still far from Ruka's handiwork, it wasn't bad at all. Having reached this level of proficiency in only a few days was admirable.

"So, Azgrad, how're you finding life here? Is the inn too cramped for a pampered prince?"

Rosalia and Huba were staying with us as live-in help, but we had gotten Azgrad set up with a room at Clare's inn, the Fairy's Song, under an alias. He was now wearing the outfit of a wandering adventurer, complemented by a scarf to cover his collar.

"Who do you take me for? In the army, camping is the norm. I'm happy just to have a roof over my head. The food at the inn's great too. You won't catch me complaining about anything."

"Glad to hear it. I can vouch for that place. They took really good care of me back when I was just starting out."

"Jeez, you know this isn't how high-ranking prisoners are normally treated, right? You're seriously making me doubt the common sense I learned growing up."

While preparations were being made for the coordinated invasion of Trycen, we were having Azgrad present himself as an adventurer. He and Huba had selected a few dozen subordinates they thought were trustworthy and convinced those men and their dragons to form a mercenary group that would be joining the war effort as well. Just in case, Sera had made the men confess a whole bunch of things that ensured they would never betray us. And that was how the Dragon Mercenary Group was formed.

"I've been hearing good things about your team. Rio was telling me you guys are totally nailing the subjugation quests he's been giving you."

"They're all just the dregs you turned down, right? But they serve well enough as warm-up exercises, I guess."

"Um, I kind of want to go out and fight too..."

"Sure, once you become a first-rate maid."

"Ugh."

If you go out, it would render all our efforts to help you keep a low profile moot. Azgrad is fine because we've abandoned the idea of disguising him—anyone who knows him would be able to recognize him immediately anyway—and decided to have him properly contribute in battle. So, since you're not him, just stay put.

“Oh yeah, I haven’t seen Colette around much recently. Wonder what’s become of her?”

Back when we’d first returned to Parth, she had come visiting so frequently it had verged on being annoying. Now, however, we hadn’t heard a peep from her in several days. It was apparently bothering Melfina so much that yesterday she had only asked for refills five times.

“You talking about the Oracle of Deramis? The army from Deramis arrived, so she’s probably busy with them, right? After all, the joint force of the three countries should be setting out in a few days.”

“I can only hope that’s all it is.”

“Uh...I heard this from Shutola, but are you in a relationship with the Oracle?”

No, she’s just a religious fanatic. “That’s a hard no.”

“I mean, I don’t care, but she said you’re a lustful man who successfully seduced even the Oracle, and that that’s how you gained a pipeline to Deramis. And that you’re really perverted or something.”



“Uh...”

“Dude, you were supposed to deny that.”

It’s quite off-target, but the general sentiment isn’t too inaccurate. Looks like I can’t underestimate his sister’s intelligence network.

“Well, I’m about to get a move on. Rosalia, Huba, the tea and snacks were pretty good. Let me have them again sometime.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Y-Yes, General!”

“Getting a move on? If you’re talking about fighting Dahak, he’s not in today.”

“The hell? That dragon, who’s only ever working on the farm or pruning your garden whenever I come by, isn’t around today?”

Hey, even he deserves a break. Despite everything, he’s been a big help with his Construction skill.

“He’s gone to visit Prettia. I’m afraid you’re going to have to give up on fighting him today.”

“Dammit. All right, I’ll come another day.”

“Ah, hold on. You have time now, right? Can you deliver this to Rio at the guild for me?”

“What’s this? A letter? Why not take it yourself? The guild’s right there.”

“Sorry, man, I’ve got something urgent after this. Please and thank you.” I held the letter out to Azgrad as he stood up.

“Well, I was about to hit up the guild to grab another quest after this, so sure, I guess. To the guildmaster, yeah?”

After watching the prince leave with my letter in hand, Efil and I exchanged a look and nodded at each other. *All right, time for me to get moving too. Oh, but before that...*

“Rosalia, Huba, I’m going somewhere with Efil now. Make sure you listen to what Ellie and Ruka tell you, all right? As your seniors, they’re next in authority

when we're not here."

"Yes, Master."

"You're going on a date *again*?"

Efil and I looked on with deadpan faces as Rosalia gave Huba's head a sharp rap.

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"And there you have it. I delivered it."

Just as he'd promised, Azgrad had gone to the guild and delivered Kelvin's letter to Rio. After that, he turned to head downstairs and look for a good quest.

"I'm sorry, just when was it you last saw Kelvin-kun?"

Before Azgrad reached the door, however, he'd been called back by Rio, whose eyes were fixed on the letter. For some reason, the guildmaster had a grave look on his face.

"About half an hour ago. Why?"

"Thirty minutes. Which means it's too late. Don't tell me *they're* also..." Rio was clutching his head in clear distress, but Azgrad had no idea what was going on. "Just...here, read it for yourself."

"Kelvin's letter? What's wrong with it?"

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To Guildmaster Rio: Everything's moving slower than expected, so we're heading to Trycen first. Come join us once the joint force's preparations are done. The enemy is the Demon Lord, so feel free to take your time! Let's all do our best! See ya!

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In response to Azgrad's silence, Rio said, "Looks like he couldn't wait a few more days. Or, based on his choice of words, I'd venture a guess that he planned on doing this from the start. Honestly, what am I supposed to do with him?"

The receptionist Ange would attest that later that day, there was a strange screech emanating from the guildmaster's office that shook the very ground.

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The moment Azgrad left, Efil and I secretly snuck out of Parth and headed for a place out of sight where I quickly Summoned all my Followers. I had said Dahak was out, but the truth was that everyone had been inside my magic pool. The whole show had been for the sake of heading to Trycen by ourselves. I mean, it was a no-brainer—if we went there as part of a huge group, we would have had to share all the fun. I'd entrusted Rosalia and Huba to Ellie and Ruka's care and also prepared a proper role for Azgrad to play, so there was little question of him chasing us on Rosalia in dragon form.

"All right, everyone present? Dahak, Boga, Mdofarak, we're aiming to reach our fortress in the Grand Scarlet Canyon by tomorrow."

"If I may, brother: wouldn't it be faster for you to run? Your speed on the ground is probably much greater than what we can manage while flying, right?"

"I mean, you're not wrong, but..."

"What?! We won't get to fly?"

A dejected look came over Rion's face, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes like a dam moments before bursting. From his position behind her, Gerard began emanating a dark, threatening aura.

"Brother! M'lady! *Please* ride on us! We promise you a super comfortable and super fast journey through the skies! Boga, Mdofarak, make sure you fly like your lives depend on it!"

"You don't need to push yourselves *that* hard," I said with a wry smile. "And Gerard, stop that. You're scaring Dahak."

My friend gave a start. "Oh dear, I seem to have forgotten myself just now."

Of course, we were not opting to fly solely to avoid making Rion sad. We were also doing it to match the timing of the Steel Knight Order that was supposedly marching towards Trycen. According to Azgrad, the order's general, Dan D'Alba, was famous as the country's most powerful warrior. That meant we just *had* to

fight him. Letting him go wasn't an option.

"Aww, thank you!"

Seeing Rion happily clamber on top of Mdofarak, the rest of us followed suit and set out. The great bulk of the dragons lifted into the air and soared through the sky. I continued casting Agility-boosting skills on them while suppressing the quickened beating of my heart.

What is this premonition I'm having right now?

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We arrived at the Obsidian Fortress right around the time we'd expected. But what we had not bet on were the people we found waiting for us there.

"Why are you two here?"

"I predicted your actions, Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama!"

"My female intuition told me to follow Colette-chan!"

It was the very Oracle we hadn't seen in a while and the big sister everyone loved, Prettia.

Yes, yes, we love you, so please stop doing that side chest pose that would upstage even bodybuilders. Nothing about it is maidenly—okay, seriously, it's scaring me. Stop. I beg you.

To sum up what they told us, Colette had figured out from our usual behavior that we would be trying to get the jump on the army and had therefore set off several days earlier on her pegasus. Prettia, who had happened to see her flying away, sensed that something was up. Because Parth's safety was now guaranteed thanks to the arrival of the Deramisian reinforcements, he had not hesitated to pursue Colette. On foot, in his case.

So this *is the reason behind the unnatural peace!*

::I'm equally outraged by this development, my king!:: ::Dammit, so that's why I couldn't find her no matter how hard I searched!:: The guys within my party—me included—all vented our respective frustrations through the Network. One person seemed to be on a different tangent from the rest of us, but we decided not to ask. Or rather, there was no time to do so.

It's a total surprise that Colette managed to anticipate my actions. But now...

"I'll concede that you have incredible deductive skills. But what do you actually plan on doing?"

"You are going to subjugate the Demon Lord in the Goddess's name, right? Then I must accompany you!"

"Colette, I'm sorry to say this, but I can't let you come along. Prettia is one thing because he's a Rank S adventurer, but we're heading for the capital of an enemy nation. Even we can't guarantee we'll be able to protect you while breaking through enemy lines."

We'd had the advantage of the terrain so far because we had only been defending against Trycen's advances. Our coming battle, however, would be the opposite. We'd be disadvantaged in every respect, not just by the terrain but in numbers too. It was hardly a place to bring someone of the Oracle's stature.

"Kelvin-sama, have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

"I am a Summoner. I have my own protection. See?" She raised her right hand and generated a glowing magic circle that I was more than familiar with.

"Oracle, please do not reveal your power so incautiously," Captain Cliff of the Holy Order of Knights admonished her as he emerged from the circle.

Ohh, so he's Contracted to Colette!

"Silence, Captain Cliff. I am currently in the middle of an important negotiation. Know that this is a matter that will influence the very future of Deramis."

Whoa, she's gone into Oracle mode and started chastising Cliff. Then again, this is probably what she's like most of the time, right? It's just that I've seen her overexcited and flying off the edge more often than not recently. Can you be your normal self around Mel and me too? No?

"Captain Cliff is Level 86, and his stats are further bolstered by my Summoning skill. He is more than powerful enough to protect me. Furthermore, you will not be reprimanded for taking unsanctioned actions if you allow me to

accompany you.”

“I see. By bringing you along, our strategy gains legitimacy. And if it comes down to it, you can claim that it was your idea.”

“That’s exactly right! As expected of Melf— Mel-sama.”

Her true nature seemed to peek out for a split second there, but let’s overlook it for now. More importantly, as things stand, does this mean she *would be held responsible if* we *messed anything up?*

::Now that the Demon Lord has appeared, the voice of the Oracle of Deramis will carry a lot more weight. In spite of everything, she is still supposedly the only person in the world who can hear the voice of the Goddess—my voice. As long as your strategy pays off, the other countries will have no grounds to lodge any complaints.:: As always, Melfina seemed to read my mind and quickly allayed my fears. *In other words, everything will be fine if we don’t blunder the subjugation. But wait a moment. Could it be that Colette went to such lengths because she’s looking out for us? If so, then I’m the asshole for assuming she’s here just because she wants to sniff Mel or whatever. Ugh, how embarrassing...*

Prettia spoke up. “Kelvin-chan, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Captain Cliff is the most powerful member of the Holy Knights, and Colette-chan has other Followers too. You’d be hard-pressed to find a more reliable ally.”

“Ugh...all right, all right. But Colette, remember to always prioritize your own safety. That isn’t up for debate.”

“Thank you very much! My Followers and I promise to dedicate ourselves to the cause!”

“I *just said* to engage in moderation. Well, anyway, I guess this is us. We’ll be the Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance th—”

“Wait JUUUST a moment!” boomed a loud voice that reverberated through the ravine.

We all looked towards the fortress where the noise had emanated from. At that moment, the door burst open.

“I’M COMING TOOAAAHHHH!”

The instant I recognized him, Sabato crashed into the far wall, having taken one of Goma’s punches to the face yet again. *Is this actually supposed to be some kind of schtick?*

“How many times have I told you not to shout like that?! Ah, hi, everyone. May we join you as well?”

How can you maintain such a straight face every time? Could it be that you also have the Nerves of Steel skill?

I sighed. “What’s one more group, right? Fine, we’ll take care of you too. Uh, Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance, yayyy...”

“C’mon, Kelvin, put more energy into it!” Sera chided me.

And so the Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance was born, composed of Prettia, Colette, Sabato, me, and our respective parties.

Chapter 3: Descent

Trycen Castle was positioned atop a small hill, slightly removed from the city that had sprung up around it and that now served as the nation's capital. Most of the country's land was desert, with the capital and its surroundings being one of the few regions of flat grassland.

The metropolis and castle were both enclosed by thick, towering walls. There was currently a line of several dozen wagons in front of the outer wall gate. The majority of those people were traveling merchants who had just returned from other settlements.

Everyone entering the city had to produce Trycenian identification—even merchants—and everything in their wagons was carefully inspected as a rule. This check was even stricter now that they were in a state of war, causing the line to be quite a bit longer than it would normally be.

"Next!"

After the inspection of the previous wagon was finished, the guards' squad leader yelled for the next in line to move up. One look and he and his men could tell that this was a slave trader—there really wasn't any other way to interpret a wagon with a cage that had multiple humanoid figures inside.

When the wagon drew abreast of the gate, the guards stepped over to surround it.

"Thank you for keeping the city safe as always, sir," said the merchant, a young man with an honest face and a warm smile, as he turned towards the squad leader. Next to him was a girl who, judging from the fact that she shared his black hair, was likely his sister.

With a friendly smile, she echoed, "Thank you, sir!"

The guard thought this a rather unusual pair of slave merchants, but he kept the thought to himself. "We'll be checking your goods and your papers. You're a slave merchant, I assume?"

"Yes, sir. As you can see, we're young and only just managed to get our own

business off the ground. Our goods today are expected at Herelton Slave Trading Company in the merchant quarter. Uh...what do you think, sir? Every single one is top-tier. I'm sure they'll fetch very good prices."

"Hah, you sure know how to make a man jealous."

"Our ID is, uh, where'd I put it again? I'm sorry, sir, would you mind checking our goods first?"

"No problem. You! Make sure to check every face properly! They're apparently all top-tier!"

"Talk about a sight for sore eyes!"

The soldier who had been ordered to do so clambered up onto the loading platform and stared into the cage as if to appraise each slave himself. However, they were all wearing deep hoods that hid half of their faces.

"Hey, you! Take your hood off and show me your face!" he barked with a faint smile at the one who had hair the color of fire and assets that were prominent even underneath her robe. It wasn't hard to see why he had chosen her first.

The woman slowly lifted her hood and drew it back.

"Damn, you really *are* top-ti...er..."

Noticing his subordinate's pause, the squad leader asked, "What's wrong?"

"Uh...nothing, sir. She's just so beautiful that I zoned out for a second. I've never seen anyone like her before."

"You have a nosebleed, soldier. I'm not going to ask what you were imagining. Just get your head back on the job!"

"Sorry, sir! Uh, she doesn't match the description of anyone on the warrants. No problem. Now, you, show me your face."

The guard wiped away the blood trickling from his nose and shifted his attention to the next slave. Eventually, he finished checking them all and confirmed to his superior that everything was in order.

"You seriously ha—"

"OH! It was in my jacket pocket! Sir, I found my ID!"

“You really have to pull it together, young man. It’s a very important document. Be more careful about where you keep it.”

“I’ll do that, sir. Here you go, sir.”

“Let’s take a look... Hm?”

The ID proffered by the young man did indeed bear the marks of a Trycen-issued ID—it had the national seal, the young man’s name, and all other details. There was just one strange thing about it.

What’s this? A stain?

There was a splotch of what looked like red ink on the surface. The closer the guard looked, the larger the stain grew until it finally rose from the card and—“Looks like there’s no problem. Let this one through!” the man hollered after testing the ID with the specialized equipment that was supposed to pick up on its magical signature.

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Thank you!”

The young man put away the ID that had been returned to him and prompted his horse to move forward. At the same time, the cheerful-looking girl next to him expressed her thanks, leaving the squad leader with a mysterious warm feeling in his chest.

“Pretty rare faces around here, those two,” one guard commented to his superior. “Being able to become independent as slave traders at that age is impressive. And the younger sister was also cute.”

“That young man looked so earnest, gallant, handsome, cool, and wonderful as well. I wish him luck in everything he does. He’s just how I like them,” replied the squad leader.

“Uh...yes...sir?”

The younger soldier delicately affirmed his superior’s words on the spot. When he returned to his post, however, he whispered to a colleague, “Hey, dude, does the commander swing...*that* way?”

“What’re you saying, man? He has a wife, you know.”

“Oh, okay. I must have been mistaken.”

The soldier shot one last glance at the wagon disappearing into the hustle and bustle of the city, then decided to forget the words he had just heard.

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The cold night wind blew through the cracks in the walls and stroked our skin. We were currently inside an abandoned building located within the slums of the capital of Trycen. Everything within was covered in a layer of dust, but all the necessary furniture was present, indicating that someone had likely been living there until a few years ago. Only after I had secured a degree of hygiene with the Clean spell did I finally settle down onto the sofa.

Hmm, this one isn’t all that bad, actually.

“Here we are inside the city, Master. Everything went well.”

“Mh-hm. And we got here pretty fast too, thanks to skipping all the checkpoints.”

We had flown in a straight line from the Grand Scarlet Canyon to Trycen’s capital while Melfina used White Magic to keep us invisible through what was effectively optical camouflage. While in the air, we’d noticed the many checkpoints that had been set up along the way. Normally, the skies would have been patrolled by the Dragon Knight Order as well, but they were all gone now. In short, we’d met with no resistance whatsoever. We’d landed just outside the city and snuck in.

There was a barrier deployed along the walls, which rose all the way up into the sky and surrounded the capital. I couldn’t determine how many mages were currently maintaining it, but it was clear that it was extremely tough and powerful. It functioned to completely cut off the effect of magic between the interior and exterior. Even Colette’s and my Summoning abilities were no exception—we could not Summon our Followers on the other side of the barrier.

That said, whatever security measures were in place would naturally be triggered if we attempted to force our way in. So, how *did* we get inside? Through the front gate, of course. I’d had Clotho take out a random wagon from

Storage, then mounted the wagon with a cage created using Adamantite Rampart, and voilà! We had ourselves a slave merchant's wagon.

We'd decided to take advantage of the fact that the slave trade was booming in Trycen. Gerard served as the coachman, I'd taken on the role of the merchant with the help of a costume tailored by Efil, which provided a buff to Drama, and Rion acted as...well, as my little sister.

In short, the plan was to bluff our way through. Sera and Mel had both refused to yield when it came to being the merchant's wife, but because they seemed on the verge of actually battling each other, I got rid of the role altogether. Alex remained within Rion's shadow, and the dragons who had yet to learn how to transform—Boga and Mdofarak—remained within my magic pool.

The remaining members had unfortunately had to enter the cage and act as slaves. The horse pulling our wagon was actually Colette's pegasus, and boy did we have trouble hiding its wings. Not like we had any choice, though. Colette had given me her very best "Let me! Use me!" face, but naturally I had ignored her.

The key to our plan had been Sera's Unique Skill, Blood Dominion. We knew that if the guards actually checked the faces of our "slaves"—well, a lot of them were pretty famous, being Gaunian royalty and the Oracle of Deramis. And Prettia was just distinctiveness personified. So we'd had Sera purposely wear a thinner robe to incite the guard's lust and prompt him to check her first. When he did so, she used Bloodbending to surreptitiously get her blood onto him and gain control.

The possibility of the guard preferring guys had crossed my mind, but I had faith in Sera's intuition and had known that she would catch on and do what needed to be done without getting noticed even if the guard first turned towards Sabato or Prettia.

The other challenge that had awaited us was the checking of our ID. I'd had Melfina forge a card based on information provided by Colette. Its appearance was flawless, but unfortunately, the real ones all had a certain magical signature embedded within. We couldn't replicate it perfectly, which meant the ID would

be exposed as soon as it was checked. In the end, the issue was resolved by using Blood Dominion and Bloodbending again. Sera simply manipulated the bloodstain that she had smeared onto my ID in advance in order to control the guard who checked our documentation.

"Those guards will remain under my control for quite a while longer."

Seriously, that skill of hers is way too OP.

After successfully infiltrating Trycen, our top priority was to gather information, but in order to do so, we needed to secure a base of operations. According to Azgrad, the barrier enclosing the city was something that was only ever activated under unusual circumstances. Its magical energy cost was as high as it was effective, and it was really more of a hindrance than anything else for the Dragon Knight Order.

We first took this as an indication of how backed into a corner Trycen felt but then learned that all the nobles had been gathered at the royal palace for a social event that had been going on for several days now. None of it made sense. A little more digging confirmed that the Magic Knight Order had returned to the palace but the Steel Knight Order was still on the road.

The first place we had considered for our base was actually the Adventurer's Guild, but it quickly became apparent that Trycen was keeping a close eye on the place, which made it inappropriate for our purposes. It wasn't as if we knew the guildmaster here, which meant we didn't know if we could trust him or her. So that idea went right out the window. After bouncing around a few more times, we'd eventually settled on this abandoned house.

"According to Colette's calculations, General Dan should be back tomorrow. That's when everything will go down."

"Just asking, but can't we invade the palace before the Steel Knight Order gets home? Hold on, what's that pitying look for?!"

Sabato, you poor child. Do you even have to ask?

◇ ◇ ◇

General Dan and the Steel Knight Order finally reached the capital the day after Kelvin and his party had infiltrated the city. Specifically, it was around the

end of the day. Although they had stored the cumbersome siege engines in magic storage items and pushed their war horses as much as possible, they were still soldiers wearing full suits of platinum armor. There was a limit to how fast they could move under all that weight.

Damnation! We took far longer than I'd hoped. But still, what is this situation?

The moment Dan passed through the gate, he felt a sense of wrongness. It came from the reactions of the citizens who caught sight of him and his troop as they were pushing towards the royal palace.

"Oh heavens, it's General Dan with the Steel Knight Order!"

"Omigod, Dan-sama! Jin-sama!"

"Trycen's most powerful warrior has pulled through once again! Looks like our country's future is secure!"

"Long live Trycen! Long live General Dan!"

The entire city was rocked by cheers and adulation from the soldiers' passage. This completely unexpected and bizarre state of affairs caused even Dan's well-trained knights to feel shaken. The reception would have been deserved if they had been parading back in triumph after a military victory, but the reality was that they had shamefully retreated from a battlefield of their own accord. Their reception was completely overboard.

"General, just what is..."

"Your guess is as good as mine. But stay calm no matter what happens. Let's get to the palace quickly."

Word spread and the crowd swelled exponentially. Every last citizen had words of praise and exaltation on their lips, painting the situation as the triumphant return of a champion. The more excited the people grew, the heavier it weighed on the knights. Even Dan, who had admonished the lieutenant general earlier on, felt the same.

"Hey, did you hear? Just like the Magic Knight Order did in Toraj, the Steel Knight Order completely overwhelmed Gaun!"

"I was there in person when King Zel announced the news! He said that Gaun

surrendered before they even started fighting, right? Fearing the military might of our country is natural, but now I'm starting to doubt if vassalizing such wimps is even worth the trouble."

"Aha ha ha, I guess this is the destiny of a country that can never lose!"

Dan frowned upon hearing a conversation between a couple on the side of the road, which he just happened to pick up as they passed.

His Majesty himself made a false announcement?

It wasn't only the couple; the entire city seemed to believe the king's words without a shred of doubt. Even though the claim sounded so ridiculous that anyone who gave it a second thought would have laughed it off as a joke, it was as if every last resident had completely abandoned their ability to think logically.

This is the same thing that happened to us. I sincerely hope that Leonhart's suggestion that His Majesty is a Demon Lord is but a misunderstanding. However, it is true that the possibility never came to mind for any of us in the Steel Knight Order until it was pointed out. In light of His Majesty's drastic change in behavior, his tacit consent of Tristan's scheming, and the sharp rise in monster activity in every country aside from Trycen, perhaps...

Dan now had two aims: to speak with King Zel directly and confirm Shutola's safety, and, depending on the circumstances, to rescue her as well. The first person in line for the throne, Crown Prince Azgrad, had been defeated during his clash with Parth, and his entire order had been obliterated without a single survivor having made it back.

Dan didn't want to imagine his beloved disciple dead, but there was no time to entertain such baseless sentimentality. If the royal line died out completely, the country would crumble. That was true even if any of the other foolish princes were to ascend the throne. No matter what happened, the general absolutely needed to ensure that Shutola made it out alive and well.

"Jin, bring your men to the back entrance. I have no idea how things are going to play out. Princess Shutola's life takes priority above all else—sacrifice whatever you have to in order to keep her safe!"

“Yes, sir! What will you be doing, General?”

“I will also be going to save Shutola-sama. But if possible, I’ll be attempting to gain an audience with His Majesty as well.”

“What are you saying?! Didn’t you just say that Shutola-sama takes top priority?! The only ones who can attack the Demon Lord are the Heroes! You’re strong, but—”

“I am well aware that I am contradicting myself. However, I am still His Majesty’s right hand. I must confirm the rumors for myself and do right by my king.”

“General...”

As Dan was riding in front, there was no way for Jin to see what sort of expression he wore. But his back seemed to be radiating sadness and grief. Jin couldn’t help but sympathize with his father. Then Dan turned around with a large smile plastered on his face.

“Well, this is me we’re talking about! I’ll rescue Shutola-sama in no time at all and talk His Majesty down, easy as pie!”

In contrast, Jin’s face quickly transformed into a steel mask. He was good at changing gears too. “Yes, sir. I’m off, then.”

“Mm. Off you go. Don’t expect to get the spotlight, though!”

By now, the order had ridden through the city proper and there were no more citizens around.

“Old man, don’t you dare die on me!” Jin shouted as he and his squad veered off the stone-paved path leading to the palace and disappeared from view.

“That rascal. Men, follow me!”

“YES, GENERAL!”

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Upon proceeding down the path connecting the city proper and the palace for a while, the inner walls protecting the royal abode finally came into view. There were only two ways in: through the main gate or through a secret entrance

around back. Just like the outer wall, this one had a barrier deployed above that blocked overhead access.

"I am Dan D'Alba, general of the Steel Knight Order! Open the gates!"

The front gates were tightly closed, with the soldiers who would normally be standing on guard nowhere to be seen. Dan's voice merely faded into the twilight sky with no reply. But soon, figures appeared on top of the wall.

"Well, I'll be! Is that General Dan I'm seeing? You're back early. I heard about how you seized victory without even fighting! I guess that's to be expected of our country's true champion. This humble Tristan is awestruck by your capableness, General!"

"Tristan!" Dan growled through gritted teeth. Of all people, this was the most annoying one who could possibly have shown up. "I'm 'early'? How can I not return immediately after hearing how you retreated before the Torajian host without even crossing swords?!"

"Whatever could you be talking about? The Magic Knight Order and I absolutely wiped the floor with Toraj. It's the talk of the town right now."

"You clown! Enough! Open the gates. I must speak with His Majesty and Princess Shutola."

"Oh dear, that's troubling," Tristan replied in his characteristically dramatic tone, shaking his head and bringing his hands to his chin. "They're both...unavailable right now."

"Come again?"

"His Majesty is currently in the middle of 'educating' Her Highness. He's announced that no one is to be allowed into the room. That includes you, General."

Dan growled in frustration. Clearly, things had taken a turn for the worse. If Tristan was speaking the truth, it meant that Zel and Shutola were currently together. Determining the veracity of the rumors about the former and saving the latter had just become much more complicated.

"What's more, everybody who matters in this country is gathered inside at

the moment and having an absolutely wonderful time. I'm afraid I can't let you and your men inside; all the weapons and armor you have on would give them such a fright. Would you be so kind as to take your leave for the day?"

"Looks like my first order of business is to break through here."

Tristan had brought a hand to his chest in a show of shallow modesty, but Dan had already closed his ears to the other's words. With a deliberate motion, he slowly reached for the handle of the greatsword on his back— "Oh dear, General Dan. Looks like you're going to have trouble taking your leave too."

"What—"

CRASH!

The sound of something incredibly heavy hitting the ground rang out from behind the Steel Knight Order. The soldiers turned around to see what had caused the commotion.

"That's... It's one of the ancient dragons from the Dragon Knight Order!"

"So there was a survivor!"

It was one of the Dragon Knight Order's prized ancient dragons, Boga, standing tall and proud. Dan's subordinates cheered at what they thought to be the return of an ally.

The dragon was not bearing any noticeable wounds. Rather, it seemed even more full of life than it had been when it had first set out for Parth. So much so that it even had the energy to unleash a thunderous roar.

"Is there anyone riding him?"

"I can't see that high. He'd have to get clo—"

"All men, battle-ready formation! And get out every last siege engine!"

"What? The siege engines, sir?"

The command that Dan had issued was not to welcome Boga but to attack him.

"How exactly do you think that huge bulk of his got through with the barrier deployed at the outer wall? I feel a power coming from him that's different

from that of the Dragon Knight Order. And it looks like Boga himself is raring to go."

The dragon crouched low, adopting a pose that made it seem like he would be charging forward at any moment. His head was aimed directly at the front gate of the inner walls.

Yet it seems like the true threat is the one on Boga's back...

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, General Dan, but I'm not opening these gates. Defending the palace takes priority above all else."

"Let me guess, this is also part of your scheme!"

"Oh, no, no, this is an unexpected twist even for me. Hm, looks like there's an urgent matter to attend to. General Dan, I'm afraid I must take *my* leave now. Please excuse me."

"I'll make you pay for this, Tristan. Mark my words!"

"I'll look forward to it. Farewell!"

At the same moment Tristan turned his back, Boga began thundering towards them.

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Tristan returned to the banquet hall where all of Trycen's most important nobles had gathered. The decor was so extravagant and gaudy that even the general thought he would get a headache if he stared too long. Regardless, every last one of the guests was a VIP commanding incredible influence, so he couldn't afford to waste attention on the view.

Although Zel was the indisputable leader of Trycen, the power of the major slave merchants hailing from various parts of the country—each surrounded by their own mercenary bands—could hardly be underestimated. These were, in effect, local warlords who collectively held the reins to Trycen's underground society.

Tristan's plan had been to instigate and manipulate them, getting them to work together to resist the alliance of the other three nations. It was for this that he had arranged the banquet and endured their obsequious attention so

far. What he wanted, in short, was a pawn to replace the Dragon Knight Order.

“There you are, General Tristan. Where did you disappear to?”

