

13

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BLACK SUMMONER

BLESSINGS OF THE DRAGON KINGS


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Black Summoner: Volume 13 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: Towards the Final Battle

Efil's Room:

A familiar ceiling awaited me when I woke up. It was the ceiling in Efil's room, and the fact that I was lying down in bed meant that after everything, I'd slept like the dead. Still, my head felt strangely clear for having just woken up. That was why I clearly remembered what had happened in my dream. I was worried that my memories of the dream would be hazy when I awoke, but that proved needless.

"That parting was just awful, though. She dug up some old wounds. Actually, it was like she was trying to finish me off."

I won't say what she did, but it was supposed to be a secret between Efil and me. It was something a certain Sword Guru exaggerated on a whim, using our memories—

"Good morning, Master. I see you're awake." Efil interrupted my thoughts. When I didn't respond, she tilted her head in confusion and continued, "Is something the matter?"

Efil, you suddenly appearing like that is bad for my heart. I'd been so surprised by her that I hadn't been able to speak. *Even the Grim Reaper will be surprised if you suddenly show yourself just as he's thinking about you.*

"No, it's nothing. More importantly, Efil, I see you've already changed into your maid clothes. Are you feeling good enough to work already?"

"I am. After sleeping with you, Master, I've completely recovered. This must all be thanks to you."

"I don't have an ability like Rion's, you know?"

"You do. At the very least, you do to me."

Don't say that with such a beautiful look on your face; you'll make me cry! Okay, I'm not going to care about what that Sword Guru did anymore. Who cares about being called War Poet or whatever!

“However, I’m still a little worried. You were sleeping very well, but you wouldn’t wake up for so long. It seems you were very tired.”

“Did I really sleep for that long? Uhh...what time is it?”

“It’s almost ten.”

Whoa. I’d thought that the sun was strangely high. It turned out that I’d slept in for quite a while. *No, wait, remember...I woke up when DarkMel woke up. Meaning that DarkMel is also just waking up now.* It seemed that even steeped in evil, DarkMel still retained some Mel-like traits. *Oho, looks like I’ve already found one of the big bad’s weaknesses. DarkMel is bad with mornings.*

“Do you feel anything wrong physically?”

“Mmnn...no, I’m good.” I said, swinging my arms around to show how healthy I felt. I was feeling totally refreshed, probably because I’d slept for so long.

“Well then, Master, allow me to help you change.”

Efil happily hummed a song as she brought over a neatly folded set of clothes.

Ahh, yeah...looks like she’s really happy to be able to take care of me for the first time in a while.

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The dining hall at Kelvin’s mansion:

“So that’s what happened. I’m planning to strengthen the party for now,” I said.

“No, wait a second. Just wait, my king. What you said was so out of left field that this old mind can’t keep up...”

“Uhhhhhhh...”

“Wait right there, Kelvin! I’ll sort everything out!”

“Yeah, this is all news to me.”

I had called a meeting of all my Followers over the Network and shared the contents of my dream. I hid nothing, telling them everything about my former lives and the events leading up to Melfina creating DarkMel. I couldn’t keep any secrets when such a big battle was on the horizon. Luckily, I trusted everyone

present, so I wasn't worried in the slightest.

"Wow, Elearis sure was a klutz when it came to that," Serge commented. "Rather, she's downright heinous?"

I heaved a sigh in exasperation. "Hey, Serge...why are you here?"

I'd only just noticed, but Serge was sitting on the windowsill of one of the windows in the dining hall. Her unique skill was probably at work, since Ange had also just noticed her presence, and her head whipped around in response.

Serge was totally eavesdropping from outside, dammit.

"Aww, don't be so mad. It's not like you're losing anything. You guys need fighting strength, don't you? I'll help."

"Man, you sure are a free spirit. What Ange said doesn't do you justice..."

"Hah! Hah! Hah! You're one to talk, Kelvin-kun!"

Serge went ahead and took a seat in the dining hall, entering our circle. *She probably would have done so whether we found her or not...*

Ellie and the other servants were all confused by this brazen act. I quickly gave my permission, saying she was all right and that I was welcoming her as a guest.

"Well, to be honest, I'd love it if you were to become an ally, Serge. But I'll correct you on one point: when Mel killed me, it wasn't Elearis who made her do it but a system of this world. Elearis simply used her power as a Goddess in accordance with that system. In essence, Elearis wasn't at fault, the one who first created this world and its systems was."

"Hrmm...you sure like to get in the weeds about this stuff...but would reasoning like that really satisfy the black version of Melfina?"

"Satisfied or not, that's what Mel said, and she's sharing memories with her black counterpart. DarkMel is simply moving out of spite and wickedness."

In fact, although DarkMel had held a grudge against Elearis for decades and acted with that as her motivation, it had eventually run its course, after which she had started to concentrate on not just bringing down Elearis, but altering the world to become a paradise for me. Her true wish was not destruction, but radical change.

“You talked about strengthening us, dearest brother, but what does that entail exactly? Even if we were to try to raise our levels, we’re at a high enough stage that it wouldn’t work against any old enemy.”

Shutola (currently in child form while in the mansion, at the request of Gerard) was the first to realize what I was getting at, so she asked for details. Her question was a good one—having already fought demons, Demon Lords, dragons, and apostles, we couldn’t expect much growth without serious effort. The kind that would entail going after the remaining Dragon Kings or some other enemy that was in the same class as my father-in-law, Gustav. That being said, levels were not the only way to make us stronger.

“We’ll simply continue hunting the angel-type monsters that have been scattered all over. It’s still not quite enough, but they’re stronger than the average monster, at least. However, rather than trying to gain levels, this is more to ensure the safety of each country and to make sure our skills don’t dull. I have other plans for strengthening us.”

“Meaning?”

“For example, gaining blessings from the Dragon Kings.”

“The Dragon Kings?” everyone questioned in unison, directing their gazes to the dragons who were with us in human form: Dahak, Yellow Mdo, and Boga. They seemed surprised by the sudden attention, as the two who were eating vegetable sticks and teacakes, respectively, seemed agitated, while Boga was simply shocked.

“Uhh...us?” Dahak spoke up.

“That’s right, you guys. Well, to be specific I’m also including the Wind and Lightning Dragon Kings, who we haven’t met yet, but let’s leave them aside for now. As you can probably tell from Efil’s flames, since she has the Blessing of the Flame Dragon King, a blessing makes a large difference in your resistance to a certain element as well as the power of your attacks while using it. This has nothing to do with levels and equates directly with combat strength. Of course, that’s only if Dahak and Mdo are fine with it. I know that Dragon Kings are only allowed to give their blessing once in their life, so I don’t plan to force your hand. Still, if you’re fine with it, then I would like to add the strength of Dahak’s

Earth and Mdo’s Light to my arsenal. So I’d like you two to think well—”



“Heheh, that’s mighty cold of you, bro!” Dahak interrupted. “We’re of one body and mind, aren’t we? There’s no need to hold back! I wouldn’t forget the oath of brotherhood we took back then when we were cutting weeds!”

“I will act for enough of sister Efil’s handmade sweets to fill my stomach. Of course, I mean for all three of me.”

Uhhh...I don’t remember taking any oaths over cutting weeds. Well, let’s just let that be, I guess. Meanwhile, Mdo’s always herself, immediately trying to sate her greed. That’s just like her. Still, I’m just happy that she didn’t hesitate to agree.

“Uh...umm...what about my blessing?”

“Your blessing is fire. The only ones in our party who use red magic are Efil and Rion, and Efil already has a blessing from your predecessor, while Rion doesn’t use magic all that much. So, there’s someone I’d like you to meet, Boga.”

“Me?”

Gerard was repeatedly pointing at himself throughout this exchange, but I emphatically ignored him.

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Toraj, a certain remote area:

“So that’s that. Will you please be Ema’s partner in this, Boga?”

“Oh...okay!”

“No, uh-uh, I don’t get a single thing! What do you mean?!”

Ema’s cry echoed so loudly that I had to cover my ears. Boga and I had visited Toraj in order to meet her. I didn’t know why, but she was staying there with Sylvia.

Heh heh, damn, Ange’s info-gathering abilities are seriously scary.

“It’s fine; don’t worry. We can use this place. I already cleared it with Tsubaki-sama. Look, I even got her autograph here.”

The nice piece of Japanese paper that I had received from Tsubaki stated that

we were allowed any and all sorts of battles and didn't have to worry about collateral damage as long as we were doing it in a remote or uninhabited area.

It's all thanks to the mountain of gifts I recently presented to her. She's a gourmand, after all, so in the end, it was easy as pie to get her to write up something like this!

"That's not it! Why do I have to fight *him*?!"

"Oh...I didn't think you'd be that mad about it. Uhh...sorry."

Boga seemed on the verge of tears. "Sorry, this person is scary..."

That's strange. I get the feeling she's acting quite a bit different from the Ema I know. I always knew she was the type to be really scary when she's angry, but it looks like she isn't even trying to hide it anymore. Weren't you supposed to be the calm one? The straight-man to put a stop to Nagua's antics?

"You can't just get angry without hearing the reason for it. Your first step should be to patiently learn about your present circumstances."

"Sylvia! Uhh...well, fine. I apologize for suddenly shouting. So, what's with all this? I require an explanation."

Uh, yeah...sorry for putting it weirdly too. I'm reflecting on it. Still, Sylvia was right, even if it was by accident. If she wasn't here, then Ema would have left already, no questions asked.

"In order to prepare for the battle that's coming, I want to strengthen our forces as much as possible, Ema. Didn't you feel like you were a bit weak during that last battle? I heard about it from Rion."

"Grk! You pulled information out of Rion-san. Of all the cowardly..." Ema forced herself to calm down, but she still stuttered a little as she continued. "You're right, I felt like I wasn't powerful enough, but that's got nothing to do with this. In the first place, who said we'd participate in whatever fight is coming up next?"

"Huh? Really? I know I heard Sylvia say it."

That seemed to shock Ema. "What?"

"Mm, I did say that. You aren't coming, Ema? If the world is in danger, mom is

in danger too.”

That seemed to hit Ema where it hurt. It took a moment for her to force out, “I think it’s unfair for you to use Sylvia like that.”

She still seemed reluctant, staring at me reproachfully, but she acquiesced in the end.

I never planned to do that; don’t blame me. I totally just assumed both of you would be in. But I should hurry up and start explaining things before Ema changes her mind. Boga’s already scared out of his wits—look at how he’s trying to hide his gigantic form behind me.

“Well, now that we’ve confirmed that you’re participating, I’ll give you a proper explanation. This is also something I heard from Rion, but you use the fire element in battle, right? Along with your greatsword.”

“Don’t talk about Solforme like it’s just an aside—it’s a true Rank S weapon despite how it looks.”

Ema produced her greatsword out of thin air as she spoke. It wasn’t wreathed in flames at the moment, but it was still very imposing. In terms of pure size, it rivaled Gerard’s weapon.

“Sorry, I misspoke again.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m partially at fault too. I’ve been trying to fix this personality of mine, so I’ve been making an effort to act calm most of the time, but I guess I still have a ways to go...”

“Mm, Ema’s mellowed out a lot. She used to be rowdier than Naguafgwhh...”

“That’s a maiden’s secret!” Ema pounced on Sylvia with incredible force to cover her mouth.

Yeah, I get it. I can read the room. I should just pretend like I heard nothing, right?

“Okay, Kelvin-san. You can continue.” Ema flashed me a smile.

“Y... Yeah...”

Damn, she’s still scary even though this is nothing new!

At this point, Boga had already backed up so far that he was pressing up against a boulder behind them.

“Uhh, to tell you the truth, I was thinking of having Ema receive the Blessing of the Flame Dragon King. Just like you have the blessings of the Water and Ice Dragon King.”

There was a beat, then Ema responded, “I heard about it from Rion, but that guy really is the Flame Dragon King, then? What happened to the wild one that used to have the title?”

“Oh, you know about the previous Flame Dragon King?”

“I do. We challenged him way back when. We got our asses handed to us easily, though, and we barely escaped with our lives. So, what happened to him?”

Efil cooked him into dragon steaks that were enjoyed by everyone. But can I really just come out and say that? Can I actually tell them that an old enemy of theirs had his bones used as soup stock? There’s no way.

“Ahh, he was beaten by Efil and Boga. After that, Boga gained the title, so now he’s the Flame Dragon King.”

“I see. So...damn, I’m just frustrated that I was beaten to the punch. I wanted to get my revenge someday.”

“Then why not vent those feelings with Boga? We don’t plan on giving out blessings for free either. If you can beat him, the Flame Dragon King, even once, then he’ll recognize you as worthy.”

“Understood. I myself want the blessing so much that I’d give an arm and a leg for it. But the vaunted Flame Dragon King seems...well...is he really up for it?”

I turned around to find Boga off in the distance trying to hide in the shadows. *Hiding in the distance again, Boga? I know she’s scary, but Ema’s not a bad person. She’s got a fun, playful side that makes dark matter (ashes) out of cooking as well!*

“He’ll become much more aggressive once he goes back to his dragon form,

so there's no need to worry about that. Also, if two people who use fire fight, they might get some new ideas for moves."

Honestly, I was hoping for a lot in that respect. On the one hand there was Boga, an inexperienced Flame Dragon King—the Dragon King normally known for possessing large amounts of power. On the other, there was Ema, who had been given a stellar education from childhood by Iris. I was expecting the two of them to grow by leaps and bounds if they went at it diligently.

What about Efil, you ask? Well, I had originally wanted her to take part in this, but it seemed taking care of me would be better for improving her maid power, so I allowed her to focus on that instead. At the moment, she was in Toraj's castle, entertaining Tsubaki.

"What about me, Kelvin?"

"You, Sylvia? You already have blessings, though... Actually, this is a bit late, but why are you here in Toraj? This isn't Deramis, where you have Iris—I mean, sister Ellen—or even Trycen, where there's Shutola."

"Mm, I was invited by Tsubaki. The food is good, so I plan to stay in Toraj for a while."

Ahh, so Sylvia was invited. As always, Tsubaki doesn't act reserved at all, and she lured Sylvia here with food. Yeah, I can see the gluttony on her face. Drool! You're drooling!

"Well, there's a perfect dance partner for you, Sylvia. She's in my home right now, but it'll be easy enough to get there using Toraj's Gate. Ah, but before that, there's something I want to ask of you. I think it's something only you can do."

"I owe you for mom, so I'll do what I can."

"Thanks. Then what I want you to do is..."

The preparations here are going smoothly. I hope it's going well for everyone else too.

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Toraj's Castle:

Having checked up on how Boga and Ema were doing, I returned to the castle with Sylvia. It seemed like the favor I wanted from her couldn't be done right away, so I decided to take her back home first. Before that, though, I needed to offer my greetings to Tsubaki, so I was heading to her room. If things were still the same as when I'd left earlier, she would be with Efil.

"Hmm, how about this, then? It's not too sweet, and the mellowness makes it easy for those of advanced age to eat as well. It's bite-sized, so it's very easy to carry and snack on."

"But the materials needed for it are fairly scarce. Thinking of the cost effectiveness, I believe we'll need to find a cheaper substitute for said materials."

"On the other hand, I think this could work if marketed as a high-class confection. It would be too big of a waste to sacrifice quality here."

They're talking business? The pair were absorbed in their conversation and hadn't noticed me, so I knocked on the door.

"I'm back. Did I interrupt something?"

"Ohhh, if it isn't you, Kelvin! Don't worry about it, we just reached a good place to stop. The things Efil makes are far too delicious for my own good. We were debating which of her recipes the artisans of my country could replicate so that we can somehow spread them to the masses. Of course, this is all assuming your permission."

"I apologize. I ended up getting engrossed in the conversation, since all these recipes were ones from Toraj that I'd arranged in my own way..."

"Ah, I see."

So this situation was brought on because Efil was entertaining Tsubaki, who stimulated her creative urges. You're good, Tsubaki.

"Red bean paste...red bean treats...want..."

Sylvia, you're drooling! Really drooling! Mrrghh, could it be that this girl is surprisingly useless without Ema around?

"Ahem, I don't really mind. But please make sure you run any money talks

through Shutola. It's out of my wheelhouse."

"Trycen's Doll Princess huh? Well, that's probably a good call. I want to make a good and proper deal with you as well. But still, it sounds like she's totally blended in with you lot, eh?" Tsubaki smiled impishly, like she'd just found a nice new toy.

Making that expression won't reveal some shocking new truth, you know?

"She ended up spending a lot of time with us, after all. Personally, I think of her as another little sister after Rion."

That was exactly why I couldn't help but feel disoriented whenever she reverted to her adult form. Anytime she accidentally referred to me as "dearest brother" in that form, it always resulted in an awkward atmosphere. To be fair, it's not like our relationship had changed at all, so I couldn't exactly say those were mistakes, but...



“Oh,” I continued, “but in exchange, make sure you keep your promise, okay?”

“You mean about the fleet? That ark has given Toraj no end of trouble as well, so I’ll help as much as I can.”