“We were so surprised when you left the hall in such a hurry, oho ho ho!”

“General Tristan, have you reconsidered the marriage proposal we mentioned earlier?”

The moment Tristan stepped into the banquet hall, he was accosted by a portly tycoon and his wife. Hot on their heels, a wave of the most unseemly humans he’d ever seen pushed their way towards him. All of them had fake smiles on their faces, but every last one of them was crowding around in hopes of lapping up whatever benefit they could from the raging war. In fact, Tristan no longer even saw these people as humans; in his eyes, they were no more than parasites.

“Esteemed guests, I sincerely apologize for the worry I caused. General Dan of the Steel Knight Order has just returned, and I was out greeting him. He confirmed that he has successfully defeated Gaun and annihilated our enemies.”

The venue burst with excitement at the news.

“General Dan is here?!”

“How wonderful! Our country really is invincible!”

“Darling, doesn’t that mean Lieutenant General Jin should be back as well? Let’s get our daughter to—”

“Say no more! Where is she now?!”

Just like the other citizens, no one here doubted Tristan’s words in the slightest. This was in spite of the fact that if the Steel Knight Order really had won, there was no way that Dan, as the individual with the greatest on-scene authority, would abandon the now vassal state of Gaun and simply ride back to Trycen without a care in the world.

In place of any sign of intelligence, these men and women put their greed on full display, with some even attempting to get a jump on the others by slipping out of the hall to find Dan straight away.

“Please calm down, everyone. General Dan is currently on his way to meet with His Majesty. He does have to deliver his report, after all.”

“Oh my, with His Majesty? Then I suppose we have no choice but to wait.”

“Indeed, prioritizing his official duties makes sense. I knew that, oho ho ho.”

The moment Tristan brought up their monarch, the VIPs calmed down as abruptly as if a switch had been flipped. Disrespect towards the king meant death. Whether this was something that had been branded onto their hearts through education or some other means was unclear.

“Could this be the reason we haven’t seen His Majesty these past few days?”

“That is exactly the case. He had every faith in General Dan’s victory and was waiting patiently so as to be the first to welcome him home and commend him for his accomplishments. The same is true of Princess Shutola.”

“We are so blessed to have rulers who care so much for their subordinates, ha ha ha.”

“On that note, I have good news and bad news for all of you.”

“News, you say? Other than that of General Dan’s return?”

“Madam, which would you prefer I share first?”

“Oho ho ho, you’re allowing me to choose? Then please start with the good!”

“As you wish,” Tristan replied with a bow before climbing the stage that was set up within the hall. Once he confirmed that he had everyone’s attention, he continued. “Dear guests, I have truly incredible news to share with you all. The martyr of unparalleled beauty who was struck down so cruelly during his last expedition, General Clive, did in fact survive. After undergoing a long period of recuperation, he is now well enough to return to the front lines!”

Commotion filled the air as the visitors whispered furiously among themselves and exchanged looks. The majority of them seemed doubtful, with exclamations along the lines of, “Is that true?!” “It’s a miracle!” and “There’s no way...” popping up around the room.

“Of course I understand your incredulity. After all, we’ve been arranging this behind the scenes with the utmost secrecy until now. However, that is coming

to an end today. And I wanted to let all of you—you ladies and gentlemen who have done so much to support Trycen—know first. In other words, this is a surprise present from yours truly! I have made preparations for a banquet with General Clive later today. He very strongly wishes for your participation!"

"*That* General Clive desires my presence?!"

"That's right, madam. *That* General Clive absolutely can't wait to see you."

The woman was so touched that she tottered backwards a step. Her husband caught her in the nick of time. Rather than offer him any words of thanks, however, she remained preoccupied by the news.

"Oh, heavens. Clive-sama is alive?! What's more, he wishes to eat with me?!"

Her husband suggested, "Let's get our daughter to meet him! This is a perfect oppor—"

"What nonsense are you saying?! He's too good for her!"

"Wh-What are *you* saying?!"

The argument between the married couple grew increasingly heated. Similarly, the other women in attendance were in the throes of anticipation and arguing in increasingly loud voices with their own partners. The artificial smile that Tristan had forced onto his face twisted into one of genuine delight as he gazed at the sight.

"Next is the bad news," he said, continuing in spite of the chaotic response. "Unfortunately, there isn't enough food for the dinner with General Clive. To that end, I'm afraid that everyone present will have to serve as his main course instead."

The guests froze and the hubbub abruptly died down. No, these people were no longer guests in Tristan's eyes. The moment forces that might prove a threat to Zel and, quite possibly, to Tristan himself had infiltrated the castle, these crimelords who held no strength of their own had been reduced to mere piles of flesh, pride, and greed. The way that Tristan intended to use them had taken a drastic turn.

"What kind of a joke is that, General Tristan?"

“You may be a general, but that was out of line!”

“Ha ha ha, I do love a good joke too,” Tristan replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “However, I’m not joking this time. Pigs fattened for no reason and filled with malice really *do* make the best food. For *him*, that is...”

The doors to the hall slowly creaked open.

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A boom as loud as the one that had rung out upon Boga’s appearance went off again before the front gate of the inner wall.

“Hnnnggg!”

“Rooooaaarrrr!”

What caused the crash was Dan’s platinum greatsword colliding with the full weight of Boga’s body. The momentum pushed the knight back several meters, his feet creating deep grooves in the ground as he slid backwards. The two of them were now locked in a contest of strength, with neither seeming to have the upper hand.

“Fuck! The siege engines aren’t hurting him at all!”

“Keep at it! All we need to do is make him flinch!”

The other members of the Steel Knight Order were shooting all their ballistae, trebuchets, and whatever siege weapons they had without rest, but the projectiles showed no signs of even coming close to penetrating the dragon’s armored skin. He merely glared back at them in annoyance.

“Don’t you underestimate me!” roared Dan as he took advantage of the opening to slam an upwards strike into his opponent’s chin, causing the beast to stumble back two steps. “Heavens, I sure have gotten old,” he muttered as he clambered up onto Boga’s head, aiming to stab the dragon’s unprotected right eye.

“RROOOOOOAAAAARRRRRRRRR!”

Just before his sword landed, a blast of sound exploded outwards from the beast. The shockwave was so great that it shook the ground and left cracks in the wall and siege engines, almost as if it was meant to kill.

Naturally, Dan was subject to the attack—in fact, he felt it the most keenly, being the closest to the source. Yet he was not fazed in the slightest.

“Boga, stand down,” said a voice from the dragon’s back. An instant later, a pitch-black greatsword clashed against the general’s dazzling white one in midair. “From now on, *I’ll* take you on!”

“You’re from the promotion ceremony in Parth!”

Dan’s new opponent was Gerard, who now appeared in all his glory with armor the color of his sword and a blood-red mantle whipping in the wind. Obediently, Boga flapped his wings and withdrew.

“How can you be here?!”

“I have no obligation to tell you that!”

The two knights exchanged blows faster than the eye could see. Unlike Boga, Gerard was human-sized—albeit larger than most—and was therefore impossible to accurately shoot with the siege engines as he fought. That said, the rest of the Steel Knight Order could not personally participate in a battle on that level, so they had no choice but to simply stand back and keep watch.

Every time my sword makes contact with his, it sucks away a whole chunk of my MP! To make matters worse, he’s very strong! Dammit, I don’t have time for this! Even now, Shutola-sama is...

Dan was still holding on thanks to the HP and MP recovery provided by his beloved sword, Great Holy Sword Chalice, but he was distracted by frustration and Gerard’s demon sword was steadily chipping away at his magic supply. The longer they fought, the more MP Gerard’s sword stole, and the faster and more powerful it became. Eventually, Chalice was sent flying out of Dan’s hands, and Gerard raised his greatsword for a final blow.

“Stop.”

A man’s voice suddenly rang out from above. And for some reason, it sounded extremely displeased.

“General, are you even trying? Mel, please dispel the False Fog over here.”

“Oh, you’ve had enough? Sure thing.”

After a brief exchange with a female voice, the air rippled and, like a fog being dispersed, a pitch-black dragon was revealed to be looming above. All the members of the Steel Knight Order were familiar with this black dragon. Naturally, so was Dan.

“Isn’t that one of the ancient dragons from the Dragon Knight Order? I seem to remember General Azgrad riding him when they were setting out.”

“Could he be here to save General Dan?”

“Are you an idiot?! The rock dragon’s turned against us—it’s obvious this one’s become our enemy too!”

“But then that means the crown prince is...”

It was true that the dragons were now their enemies, but never in a million years could the members of the Steel Knight Order have guessed that both General Azgrad and Lieutenant General Huba had revolted against Trycen of their own free will. It made sense for the soldiers to leap to easier assumptions.

Dan was shocked as well, but for a different reason than that of his men. He watched with wide eyes and cold sweat running down his back as the black dragon landed on the ground, revealing several figures on his back.

The man in a black robe was Kelvin, the continent’s newest Rank S adventurer, and of the three girls surrounding him, Dan recognized Sera and Efil as Kelvin’s party members. Unlike at the ceremony, his companions were now wearing battle gear instead of dresses.

What an overwhelming sight they are to behold. Every single one of them possesses strength equal to or above that of the black knight I was just fighting. The design of their equipment is strange, but every piece is, if not Rank S, Rank A at the very least.

Dan grew even more wary, having determined that it wasn’t the dragon he should be most concerned about.

“You’re General Dan of the Steel Knight Order, right?” Kelvin asked. “What was with that fight just now? You weren’t concentrating at all! What, do you have somewhere else to be? Do you even *want* to fight?”

“I know, right? He was acting like Gerard does when Ruka’s home late and he’s worried out of his mind!” added Sera.

Gerard started and pointed to himself. “Wait, me?”

“Brother, you can’t just say that when we’re the ones doing the attacking,” the black dragon remarked. “And big sister Sera, he’s not going to get a reference like that!”

The black dragon, who had always seemed surly and refused to associate with anyone else before being deployed to Parth, was now clearly acting subservient to this new party of his and playing the straight man to their banter. In a way, Dan was even more confused by that than by Sera’s comment.

He’s probably thinking “What is with these people?!” right now. I understand that emotion so well!

On top of everything else, Dan was even being pitied by the black dragon.

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“So, you woke up from the brainwashing thanks to the words of the Beast King and rushed back to the palace to save the princess of Trycen?” I asked.

Dan nodded. “To put it succinctly, yes. Although before I had a chance to attempt to break through the gate, I lost to Gerard-dono here.”

“Ga ha ha...ha...” Gerard’s laughter petered out before he lowered his head. “My apologies! Truly.”

Once Dan had finished giving his account, the Dark Knight had practically deflated as if he were a balloon. He had launched himself into battle thinking the other man was his main enemy. But upon defeating him, he’d discovered that he was actually an ally! It was an absolute blunder.

Of course, I’m the one who gave Gerard the order. Sorry!

“No, us having been brainwashed doesn’t change the fact that we did attack Gaun and contribute to the war. I am the one who should apologize,” Dan returned, similarly lowering his head.

I waved my hands in a fluster. “No, no. I also said some pretty self-important things in a condescending manner, which was uncalled for. I’m very sorry.”

Sera added, “And I also called you something rude, so, sorry!”

“Uh, Sera, are you indirectly calling *me* rude?” Gerard asked quizzically.

“Umm...” Efil raised her hand, interrupting our seemingly never-ending exchange of apologies. “We *are* still in front of the enemy’s gates. Should we really be standing here?”

Awkward silence filled the air.

I mean, she’s not wr— Okay, she’s right. Even though we know we’re safe because Sera hasn’t sensed anything, it’s still not the time to be having an apology round-robin. Worryingly, there’s no movement from the other side of the wall, even though I’m sure Tristan already knows we’re here. Wasting time flapping our mouths isn’t helping anyone. To that end, before we proceed...

“General Dan, this is a suggestion, but how do you feel about hiring us?”

“What do you mean by ‘hiring’?”

“As you know, we’re adventurers. And you want to save your princess. If the reward is appropriate, we would be willing to help you. What do you think?”

“It is true that you would make a reassuring ally, Kelvin-dono. However, a reward appropriate for hiring a Rank S adventurer... I’m afraid I do not have nearly enough money on me. But back at my residence—”

“Oh, we don’t want money.” *There are things that can’t be bought with money, right?*

“Mm? Then what do you wish for?”

“Well, if we manage to successfully carry out this mission, please fight us at full strength. Within the setting of a practice match, of course.”

“Is that honestly all you want?”

“That’s it.”

Dan and I exchanged a firm handshake to seal the deal. And with that, we were now the Demon Lord Subjugation Alliance + 1.

::Honey, am I understanding correctly? What we’ll be doing is exactly the same with or without this deal, right?:: Shush. It’ll serve as my motivation.

After having stumbled right off the bat, I needed something to get me back on my feet. What's more, now that we had taken the job as an official request, we could go all out.

There's nothing better than a win-win relationship. The others are still up in the sky, riding on Mdofarak's back and hidden behind False Fog, but there's no need to introduce them, right? It'd just unnecessarily complicate things, what with there being the Oracle of Deramis and royalty of Gaun and a muscle machine up there.

::Kelvin, it's just as you guessed. I found more nearby.:: Sera, who had been keeping a wary eye on our surroundings, suddenly shot me a telepathic message. She was holding stakes that bore what looked like runes from an ancient language. I had previously asked her to look for a certain something for me as a countermeasure against Tristan. My suspicions had been proven correct.

As planned, please gather them all so that he can't use them anymore.

::Sure thing. I'll put them into Clotho's Storage.:: Yep, that works. Then we won't have to be on guard against surprise attacks from him.

"Kelvin-dono, our first order of business is to get through these gates," Dan said before looking up at Boga. "I'm afraid it would take quite a long time using our siege engines, so would you be able to help out with the dragons under your command?"

Oh, is he asking that because of Boga's size? Even though it's actually Sera and Mel who have the highest Strength stat in our party... I suppose Dan wouldn't be able to guess that, though.

"There's no need. I'll do it myself."

"You, Kelvin-dono?"

I took out Black Staff of Disaster and cast Boreas Death Scythe on it. When he saw the scythe-like blade, Dan nodded in understanding.

"I see, the scythe from your fight with Lu—ahem, Sylvia. It did manage to easily penetrate the barrier set up by the Oracle of Deramis, after all."

Oh? He knows about the exhibition match? Was he watching?

I swung my staff in the direction of the castle wall. Even though it was just a simple swing with no windup whatsoever, the stones parted like butter, and cracks expanded in the blink of an eye. Within ten seconds, the cracks reached even the barrier that extended above the wall, causing it to crumble with a high-pitched shriek.

A surprised "Wow!" went up from the other knights as Dan murmured, "What a powerful attack indeed."

Looks like he's the only one who's seen my weapon in action before. "The soldiers on the other side of this wall used to be your allies, right? You sure you can handle fighting them?"

"My subordinates and I have shored up our resolve. The only thing that matters is Shutola-sama's safety."

"Gotcha. Clotho."

My slime buddy poked out from inside my sleeve.

"Take out all the golems you've got in Storage."

Clotho immediately expanded to around my height, and golems with the appearance of knights started marching out one by one in quick succession. This was all one hundred of the golems who had previously been used to man Obsidian Fortress. I had wanted to bring along the ones possessed by souls too, but it turned out they could no longer enter Storage.

What a pity.

In addition to the golems, Clotho gave us back all the equipment we had taken off so as not to catch undue attention while walking about inside the city proper. Sabato had been conflicted at the time but had still handed everything over in the end, albeit reluctantly. He strongly disliked the sensation of Clotho Storing the equipment straight off his back. In contrast, Goma and Colette loved the bouncy texture of the slime's body.

Guess it really varies from person to person.

"I'm honestly at a loss as to what I should comment on first."

“We’ve got no time for comments. So, General Dan, can I entrust you to lead the assault from the front?”

“If I’m handling the front, what will you be doing?”

“Ah. Well...”

◇ ◇ ◇

Trycen Castle was composed of the main palace and four surrounding strongholds that served as the headquarters for each knight order. The Steel Knight Order, which was most suitable for defense, was at the front, then there was the Dragon Knight Order to the right, the Mixed Monster Order to the left, and the Magic Knight Order in the back. As the existence of the Black Ops was not public, it did not have a fortress of its own.

When Trycen was at full strength, attacking the palace would have required breaking through the defenses mounted by the Steel Knight Order. This meant facing the most well-coordinated troops the country had to offer, armed in platinum armor to the last man and led by the most powerful warrior in the kingdom: Dan D’Alba.

Needless to say, it was no easy feat. And if the fight dragged on, the Dragon Knight Order would inevitably arrive in short order, with monsters trained by Tamers from the Mixed Monster Order providing reinforcements, and the sky would soon be filled with an endless rain of destructive spells cast by the Magic Knight Order. In essence, it was nigh impossible.

Now, however, the Steel Knight Order had defected to Kelvin’s side, and the Mixed Monster Order and the Dragon Knight Order had been reduced to the bare minimum of troops to keep their own headquarters running. The Magic Knight Order was technically still present and under Tristan’s control, but it had just lost its previous general, Clive, who had been declared KIA.

This left only the Black Ops which, although largely intact, was a force specialized for intelligence operations and not direct combat. There was a separate force that protected the palace itself, but they had limited battle experience. Essentially, the gulf between the lies that the citizens had been fed and the truth of the situation was enormous. Then again, it wasn’t only the citizens who were living within a fleeting dream.

All the court mages of Trycen were currently gathered in an area deep within the heart of the palace where the barrier above both the wall surrounding the city and that surrounding the castle was managed from. This was one of the most well-protected areas in the compound, far away from the front-line action. Normally, the environment would have been somber and silent, but this was not an ordinary day.

Crack...

“What was that sound? Wait, what’s happening to the barrier?!”

“What? Oh no! Reporting! The barrier is under attack and has been damaged!”

“How can that be?! Give it more MP immediately!”

The court mages held their prayer-like poses, feeding MP into the gigantic magic circle they were kneeling on and trying their best to concentrate in spite of the shouts flying back and forth over their heads. Something was happening to the barrier that was meant to be their last defensive resort. The chief manager had picked up on the irregularity almost immediately and ordered the mages to increase their output to repair and bolster the magical blockade. But it was already too late.

CRACK!

“Correction! The barrier has just collapsed!”

“Th-That’s impossible! It’s supposed to be strong enough to withstand even attacks from dragons! Shit! All right, then. Prepare for redeployment. And send word to all the orders! And to His Majesty too!”

“B-But His Majesty is currently refusing to meet anyo—”

“Are you listening to yourself?! The royal palace is under attack! It’s a foregone conclusion that someone’s head is going to fly! I’ll come with you!”

The chief turned towards the door to head to where the king was but suddenly heard a female voice behind him.

“Is the barrier actually that big of a deal?”

“Of course it is! The technology itself is the crystallization of Trycen’s cutting-

edge research and development, and the energy powering it is supplied by the most elite court mages in the country! It is maintained twenty-four seven and is strong enough—”

“Mh-hm, and then?”

“Strong en— Wait, who are you?!”

In the middle of his long-winded speech, the chief noticed the red-haired woman—Sera, of course—who had suddenly appeared. At her feet were the fading vestiges of a summoning circle and the figures of the collapsed court mages. The subordinate the chief had been talking to was among the victims.

“Took you long enough to catch on. I had so much time I went and knocked out all your people already.”

“O-Our elite court mages...all in a split second...no, no, more importantly, who *are* you?!”

“All right, that’s enough of that.”

Sera poked the man’s forehead with a bloodstained finger so fast that his eyes couldn’t even register what had happened. “So, tell me about this crisis of yours again.”

“No, ma’am! Everything is working normally, ma’am!” he replied with a sharp salute.

“Glad to hear it. What a peaceful day it is today,” Sera agreed smilingly. “Well, then, that’s it for taking over this place. I did a great job, if I do say so myself! And it looks like this is pretty deep inside the palace, so...”

The demon concentrated all her senses next to the man who remained frozen in a salute. She took everything that she was picking up through all the detection skills she possessed—Presence Sensing, Danger Detection, Magic Detection, and Concealment Detection—and added them to the map of the castle that Kelvin had uploaded to the Network beforehand. Now it showed the positions of enemy troops, including the ones Kelvin might be personally interested in, and even the locations of hidden doors and traps. After meditating for about thirty seconds, she slowly opened her eyes.

“There’s just one area at the top of the palace that I can’t read. Oh well! By process of elimination, that’s probably the place Kelvin wants to find!”

As Sera nodded to herself in satisfaction, her hands on her hips, Kelvin reached out to her telepathically.

::That should be enough for the map. Good work. How’s the situation on your end?:: ::All cleaned up. Plus I found something good!:: ::Like what?:: ::That other thing you asked me for!:: Sera was currently looking straight at what seemed to be a mechanical archway. It was the Trycenian teleportation gate. ::I really am lucky! I appeared right in front of it when I was Summoned!:: ::Whoa, well done indeed! I knew you’d gotten pretty deep into the castle, but to find the jackpot on the first try! You never cease to amaze me.:: ::I’m going to claim my reward from you after this!:: ::P-Please go easy on me. So, do you think you can start it up?:: From the look of it, the teleportation gate was turned off.

“I order you to activate this gate,” Sera instructed the last man standing.

“Ma’am! The teleportation gate is currently disabled! Authentication from someone with sufficient authority is required in order to start it up again! Unfortunately, I do not have that authority!”

“Aww, come on...”

Not being able to use the gate would render its discovery meaningless. Sera reported back to Kelvin in low spirits.

::I see... Wait, really?:: Kelvin seemed to be speaking with someone else on his side at the same time. ::Sera, Rion is going to bring Colette to your location. She said she knows how to activate it on some level.:: ::Wow, she can do that? But I’m in the heart of enemy territory. How will they get through all of Trycen’s forces?:: ::Since you did such a great job, we have a good idea of what route to take.:: ◇ ◇ ◇

I was currently looking down at Trycen Castle from way up in the sky. Gerard, Boga, and Sabato’s party were on the ground, launching an attack from the front. The rest of my party members, plus Colette and Prettia, were riding on Dahak and Mdofarak’s backs with me.

Sera’s Summoning had been successful, and now we knew everything about

the enemy fortress. What's more, we even knew the location of the teleportation gate and another special place we had wanted to find.

Sera's luck really is terrifying.

"Efil, aim right there. Oh, and shoot at a few other locations with no signs of life, just as decoy."

"Yes, Master."

A searing fire arrow left Penumbra, the bow in Efil's hands, and landed exactly where I had directed. Upon making contact, it promptly exploded, creating a giant hole in the wall. At the same time, several more arrows tore additional holes into the compound.

"Perfect. All right, let's get down there like we planned. Rion will be carrying Colette in a Concealment Cloth, and...uh, does anyone need me to fly them down?"

"Thank you for asking, dearie, but my muscles are enough. I can just jump from here."

"My Acrobatics skill should do the job, even with Colette in my arms. If needed, Alex will catch us."

"So close to Rion-sama, so close to Rion-sama, so close t—"

"Colette, can you at least keep it inside your head? Ahem, so it seems like everyone's fine. Efil, Dahak, and Mdofarak, please cover us from the sky. I'll be using the map to give out instructions as occasion calls, so keep an eye on that."

"Of course, Master."

"You got it, brother!"

"Rooaaar!"

In light of who our opponent was this time, Melfina was staying behind in my magic pool.

"All right, here we go."

"Godspeed, Master."

Without hesitation, we leaped down behind enemy lines.

◇◇◇

Immediately after jumping off Mdofarak's back, Rion activated Concealment, which caused both her own figure and Colette's to fade into their surroundings. Even Efil, who was watching from up in the sky, could no longer see them with her incredible eyesight.

::I'm off to Sera-nee's location, then.:: ::Yes, please. Once the teleportation gate is activated, you and Alex do whatever you can to disrupt the enemy.:: ::Got it!:: Shortly before landing, Rion shifted to carrying Colette under her left arm and began to gather magic around her right.

"Magnetic Whip!"

A small current of electricity shot out from her outstretched hand, pulling her towards where it had made contact with the ground within the gaping hole in the wall. At the same time, the magnetic attraction also served to offset the force of gravity acting on her so that, with a few superhumanly masterful maneuvers, she managed to land safely and without issue.

"And that's our boots on the ground. You okay, Colette?"

The Oracle had clapped her hands over her mouth, but she wordlessly nodded to indicate that she was all right. Rion had tried to refrain from moving too acrobatically out of consideration for her, but apparently even the little tricks she'd had to resort to had been a bit too much for the other girl.

"Sorry, please bear with it just a while longer. I'll bring you to where Sera-nee is—"

KA-BOOM!

An earth-shattering crash rang out a short distance away. Kelvin could land soundlessly with the Fly spell, which meant it had probably been caused by Goldiana. His role this time was to be a decoy, as his extremely conspicuous presence made him unsuitable for moving covertly the way Rion was doing. Goldiana himself had been the one to say, "I'll gather everyone's attention with my irresistible charm, so Kelvin-chan and Rion-chan, you two go do what you need to!" and Kelvin had decided to take him up on the offer.

"Let's hurry. Prettia-chan is doing her best," Rion murmured as she dashed

off, relying on the map inside her head to show her the way.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Rion opened the door, she found Sera sitting on a chair and relaxing exactly as she did in their living room back home. Next to her was a man standing stiffly at attention. He gave Rion a sharp salute.

“There you are, Rion! That was fast. And Colette...are you okay?”

“She got even sicker from how fast I was going. I did try to be careful, but...”

Colette, who Rion had lowered to the ground, was quite green in the face. She was insistently gesturing that she was fine, but Sera and Rion, who had witnessed the tragedy at Kelvin’s promotion match, knew better.

“If only Kelvin or Mel were here. They could have used White Magic to help her.”

“H-How about I try rubbing her back?”

Colette seemed to swallow something down. “No, no, I’m absolutely fine. Rather, I had the time of my life.”

“You sure? I don’t really get it, but if you’re okay, that’s good, I guess.”



Despite looking quite sick, Colette had the biggest smile ever on her face. Within her, the unpleasantness of feeling ill paled in comparison to the bliss of having been in direct contact with Rion from start to finish. It was perhaps for the best that Rion hadn't been able to see the Oracle's face on their way over, hidden behind the cloth as it was.

"Sorry to ask this of you when you aren't feeling the best, but can you get the teleportation gate up and running?" Sera asked.

"Leave it to me! I swear to carry out this holy mission bestowed upon me by Mel-sama and Kelvin-sama—"

Seeing Colette clap a hand over her mouth again, Sera offered, "Here, grab my shoulder."

In this way, Colette wobbled over to the controls of the teleportation gate, leaning on the demon for support. Behind them, Rion took out a paper bag from Clotho's Storage. Just in case.

"So, how're you going to work this?"

"It is said from one generation of the Oracles of Deramis to another that these gates were the method of travel for the gods eons ago. After an unknown amount of time, the Goddess bestowed us with knowledge of the gates in case we needed to use them in an emergency. It is quite limited knowledge, but enough that I can at least get any of them to function."

After explaining, she placed a hand on the panel and chanted, "In the name of Colette Deramilius, Oracle of Deramis, I command you to activate."

A mechanical beep sounded, not dissimilar to the sound of a computer starting up. Blue lines ran along the contour of the gate, glowing faintly. It had indeed been powered on.

Panting heavily, the Oracle reported, "Th-This is all I can do. I'm afraid anyone who wants to use the gate would still need to have the appropriate authorization. I haven't been granted permission from Trycen—blergh!"

Rion managed to get the paper bag over Colette's mouth just in time. The sudden strain of losing the large amount of MP needed to activate the gate had

apparently been the final straw. Sera gently rubbed her back with upward strokes.

“You did well. We don’t mind; just get it all out and feel better.”

“But Sera-nee, we don’t have the gatekeeper’s authority either! Activating it is good and all, but what’ll we do now?”

“I...guess we’ll ask Kelvin.”

Sera’s face was slightly flushed with embarrassment as she had no idea how to resolve this quandary either. But just as she was about to send out a telepathic message, the teleportation gate opened and three figures slowly came into view.

“Wait, someone opened the gate, Sera-nee!”

“What?! Hold on, now’s not—”

Even Sera and Rion couldn’t help but be flustered. After all...

“Goddammit, that freaking old raccoon dog. To hell with his ‘I now appoint you commander of the guards in Parth.’ He just gave me that fancy title to run me ragged!”

“It’s not actually that bad, though, is it? In any case, at least now we know why Master left us in Parth, General.”

“Can you stop calling him ‘Master’? It gives me goosebumps.”

“You know I can’t, General. This maid uniform makes it so that I have to obey all orders— Hm?”

The voices suddenly cut off upon seeing Colette, standing right in front of them, very much in the middle of something.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Couldn’t you have knocked before coming in?” Sera said somewhat accusingly.

Azgrad retorted, “Don’t ask for the impossible! And people barf all the time anyway. Do you know how many times Huba did it during train—”

“AHHHHHHH!” Huba screamed, waving her arms in a fluster. “Please don’t

tell them, General!”

Rosalia gave Azgrad a pointed look. “General, you really need a lesson in tact.”

At the moment, Colette was facing the wall in a corner of the room, sitting with her knees tucked to her chest and radiating dejection. Rion was standing behind her, desperately trying to cheer her up.

“Heh heh heh... Now my most shameful state has been seen by strangers twice...”

“I-It’s fine, Colette! You are still very attractive!”

“Am I really?”

“Of course you are! At the very least, I know that Kel-nii and I love you! I’m sure Mel-nee does too!”

The following silence indicated that the process would still take quite a while longer. Sera watched the two worriedly while updating the rest of the party through the Network.

Gerard responded, reporting that he and his team had broken through the front gate of the castle and almost finished securing the Steel Knight Order’s headquarters.

Sera sighed. “Well, I guess I’ll go ahead by myself first. There’s not much left for me to help with here anyway. What’s everyone else going to do?”

“My men and the troops from Deramis should be coming through the gate any time now,” Azgrad replied. “Until then, we’ll protect this place with our lives.”

Rosalia spoke up. “Um, this is kind of hard to ask since we’re the ones who caused it in the first place, but should we bring the Oracle back to Parth?”

It was a reasonable offer, as there was no need to purposely keep Colette on the front line when she was clearly mentally unstable. However, someone spoke up to reject that idea.

“My apologies for causing undue worry, everyone. I am back in fighting form!”

“Um...she kind of got over it on her own.”

Rion’s wry voice prompted everyone to turn and stare at the Oracle.

◇ ◇ ◇

The inside of the castle had morphed into a battlefield. The Steel Knight Order, with Gerard and Dan leading the charge, had nearly reclaimed its headquarters. The defenders were bombarded with not only breath attacks from the two ancient dragons hovering overhead but also Efil’s explosive arrows. To make matters worse, Goldiana was going on a complete rampage through the grounds. Despite having volunteered to be a decoy, he was repeatedly ripping and tearing soldiers apart, sowing fear into the hearts of those standing before him.

“What are the gate guards doing?! They didn’t realize we were under attack until the inner wall was destroyed?!”

“Leave the blame for later—it’s more important that we stop that monster first! We’re showering him with arrows and magic, but nothing’s working! He’s a terror!”

“The Steel Knight Order is closing in on the palace! Please send reinforcements!”

“Curse these godforsaken beastkin!”

Most of the soldiers were in a similar state. From their point of view, their own flagship force had turned on them, they were being overwhelmed by attacks from forces far higher than their bows could reach, and a Rank S adventurer was simply shredding his way through their troops. The soldiers had every right to want to cry. They needed all the thoughts and prayers they could get.

There was, however, someone within the Mixed Monster Order Headquarters who was watching these soldiers with a glass of wine in one hand: Tristan.

“They’re faring much worse than expected. Then again, our side doesn’t have nearly enough strength to stand up to all the powerhouses coming at us. My surprise present is ready, but even I can’t predict what’ll happen.”

“Then how about you go out there yourself, Tristan?”

A dwarf wearing high-quality clothing appeared from the darkness of the dimly lit room. In this country, demihumans such as beastkin and dwarves were not acknowledged as actual people, with almost all of them being enslaved or forced to live in the slums. Consequently, a dwarf commanding such an imposing air was extremely rare. Indeed, he had no business being there at all.

“Is that Jildora-san I see? You’ve come at the perfect time! Would you like to share a glass of wine with me? I just opened the best one I have—I’ve been storing it in my house forever!”

Tristan, however, a leader within the Trycenian army, was inexplicably treating this dwarf that he called Jildora as an equal. All this time, the general’s behavior had been entirely in line with the doctrine of human supremacy that the country he served touted. If a citizen or soldier had been present, they might have vomited blood and fainted with indignation. That was just how shocking the scene was.

“I don’t like alcohol.”

“Ha ha ha, that’s not a line I’d ever expected to hear coming from the mouth of a dwarf! Don’t your people love alcohol more than water?” Tristan slowly swirled the glass in his hand and breathed in its full-bodied fragrance.

“Don’t change the subject. Isn’t this country your home? Your countrymen are fighting with everything they have and dying like flies. Go on, off with you already.”

“To think I would be chastised by one who’s already as far gone as you are! Ha ha, what does that say about me, I wonder. It’s not that I don’t feel anything about this—it’s just that *she* has already made me a whole new person.”

“Hmph. Well, it’s no skin off my back. I came to tell you that I’m done with this matter. It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“My oh my, this country is being abandoned even by its best weapons dealer? Guess things really are coming to an end. By the way, how do you plan on leaving? General Dan is at the front, and I believe there are forces closing in from the back. Either way, you’re going to be spotted.”

“I’ll just destroy the castle wall where no one’s looking.”

“There are eyes up in the sky as well. To that end, I have a proposal: I would have no trouble getting you out by way of Summoning. There is no better time to become a Follower—”

“Tristan.”

It was almost like Tristan was making a sales pitch, given how energetically he was gesturing and speaking. However, that single word uttered by Jildora, along with the pressure that he was emanating, caused the general to stop short.

Tristan shrugged and smiled wryly. “You really don’t know how to take a joke, do you? All right, all right. I’ll handle the lizards up in the air. You make your escape in the meantime.”

“Where’s this one-eighty coming from?”

“Uh, rude. I *do* care about my allies. My real ones, that is.”

“Hmph.”

Two fearless grins flashed within the darkness of the room.

◇ ◇ ◇

After leaving the room where the teleportation gate was, I made my way to the strongest presence that I had sensed while first scanning the castle.

“This is it.”

It was behind an extremely extravagant door with every square inch either painted with gold or embedded with jewels. I couldn’t be bothered, so I just kicked it open.

Whoops, it flew pretty far. But oh well. It was really tasteless anyway.

The inside of the room was very spacious. There were numerous round tables covered with tablecloths and laden with what looked like high-class cuisine. The ceiling was high and decorated with chandeliers not unlike the ones we had back home. Then again, everything here was so gaudy that it couldn’t be further from Kelvin’s and my tastes. In all likelihood, this place used to be a banquet hall.

“Whoa...”

Why did I say “used to”? Because the whole venue was now flooded with blood. The tablecloths that had probably been pure white were stained dark red, and there were countless lumps of unidentifiable flesh scattered across the marble floor. The shredded pieces of clothing floating around indicated that they had probably once been people.

It’s a good thing I’m the one finding this and not Rion or Efil. Even I think this is pretty gory, but there are demons who eat humans too, so it’s not like I’m all that shocked. I mean, Viktor literally put everything into his mouth. I guess this is what it means to really not be picky about your food. When I was small, I put in so much effort to make myself overcome my aversion to bell peppers— Oops, I went a bit off-track there.

“So, you’re the one who did all this, right?”

On top of the waist-high stage was a somewhat humanoid figure with charred-looking skin and bizarrely large arms. The swords, spears, and other weapons protruding here and there from his grotesque figure made it obvious that this was no ordinary creature. The sole human-like characteristic of this monster—and even that was a stretch—was its incredibly beautiful face. To be honest, though, I thought it so perfect that it seemed artificial. The contrast between the face and the body below it was so drastic that it only contributed to the revulsion I felt from my overall impression.

“■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■...”

The monster’s voice seemed laden with curses and had a thick and clingy texture as if it wanted to stay inside my ears. As if it were so marred with noise that I couldn’t make out the exact words being spoken.

Just in case, I checked myself and confirmed that I was all right. The voice seemed so grating that I felt like I probably would have taken a few debuffs if not for the ring that Melfina had made.

The grotesque figure was holding a woman upside down by one of her legs. Its jaw was unhinged so that its mouth gaped wide enough to swallow her whole. The woman’s face was so petrified with fear that it was impossible to even tell her age. She was the last person remaining in the room who still

looked like a human. For some reason, she was naked and several holes had been torn through her body.

“■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■!”

When the monster noticed me, it abruptly started shouting in its horrid and utterly unintelligible voice. The way its facial expression seemed completely frozen only added to its ghastliness. The woman was unceremoniously flung against the far wall, causing a disgusting “squish” upon impact.

“■ ■ ■, ■ ■ —■ ■ ■!”

“Ugh, will you shut up already! Your voice is rattling around inside my head!”

As I smashed my gauntlets together several times to fire myself up, the monster grabbed a greatsword sticking out of its body. It looked fairly similar to Gerard’s sword, Dainsleif, back when it had still been cursed. In other words, the weapon this monster was holding was likely also cursed. In fact, the same probably went for every other weapon that I could see protruding from its body.

“■ ■ ■ ■ ■...”

“All right, that’s enough. Now I am personally sick of you. I’m going to use my full strength to kill you!” I shouted as I surrounded my fists with Black Magic.

“■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■!”

The monster’s oversized arm swelled up, then it started brandishing its greatsword in a blind frenzy. Tables and pillars were smashed and destroyed, sending fragments whizzing about everywhere. Each time it screamed, a slight headache assaulted me, but I didn’t have time to worry about that. Judging from the way the creature was flailing about, it did not possess the Sword Mastery skill. What it did have, however, was brute strength—in fact, its Strength stat just might have been around the same as Gerard’s. What’s more, I couldn’t quite determine the reach of its arms.

It’s been a while since I’ve faced an opponent I can’t let my guard down around.

“Rah!”

I rushed straight at the monster, dodging the incoming blade and various projectiles. It was true that it had power, but its speed was nothing impressive. The obvious thing to do, then, was to first strip it of its mobility. I double-cast Quagmire Boots on my fists and planted a punch deep into its abdomen.

"■ ■ ■!"

"Hup!"

A small trickle of blood flowed down my cheek as I quickly retreated. The instant I'd landed my punch, an incredible number of weapons—every last one emanating an incredible amount of miasma—had shot out from the monster's body as if it were a hedgehog.

I took the fact that my wound wasn't closing up from Auto Healing to mean that I had probably been hit with some sort of curse. What's more, the fact that I had even gotten hurt at all meant that the monster's weapons were Rank B or higher.

Where did it pick up so many cursed weapons? Or were these things part of its body from the start? Either way...

"Now you've gone and touched my blood."

The longspear that had wounded my cheek was still embedded in the creature's chest. There was a bit of my blood on the blade. It was a very small amount, as the weapon had only nicked me, but it was enough.

Attack your owner with all you've got. Also, release the curse on me.

The spear had the audacity to resist me a little, which meant that it was filled with quite a serious grudge indeed. However, such token resistance was futile, and the weapon soon fell under my control.

Good, the cut on my cheek has healed.

"■ ■...?!"

After becoming faithful to me, the longspear flew out from the monster's body and stopped in midair with its blade pointed at its former owner. Due to what I assumed was the power of the curse, it could apparently move itself at will.

Ah, I've read about this in a book before! It's called a poltergeist!

"That's the first one."

I unleashed a Gloom Lance at my opponent at the same time the longspear shot forward. In response, the monster once again stuck an arm inside its body and pulled out a huge tower shield that clearly couldn't have fit inside it normally. It must have had a skill similar to Clotho's Storage.

The two attacks smashed against the metal to little effect. There was the face of an ogre on the shield that made it look as if it had in fact eaten them both.

I wiped off the blood that was still on my face and flicked it to the already blood-soaked ground.

Fwoom!

The instant the monster lowered the shield, something whizzed through the air towards me. In the split second it flew past, I caught a glimpse of a thoroughly rusted dagger that was, again, obviously cursed. Without letting up, my opponent continued shooting cursed weapons at me like they were bullets. The strength of the projectiles seemed to vary, with some embedding themselves into the far wall and some shattering upon impact.

I ran in a circle around the perimeter of the room and deflected whatever came near me. The creature itself was moving slowly due to Quagmire Boots, but the spell did not seem to have any effect on the weapons being shot from it.

If that's the case, it might be better for me to close in and get in some good hits instead of slowly whittling it down from afar— "■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■!"

"What?!"

My Danger Detection went off like an alarm as the creature suddenly appeared right in front of my face.

How'd that happen? I thought I'd stunted its speed. Wait, no, if the sound of the wind and the speed of the bullets was due to Green Magic, that means it can increase its own Agility stat like Kelvin does!

The monster using a tactic similar to the man I loved irritated me a little. No,

my real irritation was with myself for assuming at the start of the fight that this thing only had power going for it.

“Jin Scrimmage!”

I hastily applied Jin Scrimmage to my right arm, and Arondight changed shape accordingly. Unlike before, the monster was now so fast that I couldn’t dodge its greatsword in time. I had no choice but to parry it directly with my arm. As I did, I heard a sound and saw cracks running through my black claw.

“■ ■ ■ ■!”

The monster’s back bulged, then two new arms burst out, one holding a scimitar and the other a mace. The sudden thickening of the black aura in the air let me know instinctively that these weapons were imbued with grudges that were much more powerful than any of the others.

“Ugh!”

We became locked in a dance of death. I pushed my nerves to the limit, parrying with Jin Scrimmage when necessary. Any time there was the slightest opening, I slipped in punches with my left hand, but it always ended up being blocked by the shield.

Eventually, as we continued the exchange...

Pang!

The spell on my right arm fell apart. *Which reminds me, Kelvin destroyed Viktor’s Jin Scrimmage by using cursed weapons.*

Seemingly considering it an opportunity, the monster flexed its arm and swung its greatsword as hard as it could.

“How ironic...indeed!”

Even so, I wasn’t truly backed into a corner. I used my left hand to grab the incoming sword and stopped it in its tracks. Of course, the weapon dug deep into the palm of my hand and an intense, scalding pain shot through my arm. In exchange, however, the blood that flowed out of my wound covered the greatsword in much larger amounts than what I had gotten onto the spear at the start. It took no time at all for the sword to become mine.

“■ ■ ■, ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■!”

For the first time, I saw the expression on the monster’s face change. Its eyes widened to an incredible degree as it stared at me. In that moment, a chill ran through my body. The meaning behind the previously unintelligible words seemed to force their way directly into my brain.

It’s...trying to control me? And it’s ordering me t— Crack!

I unconsciously tightened my hold so hard that I shattered the sword. What sounded like grudge-filled screams rang out, but I couldn’t have cared less at the moment.

I get it... You tried to use Charm Eye on me. But my blood runs throughout my entire body. Did you really think you could control me when I am in absolute *control of myself? I heard about you from Kelvin one time when we were in bed. You’re the piece of trash who attempted to bewitch Efil, aren’t you? Kelvin’s regret over letting you escape eats at him every day. That alone is unforgivable, and yet you* dared *to give me such an outrageous command?!*

“Me? Your sex sl— Ha ha ha...”

Seemingly having mistaken my temporary stillness for being Charmed, the monster let go of its greatsword and approached me. Slowly, step by step.

Bonk.

“■ ■?”

Father’s blessing activated around me, preventing the creature from getting any closer. It looked confused by what had happened. Then it dropped its shield and tried to push through, but the barrier refused to budge.

“Ha ha... HA HA HA...!”

The fact that my father’s blessing had activated meant that...well, it could only have meant one thing: this piece of filth was, whether consciously or instinctually, thinking of laying hands on me and defiling me. The audacity of it left me speechless. I was sure that had been its intention back with Efil at the Village of Elves as well.

“So you want... *You* want to ‘have fun’ with *me*? Looks like...”

My vision turned red. A deep, deep red, the same color as the blood oozing down my left hand.

Now I finally understand how Kelvin felt back then. I truly have my father to thank for today. After all...

“You must want every last particle of your being to be erased from existence.”

The only person who’s allowed to do something like that with me is Kelvin!

◇ ◇ ◇

When Gerard, Boga, Dan, and his subordinates reached the courtyard between the Steel Knight Order Headquarters and the palace proper, they clashed with the Magic Knight Order, which had been lying in wait with cursed weapons in hand.

“Hmph! Hah!”

Gerard, from his position at the front, blocked thrusts from five female knights at once and, with one swing, sent their weapons flying in various directions, with some even embedding themselves deep in the palace wall.

All five knights abruptly collapsed on the spot, unconscious.

“Carry out the ones who are down! Just in case, tie them up properly, as custom dictates!”

“Yes, sir!” the soldiers of the Steel Knight Order replied, but the majority of them also thought, “*What custom?*”

After clashing with the members of the Magic Knight Order several times, Gerard and Dan had figured out that—either because the brainwashing from Clive’s Charm Eye had weakened or because it had been overwritten by the power of the cursed weapons—the knights could be taken out of the fight simply by being robbed of their equipment. These were all young, beautiful women who had been brainwashed through no fault of their own. The soldiers of the Steel Knight Order had, to varying degrees, admired them previously and felt somewhat reluctant to kill them if it could be avoided. Consequently, there was only one viable course of action.

“There’s no need to kill them! Simply knock the weapons out of their hands! If

you do so, they will be freed from their curses!” Dan shouted.

Gerard added, “And be extra careful not to come into contact with the weapons yourselves or you’ll become just like them!”

“Yes, sir!”

Naturally, this command did wonders for raising the troops’ morale.

“Ugh, w-we’re losing in strength?!”

“Don’t let your guard down! They *are* much stronger than before! Work with each other!”

In spite of the boost to their morale, however, the soldiers of the Steel Knight Order were struggling against the members of the Magic Knight Order, who were being buffed by the cursed weapons they were wielding. And not only were they physically stronger—they had power almost on par with Kelvin’s golems—they were also casting spells one rank higher than usual. As it was the curse that was forcibly moving their bodies, they showed no signs of tiring either.

At the same moment, a group of magic knights in the back all finished chanting their spells.

“Gerard-dono!”

“I see it!”

A barrage of Rank A fireballs suddenly flew into the sky, aiming for the dynamically shifting battlefront. Before the spells could get too far, however, the two older men charged forward, snapping, smashing, and destroying the cursed weapons of those in their way.

“HAAAAH!”

With black demon sword and white holy sword in hand, Gerard and Dan cut down all the incoming magic projectiles with such flawless teamwork, it was as if they were comrades who had been fighting beside each other for decades. The particles of magic residue were absorbed by Dainsleif as Chalice healed its wielder back to full health.

“I’m completely recovered!”

“Great! Moving on!”

The Rank A Red Magic spells that had been meant to attack them only ended up bolstering the two hardened warriors. Through their efforts, the front line was pushing forward, but the Magic Knight Order was returning the assault in full force. The overwhelming enemy numbers, as well as the other side’s desire to avoid killing them, was making the fight drag on.

“There’s no helping it. Boga!”

“*Roar!*”

Boga nodded to signal his acknowledgment; then he began sucking in so much air that his stomach started to bulge. Up until then, the rock dragon had been using his great size to make inroads into the enemy lines along with Dan and Gerard, so he was currently in the middle of the enemy force. Now that he was occupied, he had become completely motionless and defenseless, but the firm defense mounted by the two veteran knights sufficed to keep his assailants at bay.

“It’s about time,” Gerard murmured before turning around and shouting, “EVERYONE, PLUG YOUR EARS! HERE COMES THE BREATH!”

Boga’s mouth opened wide. “RRRRROOOOOOAAAAAARRRRRRRR!”

What the dragon unleashed was a Sound Breath, an attack that amplified his own voice multiple times and generated a soundwave that radiated out in all directions, stunning everyone within earshot.

“N-Now is...the chance to...charge!”

“Y-Yes...sir...”

“Grr, grr.”

Both allies and enemies had taken damage, but thanks to the warning, the Steel Knight Order came out of it in slightly better condition than the Magic Knight Order did. The former quickly took advantage of that disparity to destroy as many cursed weapons as they could, but they failed to target every one of their opponents before the magic knights farthest away from Boga managed to recover.

“Hrm, look at how many are still remaining. It’d be one thing to cut them down, but breaking just their weapons is breaking *my back*. Can’t I just destroy them all?”

“Gerard-san, please settle this peacefully!” cried the soldiers nearby.

“You didn’t all have to gang up on me...”

“But Gerard-dono is right that we can’t afford to waste anymore time h— Hold on.”

Just as the members of the Steel Knight Order were dogpiling on Gerard, something changed within the Magic Knight Order. Specifically, all of their cursed weapons flew out of their hands and floated into the air. The now disarmed female knights collapsed as one, unconscious.

“They’re...retreating?” someone asked incredulously as the assortment of weapons started flying towards the main palace all at once. They moved in a straight, steady line, like moths drawn to a flame, towards the location of an inordinately powerful presence.

“What is this dark and intense killing intent coming from the palace? Is this the resurrected Demon Lord? As I feared, it just might be His Majesty after all. Gerard-dono, Boga, I’m heading for the palace immediately. I’m sorry, but would you lend me your strength?”

“O-Of course. I’m right behind you.”

“Men, take this time to tie up the members of the Magic Knight Order. Their lieutenant general...”

As Dan barked orders at his subordinates, Gerard mused over the burst of killing intent he had just felt.

That was from Sera, wasn’t it? And she’s completely furious. She’s not answering my messages either. What are you doing, lass? Hm, I’m sure they’ve already noticed, but let’s give my king and Princess a heads up as well.

“Grrr...” rumbled Boga in a somewhat worried tone.

“Don’t worry about that lass. You really should worry more about her opponent. Truly.”

◇ ◇ ◇

The previously resplendent banquet hall was now wrecked beyond recognition. The wall between the room and the outside corridor had been nearly dismantled, and the chandeliers lay in ruins on the floor. Huge cracks ran through the marble, which seemed at risk of giving way at any moment.

The monstrosity that Clive had become was now on its knees. The numerous weapons that had once been Stored within his blackened body had impaled him after switching loyalties. Dark blood ran in rivulets.

“That’s number 133. How many more do you have, hm?” Sera asked from where she was hovering in the air and looking down at her opponent, a whole swarm of weapons that had come from Clive’s body floating around her. Her eyes were stained blood red, the sign of a demon’s rage. She was also wreathed in a spell of the same color—the Rank S version of Jin Scrimmage: Blood Scrimmage.



Ever since she had activated this spell, Sera had completely dominated Clive. Whenever a cursed weapon touched her, it fell under her control instead of harming her. In the same way, whenever Clive threw a punch at her, he would lose control of his body starting from that fist. Both going on the offensive and staying on the defensive led to the same result of him being controlled. By now, the beast had lost the ability to use his left arm twice, his right arm thrice, and each leg once. Every time it happened, the monster simply cut off the affected limb and grew it back, but his regeneration powers were not infinite, and his HP was steadily being whittled down by the endless barrage of stolen weapons.

"Hades's Sanguine Army."

Lumps of flesh submerged within the sea of blood suddenly swelled up and took on humanoid shapes. Although the blood had come from the guests who had filled the venue not long before, once Sera laced it with her own, her blood merely assimilated the rest, making all of it hers. Clive had only just learned of her power, but the cost of this realization had been the loss of both his legs.

"I only got eight? You're a bit voracious! You only left enough for me to make a handful of these."

Sera distributed weapons to each of the blood-red skeletons that had risen. They slowly approached Clive, dragging their cursed blades along the ground.

"■ ■ ■ ■———!"

The strange wail that Clive let out was promptly followed by his back bulging up once again before six disfigured limbs burst out, each holding a blunt weapon. The beast now looked like what Kelvin would have described as a cheap knock-off of an Asura statue. Even residents of this world, unfamiliar with the reference, would have associated it with a statue of some evil deity. What made it look like a knock-off was that every single part—aside from the face—was swollen to hideous proportions, making the overall form look entirely unbalanced.

The blood-red skeletons that Sera had created in response to Clive's transformation into an even more monstrous form now charged forward as they came into being, showing no signs of fear or hesitation. They were filled with nothing but fury and absolute obedience to her.

“■ ■ ■!”

Both Clive and Sera’s army of skeletons were equipped with cursed weapons. Every swing was accompanied by an earsplitting screech, and every clash caused an explosion of grudge-filled energy. In light of their respective appearances, it looked like a fight between true *monsters*—not just typical “monsters” like slimes but rather those that nightmares were made of.

The clang of metal on metal rang out relentlessly, and both sides appeared evenly matched in strength. However, Sera was hardly one to stand back and watch.

“You shouldn’t take your eyes off your opponent during a fight,” she admonished him, easily closing the distance between Clive, who had been dedicating all his mental faculties to staving off the skeletons, and herself.

With smooth movements, Sera landed yet another punch on her opponent for the nth time that day. While he had been able to use his arm to block the blows so far, Clive failed to react fast enough this time and took the punch on the chin. Bone was crushed, flesh was torn, and his body hit the far wall with a terrific crash.

“It’s about time I got control of the lower half of your face—I was getting sick and tired of that dreadful voice of yours.”

With his chin completely pulverized, the monstrous ex-general was clearly in no shape to make any sounds. Even so, his incredible regenerative ability had already begun re-forming his mutilated jaw.

Seeing that, Sera put her hands together and said cutely, as if making a request, “I command you to shut up.” However, her smile did not reach her eyes. Now, even when Clive’s face recovered, he would remain unable to make a peep.

“GRAAAAH!” the skeletons howled as they closed in on their enemy, who was lying defenseless on the floor. They stabbed, stabbed, stabbed, stabbed, and stabbed repeatedly with the intensity of people avenging their own deaths. Clive wanted to scream, but his mouth remained firmly locked as spurts of black blood fountained out.

“Goodness, just how much did the previous owners of these weapons hate you? Even I didn’t think it’d be this bad.”

In his frenzy, Clive somehow managed to move one of his arms. The weapon in his hand happened to score a clean hit on one of the skeletons, causing it to explode in a shower of blood.

“Oh, you really shouldn’t have done that.”

The hammer that had delivered the attack was now completely covered in red. Clive hadn’t felt any resistance when the blow landed. It was almost as if what had happened to the skeleton was meant to be.

BOOM!

The reddened weapon exploded, taking the beast’s arm clean off. In spite of having taken the form of a skeleton, the blood it had been made of still belonged to Sera. Essentially, these skeletons were nothing more than traps to get her blood onto her target.

Thunk.

Before Clive had time to be surprised, a greatsword—one among many now under the demon’s control—ran his forehead straight through.

“Look at you, still alive after being hit with all these curses. Do you have Curse Resistance? Surviving your skull being bisected must mean your vitality is quite impressive as well. Oh, wait, I see. Your head isn’t actually important to you, is it? I’m sorry, I totally misunderstood. Guess we’ll have to look for your actual weak point now!”

The skeletons, under Sera’s command, resumed their stabbing assault, making sure to aim for a different part of Clive’s body each time. At this point, the demon’s goal seemed less to kill her foe and more to torment him. A switch seemed to have been flipped inside her—she had become sadism personified.

While she was choosing which of the floating weapons to use next, a telepathic message reached her despite the block she had put up.

::Sera.::

::What?! O-Oh, Kelvin!::

It was her lover. The moment she heard his voice, the red receded from her eyes and gathered in her cheeks in a blush instead. Her line to him had been the only one that she had left open.

::Is something wrong? You seem distracted.::

::Oh n-nothing, I'm totally fine. Ha ha ha...::

::Gerard told me there are a large number of weapons flying towards your position. Do you know anything about that?::

::Ah.::

::Dude...::

Sera had been so engrossed in her fight that she had stopped paying attention to her surroundings. Only after it was pointed out to her did she finally notice the situation she was in, prompting a somewhat remonstrative interjection from Kelvin.

::Uh... Tee-hee!::

::Don't you 'tee-hee' me! Normally, I'd let you off the hook for that cute laugh, but today is—::

::Oh, sorry! Looks like the weapons are closing in! Gotta go! Thanks, Kelvin!::

::Hold on, I'm not do—::

Sera cut off the conversation and, with a cool head now, looked outside. What she saw was a whole cloud of weapons heading straight for the banquet hall where she was. Specifically, towards Clive's body.

One of the skeletons approached Sera, kneeled, and groaned, "Raaaah."

"I see, so he still won't die. In that case...all of you, give me your MP."

As commanded, the seven remaining skeletons reverted to pure blood, and every last drop of MP within the weapons under her control gathered around her fists. While this was going on, cursed weapons zipped through the room and flew into Clive's body in rapid succession. With every new weapon, his rate of recovery increased and his MP ballooned.

Sera sighed. "What in the world came over me? Your body has an undying

curse on it, right? Not that I sympathize.”

Clive stood up as his right arm transformed into a misshapen, ten-meter-long sword that seemed to be a fusion of every curse he’d been hit with—numbering more than a thousand in total. He swung the weapon without hesitation, not caring in the least how much damage it dealt to the room.

“Mind your footing.”

Abruptly, one of Clive’s feet was pulled out from under him, and the slash flew wide, the blade burying itself in the ceiling. A red line was wrapped around the monster’s ankle, reaching out from within the sea of blood. Sera had prepared this one last trap using Bloodbending while her opponent had been lying on the ground.

Before Clive had time to process what had happened, Sera closed in. “Crucifixion!”

The blood-red crucifix was even more vivid and shone even brighter than the one she had generated when fighting Melfina. Clive, who had just finished a big swing and lost his balance, had no way of stopping her. He certainly tried by generating eyes all over his body to fire Charm Eye in every direction, but all that did was evoke a disgusted “Ugh, gross!” from the girl across from him.

The amount of damage the Crucifixion spell dealt was based on both how much MP Sera had gathered and how much she had bled. This time, she had bled much less than during her match with Melfina, and her wound was already gone thanks to Auto Healing, but the red flash of light was still more than enough to completely erase the monster’s body and purify the cursed energy it contained.

The effects of Clive’s brainwashing disappeared in an instant, and all of his victims regained control of their minds. The part of the enormous sword that had been beyond the range of Crucifixion stabbed through the floor and fell down to the level below.

An unconscious “Ah” escaped Sera’s mouth as she realized the broken blade had fallen close to Kelvin’s position, the only location she had not been able to read earlier on.

“Hmm...should I have wounded him a bit more first?” she murmured, retrieving an MP potion from her mini Clotho clone and leaping through the gaping hole in the floor, in pursuit of the cursed sword fragment.

◇ ◇ ◇

After Master and the others entered the palace, Hak, Mdo, and I dedicated ourselves to providing cover fire and disrupting the enemy’s movements. I was calling Dahak by “Hak-chan” because he really wanted a nickname that was similar to Clotho’s. Mdofarak also wanted a similar nickname, although in her case, she could only look at me with sparkling eyes while waiting for Rion to help convey her words. I could not understand why, but everyone seemed to have softer looks on their faces after eating something I made for them.



My sincerest apologies; I've gotten off topic. So, I was high up in the sky above Trycen Castle, far beyond the range of the enemy's bows and magic. This did not dissuade them from trying, but all the arrows simply reached the tops of their trajectories, then fell back down.

"Shit! I can't reach them with my bow even from the top of the watchtower here! We're just sitting ducks at this rate. What are the mages doing at a time like this?!"

"We just got word from the chief manager that they're all occupied with getting the barrier back up. Dude, we've got no time. I think our position's already been compromised. Let's shift our location quickly!"

"H-Hold on, there's a muscular something climbing up!"

"Climbing...as in up the wall?! Holy shit, you're right! And it's fucking fast!"

"Sh-Shoot it! Hurry!"

At ground level, Goldiana was doing a wonderful job of being a decoy. I could clearly see everything, as it was all happening outdoors. I briefly summed up the situation for Master through the Network, who quickly responded. I converted his instructions into easy-to-understand illustrations and passed it all on to Hak and Mdo.

When fighting alongside Goldiana, our roles ended up being more focused on providing support rather than raw firepower. Even now, Hak was growing thick and sturdy ivy onto the walls of the watchtower to make it easier to climb up.

"Prettia-chan's so pretty *and* gallant..."

Admittedly, Hak's attention might have been a touch biased, but I took his feelings into account and decided to overlook it as any good maid would.