“Thanks! You’re a lifesaver. Given its altitude, there are only a few ways to get up there...”

“Gah ha ha! Feel free to rely on me more, and make sure to never forget this favor. If you want, I could even make it free if you agree to serve Toraj—”

I wasted no time in interrupting that offer. “By the way, Tsubaki-sama, the technology you have in Toraj is amazing, isn’t it? I almost fainted in delight when I saw *that*.”

Tsubaki seemed somewhat miffed as she commented, “Is it just me or have you gotten even better at dodging my recruitment attempts?”

“It’s just your imagination.”

In truth, though, I’ve been trained so much in that regard that it’s almost a reflex at this point.

“Hrm...well, whatever. I wasn’t able to show off pretty much any of the things I wanted to during that fight with the Demon Lord, so...I shall show you that we are the masters not of magic, but of machinery and clockwork!”

“Ha ha, I’ll be looking forward to it. Now then, Sylvia, let’s go out for a bit.”

Sylvia looked up, her mouth full of food. “Mmn? Whffwhwhoww?”

Come on, don’t talk with your mouth stuffed full of sweets like that.

“Oh what, you’re leaving already? With Sylvia too?”

“Yes, we’re short on time, after all. There’s someone I’d like Sylvia to meet.”

“Mm...so I will be leaving. We’d like to use your Gate.”

“Always so busy... Efil, I will get in touch with you again once I’ve confirmed things with Trycen’s princess. Let’s figure out the details of making these into products when I do.”

“Understood.”

Man, rulers sure are obstinate and strong people, acting like that even given the state of things. I’m sure Tsubaki’s the same as Gaun’s king: great with an abacus.

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Kelvin’s Estate, Underground Training Area:

“Oh, welcome back, Kel-nii!”

After returning to the mansion through the Gate, we immediately headed for the underground training area and were greeted energetically by Rion once we got there.

Man, that’s a nice smile...though she’s covered in dust and dirt, and looking a little ragged.

“Whoa, and here we have another beauty appearing! Woohoo!”

“Please suppress your instincts, Serge. Still, welcome, Lunoir.”

“Mom, and...that white-clothed person?”

Rion was in the training area with the previous Hero and Protector, Serge Flore. Also there was Sister Ellen, Sylvia’s adoptive mother and the former Goddess of Reincarnation, reincarnated as Iris. She was no longer a sister, though, and switching between Iris and Elearis was too confusing, so now I just called her Ellen.

“White-clothed person? That’s just mean. Weren’t we having fun together only yesterday?!”

Sylvia tilted her head questioningly. “Don’t you mean fighting?”

“You could also say that!”

Serge giggled, as if chiding Sylvia not to sweat the small stuff. She had recently started freeloading at our place, so I was slowly getting to know the ins and outs of her personality, but...while she looked like a pretty young girl on the outside, on the inside, she was basically a lecherous old man. On top of that, it seemed she actually was a lesbian with a thing for cute girls, so she declared my

home a paradise soon after arriving.

Yeah, she's scary.

"I've been having Serge train up Rion's swordsmanship. There's no one better with swords in this world, or so she likes to claim."

"Yeah, I've been fighting her one-on-one all this time, but I haven't even beaten her once," Rion replied.

"Aww, I have no choice but to train you if you're going to praise me that much! Also, I'm not just good with swords—I can use pretty much any weapon, okay? I'm skilled with everything you would call a basic weapon. Hmm...if you were a girl, I would've been fine with teaching you all about white magic too. It's too bad."

"Ha ha...I'm relieved from the bottom of my heart that you won't, you damn womanizer," Kelvin quipped.

Even with her personality, she was undoubtedly still the world's strongest so I couldn't get a handle on her. But she at least listened to what her guardian (?) Ellen said, so nothing terrible had happened yet. Also, it seemed any "lucky encounters" of the lewd kind thanks to her Unique Skill Absolute Gospel didn't apply to members of the same gender. Seriously, I was saved by the fact that Serge was a girl.

"Okay, I understand. I just have to team up with Rion to defeat the white-clothed person, right?"

"Well...basically, yes. She speaks and acts like a clown, but Serge and her lessons are the real thing. Also, you want Ellen, who was your teacher, to see how far you've gotten, don't you?"

"Suddenly, I feel motivated."

Sylvia made a show of this sentiment by making a noise, though her characteristically blank face never changed. In all honesty, I wanted to throw Setsuna into the mix as well, since she showed the most promise out of the entire party of Heroes, but Survivor wouldn't allow it. He must have been really happy to have gained an apprentice, or rather, a successor. They were currently staying in Gaun.

Now then, I should move on to the next step. If I stay here, I fear I might get caught in Serge's version of what the girls have to deal with when they're with Touya.

"Okay then, I'll be going to Deramis next. You all have fun."

"Yeah! Say hi to Collette for me!"

"Mm...and the sisters as well."

"Remember to get me a present!"

"Don't take advantage of all the voices to demand a present, Hero. Oh, right...our fool of a grandparent is going to participate in this training too, although he's out in Trycen on business at the moment. When he comes back, make sure you give him some lessons as well."

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Trycen, a certain graveyard:

There existed a hill a little ways away from Trycen's capital that allowed a person to easily survey the surrounding area. This spot, one of the few places in Trycen's normally desert-and wasteland-ridden landscape that was beautiful and green, was a graveyard meant for the dead to rest in peace.

Two men were currently standing before one of these gravestones. One was Gerard, a large man covered head-to-toe in dark black armor. The other was a brawny older gentleman clad in silver armor, Dan D'alba. The Grim Reaper's right hand man and the general of the Steel Knight Order were facing a gravestone carved with the name "Jin D'alba."

"This is a little late, but allow me to offer you some spirit," Gerard said as he unstoppered a bottle, pouring its contents over the gravestone. As the alcohol streamed out, it caught the light of the sun, making the gravestone appear to shine.

"Wouldn't you normally offer flowers or something similar?"

"Heh. No man would be happy to receive something like that. Also, this is my favorite liquor from Gaun: Juuoushu. It's strong enough to burn your throat on the way down, but by that same measure, it really makes you feel like you're drinking. I'm sure it's also strong enough to reach someone who's gone to heaven already."

After pouring out around half the bottle, Gerard stopped, using the rest to fill up two cups. Both were filled to the brim by the time the bottle was emptied.

"Here," Gerard offered.

Dan took the cup without a word. There was a pause before he said, "My thanks."

The two men sat down in front of the grave and downed their drinks in one go. The sting from the liquor made them exhale sharply through their noses, and Dan sighed as he looked down at the empty cup.

"You're right—this certainly is strong. Gaunian liquor, huh?" He paused for a moment in thought. "Now that I think about it, I remember we took along some

liquor from Trycen to Gaun.”

“Are you talking about the war?”

“Indeed. Back when we were deceived by the Demon Lord into invading our neighboring countries. Of course, we were beaten back by the Beast King’s sons.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! That’s only natural, I say.”

“I don’t know what good it’ll do to say this now, but I really can’t believe my own actions back then. If I hadn’t met Gaun’s Beast King, who knows where I’d be now. Oh yeah, actually I brought some myself. Here, your cup.”

“Oh, don’t mind if I do.”

The two of them stayed for a while in front of the grave, drinking together. During that time, they mostly talked of the past. Only they would ever know if the conversation was good or not, but they never stopped drinking.

Suddenly, Gerard put down his cup with a meek expression before folding his hands on top of his lap.

“Allow me to apologize again, Dan-dono. I am truly sorry for killing Jin-dono.”

“Again with that? I know I’m getting on in years, but I can remember your apologies. I’ve heard about what happened from Shutola-sama, so I don’t blame you. More than anything, it was that Jildora guy’s fault, right? He was the root of all evil, wasn’t he? You put an end to him, so be proud of that.”

“But...” Gerard hesitated.

“There are no buts here, don’t say any more. You’ll just end up giving Jin lingering regrets, and he won’t be able to move on. I don’t want that. He fought as a knight of Trycen and died honorably in battle, that’s all.”

Gerard still didn’t seem satisfied. After a moment, he decided to persist, saying, “At the very least, I would have liked to have been able to bring the body back.”

“Heh ha ha! Do you want to destroy all of Trycen? Well, I’ll accept your feelings, at least. Thank you.”

Dan refilled Gerard's cup. After that, they spent a lot of time in silence, but strangely, it didn't feel awkward. They simply drank their alcohol quietly, that was all.

After a while, Dan spoke up. "I've drunk so much, but I still don't feel drunk. Still, this isn't bad."

"You truly are getting on in years, so don't force yourself. Look, we've gone through what we've brought, so it's about time to go back. Hm, oh right. I had something I needed to hand to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Here."

Gerard took out a sword from the miniature Clotho he had on him. It was the gunsword that he'd retrieved after the battle in lieu of Jin's body. It had been completely disinfected via Kelvin's white magic, and Gerard had spared no effort in maintaining it, so it was almost like new.

"This isn't Jin-dono's actual weapon, but it was what he was holding in his last moments. Please, take this as a memento."

Dan said nothing. Instead, he looked down at the gunsword for a while before shaking his head.

"You keep it."

"What?"

"It is a nice idea to stab that sword into the ground so it can be used to mark Jin's grave. But that would only be for a peaceful world. As the world is now, we cannot afford to make a sword a mere decoration. It must be used to cut down and defeat our enemies. Look, my body doesn't move the way it used to. It doesn't seem like I'll be able to take part in the next battle. So take it with you in my place. Use that sword... Grasp victory with it for me."

"Dan-dono..."

"Oh, yes, that's a great idea! To tell you the truth, I *do* hold a grudge against you. You must take that sword and use it to make even more of a name for yourself to atone! I leave it to you, Gerard-dono!"

That caught Gerard by surprise. “Dan-dono?!”

Dan pushed the sword back into Gerard’s arms. Gerard took that as both a sign of forgiveness from Dan as well as a request.

“What’re you guys doing in a place like this? Eurgh, stinks of booze. Damn.”

“Mm? Oh, it’s the king.”

Trycen’s current ruler, Azgrad, was the one who had called out to them. His expression was clouded, showing his clear distaste for what he was smelling.

“A king shouldn’t be walking around alone. So, have you come because you’re ditching work?”

“And that isn’t the way a subject should address their king, Dan, so I guess we’re both in the same boat. Anyway, you’re wrong, unfortunately. I left the castle through proper channels, all in order to find you.”

“Proper in what way...”

“I’m the king and I approved it. What could make it more proper? Agh, I didn’t come here to argue with you about that. Dan, I’ll be leaving the castle for a while, so I’ll be entrusting Trycen to you in the meanwhile!”

That seemed to blindside Dan. It took a while for him to let out a “Huh?” Azgrad’s sudden declaration had the old soldier’s mouth bending downwards sharply in consternation. “That kind of explanation doesn’t actually inform us of anything, Azgrad...”

“Then you do it, Rosalia!”

From behind the gravestone, out stepped Rosalia the maid in human form. It seemed that she had been trying to gauge the right moment to show herself.

“So the other presence I felt was Rosalia. I am *not* used to that form...” Gerard muttered.

“And? What is this precious business you have that requires you to leave?” Dan asked, forcing the conversation back on track.

“Right. I have just received a message from my master, Kelvin-sama. He asks that I return home with Azgrad.”

“Hm? You’re both going back together? Could it be—” Gerard reacted, but he was immediately shut down.

“It is not what you are thinking, Gerard-sama. Do not worry.”

“I... I see... You said it was a message from my liege, so...hm...” He could feel Dan’s stare boring into his back, and it kind of hurt.

“We are going to see mother. We are going to borrow her power, all to prepare for the battle that is coming.”

“We need quite a lot of power to bring down that flying Ark, don’t we? I owe Kelvin, so I’m gonna do what I can, got it?”

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Deramis’s Palace:

After seeing Sylvia off, I walked to Deramis with Efil. Well, I say walked, but it was really just to the teleportation gate, so it wasn’t much of an effort. I just had to lay my guild card over the pedestal, walk through the thing, and I was there. Colette was waiting for me on the other side, and she quickly ushered me to the highest floor of the palace, where everybody was waiting.

“Hey, guys. It hasn’t been that long, but I’ll say it anyway: long time no see, Kelvin-kun.”

“All right, then; I’ll hop on that wagon. Long time no see, Pope.”

The top floor of the palace was where the leader of Deramis, Pope Phillip, resided. It was one of the most important places in the country, impossible to infiltrate by any would-be spies. As for why we gathered in such a place, that was because of the members of our group.

“It’s sister Efil! Sister Efil is here!”

“Why say it twice, noble Mdofarak?”

“Because it’s important.”

“R... Really now?”

“Urghh...why was I taken to this place too? It’s too incredible! It’s gotta be some sort of mistake. It’s gotta be...”

Occupying the seats at this table I had once eaten breakfast at was the pope, Phillip; Colette; all the ancient Heroes other than Serge; Estoria, who was disguised as Sister Ria for the purposes of guarding Atra; the former Light Dragon King, Murmur; and the Light Dragon King and perennial sweet tooth, Mdofarak.

Now that I think about it, this group is stacked. I mean, I know I'm the one who called the meeting, but the majority of the people here are weirdos. Man, I'm so glad Prettia isn't here. Seriously.

"Well then, Kelvin-kun, let's get started?"

"Agreed, Pope."

"Hrm...this has been on my mind for a while now... I think I would like you to change how you refer to me, Kelvin-kun."

"Ha ha ha, I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I hear you're calling the king of the newly discovered Northern Continent 'father-in-law.' That's nice. I like that. I've never been called that, ever. Even if the occasion came up, no one would ever do it because of my position. Seriously, I believe you should take responsibility for that as a man."

"Uh...fine then...father-in-law, let's just hurry up and start this."

"Whaaat, really?! Please tell me how I earned that title!"

"You're troubling Kelvin-sama!" Colette cried.

The pope couldn't help but get carried away right after I was pressured into adding another "father-in-law" to the roster, only to be scolded by Colette. *Good...do it more. Still though, I really can't underestimate the kings of this world. They all keep heaping "responsibility" onto my shoulders.*

"Umm...Kelvin-san...I think you should take responsibility, even if you were tricked into it..."

"That's a very respectable opinion, but when you're the one that says it, Estoria..."

She was flustered by that. "I'm not Estoria anymore! My name is Ria..."

Her personality had done a 180, and by now, there wasn't even a speck of that bewitching personality remaining. Honestly, I was starting to wonder if she would even be able to fight if she had to at this point.

Sorondil immediately tried to flirt with her. "Heh, well, look at that. Seems like a scared little pussy cat has wandered in. How about it, girlie? Wanna have a drink with me?"

He probably doesn't know she's the one behind the incident at the Catacombs of the Heroic Spirits. Hey man, at least mind the time and place.

"Huh? Ah, uhh..."

"Oh, my apologies. That was so rude of me. I am the high elf Sorondil, otherwise known as the Silver Bow."

Ragat stepped in after a beat. "You're no high elf, just a regular elf."

"Ragat, could you do me a favor and not get in the way of someone else's romance?"

"Uhhh...I'd like to get this meeting going now..."

"Please, Kelvin-dono, I am trying to woo someone! Wait, that reminds me, why isn't Serge here?!"

"Yeah! You're making your father-in-law sad!"

I had no reply to that, but after a beat, Ragat muttered, "Serge... So precious..."

No good. I can't see myself reining these guys in at all. I was lucky that Colette hadn't gone berserk yet, but there was too much *personality* in the room anyway.

"Everyone, I am sure we are not gathered here to simply waste our time on idle chatter. Ignoble as I am, even I can surmise that. Is it not said that a true gentleman knows the time and place for things? That goes for you as well, Phillip-dono. Realize your age! I believe you should leave the teasing of the younger generation there."

The one who shut everyone up had close-cropped hair and was dressed like a high priest—Murmur in human form.

“Hrm...true. Yes, you’re absolutely right. Let us have that drink another time, m’lady.”

“Well, that puts me on the spot if Murmur-sama says that. Okay then, Kelvin-kun. Go on.”

Of course, the Pope and the former Heroes had to calm down now that their guardian dragon had spoken up. Murmur signaled to me with a look and a small nod to say that I was cleared to go.

I’m so grateful for your support!

“Ahem. Well then, I’ll start. I believe you know about Melfina through father-in-law and Colette. The black version of Melfina, who we call DarkMel, is essentially half of Melfina, and she is planning to use that giant Ark to find Isla Heaven. The final result, should she succeed, will be her becoming the Goddess and gaining full control over her reincarnation ability.”

“With that, she’ll have become whole, and she’ll fight Kelvin-kun. That’s the scenario she’s planned, isn’t it?” asked the pope.

“Yes, exactly. But if DarkMel truly becomes the Goddess, there will be nothing we can do. To be honest, I think it’ll be difficult to win against her even in her current state. This is just from my experience, but DarkMel has more power than Gerard, is faster than Ange, and possesses greater luck than Serge. That’s exactly why we have to stop her before she realizes her plans. We’ll be moving forward assuming this.”