We'd want to cheer on his romance, of course. There is no problem—Mdo-chan and I can handle covering the others. But wait a moment... Would supporting Hak-chan equate to getting in the way of Gerard-san's romance? Goldiana-sama did say, "Gerard-sama and I share a mutual love!" Whatever shall I do?

::Efil, can you drop a few explosions on the locations I marked on the map?

Those are places I've confirmed Princess Shutola isn't at. The flashier, the better.:: ::Efil-nee! I've got a few also!:: No, no, I must focus.

I watched as eight new marks appeared on the map, indicating locations that Master and Rion wanted me to attack. The two of them were making their way to the top of the palace by different routes. It was taking them quite some time since, even though each individual opponent wasn't particularly strong, the enemy numbers were quite befitting of the palace of a Demon Lord. And that was why our cover fire was needed.

"Mdo-chan, please take care of these three points. I'll do the rest myself."

"ROAR!"

Mdo was not used to communicating over the Network, so while she could see the map directly, I still verbalized my instructions for her. As the horns on each of her three heads started glowing, I lifted my bow and loaded it with five magical arrows.

We finished charging our attacks and unleashed them in unison. All eight locations exploded at the same time, generating thick billows of smoke that rose into the air.

Perfect. I hit all my targets without deviating a millimeter, all with exactly the right amount of explosive strength. After all, Master wouldn't be able to save Shutola-sama if the entire building came crumbling down. My goal is, ultimately, only to thin out the enemy forces.

"Rawr..." Mdo's yellow head crooned, drooping ruefully.

"Looks like you were a little off-target. But it's not by much. I'll speak to Master for you, so how about we practice together someday?"

"Rawr!"

To my relief, Mdo cheered right back up. As I spoke to her, I fired off an arrow to make up for the target she had missed.

That should suffice to help her save face, right?

::I'm sorry, Master. I was slightly late in bombing one of the locations.:: ::No worries. It was enough to clear them out. I know I can always count on you.::

::Thank you, Efil-nee! I'm going to speed through right now!:: Looks like I successfully made up for Mdo-chan's mistake. Phew. Let's see...Gerard-san and Boga-chan have also managed to break through the front and will be reaching Goldiana-sama's position soon. As for Sera-san— "Hak-chan, Mdo-chan!"

"Rawr?"

"I'm gonna seal that passage," the ancient dragon mumbled, "just like that, and now grow a few stalks that spread hallucinogenic poison. Ohhh, I just saw a glimpse of Prettia-chan's thighs!"

He seems very occupied. Maybe I should try reaching him directly through telepathy.

::Hak-chan!::

::WHOA! Y-Yes, sister! What can I do for you? Ma'am!:: Oh dear, I gave him a fright. Considering the urgency of the situation, I ended up raising my voice a little. And now Mdo-chan's looking at me with a confused expression too.

"An enemy is approaching us, Hak-chan. Be on your guard."

"Whoa, you're right. They still have someone capable enough to reach us this high in the sky?"

Good, Hak-chan can see him too. But we both know someone who fits the bill, don't we?

"Wait, is that Tristan?!"

"Grrrrrr..."

Upon recognizing the approaching general, the two dragons who had been part of the Dragon Knight Order grew blatantly hostile.

Do they hate him that much?

During Master's prior encounter with Tristan, he had managed to take a peek at the general's Status and the Status of one of his Followers. Just like Master, Tristan was a Summoner—what's more, he was a unique one who possessed a means of Summoning himself in a way that was effectively the same as teleportation. Normally, this contained potential for an effective surprise attack, but we had taken countermeasures this time. In fact, it was a slight

mystery to me why he was coming to us now of his own accord.

“He’s here, sister!”

The enemy general reached us, riding on a strange, purple bird. “Look what we have here! A cute maid! How do you do? My name—”

As he had long since entered my range, I decided to shoot him. He seemed eager to introduce himself, but I had no intention of making his acquaintance. I tried to keep my motions as controlled and suppressed as possible as I quickly raised Penumbra and fired several shots at his heart in rapid succession.

“—is Tristan. The pleasure’s all mine.”

My arrows were all deflected by a huge, mechanical monster that Tristan suddenly Summoned in front of himself. If I were to describe it, I would say it looked like a golem with only the top half of its body. It had two eccentric-looking arms floating in midair and a torso that looked like an upside-down quadrangular pyramid with a head mounted on top. Every inch of the Follower’s body sparkled with reflected moonlight. This creature perfectly fit the description of the one that Master had seen in the Forest of Crests.

“That forward personality of yours is quite a surprise given your exquisite fea—”

“Pyrohydra.”

All eight heads spat Flame Breaths at the man before my eyes at once, brightly illuminating the night sky with the light of their attacks. *Since we are fighting high up, maybe it would be better to separate the dragons.*

“—tures.”

Each head’s target has been set. Sending half for the bird and half for the golem seems about right.

::Um, sister, he’s kind of in the middle of his speech...:: ::We have no obligation to hear him out. Azgrad-sama warned me that this general has a remarkable gift for cajolery and that the best way to deal with him is to attack him straight off. For all we know, he is attempting to buy time for something.:: ::I-I suppose you have a point. Mdofarak, let’s do this! Oh wait, you still can’t

use the Network properly.:: Looks like Hak-chan and Mdo-chan are both ready to start anytime.

"I see. Someone's done a good job training you. Would you be interested in working for me?"

"No, thank you."

As I respectfully declined the offer, I cast Flame Rampart behind the enemy to seal off his escape and sent all eight pyrohydra dragons surging forward.

Oh dear, I forgot to report to everyone through the Network.

::Efil here. I am now entering battle with the enemy general Tristan in the airspace above the palace, along with Dahak and Mdofarak.:: ◇ ◇ ◇

"RRROOOOAAAARRRR!"

Explosions sounding like the roars of dragons went off as torrents of flame rushed at Tristan and the monsters under his control, illuminating the night sky with the brightness of a sun. The Flame Rampart that Efil had deployed barred him from both retreating and descending. Despite only being a Rank C spell, the wall of fire burned so hot that even Tristan felt threatened by it.

This much power from a Rank C spell? I can't see her Status because it's Concealed, but she's definitely got even more MP than Clive. And as if that's not enough, that skill of hers with the bow! Goodness, what's an average Joe like me supposed to do against a monster like that?

The only path left was forward, but he was facing a whole horde of dragons with their maws opened wide. Their speed exceeded even that of the strange, purple bird he was riding (Hound Guillemot), meaning he could not outfly them.

In spite of that, he did not seem particularly alarmed. In a calm voice, he commanded, "Do it, Tyrant Mirror."

With a mechanical whirr, the body of the golem in front of him opened up from the bottom vertex of its upside-down quadrangular pyramid torso until the flat of its reflective surfaces faced Efil directly and began rotating at high speed. Tyrant Mirror was now essentially a reflective shield that stood in the way of the flame dragons.

Soon enough, the two sides clashed.

::The dragons were repel— No, they were reflected.:: There wasn't a single scratch on the mirrors that had withstood the fierce onslaught. Not only had the raging fire failed to damage the shield of mirrors, it had been entirely reflected. The pyrohydras did not seem to have taken damage, and the force of their momentum remained the same, albeit with their directions reversed.

This was why Efil thought of them as being "reflected" instead of "repelled." She had also secretly fired a Blaze Arrow from within the shadow of the dragons, but even that attack, despite being specialized for penetration, ended up rebounding back at her. She had been able to immediately fire a second shot to counter it, because she had half expected that to happen, but it would have made for a nasty surprise otherwise.

She directed the pyrohydras to circle around the golem.

"Dear oh dear, how terrifying. Even a graze and I would have been turned to charcoal. All things considered—"

Tristan's overly dramatic mannerisms and style of speech often proved effective at provoking those he faced. Efil, however, remained largely unaffected. In fact, she had ceased to even consider him a conversation partner.

::According to Master's intel, that golem possesses a Unique Skill called Specular Reflection. As I suspected, it really does reflect magic.:: ::It's such an underhanded skill!:: ::There is no being underhanded or not. Even Master believes in using all available means in battle.:: ::Of course, of course! It's a splendid strategy!:: Kelvin had shared everything he knew about Tristan with his companions beforehand. First, he suspected that Tristan's unique Summoning technique was made possible using Specular Reflection, a Unique Skill belonging to Tyrant Mirror.

::As Master explained, Tristan must be reflecting his cast of Summoning so that, instead of a Follower, he is Summoning himself at a location of his choice. This effectively enables him to teleport short distances. Seeing as the monster Tristan was riding also disappeared when he escaped from Master—meaning it was Unsummoned—he must be capable of reverting the skill to make it

susceptible to magic at will.:: ::Which means physical combat is the only way! Though at this height, it's gonna be hard for me to use my abilities.:: ::And stay wary of surprise attacks using his Summoning power. Considering his Magic stat and how much MP he has, he shouldn't be able to use it too many times, and his range should be quite limited, but it never hurts to be careful:: Tristan's stats were excellent compared to the average resident of this world but were significantly inferior to those of Efil and Kelvin. In short, he was only a local prodigy. His Summoning skill was Rank C, so he had very few Follower slots, and the stats buffs they received from him were nominal.

In spite of that, he had managed to take Kelvin by surprise in the Forest of Crests and steal Clive from under his nose. It was an impossible feat considering how limited the range of his magic should have been. Suspicious, Kelvin had decided to examine the location where Tristan had appeared. And sure enough, he'd found stakes pounded into the ground all over the forest, hidden beneath the fallen leaves.

Through Analyze Eye, Kelvin discovered that these stakes were magic items that created a field to expand the owner's magical range. Although there were limitations—they required periodic recharging with the owner's MP and would lose their effectiveness when removed from the ground—Tristan had been able to bring the entire forest into his magical range by installing the items ahead of time. That was how he had slipped past Kelvin's detection skills.

Earlier, Sera had found the exact same kind of stake near the front gate of the castle, which meant it was safe to assume that Tristan had installed them all throughout the area as well.

::It works in our favor that we are fighting in the sky. This high up, we do not have to worry about the effects of his magic stakes.:: As the stakes only worked while in the ground, they were a non-factor during their current encounter.

After transferring herself to the head of a pyrohydra, Efil passed along the details of the instantaneous conversation that had just taken place between her and Kelvin to Mdofarak, instructing her to fall back.

"Am I not going to get an answer?" the general asked. "Not even one? Oh, you're pulling Mdofarak back?"

The weakest member of Efil's team was the three-headed dragon. Although she had managed to become an ancient dragon, a classification for one of the most powerful beings in this world, her power level fell short of Dahak's and Efil's. As a countermeasure against Tristan using his Summoning to launch a surprise attack, Efil had Mdofarak retreat beyond what she thought to be the range of his magic. She also didn't want to risk Mdofarak getting caught up in what was going to happen next.

"Milliard Burning Birds."

"It's almost refreshing how thoroughly you're ignoring me," Tristan continued in a calm tone in spite of the drop of sweat trickling down his face.

::Hak-chan, be careful not to touch any of it, all right?:: ::Uh, yeah, no need to tell me twice.:: A wriggling wall of flame suddenly sprang into being and surrounded the battle zone. The true form of this spell was a moving mass of fire birds. Although each bird was only around the size of a crow, they numbered in the thousands. It was a brute force approach that relied on the idea of strength in numbers.

::We will finish him off directly. It does not matter if this attack fails to work against the golem as long as it is effective against the Summoner himself. Hak-chan, Mdo-chan, match my timing.:: ::So, we're using brute force! That I understand!:: As the birds circled around, their perimeter shrank steadily, much like a contracting red tornado. The only thing remaining for those within its eye was the promise of death. Although Tyrant Mirror was doing its best as a shield, the birds that it reflected came right back over and over, even as others closed in from every direction. There was simply no way for one monster to counter the spell in its entirety.

To make matters worse, breath attacks of various colors, purposely adjusted to cover a wider area of effect at the expense of destructive intensity, continued blasting in through the walls of the tornado. Numerous birds and several breaths successfully slipped past the protection of the mirror shield and landed on Tristan, enveloping him in a vortex of destruction.

::He has disappeared... Oh, I have found him again. I've marked his position on the map.:: As soon as Efil saw Tristan and Hound Guillemot vanish from

within the deadly trap, she sent all eight flame dragons out searching for him. When one of them found him again and reacted, she immediately uploaded the information to the Network. All of the dragons present, including the other pyrohydras, turned to look in the direction indicated. As soon as he teleported, Tristan found numerous jaws opened wide, already in the middle of charging up breath attacks.

With a wry smile, he thought, *Oof, this is not easy. I feel like I'm playing a card game with my hand fully revealed the whole time. I think I've bought enough time now, right? But since I'm at it...*

Tristan turned to meet Efil's gaze. "Did you expect *this*?"

A faint light glowed behind the maid's back. She spotted a balloon-like monster the size of her hand from the corner of her eye. *A Follower!*

"Explode, incendiary bug."

Before Efil could even turn around, the insect had already started to swell in size. Without delay, it burst in a blinding flash of light that accompanied an explosion so huge it completely tore apart the flame dragon the elf was riding on. The fragments plunging down towards the ground spoke to the sheer destructiveness of what had just happened.

"SISTER!"

One corner of Tristan's mouth crept up in a satisfied smirk. "As I thought, little old me is simply no match for you all," he muttered as blood dribbled out from the other corner. There was a small hole in the left side of his chest where his heart was located, and Hound Guillemort's forehead and neck bore similar holes. The general's mount had died instantly.

"Cough... You managed to...dodge and shoot three arrows...all at once? Spectacular..."

Gravity took hold of both Tristan and the creature below him. They plummeted and splattered against the ground, reduced to nothing more than vivid red stains.

"Phew. What a relief I'm the one he targeted."

“Wait, since when have you been there?!”

Dahak turned to look at his own back in astonishment. There stood Efil, seeming none the worse for wear other than a little charring on a corner of her skirt hem. Her sweat-soaked hands were holding Merciless, the bow she used for covert attacks.

“Don’t let your guard down just yet, Hak-chan. The golem is still— Hm?”

◇ ◇ ◇

After leaving the members of the Magic Knight Order, who had finally been freed from their brainwashing, to his subordinates, General Dan rushed towards the main palace with Gerard, Boga, and one hundred golem knights.

As they passed through the garden, they could hear screams and the sounds of battle coming from up ahead, even though the action was not yet in view. Clearly, Goldiana was still working hard to provide a distraction.

At the same time, something appeared to be taking place high up in the sky.

“That bright fire likely means Efil and the dragons have encountered a rather powerful enemy,” Gerard noted.

“That high up?” Dan asked. “Sky battles are usually the realm of the Magic Knight Order, but we just incapacitated all of them. And I can’t think of anyone particularly notable among the remaining garrison of the Dragon Knight Order...”

“Well, I said ‘powerful,’ but honestly, I’m not worried. That lass has got it under control. Let us focus on our own fight.”

“There’s the main entrance to the palace,” Dan shouted before doing a double take. “I suppose that’s a Rank S adventurer for you. It looks like Goldiana-dono has taken care of most of them by himself.”

The gates to the palace stood wide open, with signs of soldiers having rushed outside—probably the palace guards who had responded to Goldiana’s sudden assault. Judging from the way they were lying in heaps all over the place, they had clearly failed to intercept the intruder. They were unconscious, not dead, but their pale faces hinted at them having endured some incredibly traumatic

experience before blacking out.

What happened to them? Gerard wondered as a twinge of unease shot through his chest. For all the veteran soldier's life experiences, the unknown still remained a source of fear, even if that unknown was an ally.

"Perhaps I should leave a few golems here as lookouts. Just in case."

"That sounds like a good idea. But...is something the matter, Gerard-dono? You seem somewhat unwell."

"Oh, no, I am—"

Just as Gerard was about to refute Dan's comment, an enormous explosion went off in the sky above the palace. The location was almost exactly where Efil's flames had been visible earlier. The two old knights' heads jerked upwards in unison.

"What happened?!"

"It's—"

A huge ball of fire spread across the sky. It was hard to tell whether it had been caused by magic or something else, but there was no doubting its intensity.

As if confirming everyone's worst fears, Dahak shouted into the Network, ::Sister Efil's disappeared!:: Very few sentences were as effective at agitating Kelvin's entire party. Gerard immediately sent Efil a telepathic message in an attempt to confirm her safety. He did not want to dwell on the worst-case scenario, but he had difficulty imagining any other outcome in light of the severity of the detonation he had just witnessed.

Suddenly, Efil's calm voice came over the Network. ::Efil reporting in. I've just finished my battle.:: Gerard heaved a sigh of relief. ::I think I just lost a few years of my life from fright.:: ::That big explosion surprised me, Efil-nee! Are Hak-chan and Mdo-chan also okay?:: ::Uh, yes, m'lady. I'm fine aside from my heart almost stopping from shock. Heck, I'm the most surprised after having it go off right next to me! I totally saw sister Efil disappear in the explosion!:: ::Dahak, you mind helping me test out a new spell I've just developed?:: asked Kelvin. ::We can do it after this. Colette's here too, so you don't have to worry

about anything.:: ::What are you saying, brother?!:: Clearly, everyone had been quite alarmed. Expressions of relief flooded the Network all at once.

::I apologize for worrying everyone. We have killed an enemy general and we ourselves are unharmed. However, there is one slight matter of concern. The general we defeated, Tristan, had a Follower that we have lost sight of. It is the same one that Master mentioned having seen when he encountered Tristan in the Forest of Crests.:: ::The one he was riding? Melfina, if a Summoner dies, what happens to his or her Followers?:: ::At the moment of death, all Contracts are nullified. As in, all Followers would revert from being magical entities to physical beings. Any individuals within the Summoner's magic pool would be forcibly expelled. Don't worry, Followers wouldn't die with their Summoner. Oh, but you're not allowed to die, all right, honey? Absolutely not.:: ::It's not like I have any plans to, so calm down. Argh, stop it! Stop shaking me! Ahem. In that case, where would the monster have gone? I recall it being pretty large. It's not like it can hide indoors.:: Tyrant Mirror was large enough for Tristan to ride on. And although the palace was huge, it did not have enough space for such a golem to duck inside fast enough to escape Efil's Farsight.

::I'm still checking from the sky, but I cannot find any traces of it.:: ::One possibility is that it was Summoned someplace else by the general through the magical stakes around the castle in the split second before he died.:: ::I think Mel-nee's guess seems likely, but it might be a good idea for Sera-nee to try searching for it using her senses just in case the monster's lying in wait somewhere and preparing for a surprise attack.:: ::That sounds reasonable. Sera-san, may I ask this of you? Um...Sera-san?:: No answer from Sera was forthcoming. She had apparently closed off the Network on her side.

::Which reminds me, I haven't heard Sera-nee's voice for quite a while. I wonder what's happened?:: ::Hmm, you're right. She hasn't said anything since Gerard's report. All right, I'll try reaching her myself.:: ::I shall search around the area, my king. I just happen to be available. We've whittled down the enemy forces enough that the allied troops should be able to handle things on their own.:: ::All right, then you take care of the search, Gerard. Efil, please continue providing cover fire and keep a sharp eye out.:: ::Yes, Master.::

As there was no way to see each other through the Network, no one knew

that Gerard was pumping a fist in celebration of this arrangement.

If I go to the heart of the palace, there is a very high chance of coming across him*. So let's focus our search on the area around the walls. And I'm doing this for the sake of one of my grandchildren. I'm killing two birds with one stone!*

In addition to Ruka and Rion, Gerard considered Efil to be one of his grandchildren as well—a natural development as a result of having looked out for her ever since she had joined the party. And of course, he was glad of any excuse to avoid meeting his natural enemy.

::*Rawr.*:: ::Mm? You wish to come with me, Boga? Very well, let's go.:: The telepathic conversation came to an end once everyone's objectives had been confirmed. As it had taken place at high speed, only several seconds had actually passed.

"Gerard-dono, I'm sorry to interrupt your transition from shock to relief to sudden joy, but are you sure you are all right? Forgive my bluntness, but you seem quite mentally unstable..."

As a result of his emotional roller coaster, Gerard had ended up looking rather odd from Dan's perspective.

"Ga ha ha! You ended up seeing me in a somewhat embarrassing state. But no worries—I am fully recovered!"

"I...suppose you do seem to be. I am relieved that you are fully motivated again."

"Thank you for your concern, Dan-dono. However, an urgent matter has come up that I must attend to. As such, I'm afraid Boga and I must go our own way."

After Gerard provided Dan with a brief explanation, the two decided that half of the golems would continue to follow the general in his press towards the palace while the other half would accompany Gerard and Boga on their search around the perimeter.

"I wish you godspeed, Dan-dono!"

"And you as well, Gerard-dono! I will have that rematch with you at full strength when we next meet!"

Gerard adroitly leaped onto Boga's back and, following his gut, headed in the direction of the Mixed Monster Order Headquarters.

◇ ◇ ◇

A small figure scuttled along the wall of the Mixed Monster Order Headquarters, west of the main palace. His short stature of roughly 140 cm, his extremely muscular build, and the long beard flowing from his chin were all the characteristic traits of a dwarf. However, he was wearing excessively elegant clothing that seemed to generate a somewhat peculiar atmosphere.

The name of this dwarf was Jildora. He was the mysterious stranger who had become Trycen's royal merchant when Tristan was inaugurated as a general, providing the country with countless weapons, armor, magical items, and objects of questionable origin.

After leaving Tristan, Jildora had made his way out of Trycen Castle by a route that lay in the shadow of a branch fortress, out of sight of the palace's center.

"Tristan, that fool. He's gone and lost, even though I lent him Tyrant Mirror. How pathetic."

At Jildora's feet was a stake in the ground, next to which stood Tristan's Follower, Tyrant Mirror. It was entirely motionless, with its arms hanging limply on either side. The impression it gave off was similar to that of an appliance that had run out of batteries.

"Then again, I suppose he did well enough for a human. Looks like he just wasn't quite there yet. Well, maybe it was for the best." Jildora reached towards the wall with his right hand. "And at least he did earn me the bare minimum of time needed. I can take my—"

"Where do you think you're going?"

Jildora clicked his tongue upon being addressed by a voice from behind. The hand that had been about to touch the wall was promptly redirected towards Tyrant Mirror.

Whirrrr.

The golem's arm moved up just in time to stop an attack from a greatsword.

Jildora's sharp eyes took in the form of a Dark Knight wielding a blade the color of night.

"What?!" Gerard had swung his sword expecting to cut straight through the monster, but it was his own body that ended up flying backwards.

Efil mentioned this thing reflects magical attacks—could it be it does the same for physical attacks as well?

As soon as he landed, Gerard adopted a battle-ready pose with his greatsword and studied the golem that Jildora was hiding behind. Although the monster seemed to match the description Efil had given, it was already displaying characteristics that seemed at odds with what she had reported.

"Change of plans," Jildora declared. "I'm going to have you take part in my experiment."

A massive figure appeared in front of Gerard out of nowhere, blocking the moonlight and casting a huge shadow over a significant portion of the castle. Its head, which towered over the walls, seemed to be looking down on the entire world.

Did it come from a Storage skill or a magic item? Either way, the capacity to store something so gigantic is quite rare. This is almost on par with Clotho's true body size, isn't it?

Not only was the colossal humanoid bigger than Boga, it seemed to rival even the size of the main palace itself. Its surface was not made of stone or dirt but rather something in a metallic blue sheen, and its mechanical design seemed anachronistic. Tyrant Mirror was mounted on its chest in the form of a shield, although it was hard to tell if that was its original purpose.

"Since I've been spotted, there's no point in hiding. Blue Rage and I will be expecting good battle data from you, little ant." Jildora's voice came from the chest area of the golem, likely indicating that he himself was located within the massive figure.

"Ha ha ha... GAH HAH HAH! Very well, I shall endeavor to provide you with what you need!"

Those in Kelvin's party considered a sudden encounter with a powerful foe to

be a stroke of luck. During Kelvin's numerous practice matches with his companions, an amount of his disposition had rubbed off on them. In some ways, it could be considered a side effect of having become a battle junkie so powerful that even the army of a powerful country was lacking as an opponent.

::Mayday, mayday, mayday. I might be a touch out of my depth. Just the slightest bit, truly. Anyone who can come and help, please do so.:: Characteristically, Gerard maintained the presence of mind to follow standard procedure in spite of his excitement.

Steam jetted out from various parts of the golem's body. The heavy hiss seemed to serve as a gong that signaled the start of their fight, with Jildora immediately springing into action. With every step he took, the ground shook, and the structures within the compound rattled. Not to be outdone, Gerard, who had just finished requesting reinforcements, rushed forward as well.

"Hmph!"

The Dark Knight swung his sword, generating a flying slice—the most powerful Agito he was capable of—that parted the sky with its passage. The golem stretched out its left hand and, in a movement that seemed deceptively slow due to the monster's sheer size, intercepted the attack.

"You sure are tough!"

With a loud, metallic clang, the slash left a large dent in the creature's arm. However, that was far from enough to take it out of commission.

"You took the words right out of my mouth. I hadn't expected you to damage the armor so much. It's supposed to be tougher than a castle wall, but I see now that I might have to revisit its design once more."

Despite having been forced back half a step, the golem flung its right arm towards the ground where Gerard was standing. The approaching blow had the equivalent power of Parth's famous clock tower being uprooted and thrown. Although simple, the attack covered an enormous area, leaving the knight no choice but to stand and take it head-on.

"Hnggg... HAAAAHHHHH!"

Although Dreadnought, the Rank S shield that Gerard had managed to

incorporate into his body through the Self Modification skill, remained undamaged by the clash, the rest of his armor screamed with the strain. As he was about to be blown away, shield and all, he managed to stab Dainsleif into the ground to cancel out the momentum of the blow. Even Gerard himself couldn't have said how far he'd been pushed back. His legs were buried in the flagstones that paved the ground, his greaves red-hot from the friction generated.

"And now this."

"What?!"

A gap opened up in the fist that Gerard was pushing against and spat out a stream of searing fire. The temperature was so hot that even a slight graze would have given any normal fighter third-degree burns, and the knight was bathed in it for a prolonged period of time. However, the veteran warrior did not seem particularly fazed by it, much to Jildora's puzzlement.

It didn't work? thought the dwarf.

Gerard internally heaved a sigh of relief at his physical form merely being an empty suit of armor. Of course, the cape that Efil had given him, Crimson Mantle, contributed greatly by adding its powerful fire resistance. Although he had engaged in this battle with the intention of helping the half-elf out, it seemed she had assisted him instead. Truthfully, either option brought this "grandpa" equal joy.

"Heave...HO!" he shouted as he mustered all his strength and flung the golem's arm back, causing it to lose its balance. As the monster stumbled, Gerard unleashed Gekou as a counterattack. The flying slash flew parallel to the ground and landed on one of the golem's toes, dealing the same amount of damage that Agito had done earlier.

In other words, not enough to make a difference.

I feel like I'm just barely hanging on, he thought. *Which means the longer this drags on, the more disadvantaged I'll be.*

The golem stood back up, seeming completely unaffected by the damage done to its foot.

Slowly piling on superficial wounds isn't a good strategy here. Instead, I should aim for a single weak point. The part of the chest where my enemy's voice is coming from would be a good start...if only it wasn't protected by that mirror creature from earlier. What should I do?

While Gerard racked his brains as hard as he could, a third person approached them at top speed. Indeed, it was the very reinforcements he had been hoping for. This individual clearly had no intention of being stealthy. Both Gerard and Jildora turned to look at the trail of destruction and the cloud of dust that was rapidly drawing closer.

Eventually, the newcomer leaped out of the cloud of debris and landed on top of the tallest building around.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Gerard-sama! This sweet flower blooming in the moonlight, Goldiana Prettiana-chan, is now here at your service!"

"Why are *you* the first one here?!"

For some reason, an ally without access to the Network had shown up before his own party members. Needless to say, Gerard had not been considering Goldiana at all when he'd sent out his request at the start of the fight.

"My sixth sense led me to you!" His own intuition was to blame, then. "There's no logic to it, dearie. That's right, you can actually call it the power of lo—"

Ratatatata!

Bullets of light shot out from the golem's fingertips, riddling the building under the large adventurer's feet with holes.

"Projectile attacks from its fingertips!" cried Gerard. "Now, that's a feature I'm familiar with. The concept is similar to what my king's golems can do."

"Gosh, Gerard-sama, aren't you a bit *too* calm?! Your heroine's in a pinch here!"

"You won't die from something of that degr— Wait, 'heroine'?"

Goldiana landed right next to Gerard as if standing so close was the most natural thing in the world. Seeing as his beloved pink dress remained entirely

undamaged, he must have perfectly dodged every attack.

“Ah, so you are the Rank S adventurer Goldiana Prettiana,” Jildora’s voice boomed. “Honestly, I would have preferred a subject who uses a different fighting style.”

“Oh my, what a smooth and manly voice. But are you sure you’re in a position to be choosy about the members of the team you’re facing?”

“Goldiana-dono,” Gerard warned, “that golem is capable of emitting extremely hot air. Be careful of that when you approach.”

“Hot air? Then I’ll be fine—I’m already enveloped in fiery hotness from head to toe.”

“I-I see. I’ll take your word for it. Ah, hold on, what happened to being a decoy?”

“No biggie! Reinforcements have arrived through the teleportation gate in the palace, so my job there is done! Now it’s time for me to express my love as best I can!”

“I...see.”

There was a stark contrast between Goldiana, who was becoming increasingly excited, and Gerard, who seemed to be on the verge of attaining some sort of enlightenment. Their motivations were at extreme odds on the spectrum, but there was no doubt they both possessed overwhelming strength. Gerard couldn’t have asked for better backup.

“Are you two done catching up? You may finish your conversation in the next world.”

“Oh my, were you waiting for us? What a gentleman! I don’t mind being assaulted from the back, you know?”

“My aim is not to erase you; what matters to me is the process rather than the end result. And nothing’s changed just because there are now two of you doing the same thing,” the dwarf scoffed, using the golem to point at his opponents.

“We can’t back off now that you’ve gone and said that,” Gerard replied.

“However, one correction, if I may. We don’t only have two on our side.”

The ground suddenly gave way under the golem’s feet as Boga’s powerful claws began pulling the monster underground. The enormous creature lost its balance and fell, a victim of its own weight, and was buried up to its knees in no time at all.