I actually felt like it would be a waste not to let her reach her full power, but if we lost, that was it. Not even I was foolish enough to try fighting a battle I couldn’t win. I wanted to, though. I *really* wanted to.

“We will be defeating DarkMel before she becomes the Goddess. But there are several obstacles to accomplishing that.”

“Isn’t it all obstacles?” Estoria retorted, her voice trailing off for lack of confidence.

That hit me where it hurt. There was an uncomfortable beat before I replied, “You could say that.”

This girl, Ria...she's way too harsh on me. Is she really that dissatisfied that I didn't bring Gerard?

"First up: how do we destroy the Ark? Its maximum operational ceiling is a problem, but the intense wind it puts out is an even bigger one. Even reaching the altitude we need to meet it will be difficult, to say the least, but we can't even get close." My statement was followed with an uncomfortable silence.

"Then...what do we do?"

"I want to borrow Toraj's fleet as well as the power of the Dragon Kings. They will provide both a means of transport and a way of brute-forcing the wind."

"Now wait a second. Will brute force even work?"

"We'll start with a volley of breaths of every element from all the Dragon Kings. I believe that will serve to erase the barrier, given the rough calculations done by Trycen's princess, Shutola. She's seen the barrier's power firsthand, so I believe her calculations should be reliable. I'm sure they can't just keep outputting that sort of wind forever, so we should at least be able to make an opening."

For a moment, no comments came as everyone paused to think.

"That rumored Doll Princess, huh?" Ragat asked.

That's right. She wrote something similar in her journal too.

"Mmhmm, she's the princess who got along well with my Colette at the academy, isn't she?" the pope asked. "Then I believe it should be fine. I agree with this. Not like we can think of anything better, anyway."

"Thank you very much. At the moment I have secured the agreement of the dragons under me: Earth Dragon King Dahak, Light Dragon King Mdofarak, and Flame Dragon King Boga. I have sent suitable people to convince the Water Dragon King of Toraj and Ice Dragon King Salafia, so we shouldn't have to worry about them either. I also have someone from the Baal house guiding Dahak to the Darkness Dragon King on the Northern Continent. We are currently searching for the Wind and Lightning Dragon Kings, whose whereabouts are unknown. Once they're found, I'll think of a way to peacefully secure their help, and their blessings. That is, if it's possible."

For the last two, I had Ange and the elites of the Black Ops division Shutola led searching for them. Once they were found, I planned to go to the Wind Dragon King myself while having Rion approach the Lightning Dragon King.

I hope we find them soon.

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The Ark wasn't our only problem. It was simply the prelude to the main event. The real fight lay after we overcame that hurdle.

"Second: the existence of the Apostles that now serve DarkMel, or what remains of them. They will surely stand in our way if we try to stop her."

"True. We only encountered some of the Apostles in Abyssland, after all. Personally, I wonder if DarkMel purposefully left all the members who knew about her plan out of the way? Though there might have been a few exceptions..." My second father-in-law, Pope Phillip, had come upon the same suspicion I had.

The people that we had fought before—Iris, Serge, and old man Nito—hadn't known about the plan. That also went for Ange, Bell, and Estoria. The only ones we had encountered in the Evil Deity's Heart who seemed like they knew what was going on were Jildora and Tristan. They were most likely the exceptions in the group, and Jildora was probably slated to join them on the Ark to escape. Thinking about it that way, you could say we had already managed to shave away some of their strength. Of course, the memories I had received from Melfina in my dreams held no information on any of that, so it was only conjecture.

"I'm of the same opinion. It was big that we managed to kill Creator, or Jildora, then. We've stopped them from being able to equip DarkMel or her Apostles with even stronger weapons or items."

"That's true. So, what do we know about the Apostle remnants?"

"Right. I organized the information I got from Melfina and put it on paper. Efil, if you please."

"Understood."

Efil passed around the documents I had prepared in advance. I continued my briefing after confirming that everyone had received a copy.

“As you can see, these documents contain information on the remaining Apostles. There are three left. Starting from the bottom of the totem pole, there’s the former general of Trycen’s Mixed Monster Order, Tristan Faaze. Then, there’s Rio, or Riold, the former guildmaster of the Parth Adventurer’s Guild. And lastly, the long-standing Rizean emperor, Sachiel Ohma Rizea. Please look at your papers for details on their statuses and unique skills.”

The Tenth Pillar: “Controller” Tristan Faaze

Level: 134

HP: 1050/1050

MP: 4730/4730

Strength: 218

Endurance: 362

Agility: 390

Magic: 3699

Luck: 2947

Unique Skill: Divine Manipulator

Divine Manipulator allows the user to summon and command lower-grade deities and eliminates the penalties to max MP for summoning them. However, penalties for summoning non-divine followers occur as normal. In the event that the user manages to contract with and summon higher-ranking deities, the MP penalty will be reduced somewhat.

Followers (contracted by summoning): Demise Guillemot, Incendiary Bug King, Voracious Baku Orgg, Tyrant Regress, Divine Dragon Zahahka, Deus Ex Machina, Divine Beetle Lenge-Range, Divine Snake Anra

The Fifth Pillar: “Analyzer” Riold

Level: 178

HP: 4328/4328

MP: 4469/4469

Strength: 2351

Endurance: 1807

Agility: 2490

Magic: 2184

Luck: 1326

Unique Skill: God's Eye

Cycles between all Magic Eye-type skills (including unique skills) with a blink. All skills can be used at Rank S. Each eye can be set to different skills and, depending on use, be combined to create composite effects.

Composite Magic Eyes: Long-range attacks through the combination of both Farsight and an attack-type Magic Eye. Can also be combined with curse and analysis-type eyes. The applications of Farsight are far-reaching.

The combination of the buff erasing Exorcism Eye and Heavenly Eye, which allows the user to see through physical obstacles, is brutal. A countermeasure is necessary.

The combination of using Futuresight Eye to dodge attacks, Eye of Mind Reading to see though his opponent's plan, and Observatory Eye to enhance his kinetic vision is nearly unbeatable in close quarters.

- (possible combinations to be added here) -

The Second Pillar: "Selector" Sachiel Ohma Rizea

Level: Unknown

HP: Unknown

MP: Unknown

Strength: Unknown

Endurance: Unknown

Agility: Unknown

Magic: Unknown

Luck: Unknown

Unique Skill: Omniscient Destiny

Unlike Riold's ability to see several seconds into the future, this ability allows the user to see far into the future or far into the past in order to learn the location of what the user needs. DarkMel was able to gather the Apostles through the use of this ability. Once activated, there is a cooldown before the skill becomes usable again.

Unique Skill: Sympathetic Resonance

This is the reason Sachiel's stats are unknown. His status, level, skill points, and condition are all synchronized with DarkMel's. The reason he has yet to show himself is because DarkMel was weak

and did not have a physical body. But now, he has transformed to be as strong as her.

About Sachiel: The emperor of the Rizean Empire is always wearing full body armor. This is a tradition passed down since the empire's founding, that the emperor would always be a symbol of invincibility. Because of that, only the emperor's immediate family knows what he looks like. Also, because rulership of the empire is not hereditary and is instead decided by the previous emperor, whoever is inside the armor is unimportant and thus not known to the world at large.

That was what was written on the papers.

"Now then, where to start? There's a lot I want to say."

"Heh. I'll admit they're strong, but as a whole, they're all still weaker than Serge, right? So there's nothing to worry about, is there?" Sorondil scoffed.

That brought some incredulous stares his way.

"Sorondil, the problem isn't their stats," Ragat responded.

"In terms of pure combat strength, Hu-chan-sama would definitely be the strongest," Colette offered. "However, what's more important are their abilities, which I believe will prove very troublesome."

She was right. And worse, this information on the Apostles was not up to date. All the info that Melfina had gathered was from a fragment of DarkMel's memories. It was possible that the remaining Apostles had all gained new abilities by now, which was why Mel had left a small note not to rely on this information too much. Taking that into account, I made sure to tell them to only treat it as a reference.

"Many of Tristan's Divine Pillar summons were killed in the last battle. Still, assuming his Summoning skill is at Rank S, that means even ignoring those deaths, he had Follower slots open. There's a good chance he's filled them with new summons by now. Also, we can't underestimate Riold's Composite Magic Eyes. For example, if someone with no resistance were to be hit with Charm Eye, the battle could be lost immediately."

"Even more threatening is the emperor of Rizea, Sachiel, I think. Oh man, I had a pretty big grudge against him—to think he was an Apostle. Aha ha!"

"This isn't a laughing matter, Pope! If he really does boast the same amount of power as Melfina-sama, then there'll be two Melfina—gwrfhh!"

Awww, even though we were finally getting serious, Colette's nose just had to erupt like a volcano. I had made sure she understood the circumstances around Melfina and DarkMel so that I could get her to resolve herself to face the upcoming final battle. At least, that was the plan, but it didn't change the fact that DarkMel was still an aspect of Melfina. I understood how hard it would be for her as an Oracle to fight DarkMel for Melfina's sake. So more than anything, I wanted to be able to answer her wholehearted resolve as best I could. Even now, she was fighting her instincts as an Oracle, which were carved into her genes. *I should at least wipe the blood from her nose.*

"Gwarrgh!" I was ambushed by a second eruption. *Eurgh...I'm all sticky...*

"Ahh, Master, please stay away from Colette-sama for the moment. She will only get more excited."

"Sorry about that..." I sputtered. Apparently, I wasn't even allowed to wipe her nose.

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Deramis' Palace, Colette's Bedroom:

Unfortunately, Colette's excitement continued to swell, so she had to take a break in her room for a while. Pope Phillip and I somehow managed to use recovery magic to make up for the blood lost thanks to her nosebleeds, so they ended up being nothing serious. Still, because she'd been overworking and overpraying recently, we decided to be prudent. Thanks to some unnecessary consideration from the Pope, I was forced to carry Colette to her room. I took the utmost care as I moved, since I was worried that the situation may cause her to go wild again.

"Right, okay. I'm going to let you down on the bed now."

"Sorry for causing you all this trouble, Kelvin-sama..."

"It's fine. You're doing so much for Mel's sake, I can at least do this for you."

"Hee hee, I'm happy to hear you say that. Ah, right. I'm afraid I cannot show you much hospitality, but would you at least like some chilled water? I'll pour it for you n—"

I cut her off there. “Stop! It’s fine, I’m fine! I drank plenty just now!”

That seemed to puzzle Colette, as she tilted her head questioningly. “Really?”

I did, yes. In fact, no matter how kind Colette was being, there was absolutely no way I would accept water from her. Bad memories, or actually good ones, rose unbidden in my mind at the mention of it. Since I was wearing my Goddess’ ring, I would be fine even if she had done something to the water, but...I still couldn’t bring myself to try. Fait accompli is a scary thing. Given Pope Phillip’s attitude earlier, it was probably good to be this suspicious of everything.

“There is no need to mind me so much, Kelvin-sama. I will admit that I had my share of conflict and feelings of being lost on the matter, but in the end, the deity I serve is Melfina-sama. I am sure that she is thinking of you and in distress over you, Kelvin-sama. This is no time to be worried about me, the Oracle. So please, Kelvin-sama, I am fine.”

“Colette...”

Oh crap. While I was busy with my vulgar suspicions, she’d thrown a very serious and saint-like line my way. I really was worried about her health, but the difference in tone between her earlier nosebleed and the current seriousness was too severe. *This is too sudden, I can’t think of a good response...*

“Come on, don’t say that. Just like you worry about Mel, Colette, I worry about you. I’ll be the one to pour the water for you, so just rest while you drink.”

Colette hesitated. “Sorry. That water... I’ll...abstain.”

An uncomfortable silence followed as I used Analyze eye on the contents of the pitcher. *It’s confirmed. That water has aphrodisiacs in it. The maker? Colette Deramilius.*

“Colette-san? What happened to this water? My Analyze Eye is saying that it has aphrodisiacs in it...”

“Uh...Umm....I was thinking it would perk you right up, Kelvin-sama...”

“I see, a double entendre, huh? Right.” *The pope doesn’t have eyes in this*

room, does he? “Jeez, I forgive you, so go to sleep already so you can make more blood. I’ll stay by you until you do. Come now, goodnight.”

“Thank you very much. Goodnight...”

Colette lay down and closed her eyes. If Sera had been there, she could have put her to sleep using magic, but unfortunately, my white magic was only good for waking people up. The only thing I could do was to make sure the room stayed peaceful.

After a moment, Colette spoke up. “Kelvin-sama.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“I can’t fall asleep. I’m still too excited.”

I couldn’t help but sigh. *Maybe I actually should have left?*

“Ahh, please don’t leave! The aroma from your body...it has a healing effect!”

“That aroma is what’s making you excited and unable to sleep... Aghh, this is an old method, but try counting sheep with your eyes closed. You should fall asleep eventually.”

“I see. That’s a good idea. Well then...” Colette once again lay down and closed her eyes.

“One Melfina, two Melfinas, three—”

“Hey! Stop that, dummy! Do you have a death wish?!”

Unlike with Melfina, it was a herculean task to get Colette to sleep.

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“Whew...”

After all that, I finally managed to get her to sleep, and now I was feeling heavy with fatigue. *In the first place, I was absolutely the wrong person for the job. Colette goes more berserk the closer I am. Efil would have been much better than me.*

“Good job, Kelvin-kun.”

“Woargh! That surprised me! When did you get here, Ange?”

The moment I'd closed the door to Colette's room, someone had snuck up behind me and whispered into my ear. From the voice, it was easy to tell it was Ange, but if it had been an enemy, I would have been completely blindsided. Ange being able to get behind me was old hat, but the relief I felt at realizing it was her was still alarming. I was reflecting hard.

Still, Ange. We're in Deramis' palace. I'd appreciate it if you didn't break the assumption that this place is infiltration-proof so quickly. You definitely slipped through all the walls to get here, didn't you?

"Ahaha...sorry, sorry. You don't have to say what you're thinking. I know already."

"You do, do you?"

"My bad, I just can't shake the habits of my previous job. Like, when you see an impenetrable fort, don't you just wanna try and penetrate it? I'm the same."

That gave me pause. "I don't, though?"

"Is it just me or did you think about it for a moment?"

At any rate, it had been a while since I'd seen Ange after leaving her with the task of investigating the Dragon Kings and other things. I kind of wanted to hug her, but I had no idea what parts of this area were under the pope's surveillance. *I need to bear it until we get back to the mansion. Hm? Wait a second. If Ange's back, that means...*

"Wait, did you find the remaining Dragon Kings?"

"V for victory!"

"Well done!"

"Whoa!"

Ange flashed me a peace sign, and I couldn't help but wrap her up in a strong hug complete with lots of cheek nuzzling. The pope's eyes? *Who cares!* I wanted to hug Ange!

"Ehe heh, so warm... Ah, I'm glad you're so happy, but to be clear, I only found someone who knows where the Wind and Lightning Dragon Kings are."

“Someone who knows where they are? Where was that person?”

“The Western Continent. So I thought it’d be quickest if I just brought them over.”

It took me a moment to process that. “Hmmm?”

Ange thought it’d be quickest if she just brought them here... In the back of my mind, I couldn’t help but think of the time she had brought the cow and snake demon, Galia Kudo, from Abyssland. *Back then, I believe she...*

“Ange, you can’t just go around kidnapping people.”

“I didn’t kidnap anyone! I told them what was going on and had them follow me! I was very proper! Jeez, just what do you think I am, Kelvin-kun?”

A woman who likes necks a little too much. Of course, I didn’t say that out loud.

“Obviously you didn’t! Sorry about that. Still, they came directly here with you after hearing everything and agreeing? That’s pretty bold. So, what’s their name?”

“She’s a woman named Bakke. I told her to wait in a pub in town. I’ll take you there...follow me.”

I took Ange’s hand, and a moment later, I was phasing through the palace walls.

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Deramis, a certain pub:

“Is this it?”

“Yeah. No doubt.”

Ange had led me to a completely normal pub. Deramis was host to the headquarters of the Holy Order of Rinne, so it was often misunderstood that there were no places like this in the country, but there were. Apparently, they wouldn’t cause much of a problem as long as they were built into properly designated separated blocks.

This place is pretty far from the church, too. Still...yeah...it really is just a

regular bar, at least in appearance.

However, it was strange that I couldn't hear any of the usual pub noises. Given the time, it should have been fairly lively in there, even if not on the level of when adventurers gathered at night.

I wonder, are they closed today? It was eerily quiet enough that I had to ask. "Isn't it...*too* quiet, Ange?"

"Hmm, yeah. But it's true that Bakke is inside. I can sense her."

"Well, let's just go in for now."

We passed through the swinging saloon doors and into the bizarre atmosphere inside. Once we entered, I saw that there were actually quite a few people around, collapsed at their tables.

"Whoa..."

All of their faces were beet red, and they each had what looked like steins full of booze in one hand.

Ah, I've seen situations similar to this so many times I'm sick of it. I know what's going on here. These guys have drunk themselves under. The reason this place is so quiet isn't because it's empty, but because everyone's down for the count.

But not everyone was down. Behind the counter stood a man who seemed like the owner, and he was sweating buckets from his brow. Sitting across from him was a woman with long, amber hair. I made eye contact with Ange to confirm, and she nodded in response. It seemed like this was Bakke.

"Whew, all these men are so weak. Well, they're still better than the ones back in my country, but...to think they'd fall over from so little booze. The other women back at home showed more promise. Hey, don't you agree, barkeep?"

"Uh, no. Don't you think you've had too much to drink already, honored customer?"

"Whaaaaat?! I've only had enough for an aperitif! Oh, crap. I always get tunnel vision when I get alcohol in me. Seems like I have visitors."

As she said that, she turned to face us. Her long hair flipped around as she

instantly did a 180, chair and all, and I met eyes with Bakke.

She...looks like she's in her forties?

She seemed quite a bit older, but she was 180 centimeters tall with a well-toned body, making it clear that she was well conditioned. She was also rather tan, probably because of where she was from. Also, while it didn't show on her face, she really reeked of booze.

Thank goodness Ange was the one to lead me here. If it was Sera, I'd be dead.

"So you're the one who's got business with me? Ahh, uhhh...shoot, I never got your name."

"You didn't tell her about me, Ange?"

"Aha ha...the moment I started talking, she instantly got on board and wouldn't stop hounding me to go right away, so I kinda forgot."

What? This woman seriously came without even knowing the name of the person she was going to meet? I thought she was rather bold already, but isn't that just way too *gutsy?*

"Oh man, my bad! This girl just had such an interesting ability, and I was so surprised. She picked me right up and sped off like a rocket, ha ha! You know, my husband couldn't even do that. She's amazing for having such a stick-like body!"

It must've been really funny to her, since Bakke slammed her palm onto the counter behind her in laughter.

Ah, the counter caved in a little. The owner's in tears... My people were kinda the ones who called her out here, so let's help with the repairs later.



“I thank you for accepting the sudden invitation. My name is Kelvin Celsius. I’m an adventurer—”

“Kelvin? You mean, *that* Kelvin?! The Grim Reaper who caused so much trouble for my husband?”

Hm? Husband? Who?

“I don’t know anything about causing someone’s husband trouble, but yes, I am that Kelvin.”

The moment I answered her question, Bakke’s expression lightened up considerably as she once again slammed the counter.

It’s cool that you’re happy, but please take it easy on that counter. The owner really looks like he’s about to cry.

“Wooww, so coincidences like this *do* happen! Don’t you recognize me? My name is Bakke Faanis!”

“Faanis? Like...the country of fire?”

Bakke gave a highly exaggerated nod. Faanis was the country on the Western Continent we had stopped in before going on to Abyssland. The fact that the country name was her family name meant that she was royalty.

Let’s think about it further, though... The only member of royalty I had ever interacted with from there was the king. That meant the husband she was talking about was the king of Faanis. *I wonder if that’s correct?*

“Looks like you have an inkling of what I’m talking about. Yeah, I’m the queen of Faanis. The squid you left us as a present tasted incredible! It was crazy! Gimme a handshake! A handshake of gratitude!”

“Oh, yeah...glad you liked it.” She shook my hand like a machine, and she had a grip like one too.

Aaauggh, my hand!

“Oh right, my apologies. I spoke so rudely, but I didn’t know you were royalty.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I don’t like that stuffy formal nonsense anyway. I’d prefer it

if you just kept talking like before.”

I hesitated, but in the end... “Really?”

“Also, I’m in the same business you are, Kelvin. In the past, you used to hear the name of the Rank S adventurer Bakke the Leopardess everywhere. Do you not know of me?”

I thought that might be the case. So Bakke really is a Rank S adventurer, huh? She’s way more powerful than the average queen, I wonder if she’s the kind of warrior who’s just the Beast King’s type?

“Sorry, pretty much the only Rank S adventurer I know from the Western Continent is Prettia.”

“Goldiana? Makes sense. That one’s got really unique looks and is willing to run all over the world if need be.”

“By the way Bakke, didn’t you just say that I caused your husband some trouble? You mean the king of Faanis, right? I don’t remember having done anything.”

“Ahh, it’s really more like a small prank type of deal. My hubby’s into weird charms as a hobby, and he used one on you. It’s stupid, but it was his way of getting you back since he misunderstood and thought you were playing around with our daughters.”

“What? Play...around? I never even met the princesses.” What a gigantic case of mistaken identity.

“Well, I put my husband through the ringer myself, so cut him some slack, will ya? Were you all right? Did you feel under the weather when you left the country or anything?”

“Ahh, no, I’m fine. Curses on that level aren’t a problem.”

I’d been wearing my Goddess Ring, so even if the curse was real, it wouldn’t have had any effect. It was completely harmless, so there was no problem.

More than that, I was surprised that there was someone so...*normal*... among the Rank S adventurers. My first impression of Bakke was that of a scary-faced but beautiful big sister type, but that was well within the range of normal

compared to all the others I'd met up until now. She seemed like the quintessential female warrior.

"Oh man, it's great that you're so gracious. Still, though, the rumors don't do you justice. You are a *great* catch. Makes me want a taste..." Bakke licked her lips, but her expression didn't change one bit.

Uhhh...huh? What was that chill that just ran down my spine?

◇ ◇ ◇

Deramis, a certain pub:

Bakke slowly inched towards me. Her friendly expression morphed into that of a wild cat on the hunt. The instinctual danger I felt almost made me doubt my sanity.

Huh, what? We gonna fight? Oh...yeah, this feels a bit different... Even though I'm still in danger, it's of a different sort. I welcome battles, but I would like to opt out of things of this nature. Actually, wouldn't you be cheating?

"Let's stop the jokes here, Bakke-san. Go any further and I won't forgive you."

"Oh? You Kelvin's woman? If so then I'm sorry. Women from Faanis have always been quick to act."

Ange got in between me and Bakke, and the wild look in the woman's eyes disappeared like mist. *Wow, she stopped surprisingly quickly.*

Instead, it seemed like Ange was reverting to her killer instincts from her assassin days.

"Aww, don't get so mad. It's a waste of a good face, don't you agree?"

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say that, even as a joke. I wouldn't be able to stand having even more rivals."

"Oh? Damn, Kelvin, you player! I know what they say about all great men—do you really need some that badly?"

Bakke quickly slid back to her old attitude, grinning as she stretched out a pinky into the air, the symbol for relations of *that* kind.

Ah, I get it. I know how this works. This is the pattern where getting involved with a drunkard is more trouble than it's worth.

"Oh, no...it's not that much..."

"Kelvin-kun?"

I really didn't want to say it, but it was only getting more uncomfortable as the gap in conversation stretched, so I caved. "Uh...about six."

I should have been there to ask about the whereabouts of the Dragon Kings. So how did the conversation end up being steered in such a lewd direction?

“Hah, six-timing! Oh wow, I was a sight to see in my younger days, but nowhere near as much as you! You know you’re in for a lot of hardship down the road, right?”

“Please don’t say it like that. I am fully intending on being with them seriously.”

“That’s the favorite line of philanderers everywhere! How many times have I seen playboys like that get stabbed in the back, I wonder? Actually, given you’ve got five other girls on her level, you might get attacked by another man with a grudge instead.” Bakke got a faraway look in her eyes as she reminisced. It was a little scary.

I...It’s fine. I’ll be fine. Wait, isn’t that kind of thinking the same as the typical useless man? My thoughts started to spiral. *Calm down. In fact, I’d welcome anyone who picks a fight. The only thing I have to be scared of is being attacked night after night by someone like Prettia or Grostina. Okay, imagining that calmed me down. Nope it calmed me down way too much; I feel like I’m gonna puke...*

“Stop bullying Kelvin, Bakke-san. I won’t allow that either.”

“Whoops! Damn, so scary. The killing intent you’re giving off is no joke, Ange. I’ve heard that everyone in Kelvin’s party has the strength of a Rank S adventurer, and it seems like the rumors are correct. Oh man, it’s just surprise after surprise here.”

Bakke was still laughing nonchalantly even while bathing in Ange’s hostility.

Hey, can we get back on track soon? I feel like staying any longer will just invite more conflict.

“Right, about the Dragon Kings—”

“So, how far have you gone with Kelvin, Ange? That killing intent you gave off was the real thing, which shows how deep your love is! You’ve slept together more than a couple times by now, haven’t you?”

Gwaaaghh?!

“Uh... Uhhhh...that’s...”

“Hmmm? Oooh, what’s with that super innocent response? No way—have you guys not done anything at all?”

“Wha— We haven’t done *nothing*! We’ve kissed! Once...” Ange muttered the last sentence.

That admission seemed to have stunned Bakke into silence. It was a few moments before she broke out with a loud, “Whaaaat?!”

While Ange suddenly became much more awkward and shy, Bakke was simply startled. I reflexively covered my ears and put up a barrier, trying to block out the loud yell.

Whew, the owner’s barely safe.

“No way; wait just a second here. There’s no way that’s true! Just one kiss and you say you’re dating? This isn’t some kid’s play pretend thing, right?!”

“Well, that’s...” Ange was stammering.

Oh crap. Ange’s completely on the defensive now.

“Ahh, umm... You see, Bakke, Ange has some special circumstances around her. We’ve decided to get used to things at our own pace.”

“Shut it, Kelvin! I’m having a heart-to-heart with Ange right now! No men allowed! Ange, we’re going over to that corner!”

“Huh?! What?!”

Ange was dragged off by Bakke to a table in the corner of the room. Having been left out of their conversation, I had nothing to do but stand there.

But it doesn’t seem like they’ll be done any time soon...

I sighed before turning to the barman. “Give me something cold but with no alcohol, please.”

The man seemed to still be processing what had happened. He tripped over his words a bit as he replied. “Sure, just a second.”

“Oh, one moment. Here, I’ll pay upfront.” I sat down at the half-destroyed counter and handed him a pouch of money.

“What?!” Tonight was probably a bad night for him; he could not stop crying

out in surprise. Next, he stammered out a refusal. “I can’t take this much money!”

“The extra is compensation for your broken counter. You can also count it as paying for all those guys who are lying around passed out. It’s basically like we’ve rented your place out for the night anyway.”

It was clear that the bar owner was a good man. Even with my reasoning, he tried to give the money back several times, saying it was way too much.

It’s fine, man. Just take it. I can’t even imagine how those two will behave from here on out, after all. I’d like to avoid the worst, but I can only hope that the pub doesn’t end up getting entirely destroyed.

◇ ◇ ◇

“So, was what you said true? You guys have only kissed *once*?”

While Kelvin was waiting at the bar, Ange and Bakke continued their conversation in a corner of the room.

Ange got a little defensive, which caused her to trip over her words as she said, “I mean, recently we’ve started to hold hands, and hug...and stuff...”

Bakke could only sigh. “This is bad. Hear this, Ange. That’s something even my daughters will do when they want something. It’s all kid’s stuff. Kelvin’s got six whole girls after his bones, right? You’re in the midst of a fierce battle! Why’re you taking it so slow when you’re like a speed demon?!”

Aren’t those completely different things though? Ange thought, but she was overwhelmed by Bakke’s vigor, so she couldn’t say it out loud.

“I’m not interested in any excuses, and I don’t care about your past. Ange, you want Kelvin, right? You don’t want him to be taken by anyone else, right? Love is like hunting. If you aren’t the hunter, then someone else is. The world will not take any ‘circumstances’ of yours into account.”

“But Efil-chan is my best friend, and I don’t think hogging him to myself is a good thing.” Ange trailed off in thought, but she soon started speaking again. “It’s true that there are a lot of girls, but everyone accepted it, so...”

That put Bakke on her back foot, and this time it was her turn to stammer a

little. “Your best friend’s in there too? Kelvin sure lives up to the cliches... Well, that’s still fine. Sharing him with trust is good too. But haven’t some of your friends gone farther than you have, Ange? Are you sure you can afford to be stuck like you are?”

“Well, that’s...but...now’s not a good time...”

“Oho, not a good time, is it? Then no one else is doing anything either, I take it?”

“Umm...”

With Bakke having pushed that far, Ange had nothing else to defend herself with. Her brain automatically replayed the scene she had stumbled upon when she had gone to get Kelvin.

Now that I think about it, wasn’t Kelvin looking really tired when he came out of Colette-san’s room? No way... Was he just doing it in there?!

Just like that, Ange was convinced, and she resolved to take action.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kelvin’s Estate, the baths:

Why had this happened? I was not currently in Deramis, but in my own home. Specifically, I was in the bath. Why had we come back? The answer to that lay in our earlier conversation with Bakke.

“I’ve decided. I won’t talk until Ange has your heart, Kelvin!”

“What?”

“Go get’im! Seal the deal!”

“Huh?”

And that was it. No, seriously. After that, Bakke had run out of the pub and disappeared. *There should be a limit to how easily you can blow people off.* Not to mention, she hadn’t paid her tab. And even when I had tried to talk to Ange, she wouldn’t say anything. All she had done was look at the ground with a beet-red face, tugging my sleeve as she muttered quietly, “Can we at least do it in your house...”

I had no words, because there was no way I could still be clueless after that. I had figured out exactly what the deal was. Until I *did it* with Ange, Bakke would refuse to show herself, let alone talk. *What a forceful way to stick your nose into someone else's business.*

In the end, it was great that the pub hadn't been destroyed, at least, but instead, I had been suddenly thrust into a do-or-die situation. At this point, Ange was used to holding hands or being hugged. However, the road to get there had been long and very dangerous. I was at the point where I was considering trying to kiss her, but then Bakke had come in and steamrolled everything.

In the end, there's no one decent among the Rank S adventurers...

As for what I was doing presently, I was cleaning myself by soaking in the water. I was also building up stamina and restoring HP. I needed to talk to Ange, who was being very quiet, to put a plan I had into action. This was necessary.

"Ange took a bath first, so she should be waiting for me..."

I dunked my whole body into the water, trying to psyche myself up for the task ahead.

"Let's go!"

◇ ◇ ◇

Kelvin's estate, underground training room:

Donning Astarte's Embrace and picking up my Black Staff of Disaster, I headed down to the underground training room. Ange was already waiting for me in the large space, watching Rion and Sylvia spar. Luckily Serge and the others weren't around, because as expected, Ange was acting a little awkward.

Crap, met eyes with Rion...

Rion instantly seemed to pick up on something, as she gave me a good look before letting out a, "Hmm?!"

I was going to step forward to give her a light greeting, but both my right arm and right foot moved at the same time. Apparently, I was also acting pretty awkward.

“What’s up, Kel-nii? You returned so suddenly! Something’s off too. An-nee is acting really strange...”

“It’s nothing. We just wanted a little exercise before the real thing, so I thought we’d use this place.”

“Huh?”

“Hm? Ange, is it just me or is your face red? Got a cold?”

Ange stammered in embarrassment. “It’s because I just got out of the bath, I’m sure! There’s absolutely nothing at all wrong with me, not even a little bit!”

That last sentence drew a quizzical look, but our plan was simple: we would have an all-out battle here so that she could let out all the instinctive feelings of lashing out due to embarrassment without worry! It might have sounded ridiculous, but I figured it could have a surprisingly decent effect.

“Anyway, that’s how it is, so we’ll be using a corner of the grounds.”

“Kel-nii and An-nee are going to fight? Wow, you’re all decked out too, so it’s gonna be serious. Sylvie and I will watch, so feel free to use the whole space, right, Sylvie?”

“I am originally the one borrowing from you, so I don’t see a problem with it. Yeah, this is exciting.”

“Really? Then we’ll take you up on—Ange?”

“What is it, Kelvin-kun?” Ange stammered in reply. “I’m in the middle of preparing for the fight, so if you could wait a s— Agh!”

It looked like Ange was taking stock of what she had in her own Storage when a large number of tools like kunai and what looked like explosives fell out of her sleeve.

Is she...okay? I get the feeling she’s looking back over at me and Rion a lot, but...

“Is that supposed to be some sort of strategy, Rion?”

“Hmm...maybe? This is the first time I’ve seen An-nee like that too...” Sylvia and Rion had started to suspect that she was acting strange.

Get it together, Ange!

::Urrghh, Rion's the only one among my rivals who hasn't done it yet, I think... But Kelvin's totally got a sister complex and Rion's the same way about Kelvin, so once Rion grows up, there's no way... Rion always likes to give Kelvin a lot of skinship too. Even this morning, that...that...::

::Ange, you're leaking out everything through telepathy!!!:: I hurriedly picked her up and carried her off.

"Kel-nii?!"

"I think Ange really does have a cold! I'm gonna get her to lie down!"

"Oh, what, it really was a cold, huh?" Rion spent a moment in thought before continuing, "I was so worried because An-nee's eyes were totally hollow. I should get Efil-nee to make some porridge for her."