With perfect coordination, numerous figures in black appeared, perched atop the surrounding buildings. They held fifty Gatling guns between them.

“FIRE!!!”

As Gerard and Goldiana rushed forward, so many streaks of light were fired at the golem that it was as if all the stars in the sky had turned into meteors and were falling towards the surface. Each shot was only capable of slightly charring the metallic blue armor, but through sheer numbers, they were steadily chipping away at the plates on the golem one by one. Simply ignoring the attacks was not an option for the monster. And to make matters worse, its movements had become greatly restricted by having its feet stuck in the ground.

Humanoid golems the size of actual humans, Jildora observed, looking around. *And the specs of each are rather high. Where on earth did this many come from? I didn’t sense their presence until they revealed themselves.*

In point of fact, all fifty golems following Gerard had been returned to Clotho’s Storage first. Then tiny Clotho clones had snuck close and released them at just the right moment for the perfect surprise attack.

“I suppose I would be interested in bringing a few of those back with me to serve as samples. I hope at least a few of them manage to remain in good enough condition after the fight is over.”

In response to Gerard and Goldiana’s swift approach, the gigantic monster brandished its right arm in a mowing attack, knocking over everything in its path. Even after pulverizing several of Kelvin’s golems, it showed no signs of losing its momentum. At this point, the Mixed Monster Order’s headquarters had been reduced to a truly wretched state.

::Boga!::

In response to Gerard's telepathic call, the large rock dragon burst up from the ground behind Jildora's golem, leaping much higher than his bulk would suggest was possible. Then, with his tremendous weight, he dove straight at the creature's left shoulder, causing its center of gravity to shift to the left so that its right arm struck nothing but empty air.

"You!"

"ROAAARRRRR!"

From his position on the monster's back, Boga attempted to crush the golem's head with his powerful jaws. The creature's single eye turned to glare at the dragon as metallic screams emanated from the strained armor, which seemed to be holding, albeit barely.

::Boga, keep it trapped there!:: At Dahak's command, the composition of the ground changed in a flash and Blue Rage began sinking even farther into the now quagmire-like surface.

::That's Mud Bind, the spell I learned directly from Brother! Sink into the ground, you big hunk of metal!:: Dahak had arrived after chasing Goldiana...to help back up Gerard, of course. Once he got close enough, he dove sharply and landed right on top of Blue Rage to press it down even more. The sight of the two dragons and one giant golem struggling against each other was reminiscent of a kaiju movie.

Almost all black dragons preferred using Black Magic, having an affinity for it that was almost genetic. Dahak too possessed the skill but only at Rank F—he had acquired it more for the sake of having it than anything else. But he was most proficient at Green Magic. There were dragons who learned multiple types of magic, but they still normally prioritized the development of their natural element. Dahak was in the minority. If asked, however, he would have said, "This is the best way to improve myself!"

Due to the spell Dahak had cast, the ground beneath Blue Rage's feet had turned into a bottomless quagmire. The golem steadily sank into the ground under the combined weight of the ancient dragons.

"Hmm, so the lizards the Dragon Knight Order is so proud of are here to challenge me..." Jildora murmured.

Once again, the golem expelled super-heated gas from all over its body, enveloping not only Boga and Dahak but all of the Mixed Monster Order's headquarters.

"Argghhhh... Don't you underestimate us 'lizards'! Boga, don't you dare let go! Give as good as you get!"

"RRRAAWWRRRR!"

The gas seared the dragons' hides, filling the air with a burning smell. Yet even as the knight golems that had been keeping up their barrage collapsed one after another, Boga and Dahak stubbornly clung to Blue Rage, focusing solely on pushing it down.

"Dragons may have a higher resistance to heat than humans, but they still feel the pain! I'm coming to help you now, sweeties!" Goldiana shouted as he and Gerard closed in on the monster.

Although the bottom half of the giant was already in the ground, it was resisting being pressed down any farther by pushing itself up with its arms.

"Goldiana-dono, the air in this area is heavy with gas. Can you handle it?"

"Oh, sweetie, your concern makes me so very happy! But look, I don't have a single mark on m— Oh no, don't look! My favorite dress is burning up!"

Even as he rushed forward, Goldiana crossed his arms over his chest as if to hide where some of the fabric had caught on fire. The way his cheeks flushed with embarrassment was very much in the manner of a young maiden, but the only thing his arms were bashfully covering were massive muscles glistening with rivulets of sweat. The sight was alarming on various levels. The only silver lining was that Dahak was too occupied to notice.

Realizing that Goldiana didn't seem to mind being on fire from head to toe, Gerard couldn't help but wonder, *Uh, is he actually living flesh and blood? He mentioned being enveloped in, uh, fiery hotness just now, but he's still human, right?*

For now, the Dark Knight decided to stop pursuing that train of thought and focus on the battle taking place before his eyes. He and Goldiana were heading for one of Blue Rage's arms, which was towering high up in the sky. Their goal

was to destroy it so that the golem would lose its support and sink back into the ground. Its arm was still violently spewing burning gas, but it was ineffective against the two warriors. A pink aura sprang up around Goldiana's tightly clenched fists as Demon Sword Dainsleif expanded to a massive size.

"Reflection."

With Jildora's utterance, Tyrant Mirror, from where it was lodged in the middle of Blue Rage's chest, gleamed with a strange light.

"Whoa?!"

"Rawr!"

"Ack!"

"Oh my!"

Dahak and Boga, who had been grappling with the golem, suddenly found themselves thrown into the air even as Goldiana and Gerard, who had been about to deliver their most powerful blows, were blasted away in the opposite direction the instant their attacks made contact.

::This is the same effect as when sister Efil's flames were reflected!:: ::Is it because of the mirror in its chest?! Heavens, the effect extends to its entire body?!:: Everyone was thrown quite a distance by the unexpected counterattack. Blue Rage took advantage of the opening to push itself up out of the quagmire. Slowly but steadily, its feet resurfaced.

"You are all putting up more resistance than expected. I'm afraid I've had to activate my trump card."

"So, that was your trump card," said a girl's voice, accompanied by loud booms high up in the sky.

A moment later, red arrows fell onto Blue Rage's head like rain. An explosion rang out every time an arrow landed, with the shockwaves pushing the golem back down into the muck.

"Where did y—"

"If it is a trump card, then I assume you can't use it too many times?"

The speaker was Efil, and the booms came from her unleashing a shower of arrows tipped with crimson flames from Penumbra. The unrelenting barrage quickly evolved into a squall of chaos and death. Although the golem remained unharmed thanks to Tyrant Mirror's skill, Specular Reflection, it was soon back to being as deep in the mire as it had been before, and continued to be pushed down even more.

"I simply have to do the same—"

CRACK!

The sound of cracking glass rang out loud and clear, emanating from Blue Rage's chest. A single arrow had managed to pierce Tyrant Mirror and was now embedded deep within.

"As expected, your monster can only reflect a single kind of damage at any given moment."

"That is...correct."

Efil had mixed a physical arrow retrieved from Storage in with the magical fire arrows that she had shot. And this was no ordinary arrow but a throwaway Rank S weapon forged by Kelvin. He had given it to her in case she ever encountered a powerful opponent who was resistant to fire, and she had determined this to be an appropriate occasion on which to use it. Cracks radiated out across Tyrant Mirror's body from the point of entry until both monster and arrow shattered into pieces.

"You managed to penetrate Tyrant Mirror, which had the same armor as Blue Rage. What's more, you did it in one shot and without using any skills. That was a good arrow."

"Your compliment...brings me no honor."

All the pyrohydras circling Efil abruptly changed directions and rushed at Blue Rage in unison. At the same time, a mass of vegetation sprouted from the area surrounding the quagmire, rapidly growing in size and entangling the giant. If the quagmire was a jail cell, these trees were Mother Nature's cage.

::Gah, it's way too hot here! Sister Efil, get 'im!:: Due partly to the heat being emanated by Blue Rage and partly for other reasons, it was only now that

Dahak had managed to activate his Unique Skill, Gemmation. The branches creaked loudly as they tightened their hold on the golem, trapping both of its arms.

“Hmm, that ability is nice too.”

But Blue Rage still possessed other forms of attack. Its single eye gleamed, then fired a compressed laser beam as its fingertips opened up to spit out a barrage of bullets made of light. The laser erased every pyrohydra it came into contact with even as the light bullets doggedly pursued Efil. She shot down every last projectile, gaining and losing ground in quick succession. Crimson and white clashed repeatedly, up, down, and every which way in a dizzying display.

“That’s enough...”

“From you!”

Gerard drove his enlarged greatsword deep into Blue Rage’s chest as Goldiana’s fist pulverized its head, laser eye and all. The golem finally stopped moving as the whirr of a machine powering down was heard.

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Clank! Clank! Creeeaak.

“Honestly, that’s kind of frightening,” Gerard mumbled as he watched Goldiana wrest open the door on Blue Rage’s back that led to the control area. He cleared his throat and asked in a louder voice, “How is it inside?”

“Surprisingly cramped,” his fellow warrior replied. “I’m afraid it’s empty, though I do see signs of someone having been here. Maybe there’s another escape route somewhere.”

“So he got away,” Efil sighed.

Boga let out a soft, disconsolate rumble.

Once Blue Rage had stopped moving, Gerard and the others had immediately begun their search for the dwarf who had presumably been controlling it. But he was no longer inside the golem.

Seeing everyone’s looks of disappointment, Dahak said reassuringly, “Actually, I think it should be fine. I secretly sprouted a plant in there that

releases a very lethal poison. It doesn't act immediately, but it *is* the most incurable one I know of. That's why I had trouble growing other plants just now."

"Oh my, you *are* good, Dahak-chan!" Goldiana exclaimed. "I see you in a whole new light!"

"W-Well, it was a piece of cake for me, yep!" the dragon replied, extremely flustered.

"Who was he?" Efil asked pensively. "You said he's a merchant for Trycen's royalty, right, Hak-chan?"

"I don't know the details, but there's no doubt it was the dwarf who sold them the god-awful collar they used on me. That's all I picked up from Azgrad's idle gossip."

"Mysterious items and now this enormous golem," Gerard murmured, rubbing his chin. "Any chance he's a Rank S adventurer?"

Goldiana shook his head. "None. I've never heard of a dwarf like him."

"I mean, I feel like I heard his name mentioned once. What was it again? Ugh, if only I had been listening properly at the time," Dahak grumbled. He crossed his arms and frowned, thinking deeply, before suddenly starting. "I remember now! His name was Jildora!"

◇ ◇ ◇

The headquarters of the Magic Knight Order, located in the back of Trycen Castle, was currently as silent as a grave. Every last member of the order had, under the influence of the cursed weapons they were holding, rushed out to the front of the castle to intercept Gerard and Dan's advance. Now freed from their brainwashing, they were under the watch of the Steel Knight Order. Consequently, the area should have been completely vacant. And yet there were figures moving inside.

"Ugh, this is really tiring. You're so heavy!"

"This body *is* that of a dwarf, after all. Not much I can do about it."

One of those figures was Jildora. The other, the one complaining, was

currently sprinting as they carried the dwarf under their arm. Their face was hidden within a deep hood and they had a seemingly androgynous figure and voice, making it difficult to determine even their sex.

“Uh, Creator, there are green spots on your skin.”

“Oh, this? Mm, chances are I was poisoned. Judging by the symptoms, this is from a highly toxic plant from the underground world where the demons live. It’s a place chock-full of hazardous substances said to be capable of killing even angels—”

“Hold on, and you made me carry you?!” Black Hood exclaimed in alarm, throwing him away as far as possible.

The dwarf landed on his feet with a heavy thud as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

“Don’t worry; it’s not contagious. And you used your Unique Skill while saving me, didn’t you? Which means you didn’t come into contact with the poison yourself. You just phased through it, poison and all. I, however, am probably beyond curing. Given how far it’s progressed, I’ll be dead soon.”

“How are you so calm about it?”

The spots on Jildora’s skin were spreading even while their conversation continued, each rapidly growing in size.

“I’ve done research on this sort of thing before. These spots will eventually cover every inch of my skin and begin to swell. At that point, the agony will be so severe that any normal person would die, but if he or she actually managed to survive that phase, the spots will begin bursting—”

“At this rate, that’s exactly what’ll happen to you, right? We don’t have time to be standing around here like this.”

“Fair point. Does your presence mean you’ve already located your objective, Assassin?”

“Do you even have to ask? Here, follow me. We’re through here.”

“You...have certainly lived up to your name yet again.”

Black Hood brought Jildora to the entrance of the Magic Knight Order

Headquarters. There was nobody around; only corpses. All of the bodies wore platinum armor and bore a single deep cut across their necks. In light of the fact that they all had swords in their hands and their surroundings were in disarray, it was clear they had done battle there.

“What’s all this? I was under the impression you were good enough to finish off this many without them even realizing it.”

“I got bored ’cause you were taking your sweet time, Creator. I’m the one who should be complaining. Why’d you start fighting when you were supposed to quietly slip away? And you were even losing.”

“The poison’s circulating. Hurry it up.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The two figures passed through the corpse-littered doorway, making their way to the quarters assigned to the general of the Magic Knight Order.

“Tristan said this is the best place to hide something because he set up a barrier around the room.”

“Ahh, so this is where he forcibly Evolved that good-for-nothing.”

“Well, that’s a bit harsh, maybe. Clive-kun did have the aptitude, but admittedly, he was the most useless out of everyone Selector ever chose. Oh, right, but what’re we going to do about Tristan? It doesn’t really matter that Clive-kun is dead, but Tristan was just admitted as the newest member of our group. Are we gonna get in trouble because he died?”

“He hasn’t been reincarnated yet. In any case, he would have been useless the way he was. Conversely, this could be a blessing in disguise. Arbitrator’s resurrection abilities aren’t fully developed yet, but it should be enough to suffice until our Lady awakes.”

“You know Arbitrator gets mad whenever you talk about our Lady like that. She’s usually really nice, but she gets super scary when she’s mad!”

“You think that only because you’re still immature, Assassin.”

“Yeah, yeah. All hail the almighty Creator of the Third Seat.”

Black Hood pushed the door open. There was one man currently bound

within the room where Clive had undergone his excruciating process of transformation. In an ironic twist, he was lying in the very bed where Clive had indulged in lascivious ecstasy with the very members of the Magic Knight Order who had then turned around and tortured him.

“Ah, the lieutenant general of the Steel Knight Order. Not a bad choice.”

“I’d appreciate a few more words of appreciation, considering how hard I worked for this. Um, your name is Jin D’Alba, right?”

Hearing his name, Jin yanked at his bonds. But the only thing he could do was glare daggers at Jildora as his restraints were magic items that blocked his abilities. Without physical strength on par with Azgrad’s or Dan’s, there was no way for him to break free without help.

“He’s an idiot who’s practically a walking sense of justice, but his body is young and healthy. I’ll be able to use it for quite a while,” Jildora commented as he grabbed Jin’s head with his large hands.

“I’ve heard the rumors, but this is my first time seeing you use Eternal Return in person.”

“Free him.”

“You sure?”

“It’ll be over in no time.”

As Jildora finished speaking, Jin found his restraints reduced to shreds. The cuts seemed to indicate that an edged weapon had been used, but his eyes had failed to catch any movement. And before he had any more time to wonder, his consciousness faded away. No longer could he feel Jildora’s hand on his head. No longer could he muster any thoughts. No longer was his body...his.

Thud.

The dwarf that had been Jildora collapsed to the ground.

“I’d kind of imagined it would be flashier or something. That was pretty plain,” Black Hood commented, looking not at the dwarf on the ground now but at Jin. Well, former Jin—currently Jildora.

“Ha ha ha,” Jildora chuckled as he got up off the bed. His mouth was twisted

into a grin that Jin himself had never shown before.

“Well, you’re in a good mood for having been on the verge of death. Do you like this new body that much?”

“Oh, this? No, that’s not it. I just realized that I met my own child for the first time in over a decade. Fate is ironic and mysterious indeed.”

“Whoa, you remember something from that long ago?”

“I can’t forget, not when she looks so much like the woman who bore her. Turns out I was in the wrong for writing her off as a failed subject and abandoning her so quickly. I should consider setting up a plan for a long-term study of her development.”

“Jildoraaaa! You’re talking to yourself again. This dwarf is still alive.”

Jildora shot the dwarf a disinterested look.

“Ugh... Wh-What is...this pain? Where am...I?”

“Looks like he is indeed.”

“What?! You’re from...just now!”

“It might have been a split second for you, but it’s already been decades for me. It’s a pity, as I did have things I still wanted to do as you, but no matter. I don’t need your body anymore, so you can have it back. Do as you like.”

“What are y— ARH!”

“Whoa, he looks like he’s in so much pain.”

The dwarf’s body had turned completely green and there were numerous prominent swellings.

“Farewell, so-called Father of Mechanics. Rest assured all the knowledge and techniques you’ve amassed in your lifetime will live on in me.”

“W-Wait!”

“Mm, this body is in great condition. It’s almost time for the Demon Lord to move. We’re leaving now, Assassin.”

“Sure thing. There’s, like, a secret passage here, so let’s take it. Wait, have I

forgotten anything?”

As explosions went off behind them, Jildora—now in Jin’s body—and Black Hood left the headquarters of the Magic Knight Order behind. From that day onward, no one ever saw Trycen’s mystery merchant again.

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Just how long have I been running and cutting enemies down?

I felt like it had been quite a while since I’d leaped off Dahak’s back. After using Fly to enter the hole in the palace wall that Efil had opened for me, I’d immediately darted off, aiming for the top floor of the structure.

I continued pushing forward all while searching for Trycen’s princess with the help of Sera’s additions to the map. However, with this being Trycen’s royal palace, naturally there were a ton of guards. It took me significant effort to knock them all out of my way while making sure I didn’t damage the outer walls too much. I checked the places where the princess seemed most likely to be—her quarters, for example—but had yet to find her. I got my hopes up a little after discovering the complicated lock and the high-tier barrier on her door, but all I found inside were a lot of bear plushies and heaps of cute trinkets.

Don’t tell me the lock and barrier were to hide all this... Nah, there’s no way.

The impression I got from her room seemed quite different from what I’d imagined the general of an army’s intelligence branch would be like. In any case, I eventually came to the conclusion that this princess was most likely on the top floor of the palace, the only place that Sera had not been able to map. I continued to keep an eye out but focused more on making my way upwards, at times requesting cover fire from Efil.

Just when I’d found a secret route leading straight to the royal audience hall, I picked up on an enormous presence outside the palace.

Uh, Melfina, did I make the wrong choice? The presence currently outside...wouldn’t happen to be stronger than the Demon Lord, right?

::Of course not. I think. Maybe?:: That last one was definitely a question! Mel-sensei, you’re not instilling confidence in me here! I didn’t get to fight the white wolf that Sera and the rest had so much fun with. If I end up getting the short

end of the stick and miss out on fighting the Demon Lord too, I'm seriously going to cry!

::The fact that there are so many individuals this powerful is in itself out of the ordinary. Look sharp, honey; the passage you're in is opening up.:: As Melfina had cautioned, I soon found myself on a spacious terrace that commanded a stunning view of not only the castle compound but the entire capital. This section, which was only a short distance from the top floor, was probably where King Zel looked out over his country from. East of the palace proper, near the headquarters of the Mixed Monster Order, was an enormous blue golem currently engaged in a tussle with Dahak and Boga.

I feel my thirst for battle and *my passion for golem-making both being triggered! Ugh, my tears... No, hold on. Thinking about it calmly, what* is *with that golem?! And why's it here?*

::Kel-nii?::

I received a telepathic message from Rion and checked the map to see that she was climbing up the passage that opened up to the opposite end of the terrace I was on. I quickly sent Efil a message asking her to deal with the giant golem.

"Oh, it really is Kel-nii!" my younger sister shouted joyfully as she rounded the corner and came into view. She was followed closely by her partner, Alex, and was holding Colette in her arms. The Oracle was gasping for air. They had reached the same location by a different route.

Although she had Alex to protect her, I was still extremely proud of Rion for catching up with me while carrying someone the whole way.

Still, is Colette all right? She's making really weird sounds.

"Looks like we ended up rendezvousing by accident."

"Mh-hm! Colette managed to get the teleportation gate working. I was there when Azucchi, Huba, and Rosalia arrived, and they were followed by reinforcements from Deramis. The enemy soldiers were really confused when they saw them, which was enough for Prettia-chan to shift from being a decoy to freely attacking wherever she wanted. I was scouring the palace in search of

powerful opponents, but...”

“You concluded the top floor was the only place left to look.”

“Ah ha ha... It looks like I was a bit late on the uptake, though.”

Rion seemed slightly down, so I gave her a few pats to cheer her up. Then the two of us looked at the grand staircase that led to the top floor of the palace. It was located right in the middle of the two passages that Rion and I had each taken and, according to our map, was the only way to the top floor. At the moment, we had yet to see any movement from the enemy’s side here.

“Why’d you bring Colette along? We can’t let her get hurt in the crossfire when we actually face the Demon Lord. And more importantly...she looks really sick, doesn’t she?”

“I-I am fine, Kelvin-sama. I already feel much better after letting everything out once. My mental state is in perfect condition.”

In spite of her claims, however, Colette stumbled around like a newborn calf once Rion let her down. To circumvent any unfortunate incidents, I cast Bright Heal and Relief on her just in case. It wasn’t as if she was low on MP, so she didn’t need an MP potion.

Now hold on—why’re you getting a nosebleed right after I healed you?!

“Um, I brought Colette with me because she said she can handle the princess. So she’s a safety guarantee, I guess.”

“What do you mean by that?” *Would she be verbally convincing the princess or something?*

“There is no need to worry about me. I am currently in my very best condition!”

It doesn’t seem that way to me. I mean, if you’re going to say that, can’t you at least stop the nosebleed first?

“Honey, it’ll be fine. Colette is strong under pressure.”

“WHOA?!”

The sudden voice right next to my ear gave me a start. Melfina had

materialized leaning against my back with her chin resting on my shoulder.

::The cover story we gave Colette is that we're married, right? We've got to do something to give credence to that claim.:: No normal couple would do this in public!

I resumed our conversation after getting Melfina off my back. "Ahem. Well, I'll take Mel's word for it. Colette, I'm counting on you."

"Colette, your religious piety is faithful and true. I know this better than anyone else. And I know I can rely on you."

"Yay for you, Colette! Both Kel-nii and Mel-nee gave you permission to come with us! We'll get to use the strategy we talked about!"

Rion hugged Colette from the back, looking as delighted as she would have been about any personal achievement. The Oracle's expression, which had been filled with fatigue just a moment before, now looked entirely serious. I got the impression that Colette was thinking something weird like, "*Is this...a triangle of bliss?!*" but I chose to write it off as my imagination.

During that time, another presence emerged from the same passage that Rion had taken.

"Hm? Is that Kelvin-dono I see?"

General Dan? Whoa, this guy's pretty fast too.

"Are you here in pursuit of the princess, General?"

"To be exact, I am in pursuit of both Shutola-sama and His Majesty, the king. I came up here thinking it was the most likely place for them to be, but I met only token resistance along the way. Did I make the wrong assumption?"

Oh no, you're entirely right. The reason you didn't meet much resistance is because Rion cleared the way for you.

As the three of us proceeded to catch each other up on the situation, Colette stepped up to Dan, her aura very different from before.

"You are General Dan D'Alba of the Steel Knight Order, I take it?"

"Yes I am, but wh— Wait, Colette Deramilius-dono, the Oracle of Deramis?!

What is Deramis's second-in-command doing here on the front lines?!"

"Special circumstances that I shall not delve into at the moment have brought me here. What I wanted to speak to you about, General Dan, is how to rescue Princess Shutola."

"Specifically?"

Colette, who had suddenly donned her mask as the Oracle, launched into a full negotiation with the general. She managed to masterfully spin ominous words like "brainwashing" and "kidnapping victim" into her speech in a way that prompted him to lean forward attentively.

"So, the crux of it would be that secret technique of yours. Are you sure this plan will work, Colette-dono?"

"I swear on my name as the Oracle that, if we have your help, General, we will succeed. Can we count on your cooperation?"

"Since you sound so sure, very well; my sword is yours, Colette-dono."

The negotiations had been a success.

"Thank you, Gramps!"

"G-Gramps?! Being called that feels kind of embarrassing."

"Um...do you not want me to call you that?"

"I...suppose it's fine."

Colette had managed to secure the help she needed and Rion had successfully made another "friend." *If Gerard were here, he might have been green with* Gerardsy*! Never mind. That was nothing. Don't read my mind, Melfina!*

"Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama, allow me to explain the plan that Rion-sama and I worked out together. May I have a bit of your time?"

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The air was filled with heavy rumbling as the double doors to the highest floor opened. The first person to step through them was Dan.

It was not his first time there. The somewhat dimly lit and extremely spacious hall at the very top of the palace was only used for truly special occasions. Even

members of the royal family were not allowed access without the king's express permission. It was the closest thing Trycen had to a holy site. Not even Dan, holding one of the highest positions of authority in the army, could easily get inside.

However, there was one thing the old veteran could, with certainty, say was out of place: the magic circle drawn in what appeared to be soot that covered the entire floor. His instincts cried out, warning him of the danger.

Despite that, there was something else he could not tear his eyes away from.

"Shutola-sama..."

Standing in the middle of the hideous magic circle was Shutola Trycen, General of the Black Ops, Princess of Trycen, and the very person he had been searching for. The blonde hair she had inherited from her mother fluttered slightly. She looked dressed up as if on her way to a party. Although she was absolutely stunning in her gothic lolita-like dress, its mismatch with the teddy bear in her arms and the strange atmosphere induced by the magic circle cast an uncanny shade over the scene.

"Ah, here I was wondering who it would be! You're so late, Dan! The ceremony's about to start!"

The general was so taken by surprise that he did not know how to answer. Shutola's tone wasn't the calm and ladylike one he was used to, but rather one from much earlier, back when she was still a child who said whatever came to mind.

"I apologize, Shutola-sama. However, may I ask what this ceremony you are talking about is?"

"Do you even have to ask? My marriage to daddy, of course!"

Once again, Dan found himself at a loss for words. It wasn't entirely unheard of for young daughters to dream of marrying their fathers, especially if they grew up under the care of one who particularly inspired respect and did a good job of expressing his love for his family. Case in point, Shutola herself had gone through such a phase. However, that was far in the past. Now, at eighteen years of age, she had long since come to terms with reality. She had even clawed her

way up to being the general of one of the branches of the Trycenian forces. As such, Dan was extremely perplexed by her words.

“Until now, he only ever smiled and changed the topic when I brought it up, but he suddenly said ‘yes’ today! I don’t quite get it, but he said he’d love me! I’m so happy, I feel like I’m on cloud nine!”

“Today...”

In other words, it had happened either after Dan and the Steel Knight Order had returned to the capital or started their assault on the castle with Kelvin’s group. If Tristan was to be believed, King Zel had done something to Shutola, and the end result was her current state. The natural implication was that the king was no longer in his right mind.

“But look at you, Dan! It’s such an important occasion, and not only are you late, you showed up wearing dirty armor!”

“Shutola-sama, this—”

“That’s enough, General,” Colette interrupted, joining him in the hall. “She’s clearly been brainwashed.”

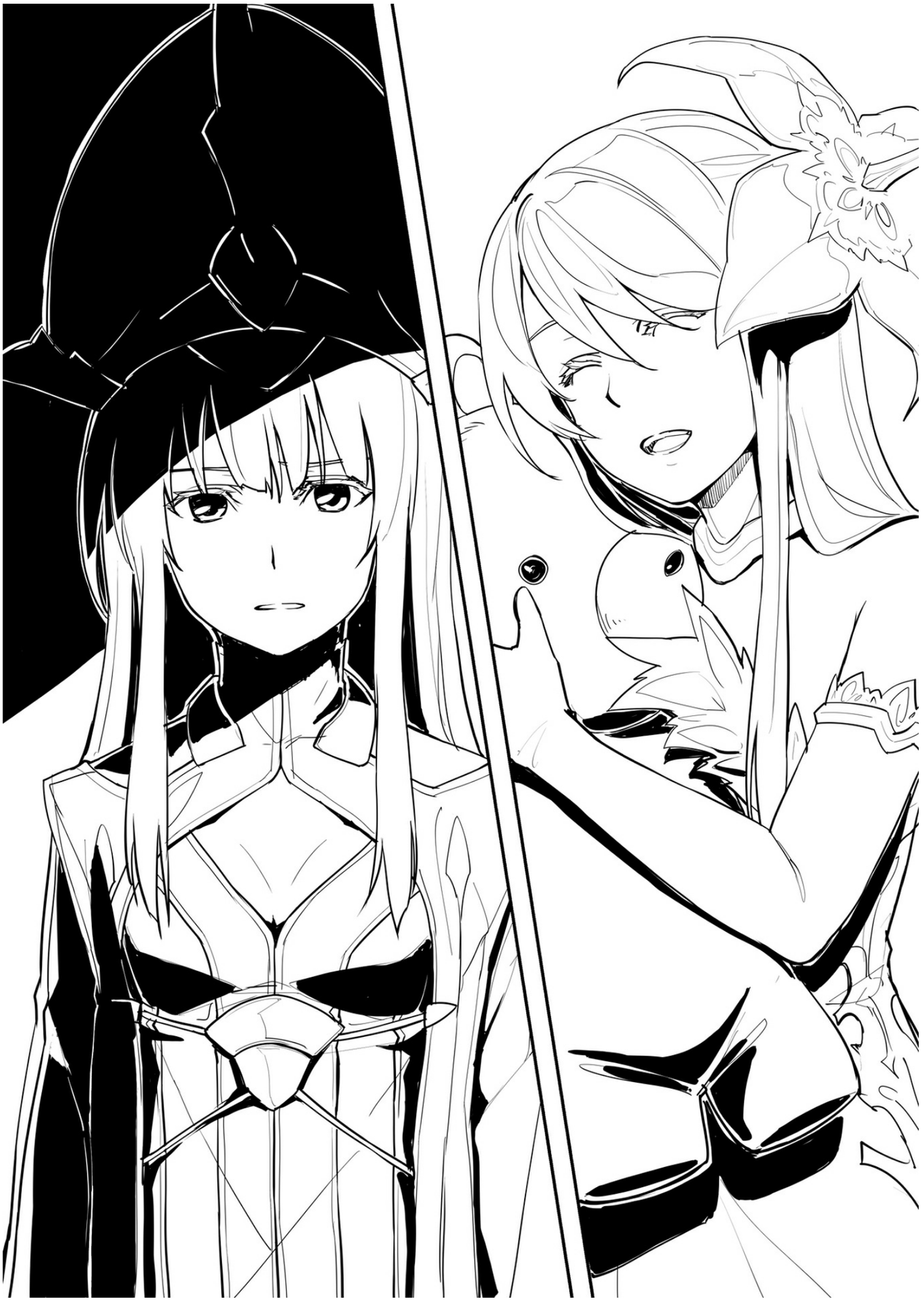
The moment Shutola saw the Oracle, her eyes sparkled. “You came for my big day too, Colette-chan?! I’m so happy! The last time we saw each other was at that dinner party, wasn’t it?”