"Right. Hope she gets well soon."

Awesome, I managed to convince them! But...where do I go now?!

◇ ◇ ◇

Ange's room:

I pondered hard while I ran, and the result of all my thinking using Parallel Processing led me to Ange's room. The excuse I'd made to Rion and Sylvia was that Ange had a cold, so I figured this place would be the most natural place to go. With Ange in my arms, I opened the door to the room, and though it wasn't good manners to do so, I made use of my legs to close the door again.

"Whew, we should be fine now. Ange, have you calmed down?"

"Somehow..." Ange stuttered, unsure.

I carried her over to the bed. Still, though, I hadn't expected her to be so nervous that it would affect her ability to control the telepathy we always used. The only silver lining of the incident was that I was the only one who had received those telepathic messages, so the others had no idea what had been said. Well, Clotho knew because it was acting as a relay, but as always, it played things cool and said nothing. The slime probably wouldn't tattle.

Silence descended as Ange and I rested on the bed. Of course, we said nothing; both of us had picked up on what was probably going to happen. What needed to happen...

“So, uhh...even though we couldn’t carry out the plan, I think I need to just man up and be ready.”

“Ye...ah... Right, it’s something I asked for, so I’ll, uhh...try my hardest!”

“Then, could you take out all of your hidden weapons?”

Ange said nothing, but soon enough, the sounds of weapons clattering to the floor rang through the room.

Clatter. Rattle.

Making sure she’s unarmed is important.

Ange had already dropped quite a number of weapons in the training area, but it seemed she still had a large stock on hand.

Huh?! How much can fit in there? The pile on the floor’s already looking like a mountain...

“That’s everything I had hidden in my clothes. You don’t have to worry about the stuff in my soles once I take off my shoes, so all that’s left is what’s on my arms and legs...”

Clunk. Kerclunk.

She was still dumping them out, forming a second mountain of deadly weapons next to the first. But she stopped when she put her hands on Carnage. Apparently, that was her last weapon, and she just stood there, staring at it.

“You know, ever since I was reincarnated, I never once let go of all the weapons I was carrying. After all, you never know what’ll happen. That’s how I was raised by Analyzer...by Guildmaster Rio. Yeah, no...I really am still scared.”

“Ange?”

Ange continued to speak, her words seemingly continuously welling up from within. “My previous life really was absolute shit. I had no idea when I would die, everything was filthy, including me, and I was treated like an animal. I... If I

don’t have my weapons, I end up remembering everything from that time; all that pain...”

There were tears in her eyes, and her hands were shaking as they held onto Carnage.

“After I reincarnated, I killed everyone I hated. I thought I’d be free after that. I tried acting strong, even if it was a lie. But, as I thought, I can’t... But still, I really do love you, Kelvin... Sorry, I’m so sorry... I... I—”

I couldn’t let Ange continue, so I plugged up her mouth. Just like that, she let Carnage drop to the floor. Then, we—

◇ ◇ ◇

Ange’s room:

It was not the next day; it hadn’t even become night yet. However, some time had passed. If there was any change at all, it was that I was resting on Ange’s bed with her sleeping soundly next to me. That being said, I’d had time to cleanly organize and come to terms with how I felt.

There was the matter of Ange’s lingering feelings about her past—no, would you call it a lingering curse? Anyway, it seemed she had managed to let go of her trauma. After all, I had been using the highest grade of white magic while giving her the utmost care during the deed. Both her heart and her body were refreshed, complete with aftercare.



“Whew, this should take care of Ange, right? Wow, she’s seriously like a cat.”

She was sleeping peacefully, but when I caressed her cheek, she unconsciously nuzzled my hand. Apparently, that caress felt good to her, and I didn’t mind the sensation either. In the end, I had managed to get over this wall without any problems, even though I usually tended to mess up during the most important parts.

Heh, is that a sign of my growth?

As I immersed myself in my own feelings of satisfaction, a feeling suddenly came up inside me, unbidden. It was the same type of feeling, like pings coming from experience as an adventurer, that I got whenever we ate out and someone would put a bottle of alcohol near Sera, or when Gerard would get on a podium or something during a feast, or whenever I just “happened” to meet Colette in town.

“I’m not really sure why, but I get the feeling that I made a huge mistake...”

What? Is there something I missed? At the very least, I should be able to relax when spending time around Ange now, and I cleared Bakke’s condition. She should definitely tell us the location of the Dragon Kings. But then, why am I getting this feeling? Calm down, erase this anxiety by looking at something cute! Wow, Ange’s sleeping face is great heh heh heh AAGHH NO, this is just running away from reality!

“Mmnn...why’re you clutching your head like that, Kelvin-kun?” Ange purred in a lilting tone.

“Oh, my bad. Did I wake you?”

“Of course you did. There’s no way I wouldn’t be woken up, given how sensitive I am and with you emitting such a negative aura, even though I was here sleeping so soundly. Also...”

“Also?”

“Look, we have a visitor.” Ange pointed towards the door.

Horror dawned on me as I heard a creaking sound, like a machine that needed oil. I turned my head to face the sound.

Uh, hmmm? Now that I think about it, did I forget to lock the door after I brought Ange in? I know I opened it with her in my arms, and when I closed it, I used my legs even though it was rude—

"I NEVER LOCKED IIIIIT!"

The door was unlocked the whole time we were forming the beast with two backs! Stupid, Stupid! How idiotic can I be?! Something like this happened before too! When will I learn?! No, wait, it's more important to figure out who our visitor is. Who it is, what they want, and most importantly, why this timing? I don't know the answer to any of those, but I still have time! Wait, why are you so calm, Ange? What happened to your attitude earlier?!

As if to drive me further into a corner during my state of confusion, I remembered something once said by a certain someone, because apparently, my head only really worked in situations like this.

"Oh, what, it really was a cold, huh? I was so worried because An-nee's eyes were totally hollow. I should get Efil-nee to make some porridge for her."

I probed the presence on the other side. *Oh, ha ha ha. It's just Efil. So, she's waiting conscientiously on the other side? But if she stays there, she'll totally hear me locking the door if I try that, ha ha ha...*

"It's the exact same as before. I haven't learned anything!"

"Aha ha... Kelvin-kun, what are you referring to by that, I wonder?"

I had zoomed past surprised all the way into expressionlessness, and even then I was still being slammed between a rock and a hard place.

Okay, let's think about this from Efil's point of view. Rion told her that Ange has a cold, so she made porridge filled with her feelings of wanting her best friend to recover quickly. Now, she's come to Ange's room to deliver said porridge and is about to open the door but feels something is off in the room. If she tries to detect what presences are inside, she'll find me and Ange together, much to her surprise. This will shock Efil, who's loyal to a fault, because it looks like I'm assaulting a sick person. So she'll reel in confusion, thinking, "What? Why?" Right, just like I am now!

"Heh, just calm down, Kelvin-kun. Your big sister Ange here knows why you're

panicking like that, and it'll probably be fine. Just relax and confirm what's beyond the door."

Instead of saying anything, I gave her an incredulous stare.

"Oh come on, don't give me that, 'What is this girl talking about?' look."

What is happening*? Ange is acting way more reliable than usual. I mean, she's always pretty reliable, but this is absurd! Still, why is she so calm? I don't want Efil to hate me, but...agghh, I can't afford to keep squirming like this. Okay, I get it; I'll prepare myself. Arghh, let's just ride this wave!*

I decided to believe in Ange and opened the door.

"Ah, Master! Um, are you okay? Are you hurt at all?"

It took me a moment to work through all the emotions that sprung up over how normal her greeting was. "I still have all my limbs attached."

For some reason, Efil was very worried about me.

◇ ◇ ◇

"So, Ange had told you everything already?"

"Yes. Sorry for acting in a way that made you misunderstand..."

"See? That's why I told you not to worry."

I had invited Efil, who was worried about my health, inside. After hearing her out, I finally understood what was going on. While I was in the bath, Ange had talked to her best friend about her decision. Apparently, she had considered that one or both of us would make a mistake, so she wanted Efil to help follow through and support us. So when Efil had been told about Ange's cold by Rion, she knew what had happened and made the porridge so as to not seem suspicious before standing before the door to keep watch. I had also confirmed that she had placed a "cleaning in progress" sign in front of the door before coming in. Seriously, Efil was a lifesaver.

"I should be the one to apologize. Actually, I want to thank you again. I was saved by Ange's quick thinking."

"No, I am your personal maid, Master. What I did was a matter of course."

“If it was a misunderstanding with Sera instead of Efil, you’d have been dead, Kelvin.”

“Don’t say such scary things with such a happy expression,” I muttered. “It’s so plausible that I could piss myself...”

Well, Sera was currently in Abyssland, so there was no way she could be here to stumble upon us. Still, we couldn’t let our guard down because of the huge convenience our personal teleportation gate brought.

“I really am glad, though. Ange-san was always worried about it...but now she’s got that weight off her chest and is smiling so wonderfully.”

“Eh heh heh...having you say that out loud is super embarrassing.” Ange trailed off bashfully, but the food that Efil had made brought her back. “Anyway, that smells great! That’s the porridge you made, right, Efil-chan?”

“Oh, you’re right. It really stirs the appetite. The relief seems to have made me hungry.”

“Hee hee. I’ll fill up some bowls, then. Please wait a second. Ah, I also have red rice.”

We took some time to enjoy Efil’s handmade porridge and rice.

“Thanks for the meal! Oh man, I’m so full!”

“Pure satisfaction...”

“It was nothing. I am honored you saw fit to eat all of it.”

True, it was delicious enough to still leave me surprised even after all this time eating her cooking. I felt like everything about me had been refreshed, from my body to my mind. Actually, that was probably the case.

“So, Master, Ange-san, will you be continuing right away? If so, may I join you two?”

Both Ange and I replied in unison, “Huh?”

All Efil did was shoot us a quizzical look as Ange and I froze up. I glanced at Ange as if to say, *What does she mean, ‘continue’?* But all Ange did in response was blush heavily with a slightly put-upon look. It seemed like Efil would

continue to wait for our answer like a faithful dog, as she wasn't saying anything further.

::Hey, Kelvin, could it be that Efil-chan is...actually really horny?::

::She could be the most out of all of us, maybe... And she's totally unaware too.::

Apparently, the porridge had a second meaning to it. It had more effect than most nourishing foods, and it seemed like I wouldn't be allowed to rest just yet.

◇ ◇ ◇

Deramis, a certain pub:

I won't go into the details of what happened after that, but there were events and it was now the next day. I had come with Ange to the bar in Deramis, where Bakke was waiting, bringing Efil with us as a witness. Apparently, Bakke had taken a great shine to the pub, so she could frequently be found there.

You can feel free to cry, barkeep.

"Excuse us!"

I opened the swinging doors with both hands and shouted in a deadpan voice. Just like before, the pub was eerily silent, with bodies of men strewn across the pub floor, making it very difficult to walk.

So, they challenged Bakke again. How bold. I could only guess at what was driving them, as it was something I couldn't understand. *Oh well, whatever. Bakke is...there.*

She was sitting at the bar alone, downing booze. "Yo, you came. And?"

"As you can see..."

Ange had her arms around mine as she flashed a peace sign at Bakke. She was all smiles, and it was threatening to spread to me. Still, I held myself back because we had company.

"I can guarantee that they have fulfilled their end of the promise. I have, in fact, seen it with my own eyes."

"Who's this girl, Ange?"

“My best friend, Efil-chan.”

“Ah, so that’s her. No, wait, what kind of situation brought this about, Kelvin? ‘Seen it in front of me?’ No way...”

“A lot happened. A lot...”

I won’t mention any details. But if you really do live up to your title, then please infer what happened using the shining aura around Ange and Efil as a reference.

“Uh, well...at least it looks like things went well with Ange. Putting aside whether or not you’re a fiend and a brute.” Bakke fixed me with a steady stare as she clinked the ice in her glass.

I’m no brute, nor a fiend.

“Then will you tell us where the Lightning and Wind Dragon Kings are like you promised?”

“Yeah, I’ll keep my promise. Women from Faanis are honorable.” Bakke downed all the booze left in her glass in one gulp and set it onto the bar. Every action of hers made the barkeep flinch. Just looking at him made me feel pity.

“Aah, where did I put it? It should have been in here...”

She jammed her hand into her voluptuous cleavage and felt around inside, looking for something.

Heh, too bad. Sure, a normal boy couldn’t help but be aroused by this display, but I’ve been trained by Prettia. All I have to do is remember how Prettia looked during the Beast King Festival and I’ll cool right down. It’s fine, I’m calm. So please, Ange, stop pinching my arm.

“Aha, there it is! Found it! I rustled up some money from those collapsed guys so I could prepare a map for you. Be grateful!”

“Wait! Wait a second! Yeah, I’m thankful for what you did, but what do you mean, ‘rustled up some money’?!”

“Don’t worry, I just won some drinking contests with my body on the line, and they all lost their cash. Look, it’s a proper contest, right?”

What the hell is this person saying with a full-faced smile? What would you have done if you'd lost? Actually, given how used to this she's acting, she probably does it all the time. Does the King of Faanis...actually have a hard life? But digging further into this seems like it'll just bring a world of trouble.

I decided to just say my thanks and looked down at the map.

"First is the Lightning Dragon King. That one's settled down and made a nest in Gaun."

"In Gaun? We've been there many times but never felt anything like a Dragon King's presence."

"He really hates humans, after all. Rarely, if ever, visits human settlements. Even for the people of Gaun, they're lucky if they manage to catch a glimpse once in their lives. That's how rarely he visits. He's the type where if you don't go to see him, you'll basically never see him, though I believe people of high enough rank, like the Beast King Leonhardt, would have some sort of connection to the Lightning Dragon King."

She went on to say that the dragon lived in a place called the Thunderous Peaks. Rion would be the one actually going there, but the name really made me want to go instead.

I need to move on to the Wind Dragon King quickly to calm myself!

My excitement seemed to have been noticed, as after a moment, Bakke reacted. "What're you panting like that for? You okay?"

"I'm fine, so please tell me about the Wind Dragon King! Hurry, please!"

"Uh...yeah. Sure."

Ah, did she just feel a little creeped out? That hurts, seeing a Rank S adventurer get creeped out by me.

"The Wind Dragon King is on the Western Continent. It's...right here."

Bakke opened a second map and pointed at the location. When she did, my eyes reflexively widened a bit.

"The Rizean...Empire?"

“That’s right. The one that’s the source of a lot of fuss. You know that they’ve confirmed angels from that flying ark falling all over the country, right, Kelvin? The angels are usually pretty docile, but it was different in Rizea.”

“Oh, I did hear that Rizea’s Emperor went missing when the capital fell.”

After leaving Abyssland, DarkMel’s ship had flown to the Rizean Empire first. We figured that it was to pick up Sachiel, the Second Seat of the Apostles, but for some reason, his capital had also been turned into ash. The angel-type monsters, which would normally be inactive unless you got close, had apparently been rampaging from the get-go there, having been distributed throughout the empire. It was unclear whether the ones in Rizea were of a different species or if DarkMel was able to order them into a frenzy. That was why we had been eliminating them on sight, but...

“After that incident, I went to Rizea on my own, you see. It was a horrible sight. I passed through many a burning landscape, where everything had been charred pitch-black. The only silver lining was that the citizens in the capital had managed to run away safely. The angels only responded to those who tried to resist them, and they practically ignored everyone who was just running away. Thanks to that, locals managed to flee to villages and towns in neighboring countries, which brings its own problems, of course.”

The room went silent for a while after that. Honestly, none of us knew why DarkMel would destroy the Rizean capital. I considered that it might be revenge for the past or just letting off steam, but I couldn’t imagine her actually doing it for those reasons.

After a while, I realized I had yet to hear the most important detail. “So, where in Rizea is the Wind Dragon King?”

“It’s far away from the attack, so don’t worry. You’ll find the dragon in a place called the Valley of Crazed Whirlwinds. It’s a Rank S dungeon and a deadly area that ranks number one out of all the places the locals will go nowhere near, at least on the Western Continent.”

“Izzat so?”

“That is a nice smile, Master.”

“Yeah. I know you’re just acting calm, but that really is a nice smile!”

Oh come on, it’s a Rank S dungeon! Who could act calm with such a delicious treat dangled in front of them? This treatment is strange! In fact, it’s downright rude!

“Ha ha, Rank S adventurers really are all weirdos. It never gets old!”

“You’re one to talk, Bakke.”

“Come now, don’t be like that. I’m going back to the Western Continent myself, so why don’t I guide you part of the way?”

“No thanks. I need to go back and report this information first, so I won’t take you up on that offer.”

Plus, I had the feeling I’d be attacked if I went with her. Like, in the Prettia sort of way.

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Kelvin’s estate, underground training room:

“The Thunderous Peaks in Gaun? That’s where the Lightning Dragon King is?”

Rion tilted her head quizzically as she wiped off the sweat she had accumulated during her sparring session with a towel.

Gerard wouldn’t be able to get enough of watching her do that, I thought. But in the end, I was also someone who loved Rion very much, and I couldn’t resist extending my hand to stroke her head.

“Yeah. We finally found the location. You need to go there and get the Lightning Dragon King’s blessing. Can you do that?”

Stroke, stroke.

“Yeah, okay! I don’t think I’m strong enough as it is, so I know this is necessary.”

“You’re leaving, Rion? Then I guess I should go meet the Water Dragon King. Kelvin asked me to, after all.”

“Whaaaat?! Both of you are leaving?! I’ll die from loneliness! I’ll die! Die I tell you!”

Serge, realizing that Rion and Sylvia were going to leave, started throwing a tantrum while flailing about on the floor.

So this is the strongest person in the world? This...

“Stop that, Serge; it’s unsightly. You have training of your own to do, don’t you?”

“Sure, Ellen, but it’s a fact of the universe that you can’t get motivated without some cute girls around.”

“Jeez, again with that... Sorry, Kelvin-san.”

“No, don’t mind me. In fact, Serge, if you want to train with cute girls that much, why not just go with Rion to Gaun?”

“To Gaun?” Serge immediately perked up at the mention of cute girls. *She likes girls down to her very marrow, doesn’t she?*

“This generation’s Heroes are training in Gaun too. You can take care of them while Rion goes after the Dragon King. You know, since you’re all Heroes and stuff.”

“Hrmm...I’d love to go with Rion, but there’s a man named Touya in the current Hero group, right? That’s...”

“Come on, really? Sure, Touya’s a guy, but the other three members are all girls, you know? Remember, Setsuna’s in that group too. Aren’t you gaining way more than you’re losing?”

Serge took a moment to think it over. “You’re right!” She easily agreed.

“If Serge is going, then why don’t I go too? Just in case, we can’t have her making any *mistakes*.”

“Please. She’s in your care, Ellen-san.”

They should be fine, given who’s in Gaun right now. Wait...huh? I get the feeling I’m forgetting something. What could it be?

“Oh, what should we tell Gramps? He’ll be coming over, right?” Rion asked.

Ah, that was it! That’s right—Gerard is coming! Thanks, Rion. That was close. Am I still tired from yesterday? I should get a massage from Efil later. Still, what

do *we do about Gerard? If he follows Rion to Gaun, he'll be in hell with Goldiana, but if he goes with Mdo to Deramis, he'll still be in hell with Estoria...*

◇ ◇ ◇

Gaun, Wild Beast Style Dojo:

This was the main building of the Wild Beast Style Dojo in Gaun, which was home to users of the iai technique. Normally, the beastfolk who attended this place would be swinging their swords, but for the past few days, others had been borrowing it for certain reasons. These "others" were a group of special someones.

"There it is. Good... Okay, one-two, one-two!"

"O—*pant*—one—*pant*—two!"

"Heeee..."

"..."

"You there, Miyabi-chaaan? You're not allowed to slack off, okay?"

"No... Impossible..."

The heroes from Deramis, led by Touya and, in this case, accompanied by Miyabi and Nana, were being trained by Goldiana Prettiana.

"Hmmm, you kids aren't making as much progress as I'd hoped. The most important thing is balance. The Goldiana-style of bodybuilding places the most importance on training in areas you're lacking in with concentrated basic exercises. I wonder... This will take a little longer, won't it?"

Miyabi had to fight through heavy breaths to speak. "Still too much. Not the kind of training humans do! And why pick on me?"

"Well, that's because you're the one most lacking in overall muscle, Miyabi-chan. Ah, and I'm not talking about your chest, okay?"

"That hurt me. That just hurt my heart."

Miyabi continued to groan under the difficulty of Goldiana-style muscle training. Beside her, Touya and Nana were training as well, also looking like they were about to die.

"Setsuna's the only one... So unfair..."

"Aha ha...Setsuna-chan has her own teacher. There was no way."

“Yep, exactly,” Goldiana replied. “Especially since if you think back on it, the entire reason the Wild Beast Style has a dojo is because of Nito-sama. Also, Setsuna-chan doesn’t need this training! She already has a well-balanced and well-muscled body.”

“Setsuna...was great in both her studies and sports...after all! Whew, that’s it. I’m done!”

Once Touya finished the last set he had been tasked with, he collapsed to the floor in exhaustion. There was a small puddle of sweat below him, and it was being absorbed back into his gi, a traditional martial arts uniform.

“Great! Well done! Nana-chan, Miyabi-chan, you’re almost there; just keep at it a little longer! Once this is over, I’ll treat you to my special cooking. Once the muscles have been torn, you need to repair them with a meal. Make sure to eat it all, even if you throw up.”

“Uurggh, this is weird. I want to eat it even though I feel like I’m about to be sick!”

“I can’t believe it...in spite of how it looks, it can rival Efil-san’s cooking. Seriously, unbelievable...”

With that, the female duo wrung out their strength for the last spurt of muscle training. Goldiana’s personalized regimens based on experience and bias were truly perfect.

“Hey there, I see you’re all going at it.”

Once the last two had finished their training, Roman, the current master of the dojo appeared.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Roman-chan. We’re about to have a meal. Would you like to join us?”

“That’s an enticing offer, but you’ve got visitors. Could you see to them first?”

“Visitors? Oh? Oh myyy...” Goldiana noticed that a small black-haired girl had followed Roman inside.

“Long time no see, Prettia-chan!”

“If it isn’t Rion-chan! You’ve gotten even cuter, haven’t you?”

Rion's group had come to visit. Goldiana lifted her up with trunk-like arms and spun her around like a merry-go-round. It should have been a touching reunion scene, but in the end, the image was still...strange.

"Excuse me," came Ellen's voice.

"Yahoo! I'm here too!" cried Serge. "Wait, where's Setsuna?"

"If you want Setsuna, she's studying one-on-one with the founder in another dojo," Roman explained. "Apparently, she's learning some sort of secret technique that wasn't even taught to us."

"Ahh, she's with Survivor, then," lamented Serge. "That's too bad, y—"

"Oh?" Goldiana let Rion down with a thud.

Rion and Roman noticed that something was strange with him and Serge, and exchanged looks. Meanwhile, Ellen, who was beside Serge, was the only one who had figured it out.

"Sorry, Rion," said Serge. "I've just found a perfect training partner, so I might not be able to look after the heroes' training."

"Sorry, Touya-chan, Nana-chan, Miyabi-chan," Goldiana announced, "I just found a perfect partner to make me even more beautifully perverted today. Would you all be okay ending the training here for today?"

Sparks flew between the two as they stared at each other, unmoving.

"Oh, uhh...I see. I get it," said Roman.

"Yeah..." Ellen added.

"What... What is it, Roman-san? And you get it too, Ellen-san?!" asked Rion.

"They say that the strong attract each other," Ellen answered. "They've each finally found an opponent they can go all out against. Something like a great rival."

"Whaaat?! That sounds like Kel-nii's kind of thinking!"

Somewhere far away, a certain battle junkie sneezed.

"A fight between the strongest on the surface and the strongest in the world, huh? I want to see it for myself, but this dojo is valuable. Go do your thing on

some mountain somewhere.”



“Got it.”

“Okay!”

While Kelvin’s party was putting its efforts into becoming stronger, others were preparing themselves for the final battle by training. They would probably become very reliable allies to Kelvin. Moreover, the training for Touya’s group would be picked up by Gerard, who arrived in Gaun a little later. This would indirectly save the knight from certain influences.

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Shadow Gaol:

This was Abyssland, more specifically the westernmost point, the Shadow Gaol, a place where even if you tried to make light, darkness would manifest to erase it, and if you tried to make a fire, the irreverent source of heat would immediately be snuffed out. It was also home to the Darkness Dragon King, who made his nest in a temple constructed above an endlessly deep shaft.

The dark aura emanating from the shaft had stuck to the temple, creating an unendingly disquieting atmosphere. This aura was sensitive to light and heat, reacting quickly to any sources with clear hostility. Because of that, any who would enter the temple had to make their way using their own senses.

That being said, almost no one would come to this domicile of the Darkness Dragon King of their own free will, even in this harsh land teeming with demons. The only ones to enter were those who had come unknowingly from Toraj’s Waterfall of Heaven and Hell: Sylvia’s and Touya’s parties. Luckily for them, they had come at times when the Darkness Dragon King was not present and simply proceeded to the exit. So it was more accurate to say that they had wandered in rather than invaded the temple or anything like that.

However, there was now a group that was about to step into the Shadow Gaol of their own volition: three figures with red hair or flowing beards standing in a line. Side by side like that, the differences in their heights and chests stood out. They each took a bold stance as they gave the temple a once over, stating their impressions one after the other.

“That’s some aesthetic sense! I like this type of architecture!”

“Mhm, indeed. I agree!”

“I think it’s...fine. Well, I guess it’s great for being the house of that veggie fool’s parent? Personally, I’d prefer a more modern feel.”

“Yes, exactly. I think so too!”

Going from left to right, which was also in order of height, stood Bell, Sera, and Gustav—the Baal family. Gustav was the one agreeing with everything his beloved daughters said.

“Ah, sister Sera, everyone else...please don’t go too far ahead! It’ll be awful if we get separated!”

Trailing behind the family but running to catch up was Dahak in human form. It seemed that he was there to guide them but had instead been left behind.

“Oh, you’re finally here. Did you get lost?”

“You’re too slow, son of Dagok.”

“I bet you got distracted by some rare flower or something, didn’t you? Stupid plant boy.”

Dahak was showered with abuse from the moment he arrived, with Bell being particularly harsh. He had been at odds with her ever since he had bumped into her in Gaun, and it seemed she had yet to let go of that grudge.

Grk! I... I really wanna fire back, but with old man Gustav here, it’ll never work out. You’re a man, Dahak; just endure for now! Have an affectionate and merciful heart, just like Prettia-chan!

Setting aside the past, Dahak had gained power as the Earth Dragon King. He knew he was on par with Bell in terms of fighting strength, but if he tried to retaliate now, he would be making an enemy out of Gustav, who had completely become a doting parent. He knew that not even with his new power would he stand a chance, so he chose to grit his teeth and bear it.

“Uh...still, old man Gustav, are you sure it’s okay that you all left the country like this? Your kingdom’s gotten bigger recently, and I heard you were super busy...”

“Heh, what a dull question. Out of all the duties upon my shoulders, the

greatest is my daughters. This is a universal truth that will never change, and it is my reason for living."

"Yeah...right...'zat so?"

Gustav somehow managed to look proud. Still, it was only natural that his workload would expand as the country did. In truth, he had been mired in paperwork until Dahak had come to visit with Sera. So Dahak was naturally questioning what was going on.

"Also, I've left my work to Victor and Sebasdel. I took over their job as caretakers as they took over my job. It was a right and proper exchange. Yes."

Dahak had nothing to say in response to that, which left the group in silence for a moment. Leaving Sebasdel aside, it shouldn't be forgotten that Victor was normally also swamped with work in peacetime.

"Right. And you?" the dragon asked Bell.

"I wanted to get some exercise in. It'll serve as rehabilitation among other things. Also, if I let sister Sera and Papa go by themselves, I have no idea what they'll get up to. I suppose I'm something like a chaperone or guardian? We won't be ganging up on your papa or anything, so don't worry."

"Hah! Really now? That's so thoughtful, it almost brought a tear to my eye," Dahak said.

"Right? I thought it was! Sure Bell seems like a cool beauty at first glance, but she's a much kinder girl than other demons! This is a story from just the other day, but—" He was interrupted by Bell.

"Papa, stop that."

"Okay."

One word from her shut Gustav right up, leaving Dahak speechless once again. He couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Kelvin, having to deal with Gustav as a father-in-law for his whole life.

"Anyway, Dahak, is it okay if we just enter this place like normal? Is your father present?"

It seemed that Sera, as always, couldn't wait to barge in. She was repeatedly

jabbing her finger in the direction of the black temple above the Shadow Gaol.

“You don’t have to worry about that. That dark aura always gets stronger whenever my old man’s around, just like it is today. I’m sure that once we enter, we’ll be surrounded by darkness. I’m not actually worried about you, sister Sera, but...”

Dahak turned his gaze towards Bell and Gustav. Once again, he explained that they would have to proceed through the Shadow Gaol without the help of any light. Sera and Bell would find it easy to beat back the encroaching darkness; however, darkness was something that would endlessly spawn as long as light existed. In order to make progress without spending undue time on it, they would need to proceed without the help of any illumination.

“Hey, someone like you shouldn’t get any weird ideas in their head. Do you really think not being able to see would be able to bring us to a standstill?”

“Be at ease, son of Dagok. We have better detection abilities than the average demon. You should understand, no? Given how well you know Sera’s power. You may consider Bell to be her equal.”

“Ahh, that’s easy to understand. Then I don’t need to be worried.”

The Shadow Gaol was ensconced in magic darkness. Dahak, being in possession of the Blessing of the Darkness Dragon King, had an unbeatable resistance to it, and he could see through the jet-blackness as easily as he could daylight. Meanwhile, the members of the Baal family were basically walking lumps of detection skills. They’d be able to walk through the darkness with smiles on their faces.

“Then let’s get going. Oh, could all of you cover your ears for a bit? I need to make my greeting.”

“Greeting? Well, it’s not a big deal, I guess. Bell, father.”

Sera agreed to Dahak’s request and covered her ears with her hands. Gustav imitated her, as did Bell, though she seemed dissatisfied with it. Once he confirmed that they had all covered their ears, Dahak turned to the temple and sucked in a large breath. It looked as if he was preparing to fire off a dragon breath, as he was filling up his lungs to the very limit, before—

“YOU DAMN SHITTY OLD MAAAAAN! WE’RE COMIN’ FOR YA, DAMMIIIIT! YOU WASH YOUR NECK AND WAAAIIIIT!”

His powerfully vocalized and violent greeting echoed through the area. The Baal family’s ears were ringing even though they had covered them. Although it was quieter than Boga’s voice at maximum volume, it was still enough to cause damage, and it traveled into the darkness. Having yelled his loudest, Dahak seemed strangely satisfied as he turned back to Sera and her family.

“Now then, that shoulda got my old man’s attention. Let’s go everywhbwhhaaa?!”

Dahak had taken a perfectly in sync three-hit combo and was sent flying into the sky of the Northern Continent.

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The demons proceeded through the darkness. Sera was leading the pack, followed by Bell, Gustav, and finally Dahak. Why was the guide walking in the rear? One could only guess.

“Ah, sister Sera, that’s—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Sera cut him off. “A trap in the floor, right? Let’s just go around!”

“Yeah, but on the right side—”

Once again, he was interrupted. “You don’t have to say it; we know. We can follow the big presence to reach the Dragon King, right? Just leave it all to my big sister.”

“Indeed, Bell is correct. Therefore, Sera is also correct!”

Dahak only replied with a silent look. They hadn’t been caught in even one trap so far, and they showed no signs of getting lost either. It was at this point that Dahak finally realized he was utterly unnecessary. Needless to say, he was slow on the uptake.

The party made it out of the last corridor, for it had been all corridors so far, into a slightly more open space. This was where they felt the dragon-like presence.

“Heh ha ha ha ha, so you’ve come, invaders! I, Gillze, leader of the first assault unit, will make it rain—blooaarggh?!”

KaBOOOOOM!

“Awesome! Got’im!”

The owner of the voice, the one who had been waiting for them in the room, had been punched by Sera as soon as he showed himself and was sent flying. He flew so far that he hit the opposite wall and caused a great thud to ring out. Though she couldn’t see, Sera could tell from the feel of the punch that she had gotten a good chunk of his face, so she was satisfied.

Dahak swallowed and stammered out his reaction. “Come on, sister Sera, couldn’t you at least listen to what he had to say?”

“Huh? But I was sure he was a monster, since he was radiating hostility everywhere. He was big too. Did I do something wrong?”

“You did not. It was his fault for showing an opening.”

“Indeed, she has a point.”

Dahak sighed, quickly giving up on explaining anything.

“I... I see...this guy’s one of my old man’s lackeys. I believe he’s the darkness dragon Gillze. He should be a proper ancient dragon and a Rank S subjugation target. He’s even got his special assault jacket on. He sure was pumped up...”

“Special assault jacket? What the hell is that? That’s an interesting fashion choice for a dragon; it’s too bad we can’t see him.”

“No, it wouldn’t suit you, sister Se— Actually, it might. You all have very sharp eyes, so I think if you all bound your chests with cloth so you all matched, you’d very much look the part...”

These jackets were very similar to the type of long jacket worn by biker gangs, so Dahak’s imagination was running along those same lines.

Sera would be like the leader of an all-female group, but Gustav would be more like a regular gang leader. Yeah, it fits. It fits way too well. But for her...there wouldn’t be much point in binding...

Dahak focused his attention on a certain body part. It needn't be said where.

"Wait a second. Is it just me or did you just think something very rude?"

"No, I didn't. In fact, it was a compliment. There aren't many people who would be able to pull off this look, you know?"