“Shutola, you’re...”

“You know what, Colette-chan? Lunoir-chan and Ashley disappeared somewhere. We’re friends but they didn’t even say anything to me...”

Colette studied Shutola quietly. She knew the reason that Lunoir Victoria and Ashley Brize—who now went by the names Sylvia and Ema, respectively—had left Trycen, after asking them in person during the dinner party hosted in Parth. It wasn’t clear whether Shutola knew the reason as well, but it seemed obvious that her current memories were quite jumbled.

How long has it been since we called each other “Colette-chan” and “Shutola-chan”? And the teddy bear she’s holding is the one I gave her as a present back then, isn’t it?



The words “age regression” came to mind.

“But it’s fine! He was late, but Dan still made it, and you’ve come all the way from Deramis. Esteemed brother Azgrad isn’t here yet, but I’m sure he’ll arrive just before it starts. Whenever big brother Tabura bullied me, he always came to my rescue. Huh... Colette-chan, did you get bigger? And you’re so pretty now!”

“I think the same of you, Shutola.”

“Aww, you mean it?” The princess spread her arms and twirled as if showing herself off. She showed no signs of doubting her current situation, likely due to the brainwashing she had undergone.

“Where is King Zel?”

“Daddy is in the back, busy preparing the venue for the ceremony! But he doesn’t want anyone getting in his way, so I can’t let you pass until he says it’s okay!”

Colette took a step forward. “I’m truly sorry, but we have an urgent matter with King Zel. Would you please step aside?”

“YOU CAN’T!” Shutola screamed.

In response, the magic circle sprang to life, emanating a terrifying pressure. Even though they were indoors, a fierce gust sprang up and blasted Dan and Colette backwards.

“You can’t! You just can’t! You have to do what daddy says! If I’m not a good girl, daddy will hate me!”

“Shutola...”

Shadowy monsters emerged from the circle, which seemed to be growing in power in proportion to the intensity of her emotions. The number of monsters increased unchecked as she stood in place, trembling.

“I can’t forgive anyone who tries to get in daddy’s way. Not even you, Colette-chan,” the princess swore, her eyes glazed over with madness.

“I’m afraid there’s no avoiding this after all,” Colette replied sadly. “General

Dan!”

“Understood! Shutola-sama, I’m very sorry, but please take a nap!”

“I DON’T WANT TO!”

The old knight darted between the monsters, which were still taking form, and reached out for her arm. Just before he managed to reach her, however, another figure leaped out from behind her and blocked him.

“You too, Satella?”

The woman clad in black now standing before them was Satella, the lieutenant general of the Black Ops. Like the princess, her eyes were devoid of sanity.

“Please take care of them, Satella!”

“As you wish, Your Highness. I will now remove the intruders.” Satella’s short sword was drawn from its sheath, accompanied by a blast of killing intent.

Dan reached for the greatsword on his back and shouted, “Colette-dono!”

“Thank you for buying me time!”

A pale bluish-white barrier sprang up around the black magic circle, perfectly containing Colette, Dan, Shutola, Satella, and the emerging monsters.

“What...is this?”

“It’s a secret technique passed down through generations of the Oracles of Deramis. Neither you nor Satella can pass through this barrier.”

This spell was different from the one she had cast for Kelvin and Sylvia’s fight. It was the highest-tier version—not only did it prevent attacks generated inside from leaking out, it gave her complete control over who was allowed to step across.

“I can break through it!” Shutola insisted stubbornly, directing the monsters under her control to attack the barrier while Dan and Satella kept each other busy. But the spell held firm and remained unharmed.

“Judging by how hard they’re hitting, these monsters all seem to be Rank A. We should be fine,” Colette murmured as she produced an MP potion and

gulped it down.

Shutola stomped her foot angrily. “Then I’ll just defeat you, Colette-chan!”

The crowd of monsters turned and began rushing towards the Oracle. But three white magic circles appeared in front of her.

“My apologies, Your Highness, but I cannot allow anyone to pass through,” Captain Cliff of the Holy Order of Knights declared as he slaughtered the closest enemies the instant he appeared. Stone sculptures—a lion and an angel—towered on either side of him.

“Cliff, Mystic Cougar, and Angel Statue, keep me safe.”

“As you command!”

Cliff brought his sword up, the lion roared, and the angel floated upwards. Seeing Colette’s subordinates preparing for battle, Shutola tightened her grip on the teddy bear.

But these three were not her only unexpected visitors.

“Colette, I’m leaving the princess to you!”

“Good luck, Gramps Dan!”

Two people zipped through the room at incredible speed and ran past them and into the passage beyond like gusts of wind, words of encouragement on their lips.

“Thirty minutes! I swear I will keep this barrier up for at least that long! I wish you both godspeed!” Colette replied.

“That’ll be enough!” the two figures shouted back in unison.

Then they were gone, leaving behind only Colette’s swelling excitement and Shutola’s rising distress.

“I said you can’t! You’re not allowed to go inside!”

Colette’s aim was to save Shutola. Locking her up inside a barrier wasn’t the most orthodox definition of “saving” someone, but it did prove effective at cutting her off from the Demon Lord. Even if the building were to collapse, she would remain safe inside the barrier.

In short, it was an emergency shelter for her to remain within until the Demon Lord was defeated. The real reason Dan had rushed so close was to protect Shutola in case the shadowy monsters turned around and attacked her. He was more than powerful enough to handle Satella while fighting the monsters approaching his back.

"I'm afraid you'll have to forget about the marriage ceremony," Colette said firmly. "But I'll play with you here instead. This barrier is extremely draining, yet I've never felt better—I can drink as many potions as I need to! Don't worry, I will free you from your insanity with *my own* insanity—my religious piety! To that end, Shutola-chan, let's play again. Just like we used to."

◇ ◇ ◇

Dragon roars reverberated through the air on the left side of Trycen Castle where the headquarters of the Dragon Knight Order were located. Here, at this fortress above a ravine, where thousands of dragons nested, the dragon knight garrison was fighting alongside Sabato and his party. The beastkin had parted ways with Gerard and Dan after they'd broken through the front gate and headed here instead.

"A dragon's coming for you, Goma! Do your best to incapacitate it without killing it!"

"You don't have to remind me! The main force of the Dragon Knight Order is on our side now, right?!"

Goma ducked underneath both the clawed swipe from the approaching beast and the thrust unleashed by the soldier on its back. The dragon knight clicked his tongue at having missed, then immediately took a dropkick to the face that sent him flying far away.

The dragon that was left behind shot a worried glance at its partner, but it only had a moment to be concerned. With flowing motions, Goma chained her dropkick into an ax kick that landed squarely on the dragon's forehead and knocked it out straightaway.

"Beautifully executed, Goma-sama!"

"I can handle myself, so go help Guin, Akgas. I know these are only their

leftovers, but there are still a few adult dragons mixed in with the whelps and subdragons. When Guin's alone—"

"I so can't hold on much longer! Save me, Akgas-san!"

"When will he man up?" Akgas sighed even as he headed over to deal with the dragons that were chasing Guin around.

There were very few left among the troops of the Dragon Knight Order. However, a beast—or a dragon, in this case—was most dangerous when wounded. The beastkin knew not to let down their guard just yet.

"Curse you, beastkin! That's enough lies from you!"

"This is the time to prove yourselves, men! Surround the enemy!"

"Gah, they're not listening, no matter how many times we try to explain it to them," Sabato complained. "This is getting annoying. Still, I suppose we're having an easier time of it than *they* are..."

The beastkin shot a quick glance at the eastern sky, where a figure massive enough to reach the clouds was currently fighting two enormous dragons. It was not a fight that he and his companions could approach much less participate in. However, not being able to do so meant failing to surpass his father, the great Beast King. It was a goal that he would have to reach one day, but the path would be long and treacherous indeed.

"Don't look away in the middle of battle!" Goma chided him. "And did you really think they'd obediently lay down their arms if you shouted at them? No surprise they became wary of you!"

"Why, though?! All I did was tell them Azgrad had changed sides. Stop making that fist! If you want to punch someone, hit the enemy, not me!"

"Rather than getting stronger, you should probably work on your stupidity first."

"You say that, but I'm doing my best with what little brains I have."

"Yes, I know you are. That's the problem."

"Heads up! Incoming."

Sabato was pointing to an area of the sky where a white dragon emanating a markedly different aura was approaching. The other flying beasts and their knights looked extremely surprised, indicating that even they had not expected this new arrival. However, as Rank A adventurers, both Goma and Sabato could tell that this dragon one was far more powerful than they themselves were.

“Heh heh, opportunities really do hit you out of the blue. Goma! If we defeat that dragon, do you think we can finally reach Rank S?”

“Don’t be overcon—” She stopped short. “Hold on...”

“What’s this? You getting fainthearted? That’s not like you at all! If you aren’t charging in, then I’m—*mmmphh*!”

Just as Sabato made to lunge forward, Goma’s backfist sent him crashing into the wall of the fortress.

“*Cough, cough, cough.* Dude, can you not?! Hello, ongoing battle h—”

“Shush! Looks like this fight is over.”

Sabato continued to protest as he wobbled to his feet, aching all over, but instead of being worried about him, Goma urged him to hurry with a death glare. He thought it somewhat unreasonable but still obliged. After studying the approaching dragon in the sky a while longer, he understood her urgency.

“All of you, stop fighting the Gaunians!”

“General Azgrad?!”

The voice that had shouted the command from the dragon’s back was that of Azgrad, who as far as the Trycenians knew, had gone missing after departing for the front lines. The soldiers fell into total confusion.

“You’re...back safe and sound, General!”

“But, General, these people are intruders—”

“SILENCE! I don’t have time to explain! Just shut up and follow me!”

The high-handed reply that made even Sabato’s attempts seem patient left the men below speechless.

“I’ll answer your questions later. YOUR ANSWER?”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

“Good!”

Rosalia made a conscious effort not to let her reaction to Azgrad bringing his men together through sheer force of will show on her face.

“Couldn’t you have explained things to them in a more reasonable manner?”

“That’s Shutola’s ballgame, not mine. I get things done my way.”

“I...suppose you have been like that ever since you were young. All right, we’re here.” She abruptly dropped to land in front of Sabato and his party.

“Yo! You guys the adventurers Kelvin mentioned?” Azgrad asked lightly. “Wait, you’re Sabato and Goma. Uh, why does Sabato look more beat up than the rest of you?”

“That’s because this barbar—*iaaannnnn*!”

“Please pay him no mind. Actually, let me rephrase that: please ignore him. So, you’ll be backing us up, Prince Azgrad? Uh...to attack your own castle?”

“Well, a bunch of stuff happened. I’ve got a whole lotta subordinates who can’t stand being in someone’s debt. And I’m kinda just, well, along for the ride.”

“In other words, you’re as fond of fighting as ever.”

“I won’t deny that. But hey, thanks for not killing my men and their dragons. That said, we have no time right now. Can you leave the quarreling for—”

A bluish-white light shot up into the sky. Azgrad, Rosalia, Goma, and the newly recovered Sabato turned and saw that it had originated from the top of the castle. Sabato and his companions, who had seen Kelvin’s promotion match in person, recognized the sight immediately.

“That’s the Oracle’s barrier, isn’t it? It looks just like the one from the exhibition match in Parth,” Sabato exclaimed.

“It’s certainly the secret technique of the Oracle of Deramis,” Goma agreed. “But...”

Azgrad clenched his fist. “What is this overwhelming dark aura? Why is it

coming from you, you shitty old man?!”

A malevolent power had ballooned up and over the main palace, threatening to swallow up the holy barrier cast by Colette.

◇ ◇ ◇

With the Oracle’s help, Kelvin and Rion managed to pass by Shutola and climb to the roof of Trycen Castle, which was a large, circular space. The princess had mentioned something about preparing for a ceremony, but there wasn’t a hint of anything celebratory there. All they found was the cold, smooth floor and a grandiose throne that faced outwards, commanding a view of the city below.

Seated on that throne was Zel Trycen.

“Pretty dominating setup you’ve got here, Your Majesty.”

“You must be Grim Reaper.”

The royal seat was positioned so that its back was facing the entrance of the passage that Kelvin and Rion had emerged from. Naturally, that meant Zel was not looking at them. Even so, he showed no indication of shifting from his current pose, sitting with his head propped up and his elbow on the armrest.

“I’m asking just in case, but do you have any intention of surrendering? We’ve immobilized pretty much all the soldiers inside the palace and all your precious knight orders are temporarily out of commission. You’re the only one left.”

“Surrender? Ha ha ha, what an amusing suggestion. My pawns did entertain me somewhat, but never once did I pin my hopes on them. As long as I remain standing... Ah, no, Shutola is indispensable as well. She will need to bear my children to create the perfect lineage: those who carry the blood of one who has awakened to true power.”

Zel chuckled as he stood, then turned to look at Kelvin and Rion. His eyes were completely black, without a shred of humanity remaining.

“I shall kill you and your little friends here, followed immediately by the Heroes of Deramis. Then I shall have my beloved Shutola bear my child. Grim Reaper, this is the day this world learns what it means to be ruled by terror. Everything shall be destroyed, trampled, and obliterated by my demonic

forces!”

“Oh, we don’t need the speech, thanks.”

Stab!

“Hm?”

An azure lance that was still rotating suddenly protruded from the Trycenian king’s chest. It was, of course, Holy Lance Luminary—Melfina’s weapon.

“Purge, Luminary.”

The attack was meant to be a complete surprise, as Melfina had emerged from a concealed magic circle behind the king’s back. With a high-pitched whine, the lance continued to spin until the azure brilliance it gave off had expanded to envelope the entire figure of the king.

Holy Lance Luminary possessed the ability to purge any and all malice from a target. Although it didn’t deal direct damage during that process, the lance of the gods could completely alter someone’s personality, turning the most malicious individual into an altruist. Since gods and goddesses weren’t supposed to unduly affect the mortal realm, there were many restrictions on the use of such a weapon. Or at least, there were supposed to be, but Melfina had unleashed it with everything she had.

“This magic signature... Who are you?!”

“Oh my, looks like you’ve already fully awakened.”

Melfina pulled her lance back out and leaped to Kelvin’s side. As she did so, the light surrounding Zel quickly dissipated.

::Honey, I’m sorry, but he’s too far gone. He’s completed his transformation into the Demon Lord.:: ::No, it’s fine. Thank you for checking. Now we can tell General Dan that we did try. So, we know for sure this guy is the Demon Lord now.:: Kelvin was staring straight at the words “Mara Pisuna” in the Skills category of Zel’s Status.

◇ ◇ ◇

What was a Demon Lord? Even the goddess Melfina could not answer that question precisely. Or to be exact, she probably knew the answer, but part of

the restrictions placed on her artificial body forbade her from sharing information that was deemed confidential by the gods.

So I summarized for myself everything that I knew so far: Periodically, someone became a Demon Lord. Without exception, these people all possessed the Mara Pisuna skill and the power to destroy the entire world, and they were filled with malice.

When there were signs that the next Demon Lord would be appearing soon, the Oracle of Deramis would receive a visit from and be blessed by the Goddess of Reincarnation. The Oracle would then summon Heroes from another world—whether a single person or a group—who would invariably go on to defeat the Demon Lord. The most recent Demon Lord had been Sera's father, Gustav.

Whenever someone became a Demon Lord, they would use everything at their disposal to plunge the world into chaos. Those powerful in battle would do so on their own, those holding political authority would mobilize their nations, and those with financial influence would seek to topple society as a whole.

The Mara Pisuna skill protected all Demon Lords from any attack and could be nullified only when the Demon Lord was assaulted by a party that included an otherworlder.

Upon successfully defeating the Demon Lord of the age, the Hero or Heroes would be presented the option of returning to their own world or living out the rest of their lives in this one. Those who chose to stay would be guaranteed appropriate remuneration and social status, but even those who returned home would receive a reward within the framework of their own world—in my case, that meant something appropriate for modern Japan. Apparently, the gods intended it to be a form of reparations for suddenly yanking someone out of their own life and burdening them with an immense undertaking.

In my case, well...the fight itself was the reward. Then again, I hadn't even been summoned as a Hero—if anything, the reward was more pertinent to Rion than me. And according to what she had shared with me before, my sister had no intention whatsoever of returning to modern Japan.

Your big brother is relieved to hear it, Rion.

::Can you see the Demon Lord's Status, Kel-nii?:: Oh, oops, that train of

thought under Parallel Processing took a pretty big detour. And now Rion is checking in.

Yep, I'm uploading it to the Network now, I replied telepathically.

I had been so absorbed by the sight of the Demon Lord's first Unique Skill that I only now took a better look at the rest of his Status.

Zel Trycen (58 y/o, Male, Human (Demon Lord), Ruler) Level: 41

Title: King of Trycen HP: 2,285/2,285 (+2,000) MP: 2,320/2,320 (+2,000) Strength: 1,151 (+1,000) Endurance: 1,127 (+1,000) Agility: 1,098 (+1,000) Magic: 1,160 (+1,000) Luck: 1,155 (+1,000) Skills: Mara Pisuna (Unique Skill), Royal Decree (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank B), Black Magic (Rank D), Army Command (Rank C), Nerves of Steel (Rank D), Companionship (Rank D), Negotiation (Rank C), Conversation (Rank B) Passive Effects: Mara Pisuna/Demon Lordification, Concealment (Rank A)

The stats buffs he's receiving from the Mara Pisuna skill are absolutely off the charts—it's like he got a whole Clotho added onto his base numbers. It's not to the point where we can't handle it, but it would definitely be too much for the Heroes. Zel's skills and base stats seem reasonable for someone of his level who's so-so at fighting. If I had to comment, I would point out that more than half of his skills aren't even battle-oriented. In other words, his original build is not specced to be a one-man army. A damn shame, really.

What really caught my attention was Zel's second Unique Skill. It seemed to be the most likely culprit for the brainwashed state of Shutola and Trycen's soldiers.

"Shall we get this banquet underway? For starters, all of you, *kill yourselves*."

While speaking, the king drew his magnificently ornamented sword. I felt my right hand respond slightly to his "kill yourselves" command, but then the Goddess's Ring I was wearing resisted, after which I felt no other effects. I used telepathy to confirm that Rion and Melfina had also felt something strange in their weapon-holding hands for a fraction of a second.

A look of surprise came over the Demon Lord's face.

All right, clearly Royal Decree is the ability to control other people with his words!

::Whoa, that means if it wasn't for these rings that Mel-nee made us, we would have killed ourselves just now? Talk about a close one!:: ::Even I'm surprised to see that what I made as a countermeasure against Clive has proved useful here.:: My thoughts raced. *If he can control people just by speaking, that is definitely a terrifying power. Judging from the atmosphere around the soldiers and citizens of Trycen, this works in a very different way from Clive's Charm Eye. The victims still possess their sense of self yet are not conscious of being controlled. I can't imagine a more perfect skill for mobilizing a country and pulling its strings. Hmm...would it help if we used earplugs? Yeah, I'm serious. After all, we can communicate just fine through the Network. Oh wait, Clotho doesn't have any earplugs in Storage. We've never encountered a situation where we needed them before. I mean, it would be a crime to wear them in bed.*

::Although the rings can resist Zel's control to a certain degree, we're still affected for a split second, right?:: Melfina commented. ::That split second could prove fatal.:: ::What an annoying skill, huh? But there's only one thing to do, then!:: Rion answered, clearly thinking along the same lines as me.

We could not afford to take too long, as Colette was working hard to hold Shutola back with her barrier even now. Knowing her, she would keep at it even if it required her to push herself beyond her limits and discard her dignity as a woman. It made me both happy and pained that she was willing to go so far for us. We had to finish up here as soon as possible so that the worst-case scenario would not come to pass.

Yep, let's charge straight into close-quarters combat!

::Lightning attacks are what I'm good at!:: ::We shall finish him off without giving him time to say another word!:: With everyone in agreement, the three of us charged forward with scythe, double swords, and lance in hand, respectively—Rion and I from the front, and Melfina from the back.

Zel's Agility stat was quite a threat at 1,098, but it paled in comparison to Rion's and Mel's base stats as well as my own after casting Sonic Acceleration. We rushed towards him faster than wind—no, faster than even electrical

impulses.

"Kne—"

Not a word from you!

Reaching him first, I swung Boreas Death Scythe in an upward slash to interrupt Zel's second attempt to use Royal Decree. Analyze Eye informed me that the sword he was holding had been passed down through the Trycenian royal family for generations. He attempted to block my attack with it, but that was a bad choice. Of course, his weapon was Rank S, so his decision made sense...under normal circumstances. Against my scythe, however, it was a different story.

"Ugh!"

My weapon bisected the royal sword before going on to amputate Zel's right arm near the elbow. He looked astonished by the fact that he had gotten hurt but recovered almost immediately. Even before his severed arm hit the floor, he had leaped to the side of the roof farthest from us, even going to the trouble of throwing up a smokescreen using Black Magic. However, a mere Rank D spell was nothing to my two companions.

::Star-Studded Stage!:: ::Lightning Enhancement!:: Melfina's chantless White Magic spell generated countless dazzling stars that rose up into the sky and instantaneously shredded the veil of night. At the same time, Rion, who had become as fast as lightning, circled around Zel, with Demon Sword Caladbolg and one Black Sword Aklama held at the ready. As he was still in the middle of his leap, the king was off balance. The only thing he could do was again use Royal Decree.

"Sle—"

Needless to say, Rion did not allow him to finish. The blade, charged with crackling energy, slashed across Zel's back, followed quickly by Aklama stabbing deeply into his left leg and nailing it to the floor, effectively halting his movements. The furiously sparkling electrical charge spread out from the king's back to cover his entire body, robbing him of the ability to speak.

Good job, Rion. All yours, Melfina.

::Luminary, shift to Holy Extermination Form. Charge MP.:: Once again, Melfina's lance began rotating at high speed. An even more furious-sounding whine than last time filled the air, accompanied by a bluish-white light that quickly grew blinding. This was Luminary's second ability. If the previous function was to eliminate evil in the mind, this was meant to erase a target entirely so that not even a speck of dust remained.

Rion had already gotten out of the path of this superweapon hailing from the era of the gods. Zel, in contrast, was still paralyzed.

Go for it!

::Luminary Burst!:: Light gathered at the tip of Mel's weapon, then blasted out as a thick beam that pierced Zel, erased him, and purified his very existence. Visually, the attack seemed quite similar to Clotho's Mortality Beam, but the damage it dealt was on a whole other level. The strike of divine punishment—in the literal sense of the word, considering who had used it—extended far into the distance. After what felt like ages, the beam finally shrank and disappeared.

Did we get him?!

::Honey, did you *have* to go and jinx it?:: I mean, this is the Demon Lord we're talking about. The fun can't be over this easily. Everything so far has just been the opening skirmish, right?

::I understand what you're saying, but...:: ::Kel-nii, up there!:: "*Kneel*."

Just as I received Rion's message, a Royal Decree reached our ears from on high. We felt the soles of our feet press into the ground for less than a second. When we looked up, we found what was remaining of Zel—his head, one shoulder, and a barely connected left arm—floating in the air.

Seriously? How high is your vitality stat that you're still alive in that state?

"*Do not move*. It's a pity; you would have defeated me if you'd had several seconds more. Unfortunately, your time is up."

Is he waiting for something?

::Kelvin! A part of Clive is heading your way! He's faster than I expected!:: My thoughts were interrupted by a telepathic message from Sera. I checked the

map and found her approaching our location at incredible speed—she would likely reach us in a few seconds. However, there was something else flying ahead of her: a disfigured object that looked like some sort of blade.

That's...Clive?

"*Do not interfere*. Husk of the fool who was Clive, now is the time for you to truly serve me."

Before I could react, the incoming projectile pierced Zel's forehead, then swelled up as if it were jelly and swallowed the entirety of what was left of his body. It continued squirming and expanding until the bulging mass formed a somewhat humanoid shape.

::Aww, I was too late!:: Sera landed with a crash that sounded far heavier than her light body would normally generate, biting her bottom lip in frustration. I glanced over and realized she was covered head to toe in Crimson Scrimmage, a new, original spell that she had developed by incorporating Blood Dominion into Jin Scrimmage. It was essentially armor made of blood, giving her the appearance of a terrifying classic demon as described in the legends. She had come up with the move after Evolving to Demon Blood Lord and gaining Bloodbending as a Unique Skill. She rarely used it even in our practice matches.

Was your fight so difficult that you had to bring that out, Sera? You sounded kind of stressed in your message just now too.

::Huh? Uh...yeah! I can't believe how heated it got. But enough of that. The Demon Lord's more important now!:: Can't argue with that.

I kind of felt like Sera was changing the subject, but as she'd said, the Demon Lord did take priority. I put the fact that she had also let a tough opponent slip through her fingers out of my head.

Demon Lord, Demon Lord, Demon Lord.

::Sera-nee, what *was* that thing? You and Zel mentioned a name?:: Rion asked as she pulled Aklama out of the floor. The blade had been in the line of fire of the Luminary Burst that Melfina had unleashed—it had been keeping Zel nailed down—but had remained unscathed due to its toughness. Part of that was probably due to the fact that Luminary Burst's damage was mainly effective

against that which is evil and impure, but even so, the other Rank S weapons that Rion possessed might not have survived.

The secret ingredient is, of course, my familial love for my little sister.

::Mm, it's sort of like...the remainder of the Clive guy, the one Kelvin couldn't finish off that time. I destroyed his body, but the cursed blade that was part of him got away. That's what you just saw.:: *So I* didn't *mishear! Sera, are you all right?! Did that pervert try to do anything bad to you?! Did he look at you with lewd eyes?!*

::Don't worry, my father's blessing protected me. And I had Mel's ring too.:: I see... That's a relief to hear...

I mentally bowed down to Sera's father. *Thank you, dad whose face I don't know! Wait, but if his blessing activated, that means... Oh, right.*

::Aha ha, you're such a worrywart, Kel-nii. Anyway, what do you mean by the cursed blade being a part of him, Sera-nee?:: ::Um, it's hard to describe. Let me just show you guys how he looked when I fought him.:: As she spoke, an image of a very grotesque Clive appeared through the Network. *Oof, that's gross.*

He looks quite different from how I remember him. Though that nauseating face is still the same.

::Honey, this...:: Oh, do you know what this is? Teach us, Melfina-sensei!

::It's a deviant subspecies of human called cursekin. Some people incorrectly believe this is one of the paths of Evolution for humans, but as it involves inundating a person with curses, it cannot be considered a natural one. Its existence was discovered long, long ago when battle slaves were equipped with cursed weapons. Looking at this, however, we aren't talking about just one or two curses. How did Trycen gather this many?:: According to the explanation from our trustworthy teacher, Clive had, through an absolutely insane method, strengthened himself to the point where he was almost as powerful as Sera.

Sure, he was a pervert who would do and say absolutely ridiculous things, but was he really the kind of guy who would sacrifice himself and go this far?

::Honey, the Demon Lord is about to make his move.:: Gotcha. Everyone, share anything you notice about him while fighting.

After merging with Clive, Zel's appearance had completely transformed, as if he were in a whole new body. When he had been human, he had carried the dignity of a king that had instilled fearful awe in the beholder. Now, he was nothing like that. He towered over us like a giant, and his skin had turned black like a night that threatened to devour all. Although he wasn't quite on the level of Gigant Lord, the monster Rion had fought in the Forest of Crests, his current size was more than enough of a threat in this limited space. On his head were sinister horns that seemed to pierce the sky, and he was wearing armor that was emanating a very unsettling aura...

Well, there would be no end if every part of him were to be described in full, so in an effort to sum it all up in a single term: Demon Lord. Now his appearance truly lived up to the title of a being who could shake the world and threatened to bring it to its knees.

"Ha ha... HA HA HA! NeveR HaD I ImagineD ThaT I WoulD Be ReborN In SucH GlorY!"

Zel laughed fearlessly, looking around in his brand new form. His voice was filled with strength, so much so that it was triggering my Danger Detection. I strongly suspected his words were laced with magic.

"HmM, LookS LikE ThaT FooL's SkillS AlL DroppeD QuitE A BiT FroM HiS UnnaturaL EvolutioN. ThougH In ExchangE, He DiD GaiN A FeW OtherS... No MatteR, This ShalL ServE."

There we go. He's successfully transformed into his second form. This is a must-have in Demon Lord fights, of course. All right, let's take a look at his new Status!

Zel Trycen (58 y/o, Male, Cursekin (Demon Lord), Ruler) Level: 132

Title: He Who Brings Destruction HP: 5,660/5,660 (+2,000) MP: 3,291/3,291 (+2,000) (+369) Strength: 2,617 (+1,000) Endurance: 2,293 (+1,000) Agility: 2,032 (+1,000) Magic: 1,480 (+1,000) Luck: 1,156 (+1,000) Skills: Mara Pisuna (Unique Skill), Royal Decree (Unique Skill), Charm Eye (Unique Skill), Cursed Item Creation (Unique Skill), Sword Mastery (Rank B), Green Magic (Rank C), Black Magic (Rank D), Analyze Eye (Rank D), Magic Detection (Rank D),

Concealment (Rank D), Army Command (Rank C), Nerves of Steel (Rank D), Companionship (Rank D), Negotiation (Rank C), Conversation (Rank B), Storage (Rank A), Auto Healing (Rank A), Spirit (Rank C) Passive Effects: Mara Pisuna/Demon Lordification, Concealment (Rank A)

I had to suppress my urge to raise both my hands in celebration. We finally had an opponent with stats over two thousand—I didn't care that it was from buffs, since what mattered was the effective numbers. Of course, I promptly uploaded the information to the Network. Everyone else had to see this guy's Status too.