"It's only natural. Sera and Bell look good in anything they wear! So you've opened your eyes to the light, have you, son of Dagok?"

"No. You really did just try to gloss over it, didn't you?" Bell glared at the former Demon Lord. She was definitely Sera's little sister, given her almost excessively sharp intuition that even let her know the innermost thoughts of others. Dahak looked around the area in an attempt to find something to change the subject to. That was how his eyes settled on Gillze, whose upper half was buried in the wall.

"Oh, right! There should be more of my old man's flunkies like Gillze waiting for us from here on. So even if you guys know the way, don't let your guards down."

"What? Wait a second, do they really each have their own designated spot like this guy? Why wouldn't they just come at us all at once?"

"Because there's beauty in the ceremony. I heard from Kelvin, my brother, that the Four Demonic Generals from your place also waited to fight him one on one, you know? They made a tower and each had their own room, didn't they?"

There was a pause, then Bell said, "That was all papa's idea." The pause was her falling into thought, but right after that, she averted her face.

Heh. I won.

Dahak took advantage of the fact that Bell couldn't see to pump his fist low in victory. The excitement and pleasure of having bested her without having to make an enemy of her ran through his body, filling the Earth Dragon King with happiness. However, at the same time, he noticed that his actions and the things that brought him joy were getting smaller and smaller in scope.

"All darkness dragons are quick to get into a scuffle, but they're also weirdly proper in a way. That's why they test our power like this. Heh, that Dagok never

changes. He always liked the one-on-one duels.”

There was another pause, then Bell piped up, “This is just a thought, but with their strength, sister Sera will end up defeating them by reflex. So...isn’t it the same as if they weren’t there at all?”

“You’ll make them sad, so don’t say any more than that...we still have the vice captain and captain of the guard as well as up to ten squads waiting for us.”

“Wow, that sounds incredibly annoying...”

“Hey, come on, let’s hurry it up!”

The group did as Sera said and picked up the pace, plunging themselves into the next bout of darkness. After that, the same thudding sounds of bodies hitting walls could be heard many times, resulting in as many bodies of dragons being half-buried in those walls. Once the heads of squads one through ten had all been handled, a door opened in the back of the temple as if a key had been used.

“I was just thinking it wouldn’t be good for us to break the door! Glad that they opened it for us!”

“You’ve already buried many of them in the walls, so there’s already a lot of property damage, big sister.”

“Damage done during battle doesn’t count!”

“You’re right.”

“Your papa thinks so too.”

“All right! I’m gettin’ into the groove! Hey, old man, you’re in there, ain’tcha?! Your son has returned!”

Dahak spat out the line he had probably been waiting to use for a while, although he couldn’t deny that he did so half out of desperation. The other side of the door was, of course, covered in darkness, barring Sera and her family from seeing into the room. However, Dahak could see, being a darkness dragon and having received his father’s blessing. His gaze was focused on a single point in the pitch-black room.

“Yo. So you’ve come back, my son. Sounds like the only thing you’ve gotten

better at is bluffing, eh?”

“Whoa...”

“That’s a really deep voice...”

The voice that thundered out from the darkness was, as Bell said, extremely rugged. There was no way it belonged to anyone respectable.

“Oh, so Gustav is with you. I thought I sensed someone big there.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you, my wicked friend, although given this darkness, I can’t actually *see* you.”

“Tsk! You really brought some big guns with you. Fine, I’ll thin out the darkness for now.”

The deep voice seemed resigned as it spoke, and the deep blackness beyond the door gradually grew thinner. Somehow, it was clear that it was receding even though there was no light in the area. After that strange phenomenon, Sera and her family could finally see the outline of what lay in the room.

Whoa... both Sera and Bell thought deep in their hearts.

The fact that they didn’t let their thoughts out verbally showed how well they had been raised. Still, why was that Sera and Bell’s reaction? Well, because they saw not only the Darkness Dragon King in the room, but all the other darkness dragons lined up along the wall with their arms crossed. Each and every one of them was swathed in mufflers with strings of difficult kanji so convoluted it was hard to tell if they were even cool or not.

Is this the special assault jacket Dahak was talking about? they thought. To the girls, they looked like half-assed, badly wrapped mummies.

“Aha, it really was Gustav! So, you came back to life; that’s pretty gutsy of you! And I assume those beauties there are your daughters?”

Though the lines of text had some style to them, somehow the words just would not enter Bell’s and Sera’s heads. Meanwhile, Gustav reacted with normal conversation, saying that the Dragon King hadn’t changed. It seemed to the sisters that the dragons always dressed like that, so the pair looked to Dahak for an explanation.

“Those were made by my mom. Their outfits in human form are much better, but my mom isn’t anywhere near as skilled as sister Efil, so in dragon form, there’s a limit to how good they can be...” Dahak whispered to them.

“Do... Do they really *have* to wear those things? The special assault stuff?” Sera whispered back.

“Well, everyone’s afraid of mom, so they can’t really complain about the things she makes...” The whispered conversation continued.

“Whaaaaat...” Both Bell and Sera reacted at the same time.

Upon further questioning, the girls found out that the dragon Sera had first punched into a wall was wearing pretty much the same thing.

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“So, what did you guys come here for, then? Dahak was really putting up a front, but you’re not here to defeat me and become the Darkness Dragon King, right? Since you just took the Earth Dragon King title from that old codger.”

Dagok, the Darkness Dragon King, fixed his son Dahak with a glare as he spoke, inquiring about the purpose of their visit to the Shadow Gaol. His son had run away from home long ago, had at some point taken up the title of another clan instead of his own, and now when he finally returned, it was with an old acquaintance and that man’s family. It was only natural to have questions.

“I refuse to believe it. Are you here because you want to marry Gustav’s daughter? Don’t get me wrong, they’re both slammin’ hotties. Are you here to report—”

You didn’t just bring your girlfriend, but her father too?! It was only natural for Dagok to think that, and for a moment the gaze with which he looked at Dahak housed a little more respect.

“As if! Sister Sera’s my sworn brother Kelvin’s woman! And that little squirt is even more out of the question! Never in a million years! Okay?!”

“It’s not okay. That hurt me a lot, papa. I might die.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! Oh, son of Dagok, I invite you to step outside.”

“Huh? Ah, wai— No you’ve got it all wrong?!”

Gustav grabbed Dahak by the scruff of his neck and started to drag him back the way they had come. He was being carted off forcibly, for swift is heaven’s vengeance. Bell watched them go with a smile and a mocking tongue sticking out of her mouth.

‘Hmm...yeah, Dahak was at fault this time! Guess it had to happen!” Sera remarked.

“Let’s hurry up and do what we came here for, sister,” Bell added. “If papa was here, he wouldn’t let us fight.”

Gustav, being a terminally doting and overprotective parent, would never have allowed his daughters to fight the Darkness Dragon King in his presence. In fact, there was a chance he would try to fight in their place. Dahak had been brought along as a guide for that purpose. He was bait.

“Oh, what? I was wrong?” said Dagok. “Guess I was the fool for being a little impressed. Dammit, whatever...”

“Sorry for interrupting your important sighing session, but could I have a moment?” asked Sera.

“Huh? Whaddaya want? Oh, right, you haven’t said why you’re here yet. I’ll hear you out since Gustav’s an old acquaintance.”

“That makes this quick; thanks. You see, I want the blessing of the Darkness Dragon King. So gimme!”

“GUSTAAAAV!!! What kind of education are you giving your daughters?!”

Dagok’s voice thundered throughout the temple. A Dragon King’s blessing was something that could only be given once in a lifetime, to someone the king truly recognized as worthy. And Sera had just asked for it with a full-faced smile. It was like asking for something just short of one’s life.

“Hey, I take offense to that. Both my sister and I have been raised very well, thank you. Look, isn’t it obvious?”

“You only look like selfish, sheltered little girls to me. Hmph, either way I can’t give you a blessing. I’ve already given it to my idiot son. It doesn’t matter how

pretty you are or how much you beg—it's impossible."

"Awww, pleeaasee! Can't you do something about that?"

"Did you hear what I just said?"

Sera brought her hands together in a praying motion as she asked again, but it just seemed inappropriate for a demon to be doing that. Bell, of course, hesitated to follow suit.

"Goddamn, you didn't just get his looks, you also have Gustav's greed." Dagok trailed off, grumbling. "I'll say this now while he's not here: I really wanted Dahak to become the next Darkness Dragon King. If he wants to give you a blessing after that, that's his business. But obviously, he's already the Earth Dragon King. And right now, there's no other candidate to take over. Just give it up."

Dagok was talking sense. However, it seemed Sera was not taking no for an answer.

She cocked her head quizzically before saying, "But there are candidates, aren't there?"

"Huh?"

"We can have Dahak's mother, your wife, become the next Darkness Dragon King! Dahak already told us that no one can go against her, so she's gotta be the best for the job! Then she can give us the blessing!"

Dagok was shocked into silence. Their imagination had gone above and beyond into territory he couldn't even conceive of. But there was no way he could approve of their idea. After all, he was already on the verge of losing any marital spats they had, and he was the king. If he were to give up that little bit of high ground, the only thing awaiting the rest of his life was pure servitude, being whipped into any kind of shape she wanted. Dagok would never, ever, allow that to happen.

However, he was facing Sera, bearer of the most incredible luck. His wife just happened to be passing through a nearby corridor and just happened to hear their conversation. Such happenstance was by no means impossible, so...

Dagok panicked, stammering out, “You idiot! There’s no way I could—”

“Heh, interesting. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

As soon as that voice made its way through the room, Dagok froze. As if reflecting the state of his heart, the darkness in the room wavered and flickered fiercely as the darkness dragons lined up along the walls also gulped.

A dark abyss sprang forward from a side door, revealing a woman in the prime of her life. She had white hair and dark brown skin. Her sharp eyes lent a scary look to her face, but she was undoubtedly beautiful. Sera was immediately reminded of Dahak.

“Muh... Mom...how long were you...there?”

“Since those kids started talking about blessings. That was a pretty interesting offer, so why not be a man and let me have the title?”

“Eh? Ah, huh...no, see...the title of king isn’t something to be tossed around like that. You get it, right, mom? You also challenged me before we started dating, and I won back then.”

“But it was close! If not for the fact that you already had the title, I think I’d have gotten more hits in.”

“Buh... But I still won in the end! Either way, as long as no one who can defeat me shows up, I don’t plan on leaving this throne, got it? Yeah, no matter how much you ask for it, mom, I’m not doing it!”

“I see.”

As soon as the edges of his wife’s mouth twisted, Dagok got an incredibly bad feeling about his future. This was a sign that heralded a spat, something that he had a lot of experience in feeling whenever their opinions clashed. He knew it was the same now.

“Then if you lose against these girls here, renounce the throne. Once you do, whoever is best suited for it will automatically become the next king. How about that? There’s no way you, Dagok, the Darkness Dragon King, would run away from this challenge, is there?”

“Wha—”

“That’s a great idea! It’s so quick and easy to understand!”

Sera was instantly on board, and the surrounding darkness dragons also started to stir and murmur amongst themselves. Meanwhile, Bell covered her mouth in an attempt to contain her laughter.

“Hey, girl, listen here. If you win and I become the next Dragon King, I’ll happily give you my blessing! Think of it as my thanks for allowing me to build an even happier and more harmonious household!”

“You’ve got yourself a deal! I’m countin’ on you for that!”

“You don’t got shit! Agghh, dammit! Fine, I get it! I’ll accept the challenge! As the head of this clan, I mustn’t run away from a fight! Don’t you dare come crying to me later, Gustav’s daughter!”



That was the day a new Dragon King, or rather, Dragon Queen, was crowned.

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Gaun, Wild Beast Style Dojo:

It was the day after Rion had arrived in Gaun, and Touya's training was continuing at the Wild Beast Style dojo. However, Gerard was now his instructor instead of Goldiana, and their training was a lot more practical than before.

"Lower your hips a little more—yes, like that!"

"Like...this?!"

"Good! Looking good!"

Gerard intercepted Touya's holy sword and parried it. Touya's swordsmanship was already visibly sharper than it had been a few days ago, and his strikes were now heavier as well. This was clear even to Miyabi and Nana, who were novices at best where swords were concerned. That was how marked his improvement was.

Is it all thanks to Goldiana-san's lessons? My body feels so light it's almost like I'm someone else entirely. I can move exactly how I imagine!

Touya's body did not betray his enthusiasm for the Goldiana-style training he'd received. He had not only increased muscle mass, but had also become more flexible thanks to the Goldiana-style massages he'd received. Moreover, thanks to Goldiana-style cooking, his body had perfect nutrition, which synergized with everything else, bringing his training to new heights. Then, Gerard had come in to train him in swordplay. There was no way he wouldn't steadily grow.

"Raaargghh!"

"That's the spirit! Come, one more time!"

Once again, the sound of clashing swords reverberated through the dojo. They were only heard by the life and the chaos of the party, Nana and Miyabi, who were currently taking a break.

"Kanzaki-kun is really into it, isn't he?"

"I will never understand his fascination with the physical. But I also feel we gained some stamina. Hrmph!" Miyabi tried to punctuate her point by flexing.

“You....do have some more definition...I think. But you’re still definitely stronger!”

Even the two of them, who mainly fought using magic and staves instead of swords, had become sturdier thanks to their training. They had trained their mental fortitude in Deramis, and now their physical fortitude in Gaun. They had also gained an almost sickening amount of combat experience in Abyssland. As they were, Touya and his party were strong enough to stand with all the heroes of the past. They could declare themselves proudly as such.

“Th...” Touya panted. “Thank you very much!”

“Indeed, well done. You may rest for ten minutes.”

The moment his training ended, he collapsed onto the floor. It seemed he had pushed himself past his limits.

“Here, Kanzaki-kun. Some water and a towel.”

Touya was still breathing hard and having to speak through it. “Th... Thanks. Whew, I’m feeling alive again. Still, it doesn’t look like Gerard-san is tired at all. I suppose I should have expected that, but it really hammers home the difference in our strength.”

“Hm, really now? Well, it’s only natural. I get more than twice the exercise when going up against Sera or Rion, after all.”

“Twice?!” Touya stammered in disbelief, provoking a lull in the conversation.

“A monster... There’s a monster in our ranks...”

“Miyabi-chan...”

In fact, if they were to try and spar against Kelvin and the others, what they were doing could no longer be called training. The difference in their levels, as well as the abilities afforded by race, were too overwhelming. That was just how large the gap was between a normal human and a Daemon or Saint.

“Hmmm...we’re fitting in sessions of hunting the angel-type monsters between training, so I think it’s about time for all of you to evolve as well...” Gerard trailed off as he sank into thought. “You all defeated a whole lot of monsters when we went to Abyssland, didn’t you?”

“We tried our best, I think...” Touya’s voice lacked confidence.

“Really changed the way we fight.” Miyabi suddenly said as she took off her pointed hat and put it on her lap.

“Oh? What do you mean by that?”

“For the experience to gain levels, most goes to whoever deals the final blow. Been trying to split this evenly, but some enemies don’t let us. Almost always rely on Setsuna then.”

“Setsuna...that black-haired girl?” asked Gerard. “Her Iron Cutting Authority skill *does* allow her to cut enemies down regardless of their strength.”

“That’s right. So Setsuna is far and away the strongest in our group.”

“Yep.”

“Exactly.”

What Miyabi said was true. Every time they were in a pinch, they cut through it using Setsuna’s power. This was transmitted in full to Gerard, whose instincts as a warrior made him want to meet her based on what they had told him.

“So where is Setsuna now?” the knight asked. “I haven’t seen her since I arrived.”

“Now that you mention it, we haven’t seen her in a while either,” Touya answered. “I believe she’s been holed up in a different dojo these past few days?”

“That’s right. It’s been three days alrea— Ah! Wait, is that middle-aged man doing something perverted to her?!” cried Miyabi.

“No, no, I’m pretty sure there’s no way that’s happening,” said Touya. “His gaze and the way Nito-san speaks may be obscene, but he was so happy that he’d gotten a disciple.”

“I wonder. You can never tell what goes on in the heads of middle-aged men. That’s why they’re so dangerous. Very dangerous.”

“I think you’re just really biased, Miyabi.”

Touya and Nana gave strained laughs at Miyabi’s statement, but it didn’t

seem like they'd totally dismissed what she'd said. Even though they didn't think Nito was doing such things, they still definitely thought it was possible. Their trust in the old man was almost nil.

"Okay! Then let's peek at their training a little!" suggested Gerard. "Where is this dojo?"

"What?" All three of them reacted in unison.

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Roman, the swordsmanship instructor for the Wild Beast style, owned a second dojo, where Setsuna and Nito were training. He was interested in watching them train both as a fellow disciple and swordsman, especially since Nito was the founder of the Wild Beast Style. So after some intense negotiation, he was allowed to watch the training from a corner of the dojo and had been sitting there in seiza pose since the morning.

Is this...really training?!