Sera glared at him, murmuring, ::I think he probably absorbed all of Clive's stats and skills. I didn't see Clive's Status myself, but this generally matches what I observed while I was fighting him.:: Seriously? Guys, take a good look at Sera's battle footage. Zel might come at us with similar moves.

Clive's fighting style had been centered around using Green Magic and close combat with cursed weapons. He was probably also the source of the new Unique Skills that Zel had gained.

"NoW, BolD AdventurerS. I HaD NoT ExpecteD YoU To HavE A HerO AmonG YouR NumberS AnD To CorneR Me So FaR. NoW, HoweveR, *I* Am YouR GriM ReapeR. BeholD ThiS PoweR ThaT SeetheS WitH ME! I Am ThE MosT PowerfuL DemoN LorD In AlL HistorY! MUA HA HA HA!"

The creature's laughter showed no signs of abating. *Uh, is it just me or did his personality change drastically after merging with Clive?*

"The strongest in history, you say! You think that's a title you can take on just by joining with that self-claimed protagonist?"

"HA HA HA, VerY WelL, I ShalL TelL YoU ThiS As A PartinG GifT. WhaT I NeedeD WaS NoT ClivE HimselF, BuT HiS VesseL. WhY ElsE Do YoU ThinK I KepT HiM ArounD? ThE MalicE FroM HiS BodY CarryinG A CountlesS NumbeR of CurseS BecamE CrystallizeD IntO A SinglE SworD. HiS FilthY MinD WaS NothinG BuT A HindrancE, BuT HiS BodY—ThE BodY Of An OtherworldeR—Is TrulY PricelesS. In OtheR WordS, ClivE WaS ThE SeedbeD FoR ThE ForginG Of A WeapoN ThaT Is TrulY WorthY Of Me. AnD ThaT WeapoN Is..."

He brought his right hand up and stabbed the part of his chest where his heart was supposed to be. Strangely, there was no blood. He seemed to grab hold of something, then pulled it out.

It was a longsword scaled to his current size—clearly unfit to be wielded by any normal human. And even if the issue of size were to be resolved, the wielder's mind would be instantly crushed by the thousands of curses emanating from the blade.

"ThiS MaD SworD ClivE. HA HA HA, ThE NamE Is As DistastefuL As YoU WerE! HoweveR, I AcknowledgE YouR LoyaltY In PresentinG Me WitH NoT OnlY YouR SworD, BuT YouR PoweR As WelL! YoU HavE DonE WelL, ClivE!"

"Tempest Barrier," I murmured, casting the Rank S Green Magic spell I'd learned from Clive through the abilities of my robe, Astarte's Embrace.

A tornado sprang up around the roof, threatening to mince anything and anyone it came into contact with.

"WhaT Is ThE MeaninG Of ThiS? WhY HavE YoU SealeD YouR OwN PatH Of RetreaT? AnD WhY ArE YoU SmilinG? HavE YoU GonE InsanE?"

"Hey, thanks for all the exposition just now. I had a personal grudge against Clive, you know. I swore to myself that I would finish him off the next time I met him, but Sera got to him first, and he's now gone. So I can't fulfill that dream of mine anymore. But lo and behold, I found a replacement. I mean, practically half of you *is* Clive, right, O Mighty Demon Lord?"

"YoU DarE InsulT Me?!"

Learning from past mistakes is important. For the sake of relieving my frustrations and for the sake of ending this war...buddy, you're not leaving here alive!

"Sonic Acceleration!"

Just before we dove back into the battle, I buffed all my companions with the Green Magic spell that doubled their Agility stats and renewed the cast on myself. Thanks to Parallel Processing, I managed to activate all four casts simultaneously and in such a short time that it was practically chantless. And now the wind was on our side.

Doing it did cost almost as much MP as using a Rank S spell, but our opponent was an absolute juggernaut with 2,032 in Agility. If I hadn't cast it, he would have beaten us all in speed, with Melfina being the only one capable of keeping up.

"PerisH."

A mere fraction of a second after I finished applying Sonic Acceleration to our team, the Demon Lord closed in on us. He lifted Mad Sword Clive up high and swung it down, drawing a trail of cursed energy that scattered all around. Rion and Sera darted to the left and right, respectively, while Melfina materialized her wings—a sign that she was getting serious—and flew away, employing evasive maneuvers.

Even I, with the lowest Agility stat in our group, managed to dodge somehow. However, if we allowed Clive to directly strike the floor, the castle itself would take massive damage. Colette, Dan, and Shutola were still on the floor directly below. I knew they were protected by Colette's barrier, but I didn't want to risk it. I also knew I would die if I took the attack head-on.

It would be a gamble, but should I aim for Zel's blade with a flying Boreas Death Scythe?

::Honey, I made it in time. The others are safe now. I got them.:: Upon receiving Mel's words of reassurance, I immediately mustered all my speed to dodge the falling sword. I didn't even stop to think about it. Melfina said she'd gotten them, and that was all I needed to hear. I had complete trust in her.

"Hmph!"

Clive slammed into the castle floor, sending fragments of stone flying everywhere. But stone wasn't the only thing that it had collided with—there was also a sheet of roses and briars made of ice that were covering the entire surface where we had stood. The flying shards stabbed the Demon Lord's body in such numbers that any lesser monster would have been filled with holes. *His* skin, however, was made of much tougher stuff.

You're a lifesaver, Melfina!

::It really was a close one. Clearly, this is going to be more trouble than the

previous round.:: A countless number of briars not only covered the rooftop but also the entire outside wall of the palace. What Melfina had used was a Rank S Blue Magic spell by the name of Celsius Briar. This ultimate defensive measure involved completely enveloping a target with briars, which both protected the subject and dealt damage to any assailants. At face value, it sounded exactly like Frozen Vajra Briar, but in addition to being effective over a much larger area, Celsius Briar boasted far higher durability and was capable of differentiating between friend and foe. The ice briars never stopped growing, meaning that any damage it suffered would be repaired immediately. As long as Mel's MP lasted, removing the roses from the rooftop would be nigh impossible.

Of course, her MP was not infinite, and she had just cast a Rank S spell. What's more, the spell's fuel efficiency was quite bad—the larger it grew, the more MP it drained. But that wasn't a problem in our case.

::*Gulp, gulp, gulp*... I'm back to full!:: The solution was simple: just chug down a potion in a single breath. Normally, drinking a potion to recover MP in the middle of a battle was considered a bad idea, as it meant being entirely defenseless for a period of time. And if one wasn't careful, it could also lead to a terrible tragedy like that which had befallen the Oracle of Deramis not long ago.

But Melfina—and perhaps also Sylvia, another Rank S adventurer I knew—was capable of instantaneously drinking a near limitless number of potions. It was a feat achievable only by true gluttons—those who had attained the Hearty Eating skill at Rank S. They could down the absolutely revolting elixir like it was a delicacy.

To complement that, Melfina had a mini Clotho hiding inside her light armor, and the stock of potions in the slime's Storage far exceeded that of any wealthy merchant. Thanks to the synergy of this pairing, Melfina had access to even more MP than I did.

"YoU InsolenT..."

In fact, Celsius Briar had been deployed before I'd even cast Tempest Barrier. If not, the palace would have been obliterated as soon as Tempest Barrier had gone up. Melfina had actually cast Celsius Briar before we'd even breached the

room where Shutola was.

After Rion and I had joined up and Colette had explained her plan to set up the barrier, Melfina had offered to freeze the outer wall of the castle “so that we’ll have a double layer of protection.” The reason, she went on to explain, was to alleviate the load on Colette and to guarantee that the building would withstand attacks not only from Shutola, but also from the Demon Lord. The religious fanatic had started almost hyperventilating, exclaiming, “A collaboration with Melfina-sama?!” But that was par for the course.

After we had finished discussing our strategy, Melfina had planted the seed right there on the terrace. It had rapidly expanded to envelop the castle’s exterior but had only reached the roof in the nick of time. I was worried that the Demon Lord would catch on after having obtained Magic Detection from his fusion with Clive, but apparently he was still unfamiliar with all his new skills.

Unfortunately, it looks like Celsius Briar by itself isn’t enough to stop him.

Not only were the briars already recovering from Zel’s attack, they were also wrapping themselves around the Demon Lord’s legs and Mad Sword Clive as if in revenge. Yet he still seemed to have no trouble moving about and brandishing his weapon. The wounds that the briars were dealing to his feet were healing almost immediately, likely due to the Auto Healing skill that Zel had gained from the late general. The damage from the icicles earlier was similarly gone, demonstrating that piling on minor attacks would be the wrong strategy to use here. Zel had a large HP pool, and his recovery rate was proportionally high.

::But he’s definitely slower than before! The briars *are* having an effect!:: Rion readjusted her grip on Aklama and rushed forward.

::Don’t let your guard down! He still has Green Ma—:: “*StoP*.”

We all froze. It was only for one or two seconds—no, maybe even less—but the intensity of what we were feeling was many times what it had been before Zel’s transformation, and it was clear that Royal Decree had finally affected us in a major way. The Goddess’s Rings on our fingers vibrated furiously as if attempting to deal with something beyond their capabilities. What was supposed to be a short period of time felt like eons. Every single thought in

Parallel Processing screamed, “Move, move, move!” at me, but it was the Demon Lord who moved first.

::Aha, makes sense it’d be me...:: His target was the one who, having charged first, was now closest to him: Rion. The briars tried their best to entangle him, but his speed remained unaffected. I took a peek at his Status and found the words “Sonic Boots” under the Passive Effects field.

::Right, this did happen in the battle footage that Sera-nee shared. Um, sorry!:: ::You dummy, Rion!:: Sera yelled. ::Move already, legs!:: The buff from Sonic Boots was apparently canceling out the debuff from the briars. In the blink of an eye, Zel was standing in front of Rion. At this rate, the three of us wouldn’t make it in time.

“FirsT OnE DowN!”

“*ARF!*” (I won’t let you!) Alex suddenly leaped out from within Rion’s shadow with Lethal Opiate Sword in his mouth. He parried the attack and, at the same time, manipulated the shadows around him to grab his partner and throw her beyond the range of the Demon Lord’s attack. Zel’s swing faltered a bit in light of this new development, but it was still far too powerful for the wolf to handle.

Alex was blown backwards, with Lethal slipping from his mouth and flying through the air.

“UgH?!”

A flash of lightning shot past the wolf, grabbed Lethal before it hit the ground, accelerated even faster using Sky Walk, and brandished it alongside Aklama to launch a barrage of slashes at the Demon Lord’s head. At the same time...

::Well done, Alex!:: Sera praised the wolf as she landed a blood-drenched fist on Zel’s flank, sending him flying into the air.

The pair’s efforts successfully prevented the Demon Lord from dealing Alex a finishing blow.

::He did catch us off guard. But no more,:: Melfina declared in a displeased tone, thrusting Holy Lance Luminary towards our opponent’s heart.

Attacks fell like rain on the Demon Lord’s vitals, but he showed no sign of

falling. I very much wanted to join the others, but I had something else I needed to do first.

After using wind to cushion Alex's fall...

"*Di—*!"

I cast Silent Whisper around Zel's mouth to prevent him from using Royal Decree again. He had seen that the ability could finally affect us and had therefore tried to use it again, but now his voice would no longer reach anyone's ears. Needless to say, he looked extremely astonished at being unable to hear himself anymore.

Now you can't rely on the easy way out. This is no time to look confused—you'd better think of a new move, and soon. I don't think the girls are going to wait for you.

::*Arf...?*:: (What happened...to Rion?) ::Thanks to you, she's fine. In fact, she's already back in the thick of it.:: Our big dog had taken quite a bit of damage—it wasn't fatal, though, thankfully—so I gave his head a quick pat and filled his HP back up with White Magic. For good measure, I also cast a curse-dispelling spell on him. And since Rion was now holding Lethal, I took Caladbolg out of Storage—I'd asked Clotho to retrieve it with a clone when Rion dropped it earlier—for him to use instead. Lastly, while I was at it, I buffed him with Sonic Acceleration too.

There ya go, buddy. Now let's go and get back at him!

::Arf!:: (You bet!) ◇ ◇ ◇

"(YoU ImpertinenT AntS!)"

Countless pitch-black spears practically dripping with curses abruptly shot out from all over Zel's body. None of them even came close to scratching the girls, though, as Clive had already revealed this trick to Sera earlier. Rion not only dodged those coming her way, she reduced them to dust with blasts of lightning.

Now that he could no longer use Royal Decree, Zel had no choice but to actually engage Sera, Rion, and Melfina in direct combat. All of his shallow wounds healed nearly instantaneously, but the damage that he had suffered

while attempting to pursue Alex remained, preventing him from regaining the upper hand.

::His skin's so tough!:: Rion complained. ::Aklama is kind of effective, but Lethal can't damage him aside from pinpoint attacks on vital areas! And if I use Thunderclap Edge, it registers as elemental damage, so Lethal's ability doesn't activate.:: She was deftly using Sky Walk to zip all around the air—sometimes even using Covert Action—in a bid to constantly keep the Demon Lord distracted. She held Lethal in her right hand and Aklama in her left and slashed at Zel with every pass she made, but she was finding it difficult to so much as scratch his skin let alone inflict any major wounds. Aklama was tough enough to get through his defenses somehow, but the other blade wasn't doing anything at all.

::I should be able to get to him using Lethal through his eyes and mouth, but—:: ::That's no reason for you to rush in by yourself again! It's dangerous!:: ::Sera's right! It's too early for you to consider yourself a master!:: ::Ugh, I don't really have a comeback after what just happened...:: Rion had landed several attacks on the Demon Lord's head using Lethal after grabbing it from Alex. Although most of her blows had simply bounced off his black skin, she did land one stab in his eye. Thanks to that, he had lost his sense of taste. However, he had very likely caught on to her tactics, and the members of the older sister squad had determined that attempting another attack requiring her to be so up close and personal would be far too risky. Although Rion hated being treated like a child, she had no grounds to protest this time.

::Why are you insisting on using Lethal? Aklama comes in a pair, right?:: Sera asked.

Rion replied in a somewhat pouty tone, ::But I want to get revenge for Alex with the same sword...:: ::So stubborn,:: Sera sighed. ::Mel, are you done recharging for another Luminary Burst?:: ::My MP is full, but it's going to be some time before my lance can handle another one,:: the goddess replied.

Steam was evaporating from the length of her weapon, indicating that she was already using Blue Magic to forcibly cool it down.

::All right, let us know. Zel's regeneration is way too fast, so our only hope of

killing him is to hit him with one big burst of damage.:: ::So, we just have to hang on until then!:: ::At least I've already seized control of a part of his body with Blood Dominion.:: Sera and Mel were doing a great job of fighting in concert with each other. Meanwhile, Zel had noticed that something was off. Ever since Sera had landed her blow, his waist seemed to have gained a will of its own and was actively working against him, turning in the wrong direction whenever he swung his sword. He was struggling to generate the force to both attack and defend.

::The core is crucial for all physical movements, after all! Anyone who can't control their waist won't be able to muster even half their usual power!:: ::Nice job, Sera-nee! So, can I rush in now?:: ::Oh no you don't!:: ::No rushing, Rion!:: ::Ugh, I figured you'd say that...:: The attacks from all three working together fell with both unrelenting ferocity and unparalleled precision. Although Zel had bolstered his own Agility with Sonic Boots, the ice shackles from Celsius Briar still clung to his legs. There was no way for him to perfectly detect everything flying at him.

"(My BodY Is WarninG Me ThaT ThE RedheaD Is ThE MosT DangerouS. Hm? Is ClivE PerhapS...?)"

The Demon Lord started prioritizing Sera's attacks.

"(HeH HeH HeH. WomaN, WhaT HavE YoU DonE To ClivE To MakE HiM ReacT So?)"

The Mad Sword started twisting itself, repeatedly altering its trajectory while closing in on Sera. It was the blade that was doing all the contortions, and unfortunately, it was not under Blood Dominion's influence. Rion and Melfina gave their best effort at distracting it, but Clive ignored them, accelerating at an incredible rate.

"I can't tell what you're saying when your mouth is just flapping uselessly!" Sera shouted as her Blood Scrimmage-clad fist clashed against the blade that had extended so far it now looked like a spear.

The resulting shockwave spread out in all directions across the rooftop, making Rion back up several steps in the air and forcing Melfina to drop her center of gravity in order to maintain her footing. The tip of the extended blade

let out a metallic screech as it pressed downwards with incredible weight, forcing Sera's feet through the layer of icy briars where they became buried within.

"(MaD SworD ClivE Is An AccumulatioN Of CurseS! EveN I CannoT TelL WhaT YoU WoulD Be AfflicteD WitH If YoU ToucH ItS BladE CarelesslY!)"

"As I said, I—*RAH*—have no idea what you're saying!" Sera finally succeeded in smashing the point of Mad Sword Clive up into the air, even managing to get a bit of her blood on it. In the end, she was the one who had been victorious in the exchange. However...

Ting.

Clive must have scraped her Clip of Camouflage as, right at that moment, it lost its abilities, and all the characteristics that marked Sera as a demon—her horns, wings, and tail—ceased to be invisible and could now be seen with the naked eye.

"(AfteR A HerO AnD An AngeL, NoW A DemoN ToO! GriM ReapeR, YoU SurE HavE An InterestinG EntouragE!)"

::How dare you—:: Glory Sanctuary.

"(HnG?!)"

A white magic circle as wide as the rooftop appeared, centered around the Demon Lord. It quickly turned into three floating rings that tightened around him, robbing him of the ability to move. Immediately afterwards, two blades slashed down. My Boreas Death Scythe sliced off his right arm, sword and all, while Alex used Caladbolg, which was crackling loudly with charged-up energy, to gouge out a huge portion of his left arm.

Sera, don't let him get to you. Getting all worked up over it won't do you any favors in battle, right?

I placed a hand on her head, casting a curse-dispelling spell while I was at it. The hair clip seemed to regain its powers, as her horns and other demonic parts faded back out of sight.

She pursed her lips a little. ::It's going to take me quite a while to seize control

of that sword with the small amount of blood I got onto it. Should I just kick it off the roof? It feels disgusting to have around.:: That sounds like a waste. Clotho, can you grab it please?

We had no need for the arm that was still attached to the sword, so I used Impact to blast it off, doing so in such a way that it flew directly into Tempest Barrier. Mad Sword Clive went straight into my buddy's Storage to be purified and reforged at a later date. That way, we would gain a pure Clive, although on second thought, I wasn't sure I even wanted a pure version of him, but I decided to leave that for some other time.

Only half a minute or so had elapsed before Alex and I rejoined the battle, but it had been a very eventful half-minute indeed.

"(A HigH-TiereD BindinG SpelL. GriM ReapeR, JusT HoW MucH MP Do YoU HavE?)"

Damn, his left arm's already *grown back? Yeah, we're going to need one big attack. Anything less is going to be worthless.*

::Kel-nii, you've been using pretty draining spells since the start of the fight. Are you okay on MP?:: ::Don't worry, Rion. I lent Honey my ace.:: ::What ace is that?:: Melfina's very special skill was, in fact, currently residing in my left Skill Eater gauntlet, and its name was...Hearty Eating! With this, I too could use as much MP as I needed!

I had expected this to be a drawn-out encounter from the start, so although there was nothing to be done about the terrible taste of the potions, I was capable of downing them in the blink of an eye. It was actually a pretty impressive skill.

"(MuA Ha Ha! It MatterS NoT, As I WilL BreaK OuT Of FlimsY BondS SucH As ThesE In No TimE At AlL!)"

I had no idea what Zel was saying but prayed that it was something along the lines of "I still have two more transformations!" At this point, Glory Sanctuary was down to a single ring. We had to get going and bring things to an end while the buff the spell provided us was still in effect.

Mel, you ready?

::Anytime, honey.:: Good. Rion, go on and charge in!

::Can I really?! Can Alex come with me?!:: Sure thing. Go from the front.

::Kelvin?!:: ::Honey?!:: I understood their worries, but I also understood Rion's desire for payback given what Zel had done to Alex.

It's fine, I'll handle anything that happens. Rion and Alex, you two do this. Then Sera, you move like this, I instructed them, marking up the map on the Network with the information.

::Oh, all right, fine. But make sure you take care of her!:: Ma'am, yes, ma'am! And Mel, you got this?

::I'm honestly surprised you can be so blithe even in a situation like this. Just promise me you'll protect Rion properly, understand?:: Okay, I'm aware that I go a bit too far myself sometimes, but you two are pretty overprotective of her too, don't you think?

Of course, making the impossible possible was my motto. So now that we were all on the same page, without further ado!

::Let's do this, Alex!:: ::*Arf!*:: (Yep!) Rion and Alex, both buffed with Lightning Enhancement, shot forward, leaving trails of lightning in their wakes.

"(HerE I WaS, BracinG MyselF, WheN It TurnS OuT To Be MerelY MorE Of ThE SamE. HavE YoU NoT LearneD ThaT AlL AttackS ArE MeaninglesS AgainsT Me? AiR PressurE!)"

Oh no you don't. Here's Air Pressure from me in reverse.

Zel's Green Magic was only at Rank C, but he had such overwhelming stats that his cast of Air Pressure was as powerful as a serious cast from me. Conversely, that meant I could actually deal with it if I genuinely tried, so I cast my own Air Pressure in the opposite direction, effectively canceling it out.

During this time, Rion and Alex had gotten within melee range. The latter tore the Demon Lord's skin open using electrical damage dealt with the heavily charged Caladbolg, then the former followed up by tracing the wound and gouging it even further with Lethal. This happened more than four times in total, finally robbing our opponent of all five of his senses.

::Hmph!::

The next to spring into action was Sera, who had repositioned herself at Zel's side. She unleashed a barrage of punches, all of them properly thrown from the waist. In no time at all, the Demon Lord's armor cracked, shattered, and disappeared. As he had lost his sense of touch, he couldn't even feel the pain from what was happening. The rain of blows—each one normally powerful enough to kill—continued unchecked, slowly pushing his gigantic form into the air before sending him flying straight into Tempest Barrier, still immobile due to Glory Sanctuary.

"(I CannoT SeE AnythinG. I CannoT HeaR AnythinG! As FoR ThE FloW Of MagiC... I Do FeeL A GigantiC WalL Of MagiC RushinG Up BehinD Me. No, It'S RotatinG RapidlY. ThiS MusT Be ThE TornadO! MuA Ha Ha, I GeT It NoW! TheiR PlaN Is To ThroW Me IntO ThE TornadO ThaT MinceS EverythinG ThaT ComeS IntO ContacT WitH It. HoweveR, ThaT AlonE—)"

"That alone probably still won't do the job. So that's where—"

"—we come in."

Just as the Demon Lord's body reached Tempest Barrier, Melfina's wings burst wide open, glowing with a dazzling blue light as she unleashed a full-power Luminary Burst. In the same instant, I spammed Radiance Crossfire as many times as I could with my remaining MP. I actually wanted to unleash flying Boreas Death Scythes as well, but unfortunately, that would have severed Tempest Barrier.

It'll all be for nothing if we let him get away. Self-control. Self-control.

"Hey, Zel, it's too bad you obviously had no idea how to properly make use of your bolstered stats. You don't actually know how to fight and had no time to get used to all the new skills you acquired. Also, you've never fought me before... Well, I suppose that last one can't really be helped. So, yeah, keep all those things in mind for your next life. Oh, wait, I forgot, he can't hear anything."

If you'd been more familiar with Green Magic, there are quite a few ways you could have countered Silent Whisper, I thought. *You totally dropped the ball there, buddy.*

Zel crashed into the roaring tornado back-first. We watched as the razor-sharp wind attempted to dice him into nothing as the cannon-like blast of holy light destroyed his body from the front. His cells underwent destruction and regeneration in a continuous cycle, but the cumulative effect was plain to see.

"(AAAARGH! Am I...Am *I* GoinG To Be DestroyeD?! ThougH I Do NoT FeeL ThE PaiN, ThE RapiD DraininG Of My MagiC InformS Me Of ThE CrisiS I Am In! ThiS CannoT BEEEEEEEE!)"

Oh, his regeneration is increasing. He's trying to make a stand! Can I really get my hopes up for a third phase?!

"Honey, your thoughts are written on your face."

"I'm sure even God would forgive me at a time like this! And doesn't being a good wife mean loving those parts of your husband too?! I'm sure such a wife would even have a bowl of homemade miso soup cooked and ready for him the next day!"

"H-Honey?! Are you seriously proposing at a time like this?!" Melfina, who was normally even more tenacious than me at taking things at her own pace, was now as red as a tomato.

Wait, uh... Huh? I was just bantering with her like we always do, but...did she interpret my words in a weird way?

"I did say I was expecting a novel and surprising proposal, but doing it in this particular moment is a bit *too* novel!"

Oh my god, she really did *misunderstand! She took my joke about making miso soup at face value as a marriage proposal!*

Before my eyes, Melfina's wings grew even more blindingly bright and, strangely enough, Luminary Burst suddenly grew even thicker and more powerful. The sound of energy surging through the lance grew louder in proportion.

"(I Am...ThE DemoN LorD WhO...BringS DestructioN...To ThiS WorlD...)"

"But actually, I... I do love you tooooo!" Melfina cried.

The Demon Lord disappeared into the torrent of light. The first task that I had

completed with Melfina was nothing less than the subjugation of a Demon Lord.



◇ ◇ ◇

Tabura, brother of Shutola and third prince of Trycen, had been sneaking about the palace proper with his underlings while numerous pockets of fighting were going on throughout the compound.

“Your Highness, isn’t fishing through His Majesty’s private quarters going too far?”

“I-I think so too, Your Highness. Our heads will literally fly if we’re discovered here!”

“Shut it! The united army has cornered us. There’s no recovering from this! When the country falls, do you know what they’ll do to a prince like me?! Dammit, Shutola’s such a useless bitch! If she had only listened to my advice, things wouldn’t have gone so wrong! Jean, Alba, gather everything that looks expensive! It shouldn’t be hard—everything here should be worth a lot. I’ll get out of this country and head for the Western Continent! I’m too important to meet my end in a place like this!”

“But how will we escape the compound? There are enemies at the front gate —”

“Idiot! That’s why we have a secret passageway in the headquarters of the Magic Knight Order! We just have to reach it using our fighting spirit and we’ll be home free! So you can stop worrying and just focus on moving your hands!”

Both subordinates thought, “*Uh, fighting spirit?*” but only responded out loud with “Yes, sir!” They obediently began picking out what they thought could be sold off for good prices.

After a few minutes, Jean found a certain book on one of the shelves. “Um, Your Highness, what do you think of this?”

“Huh? It’s just a stupid, ugly book. Why’re you... No, hold on...this is...” Tabura trailed off as he stroked the front cover. The farther down his fingers went, the more his face twisted into a mad smirk. “So *this* is where father gained his power from. Ha ha ha... MUA HA HA! With this in hand, even I—”

“Nuh-uh, that’s not for you,” said a voice from behind him, giving him a jump

scare. “Hi! Good evening.”

“Wh-Who are you?! Jean! Alba!” The prince whirled around and found a black-hooded form leaning against the doorway. He couldn’t see their face and therefore had no idea who it was, but now that they’d seen him in his father’s quarters, they needed to die. So he called for his subordinates...then shivered in terror.

“Ah, sorry. They both looked so open to being attacked that I couldn’t help myself.”

Red blood was spreading like a river across the carpet. The owners of that blood had been disassembled into numerous parts, still wearing the same expressions they’d had while speaking with Tabura. The lack of fear or pain on their faces seemed to suggest they had both been wholly unaware of their demise.

But Tabura currently had bigger things to worry about. A far greater threat than anything he had ever faced was slowly but steadily approaching him.

“Aha ha ha, I’m sorry for the sudden intrusion. But still, I admit I’m a bit hurt. Did you really forget my face?”

“I...can’t see your face.”

“Oh, right. My hood’s in the way.”

Black Hood showed Tabura their face for a split second. However, recognition did not dawn in his eyes.

“So, you really don’t remember. That’s too bad. I guess maybe there’s no helping it—it *was* a few years ago. I was still just a child back when you killed me.”

“What ar—”

Tabura’s words cut off because he physically could not continue speaking anymore. His view rotated once, twice, then several times more until he could no longer tell up from down. But the last thing he saw, he saw very clearly: it was the sight of his own headless body crashing to the floor.

“I was your slave once, Prince Tabura. Then I died before these abilities

blossomed within me. I didn't know who my parents were, and every day was hell back then. It was dirty, it was smelly, and it was painful. Now, though, I'm actually thankful to you. After all, here I am, resurrected and better than ever. Oh, my Lady! Or so the others might say—that's not quite my character, ha ha. But all that being said..." Black Hood stepped onto Tabura's face. "At least have the decency to remember the women you raped, you pig."

The head was kicked forcefully, and it violently burst apart upon colliding with the far wall, reduced to nothing more than a splatter. No one could have guessed it had once been Prince Tabura.

"Well then, time to get what I came for. Phew, I was *this* close to being scolded by Arbitrator," Black Hood murmured as she picked up the book from the floor and cheerfully stuffed it down the front of her clothes. "Still, what a surprise it was having the Demon Lord taken down so quickly. This one was actually supposed to be the strongest in history, but oh well. Mission accomplished for Assassin of the Eighth Seat. Time to go home!"

In the blink of an eye, Black Hood disappeared without a sound. The only things remaining in the king's private quarters were corpses.

◇ ◇ ◇

Having finished its duties, the wall of raging wind, Tempest Barrier, dissipated as the icy tendrils of Celsius Briar, which had covered the entire surface of the castle, also vanished in a glow of blue light.

We had won the fight. Thanks to Melfina's full-powered Luminary Burst, Demon Lord Zel had been so thoroughly obliterated that not a single particle of him remained. Everyone who had been brainwashed by Zel had regained control of their minds and, several hours after our victory, our allies had finished suppressing the remainder of the Trycenian forces in the castle.

There was a lot of confusion all around, but Azgrad and Dan did their best to bring everyone up to speed. Personally, I thought it was less their words and more the intense pressure they were emitting that cowed everyone into acceptance. The two were probably more focused on preventing Trycen's image from going even further down the drain, but to the locals, it was like getting kicked while they were down.

Still, both the Steel Knight Order and the Dragon Knight Order were cooperating, and they had the aid of the forces from other countries that had come through the teleportation gate. I didn't expect it to take long for some semblance of order to be restored.

It was hard to tell what would become of Trycen now. It was a Demon Lord that had caused the conflict, and the people of his nation had simply been unwittingly controlled. In a way, they were victims themselves. Now that their king was dead, the question of who would take responsibility arose.

I had faith that things would fall into place somehow with Colette, the Beast King, and Queen Tsubaki putting their heads together. In any case, it wasn't a matter for me, a mere adventurer, to bother with. No, let me rephrase that: I was in no state to get involved with *anything* at the moment.

"YEEEAAAHHHHHHH!"

Cheers from the united army went up in various places throughout the castle again and again. Normally, I would have preferred to be in their midst, celebrating a good fight and sharing the joy all around. However, what I was actually doing was kneeling on the ground in the seiza pose. Allow me to repeat: I was kneeling in the seiza pose.

To make matters worse, this was smack-dab in the middle of a garden very close to the gate of the palace proper. Although I wasn't in as much pain as I normally would be—the grass was really soft and well-kept—I was drawing a lot of attention. People rushing about busily gave me a conspicuously wide berth as they went about their business, doing whatever needed to be done after the storming of a castle.

I wonder what they're thinking, looking at me on my knees. Nothing bad, I hope. I can imagine some of them going, "What's he doing during such a serious time?" But really, stop shooting looks my way as you go by!

I saw a man from the Holy Order of Knights stop a passing Dragon Knight Order member while looking at me. I instinctively directed my ears their way.

"Uh, those people have been in there a while now, right? What're they doing?"

“Oh, did you just arrive? That’s the Rank S adventurer who killed the Demon Lord, Kelvin-san, and his party members.”

“What?! I’d imagined someone more...muscular. You sure?”

“As you can see, he looks like an affable young man. But I’ve heard he changes completely while in battle. I didn’t see it myself, but my commander fought him, and he said he got done in before he could even lift a finger. And that’s coming from a man who can fight Rank S monsters when mounted on his dragon, all right? Rank S adventurers are just cut from a different cloth from the rest of us.”

“That Rank S adventurer is currently sitting seiza-style and prostrating himself in front of a smoking hot redheaded beauty with an unbelievably cute blue-haired girl clinging to him. What kind of situation is this?”

“Well, that redheaded beauty is his lover, and—”

“Unforgivable.”

“What? Oh, I...guess so?” The holy knight’s retort came so fast that the dragon knight faltered slightly.

Please stop directing killing intent at me.

“Uh, do you have a grudge against him or something?”

“Well, if you can keep this between us... There are absolutely absurd rumors going around that Colette-sama, the Oracle we holy knights look up to and revere, the paragon of both intelligence and beauty adored by all Deramisians, fell in love.”

“That’s news to me. What of it?”

“The man she supposedly fell for...is him. This Rank S adventurer named Kelvin.”

“The Oracle loves Kelvin-san? Nah, man, there’s no way. You can’t trust rumors, you know.”

“Yeeeaaaah. Mm. Yep, you’re probably right! Rumors are just rumors! Man, if anything happened to Colette-sama, the believers of Rinne just might cause a riot. There are quite a few rather unsavory fellows who joined our faith not out

of love for the goddess Melfina but for Colette-sama."

"Ha ha, like you, for example?"

"That's ri— Dude, what are you making me say?!"

The two men exchanged mock blows and then threw their arms around each other's shoulders in an expression of blossoming friendship.

I'm glad something's going well for someone. But I shudder to imagine what would happen if the Deramisians learned about Colette's religious fanatic side. I bet a large percentage of the higher-ups in the country would brand me an enemy. To which I say, if you're over Level 50, just name the time and place, and I'll be there!

"Sorry, man, I kinda interrupted you."

"Hey, no biggie. So, where was I again? Oh, right, I was explaining why Kelvin-san is in this situation. Uh, so he apparently proposed to that blue-haired girl in the middle of their fight against the Demon Lord, right in front of his lover's eyes."

"Hold on...come again?"

"That's exactly how I reacted. But it's the truth, apparently. He shouted his proposal so loudly that a guy in my order who happened to be nearby heard it in person. The story is spreading like wildfire right now. I myself heard it from one of my friends."

Wait, what?

"Well, tell me!"

"Ahem. 'A world threatened by a Demon Lord does not suit you. That is why I will kill him. When the world is at peace again, will you walk the path of life with me?' *Gasp.* 'Oh, nothing would make me happier. I do love you tooooo!'"

"Damn, I'm getting embarrassed just hearing it."

Now hold on a goddamn minute, I never said any of that! It was a more traditional Japanese proposal! Everything aside from that last line is just dramatization! Thinking about it now, the area where we were fighting was surrounded by Tempest Barrier—there's no way anyone *heard us clearly! Did*

the guy who was close by fill in the blanks with his imagination?!

"I know how you feel. Even I got itchy all over when I first heard it. Then he actually defeated the Demon Lord and made good on his promise. But as I said...well, his red-haired lover was there too."

"I see. Now I get what's happening. In other words..."

"Yep, his life is still in danger. Pft."

I can hear you over there!

"Kelvin, are you listening to me?!"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm listening. Of course I'm listening."

Naturally, I had also been hanging on to every single word coming out of Sera's mouth. This was exactly the situation Parallel Processing was meant for. Yep.

"So, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Even I'm confused right now!"

"Oh, honeyyyy!"

Melfina had attached herself to my arm, obstinately refusing to let go. She was repeatedly rubbing her cheeks against me, paying zero attention to the stares we were drawing. The only other times I ever saw her with such a blissful expression on her face were when she was eating or sleeping.

Uh, wait... So I do see it pretty often, actually.

Sera was looking down at me, her legs spread and arms crossed menacingly. Although she was emitting an incredible pressure, the fact that her eyes weren't red meant that she wasn't truly angry.

I think. I...hope?

"Why did you propose to Mel in the middle of the battle?! Couldn't you have done it in a safer place? You did it for me in bed! Something like that would've been fine! What would you have done if she'd been distracted and gotten hurt?!"

Wait, that's *what you're angry about?*

“Um...you aren’t mad that I proposed to Mel?”

“Why would I be? I said it before, didn’t I? It’s fine as long as there’s real love involved. The fact that Mel loves you is no secret; not with how she acts all the time.”

“You do have a point.” *After all, no girl would repeatedly crawl into the bed of a guy she doesn’t like.*

“That’s right, Sera! Good job seeing through the hidden intentions behind my actions!”

What made you think now is a good time to play mysterious, you hopeless goddess?!

“Since Efil and Sera had progressed further than me in their relationships with you, I was holding myself back. But now that I’ve been proposed to, I consider all of us to be on an equal playing field. I won’t hold back anymore, so brace yourself, honey!”

“Of course I’m... But...” *What is this terrible fever I’ve been feeling since we fought the Demon Lord? Am I coming down with something?*

“KELVIN?!”

“Honey—”

Sera and Melfina’s voices seemed to fade into the distance.

This is why I said I was in no state to get involved with anyone at the moment...

I faintly registered someone catching my collapsing body before I lost consciousness entirely.

Afterword Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 5: The Demon Lord Rises*. This time, I don't have that many pages to spare for the Afterword, so I'll be forgoing the self-introduction.

The three months since the previous volume passed in the blink of an eye. Thanks to your support, this volume successfully made it to print. The story goes up to the very end of *Arc 5: Demon Lord* from the web novel. From this point on, the volumes are getting thicker than before. Since there aren't really any other good places to cut them off at, I had to ask my editor to go out of his way to get the page count greenlit. Well, hey, that means more for you to read, right?

In this volume, I seriously packed things as tightly as I could. Afterwards, I went, "Arg, I really wanted to include this character's Status too!" and see-sawed back and forth many times. I only barely managed to reduce it to the current number of pages after reviewing it many times. Despite all my efforts, there still wasn't enough space for a side story at the end. I'm very sorry to those of you who were looking forward to it, but I'm afraid there isn't one this time. If I can convince you not to throw stones at me, I'll write twice as many next time... Or at least, I swear my desire to do so is sincere!

And that's why I'll have to end the Afterword here. All because of how limited the page count is. What? I didn't arrange the page count just because I thought writing the Afterword would be a pain! There's no truth to that claim. None whatsoever. Gosh, darn, it's such a pity. There was so much more that I wanted to write. Uh...how's the space? It's good? All ri—*cough cough*. Let's wrap this up!

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN/
■ SUMMONER
■ LEVEL: 120
■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER
■ HP: 1,820/1,820
MP: 9,000/9,000 (+6,000)
SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100
SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 300
SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000
SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY): MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -320
SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -500
SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -500
SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP-500

■ STRENGTH: 589 (+160)
■ ENDURANCE: 543 (+160)
■ AGILITY: 1,140
■ MAGIC: 1,664 (+160)
■ LUCK: 1,369



■ EQUIPMENT
BLACK DISASTER (RANK S)
STRENGTHENED MITHRIL DAGGER (RANK B)
SKILL EATER (RANK S)
ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S)
BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)
GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS
SWORD MASTERY (RANK B)
SUMMONING (RANK S)
GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)
ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)
PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)
ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)
SPIRIT (RANK S)
IRON WALL (RANK B)
DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS
SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)
[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]
WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK B)
DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK B)
SMITHING (RANK S)
HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK B)
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
EXPERIENCE SHARING

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION
SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)
SKILL EATER (LEFT)/HEARTY EATING (UNIQUE SKILL)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ EFIL

- 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HALF-ELF / BATTLE MAID
- LEVEL: 119
- TITLE: BOMBING PRINCESS
- HP: 982/982
- MP: 1,861/1,861



- STRENGTH: 480
- ENDURANCE: 474
- AGILITY: 1,668 (+640)
- MAGIC: 1,159 (+160)
- LUCK: 240

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)
MERCILESS (RANK S)
BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)
BATTLE MAID HEADDRESS V (RANK S)
MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK B)
SLAVE COLLAR (RANK D)
GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
FLAME DRAGON LEATHER BOOTS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

ARCHERY (RANK S)
RED MAGIC (RANK S)
FARSIGHT (RANK A)
COVERT ACTION (RANK A)
SERVICE (RANK S)
COOKING (RANK S)
SEWING (RANK S)
CLEANING (RANK A)
ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ CLOTHO

■ 0 Y/O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 119

■ TITLE: EVERLASTING DARKNESS

■ HP: 2,230 / 2,230 (+100)

■ MP: 1,817 / 1,817 (+100)



■ STRENGTH: 1,413 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,367 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1,345 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1,176 (+100)

■ LUCK: 1,299 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY	(UNIQUE SKILL)
METALICIZE	(RANK S)
ABSORPTION	(RANK A)
DIVISION	(RANK A)
DISMANTLE	(RANK S)
STORAGE	(RANK S)
BLUNT DAMAGE INVULNERABILITY	

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY	(RANK S)
CONCEALMENT	(RANK S)

GERARD

- 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT
- LEVEL: 121
- TITLE: SWORD GURU
- HP: 8,050/8,050 (+5,300) (+100)
- MP: 493/493 (+100)

- STRENGTH: 1,414 (+320) (+100)
- ENDURANCE: 1,501 (+320) (+100)
- AGILITY: 456 (+100)
- MAGIC: 347 (+100)
- LUCK: 416 (+100)

- EQUIPMENT
  - DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF (RANK S)
  - DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)
  - CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)
  - GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

- SKILLS
  - LOYALTY (UNIQUE SKILL)
  - SELF MODIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)
  - SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
  - DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)
  - MIND'S EYE (RANK S)
  - ARMORED SKIN (RANK A)
  - RIDING (RANK B)
  - ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)
  - TEACHING (RANK A)
  - AUTO HEALING (RANK A)
  - FORTITUDE (RANK S)
  - HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)
  - IRON WALL (RANK A)
  - MATERIALIZATION
  - DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE
  - SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE
- PASSIVE EFFECTS
  - SELF MODIFICATION/DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF+
  - SELF MODIFICATION/DREADNOUGHT+
  - SELF MODIFICATION/CRIMSON MANTLE+
  - SELF MODIFICATION/GODDESS'S RING+
  - SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
  - CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERA

- 21 Y/O / FEMALE / DEMON BLOOD LORD / CURSED PUGILIST
- LEVEL: 120
- TITLE: EMPRESS
- HP: 3,085/3,085 (+100)
- MP: 3,250/3,250 (+100)

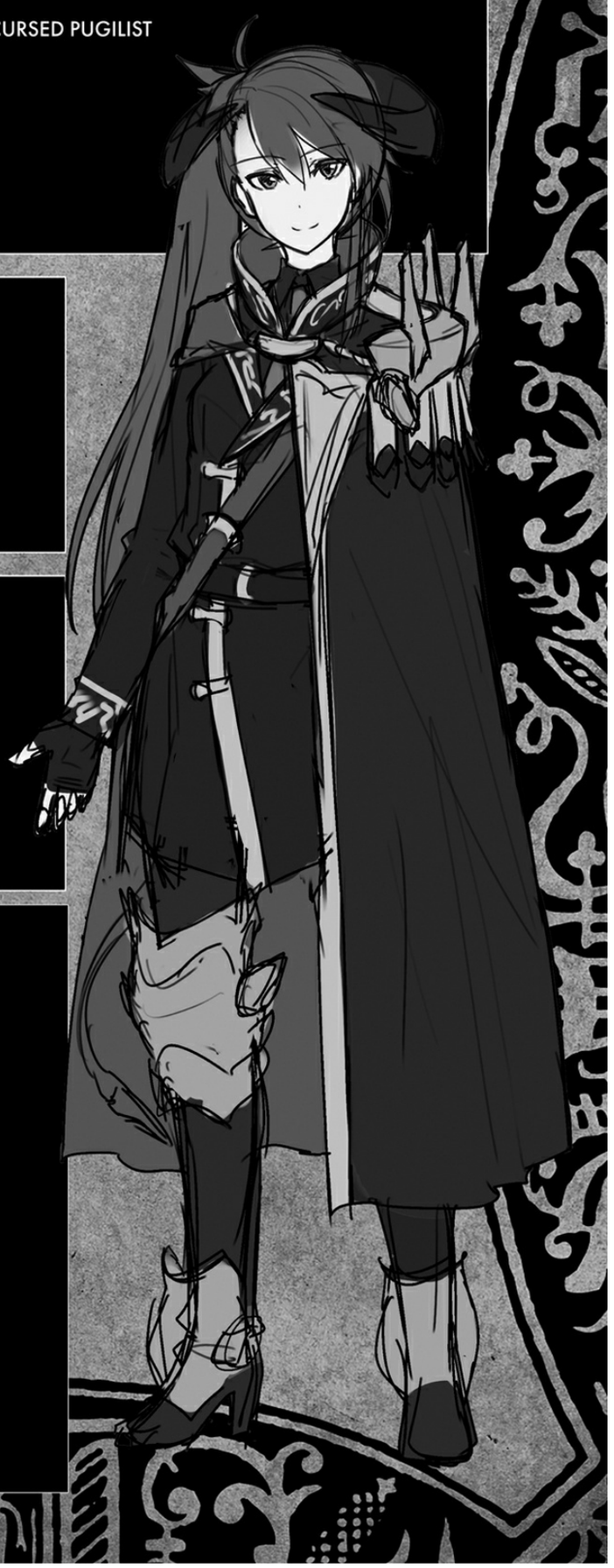
- STRENGTH: 1,467 (+100)
- ENDURANCE: 1,202 (+100)
- AGILITY: 1,386 (+100)
- MAGIC: 1,589 (+100)
- LUCK: 2,221 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

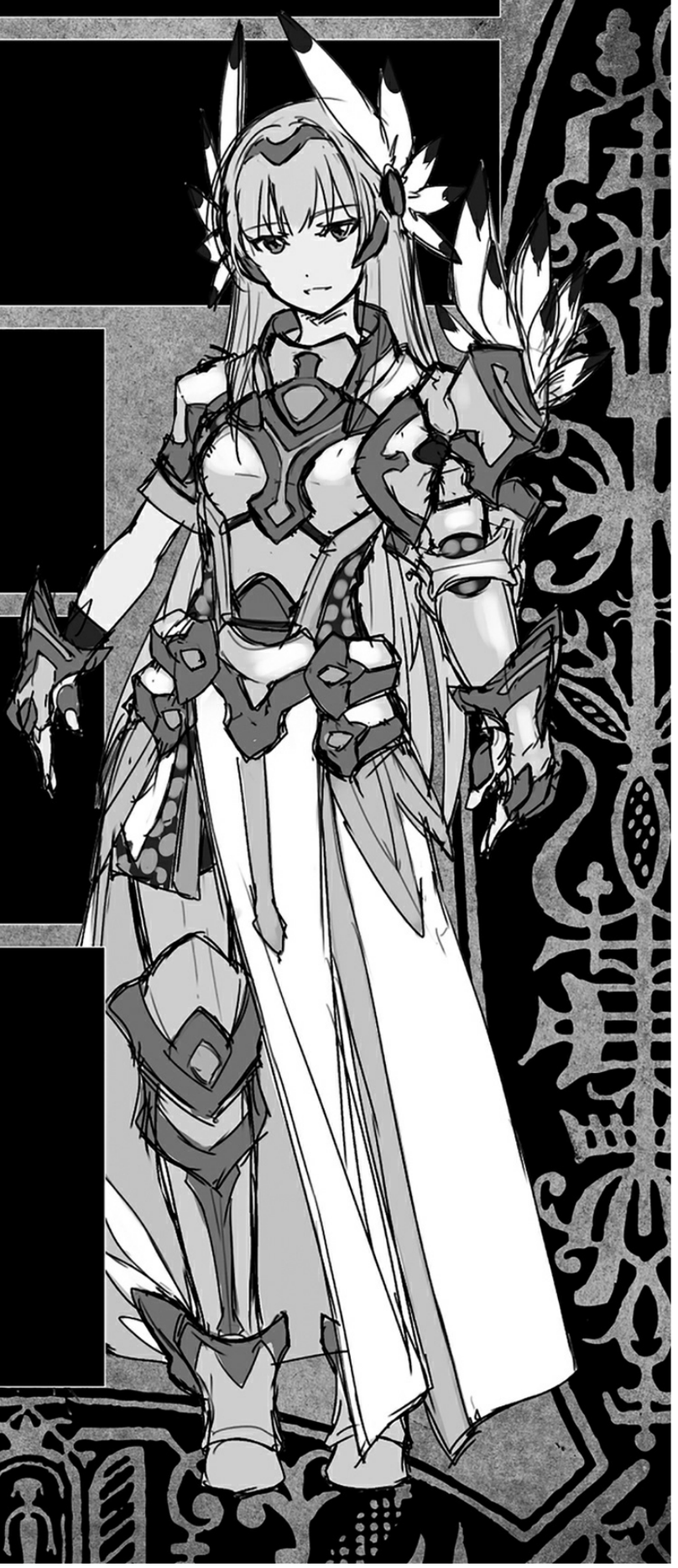
ARONDIGHT (RANK S)
QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)
CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)
GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
STRENGTHENED MITHRIL GREAVES (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)
BLOODBENDING (UNIQUE SKILL)
COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)
BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK A)
PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)
DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)
MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)
SERVICE (RANK D)
DANCING (RANK A)
MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK A)
FISHING (RANK A)
AUTO HEALING (RANK S)
■ SUPER LUCK (RANK S)
PASSIVE EFFECTS
BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD
SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY)



- 17 Y/O / FEMALE / ANGEL / VALKYRIE
- LEVEL: 120
- TITLE: SMILE
- HP: 1,843~2,303 (+1,476~1,936)
- MP:1,843~2,303 (+1,476~1,936)

- STRENGTH: 1,843~2,303 (+1,723~2,183)
- ENDURANCE: 1,843~2,303 (+1,723~2,183)
- AGILITY: 1,843~2,303 (+1,723~2,183)
- MAGIC: 1,843~2,303 (+1,723~2,183)
- LUCK: 1,843~2,303 (+1,723~2,183)

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY SPEAR LUMINARY (RANK S)
VALKYRIE MAIL (RANK S)
VALKYRIE HELM (RANK S)
GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
ETHER GREAVES (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL)
SYMPATHETIC RESONANCE (UNIQUE SKILL)
SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)
MIND'S EYE (RANK S)
BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)
WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK S)
MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)
ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK S)
ALCHEMY (RANK S)
HEARTY EATING (RANK S)
GUSTATION (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ RION

■ 14 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT

■ LEVEL: 114

■ TITLE: BLACK METEOR

■ HP:1,360/ 1,360

■ MP: 1,564/ 1,564

■ STRENGTH: 1,036

■ ENDURANCE: 669 (+320)

■ AGILITY: 1,499

■ MAGIC: 1,427 (+320)

■ LUCK: 770

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD CALADBOLG (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK A)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) X 2

BLACK RECESS (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

RESIDUAL SLICE (UNIQUE SKILL)
SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
DUAL WIELD (RANK S)
ACROBATICS (RANK S)
COVERT ACTION (RANK S)
SKY WALK (RANK S)
RED MAGIC (RANK S)
DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)
MIND'S EYE (RANK A)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)
COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)
VIGOR (RANK S)
IRON WALL (RANK A)
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK A)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



ALEX

- 3 Y/O / MALE / HRÓÐVITNIR
- LEVEL: 114
- TITLE: HEAT HAZE
- HP:2,077/2,077 (+100)
- MP: 777/777 (+100)

- STRENGTH: 1,347 (+320) (+100)
- ENDURANCE: 855 (+100)
- AGILITY: 1,043 (+100)
- MAGIC: 622 (+100)
- LUCK: 563 (+100)

- EQUIPMENT

  LETHAL OPIATE SWORD (RANK S)
  GODDESS'S COLLAR (RANK S)

- SKILLS

  SHADOW TRAVEL (UNIQUE SKILL)
  CREEPING DARKNESS (UNIQUE SKILL)
  SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
  ACROBATICS (RANK S)
  OLFACTION (RANK S)
  COVERT ACTION (RANK A)
  CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK B)
  HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

- PASSIVE EFFECTS

  SUMMONING/ MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
  CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ DAHAK

■ 162 Y/O / MALE / BLACK DRAGON (ANCIENT) / FARMER
■ LEVEL: 113
■ TITLE: GIANT FARMER
■ HP: 2,406/2,406 (+100)
■ MP: 605/605 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,170 (+100)
■ ENDURANCE: 911 (+100)
■ AGILITY: 578 (+100)
■ MAGIC: 927 (+100)
■ LUCK: 337 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (HUMAN FORM)
IRON HOE (RANK E)
WORK CLOTHES (RANK E)
WORK BOOTS (RANK E)
TOWEL (RANK F)
■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)
DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS
GEMMATION (UNIQUE SKILL)
BLACK SOIL SCALES (UNIQUE SKILL)
GREEN MAGIC (RANK A)
BLACK MAGIC (RANK F)
BREATH (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK A)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK C)
AGRICULTURE (RANK S)
HORTICULTURE (RANK S)
CONSTRUCTION (RANK A)
CONVERSATION (RANK D)
■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
BLESSING OF THE DARKNESS DRAGON KING
SUMMONING/ MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ BOGA

■ 103 Y/O / MALE / ROCK DRAGON (ANCIENT)
■ LEVEL: 110
■ TITLE: SWORD GURU'S FAVORITE DRAGON
■ HP: 4,095/4,095 (+1,365) (+100)
■ MP: 228/228 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,449 (+160) (+100)
■ ENDURANCE: 1,472 (+160) (+100)
■ AGILITY: 764 (+100)
■ MAGIC: 212(+100)
■ LUCK: 398 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)
DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS
BREATH (RANK D)
ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)
FLIGHT (RANK D)
BURROWING (RANK A)
THUNDEROUS VOICE (RANK C)
FORTITUDE (RANK B)
HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK B)
IRON WALL (RANK B)
■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MDOFARAK

■ 63 Y/O / FEMALE / THREE-HEADED DRAGON (ANCIENT)
■ LEVEL: 107
■ TITLE: SWEET-TOOTHED SNIPER
■ HP: 1,873/1,873 (+100)
■ MP: 1,510/1,510 (+100)

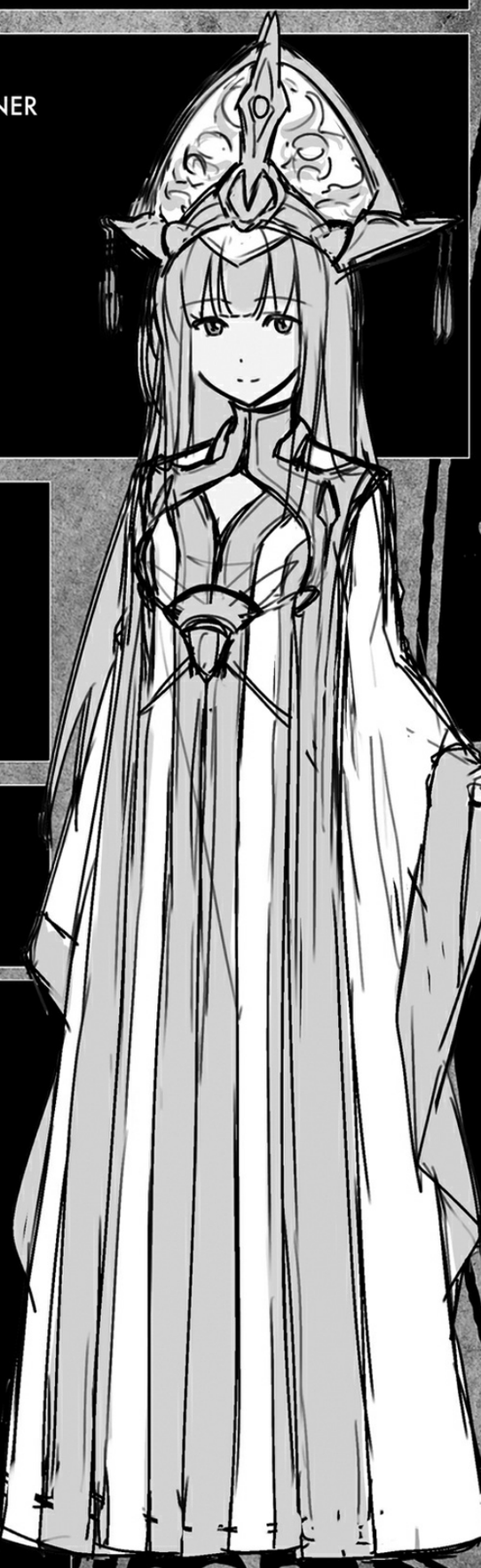
■ STRENGTH: 697 (+100)
■ ENDURANCE: 664 (+100)
■ AGILITY: 584 (+100)
■ MAGIC: 819 (+100)
■ LUCK: 806 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)
DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS
MULTI-ELEMENTAL CONSTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL
BREATH (RANK S)
FARSIGHT (RANK B)
FLIGHT (RANK A)
CONCENTRATION (RANK A)
MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK A)
MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK A)
■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ COLETTE DERAMILIUS



■ 17 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SUMMONER
■ LEVEL: 70
■ TITLE: ORACLE OF DERAMIS
■ HP: 312/312
■ MP: 1,390/1,390

■ STRENGTH: 1,036
■ ENDURANCE: 669 (+320)
■ AGILITY: 1,499
■ MAGIC: 1,427 (+320)
■ LUCK: 770

■ EQUIPMENT
SAINTESS'S ROBE (RANK A)
SAINTESS'S MITER (RANK A)
SAINTESS'S SHOES (RANK A)
??'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS
ORACLE SECRET ARTS (UNIQUE SKILL)
SUMMONING (RANK C) [AVAILABLE SLOTS: 1]
WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
MAGIC DETECTION (RANK B)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)
STRATEGIZE (RANK C)
MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK B)
PROPHESIZE (RANK A)
TAMING (RANK C)
COMPANIONSHIP (RANK C)
NEGOTIATION (RANK C)
CONVERSATION (RANK C)
OLFACTION (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS
BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION
CONCEALMENT (RANK B)

■ SHUTOLA TRYCEN

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / PRINCESS

■ LEVEL: 14

■ TITLE: AMNESTIC SAGE

■ HP: 64/64

■ MP: 90/90

■ STRENGTH: 27

■ ENDURANCE: 30

■ AGILITY: 67

■ MAGIC: 94

■ LUCK: 81

■ EQUIPMENT

TEDDY BEAR (RANK B)

DESIGNER DRESS (RANK A)

HIGH-CLASS SHOES (RANK C)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

PERFECT MEMORY (UNIQUE SKILL)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK D)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK D)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK A)



AZGRAD TRYCEN

- 28 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN / DRAGON KNIGHT
- LEVEL: 94
- TITLE: GENERAL OF THE DRAGON KNIGHT ORDER
- HP: 1,884/1,884
- MP: 560/560

- STRENGTH: 915 (+80)
- ENDURANCE: 899 (+80)
- AGILITY: 776
- MAGIC: 240
- LUCK: 437

- EQUIPMENT
  - FLAME LANCE DRAGOON (RANK S)
  - BLACK DRAGON RIDER'S ARMOR (RANK A)
  - BLACK DRAGON RIDER'S GAUNTLETS (RANK A)
  - BLACK DRAGON RIDER'S GREAVES (RANK A)
  - SARAFIA'S AMULET (RANK S)

- SKILLS
  - DRAGON BOND (UNIQUE SKILL)
  - SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)
  - FLIGHT (RANK A)
  - DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)
  - RIDING (RANK S)
  - ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)
  - MILITARY TACTIC (RANK C)
  - TEACHING (RANK C)
  - COMPANIONSHIP (RANK B)
  - AUTO HEALING (RANK B)
  - HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK C)
  - IRON WALL (RANK C)
- PASSIVE EFFECTS
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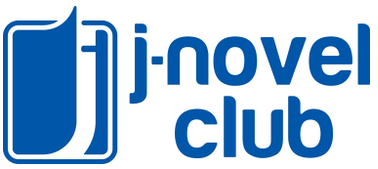
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Black Summoner: Volume 5

by Doufu Mayoi

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Edited by Tess Nanavati

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THE DEMON LORD RISES
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