What was unfolding before his eyes was an actual battle to the death using real blades. Setsuna stood holding Nehanjakujou in an iai stance, one used for sword-drawing techniques.

Opposite her were a total of ten of Nito's clones, surrounding her and taking various other stances. The two had spent all day and night fighting each other. Nito attacked from all sides but was cut down with a speedy flash of a sword, causing blood to fly. However, he immediately revived himself using Return From Cold Ashes and once again leaped into the fray. If any swords were slashed apart using Setsuna's ability, Nito's clones would simply pick up one of the countless blades littering the floor and go back to fighting. It had been a constant repeat of that.

Setsuna had gained enough experience in cutting down people to be sick of it, and her body remembered the techniques even as she wondered what purpose there actually was in getting better at killing people. As her techniques grew, Nito gradually held back less and less, and now, they were fighting at frightening speeds. There was no room for Roman to step in even if he wanted to, as they were swinging their swords far faster than his own sword-drawing techniques could manage.

Then, in a flash, Roman saw something that he'd never seen before in Setsuna's technique. It was only a single swing, but all the clones surrounding her had been turned to ribbons, their swords included. To Roman, it looked like Setsuna had used a regular sword-drawing technique, so he couldn't understand what had happened. However, his goosebumps and the fact that his hips had given out showed how incredible that sight was.

"Good. Very good. You went above and beyond this old man's expectations," the katana beside Roman said, sounding moved. Roman had yet to realize it, but that sword was Nito's true body.

"No, I have yet to master it. Also, I was bedridden for an entire day. I need to make up for it quickly!"

"You don't need to be in such a hurry, okay, Setsuna-chan? There are generally three paths of evolution for humans. One is the Daemon, which specializes in magic and even has unique skills to support that. Then there's the Saint, which is well-balanced with no real weaknesses thanks to unique skills that offer great benefits. Finally, there're Titans like Prettia-chan who have incredible physical abilities. Of course, any unique skills they have also help. You, Setsuna-chan, have become the last one, a Titan, and the best one to inherit this old man's techniques. Your new unique skill can be honed to new, greater heights using this old man's style. Oh man, I want to see you eventually take the world by storm with your skills."

"Please leave the jokes there. Let's have another round!"

They started again. Meanwhile, behind Roman, who was frozen in place, there were those who had until now been peeking into the dojo through a gap in the door. They must have been motivated by that display, as hurried footsteps betrayed their return to the first dojo.

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Empire of Rizea, site of the former capital:

By now, Sera had most likely reached the Darkness Dragon King with Dahak, Gerard must have met up with the others in Gaun, and Rion would be off hunting the Lightning Dragon King. Meanwhile, I had just reached the Western Continent in search of the Wind Dragon King in the Valley of Crazed Whirlwinds.

I still felt conflicted, so I had decided to use the Crux Bridge spanning between Deramis and Rizea to cross between continents. Colette had looked at me the whole way through Deramis like she was just waiting for me to invite her along, but I pretended not to see it since she had her own work to do.

It'll be fine. Colette has a will of steel. I can afford to be this cold.

"This is a very long bridge, isn't it? In a good way, I mean."

"I know it seems that way, but we've actually saved time since the Rizean checkpoints are all empty. Still, your big sister here is very satisfied."

This time I was accompanied by best friends Efil and Ange. Ever since we had cleared the last fort on the Deramis side, they had taken position on either side of me. Even now, they had a firm hold on each of my arms. They were taking advantage of this opportunity now that Sera and Gerard weren't watching to stick to me as close as they wanted.

Ange, who up until now had had difficulty even holding my hand, wanted to make up for lost time ever since *that event* and had been taking every opportunity to assert herself. Meanwhile, Efil was Efil, simply joining in and copying Ange.

As a result, we ended up walking across the entirety of the bridge this way. True, it made for some good memories. Still, I couldn't afford to be thinking of those things for the entire journey. The reason I wanted to cross the Crux Bridge was related to my previous life's previous life. I wanted to see if I could remember something from the time when I had become a Demon Lord.

According to the story relayed by Melfina in my dreams, I had crossed the bridge along with Mel and Mao. Centuries had passed since then, but I thought there might be a chance. Just like in the story, there were forts all along the Crux bridge belonging to either country, and in each section was a space to make camp. The only thing that was different was that all of the Rizean forts were left open and empty, probably because their capital had been destroyed. Still, I'd gotten almost nothing out of this trip even after visiting all those places. I didn't remember anything to aid or clarify Melfina's story, and even though I was paying close attention, I didn't notice much of anything that I remembered. It was just an incredibly long and amazing bridge, that was my impression of

Crux Bridge so far.

Well, guess that's to be expected. I don't even have any memories of my previous life in Japan, so there's no way I'd have something like my memories of a life even before that.

"Still, it's too bad..."

"What's too bad, Kelvin-kun? True, mine aren't as impressive as Efil-chan's, but..."

That stunned me for a moment. "Wait a second, Ange. It's a misunderstanding. I wasn't talking about that, so please stop pointing a knife at my throat."

"What do you mean by *that*? Your big sister Ange here didn't mention anything specific, though?"

And that was how today's super-realistic sparring began. I had to protect my neck while trying to explain myself. Meanwhile, Ange was persistently going after me with her knives. Oh, I'll say this now, but we were not actually fighting. If I had to put a label on it, this was much closer to flirting for us than simply walking arm in arm. I was satisfied fighting Ange, while Ange got to enjoy my neck. It was a win-win activity.

While that was happening, Efil, my excellent maid, stood watch silently so that no one interrupted us.

"Whew..." Ange and I said in unison.

"Are you two satisfied?"

"Yep!" Once again, we answered in unison. With our nutritional needs satisfied, we proceeded to the Western Continent.

"This is awful."

"There's nothing left..."

The capital was basically right next to the Crux Bridge. Or rather, it used to be. The sight of the impregnable castle that was Rizea's symbol, and of the capital's splendid townscape, should have been available to my eyes just a few days ago. However, what I saw now was nothing more than countless pieces of rubble

and a burned wasteland. It was hard to imagine that this used to be the seat of power of the Western Continent's greatest country.

"Apparently, a few days before the emperor, Sachiel, betrayed Rizea, he gave orders for a great evacuation. It seems the country was confused by the suddenness of these orders, but thanks to that evacuation, the number of victims was kept to a bare minimum. The buildings and anyone who resisted those orders were hit even harder in exchange, though."

"A great evacuation, huh? In other words, DarkMel and the Apostle's objective wasn't a massacre."

"It sounds like they simply wanted to reduce the strength of the Western Continent."

So that's the reason everything was destroyed so thoroughly. Does that mean Rizea was hiding something that DarkMel considered an obstacle? Maybe something like an undiscovered Divine Pillar—oh, but then she'd use Tristan.

Asking someone who was well-versed in Rizean affairs would be the fastest way to answer that question, but right now, the Dragon King was our priority. He was waiting for me, after all.

"Master, I see an armed group over there. It looks like they are working on something."

"There are still people in a place like this? Efil, I'm going to borrow your Farsight for a while."

Ange seemed to have already noticed the group before Efil mentioned it, as she was already facing that way. I copied Efil's Farsight using Skill Eater and had a look for myself.

"Hmmm?"

Soldiers wearing armor and helmets with black as the basic color were...sifting through the rubble? There were about a couple hundred of them, a fairly large detachment. The one who looked like the leader was wearing a mantle that was also black. Even the color of his sword's handle and scabbard was matching. Suddenly, I felt a small sense of kinship.

“Those are Rizean soldiers, aren’t they? I hear their military uniforms are generally black.”

“I see. But one of them’s dressed differently. Look, right in the center of the group.”

Mixed in among the soldiers was someone who clearly wasn’t one, giving orders to everyone else. He wore his hair in a neat 7-3 part, had glasses, and was slightly...plump? I couldn’t help but think that about his build. He was the only one wearing white, what seemed like a uniform. He stood out greatly in the middle of a sea of black.

“A white uniform means a Rizean civil official.”

“Ah, so different colors denote different branches. That’s nice and easy to understand.” However, if that was the case, it raised the question of why a civil official was working among soldiers.

“Ah!”

“Hm, what’s up, Efil?”

“Excuse me. It seems they’ve noticed us. Several of them are coming this way.”

Whoops. I guess it was our fault for standing out in the open even though we’re far away. The other side might have people with Farsight or other detection skills.

“What should we do? They shouldn’t have figured out who we are yet, so this is our chance to run away.”

“No, this kind of feels like fate. Not to mention, I’m curious as to what they’re doing, so let’s talk to them a little. It’s not like we’re doing anything we should feel guilty about.”

It was decided that we would wait where we were for the Rizean soldiers. Well, we waited at first, but they were so slow that we decided to go to them, jogging in their direction.

As soon as we were within earshot, the lead soldier shouted at us. “You there! This area is off limits! What are you doing here?!”

Come on, how were we supposed to know it was off limits? We just crossed the bridge.

“Ahh...we just crossed the Crux Bridge to get to the Western Continent. This is the first time I’m hearing that this area is off limits—”

“What?! You came from Deramis?!”

“So you forced open the fortresses? We sealed those! Damn, of all the times...”

The soldiers grew more hostile.

That’s weird. Did I say something wrong? I didn’t want to fight them, but I wouldn’t hesitate to defend myself. A fight would also allow me to measure Rizea’s strength. *I’ll laugh to show that I don’t intend to fight them, but I should be prepared to engage.*

“Wait! Please! Both sides, stow your weapons!”

As if to spite my preparations, a voice called out from behind the soldiers to cease hostilities. It was the plump official. He was running rather nimbly, despite what his build would suggest.

“Are... Are you sure, sir representative? They’re clearly very suspicious.”

“It’s fine. I’ll take responsibility, so put those away. Ah, my apologies. This was so sudden, you must have been surprised, right? My name is Edward. You’re Kelvin-san, an adventurer from the Eastern Continent, yes?”

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The plump man was named Edward, and apparently he knew me. However, I had no memory of ever meeting him.

No, wait. I get the feeling that I’ve heard the name Edward somewhere before.

“Excuse me, have we met?” I asked.

“Ah, once again my apologies. It’s only natural to be on guard since I called you by your name out of nowhere. I serve in Rizea’s parliament. Thanks to that, I’m well-versed in the affairs of other countries.”

“Rizea’s parliament, you say?”

“Indeed. So I am also aware of at least some of the physical characteristics of certain Rank S adventurers. On top of that, when it comes to adventurers who would be able to obtain permission to cross the Crux Bridge from the Holy Empire of Deramis, well, there would only be Kelvin Celsius, the Grim Reaper who recently came to fame. Am I correct in that analysis?”

It seemed that Edward, the Rizean parliamentary official, had a good head on his shoulders. Still, I had the feeling that I’d heard his name somewhere before.

Edward...Edward...Rizea’s parliament...ah!

“Umm...from that frown on your face, have we done something wrong?”

“Oh, no, excuse me. My name is indeed Kelvin Celsius. As you deduced, Edward-san, I am a Rank S adventurer from the Eastern Continent.”

Once I admitted that, the soldiers who were on guard around Edward all made a stir.

“Grim Reaper... *That* one?”

“I’ve heard rumors that he’s a poet so good you’ll get goosebumps, and also that he’s horribly obsessed with women.”

“So, he’s the one from the adventurer directory? He *does* have slave collars around those girls...”

“Then the rumors were true?!”

Yeah...once again, I need to have a word with the author of that directory. For sure.

“Quiet! Quiet, please! Uh, apologies once more. We only really get rumors here on the Western Continent, so gossip travels fast. I know some people might act rudely towards you, but please, if you could cut them some slack—”

“Some people are like that even on the Eastern Continent, so I don’t mind. More importantly, there’s something I’d like to confirm with you.”

“Yes? What is it?”

I finally remembered what had been niggling at me all this time. It must have

been back in my father-in-law's castle, with Sylvia's group, Melfina, and Sister Ellen. At the time, Ema had said Edward's name out loud. If I remembered correctly, he was someone who had left the orphanage before Sylvia and Ema, something of a big brother to them. She had also said that he was a politician in Rizea, so it matched this man before me perfectly.

"Edward, do you know someone named Sister Ellen?"

Edward gasped in shock. "You...know about mother?"

As I suspected, he hailed from the same orphanage as Sylvia and Ema, the one that Sister Ellen had founded. I had chosen correctly when I'd decided to not specify that the orphanage he hailed from was in Deramis, given his current position. I also made sure to warn Efil and Ange using telepathy.

After that, Edward led us to a temporary base built by Rizea. They had set up tents to house them during their efforts to save anyone who had been left behind in the capital. Given the sheer area they were trying to cover, removing debris and calling out to any survivors would take a long time. Edward also seemed pained as he explained that the countries surrounding Rizea were making their own moves in this time of weakness, so they couldn't afford to send too much manpower to help with the task. However, there was a silver lining in that they hadn't found any corpses of civilians who hadn't managed to make it out.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. I have soldiers on guard outside of the tent, so we shouldn't have to worry about any eavesdroppers."

As soon as we sat down in a tent near the center of the base, Edward served us drinks that seemed like Rizean tea. I made sure to appraise it, and it wasn't poisoned.

"So, talk of Deramis really is taboo in Rizea now, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm embarrassed to admit it , but people were sensitive about it even before the capital fell. My standing has become shaky as a result as well. At any rate, continuing from earlier..."

I'll leave out most of the details here, but I told Edward about how I had found Sister Ellen with Sylvia and Ema. It seemed that he had also received a

letter from Ellen and had been conducting his own investigation.

“I see. So you were with Sylvia-san, who’s also a Rank S adventurer, the Ice Princess. I can only thank you for treating my mother’s illness. I knew that Sylvia-san was investigating the case of our mother, but because of some coincidences, I was never able to meet her directly. I’ll need to go and thank her myself later.”

Hmm? It seemed to me like he was talking about Sylvia like she was an outsider. *Wasn’t Edward like her older brother?*

::Is it possible that Edward-sama is not aware that Sylvia-sama is Lunoir-sama, Master?::

::Yeah! If he left the orphanage first, then he might not know that Lunoir changed her name.::

::Ah, I see.::

I’d had a misunderstanding of my own since he had seemed so knowledgeable about Rank S adventurers. Though he would have known them immediately if he’d seen them in person, he must not have been able to connect their physical description and names with Lunoir and Ashley, who he’d grown up with.

“Continuing from that, Edward-san...do you know Lunoir and Ashley?”

“Yes, I do. Lunoir eats a lot even though she’s a girl, and Ashley sticks right next to her and is quick to anger. Oh, I’m getting nostalgic... The two of them were basically geniuses; our mother taught them swordsmanship and magic well. Still, how do you know about them, Kelvin-san? Did you meet them somewhere?”

“Ha ha, uh...well, they’ve made their appearance in this conversation already...”

“Huh? Uh, what?”

Edward, who had up until now given off a very wise impression, was dumbfounded. *I bet he’s desperately trying to sort all the information he has in his head.*

“Uh...no...wait, but...last I heard, the two of them were in the employ of some country somewhere...”

“That’s true. Lunoir and Ashley were generals serving the Warrior Nation of Trycen. However, they also received letters from Ellen-san.”

I then proceeded to tell Edward about how they had thrown away their positions as generals, changed their names, and become adventurers. It seemed that those actions clicked with his knowledge of events, as he kept nodding in agreement and understanding.

“How could this be? They went so far as to abandon their positions to find our mother. Meanwhile, I’ve been bound by my standing, only conducting my own investigation in my free time. I’m so ashamed of myself...”

“Don’t be. They also saddened and worried their friends, and in the end they were scolded by Ellen-san too. I think you’re very respectable, Edward-san, for acting so professionally.”

“Thank you. Hearing you say that is a great relief. So, where are mother, Lunoir, and Ashley now?”

“They’re all on the Eastern Continent, but due to some circumstances, they’ve split up. Uhh...Ellen-san has gone to Gaun, and while Lunoir and Ashley are both in Toraj, they’re doing their own thing.”

“I...see. Given the times we’re in, I can’t just go meet them right away, but I can at least send them letters. There’s a lot I want to say, after all.”

After that, Edward handed me some letters and I promised to deliver them. Like the two women, he had suddenly received that strange letter from Ellen and spent his days in worry and anguish, so it was an easy choice for me to accept.

“Ah, that’s right. Edward-san, there’s also something else I’d like to ask you about.”

Now then, it’s about time we got to brass tacks.

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Valley of Crazed Whirlwinds:

Wind swirled around me as the tornadoes roared. Any birds that carelessly got too close were split apart and thrown into the sky. After leaving Rizea's capital, we dashed towards our destination: this valley. It had taken us nearly half an hour to get here.

"It's clearly refusing all visitors."

"This valley was created thanks to the influence of these constant powerful tornadoes. Apparently, this started to happen because of the overflowing magic coming from the Wind Dragon King ever since he decided to settle here."

The landscape had changed unnaturally quickly. Even though we had just been on a flat plain, we were now all of a sudden in a deep valley.

So, this place was created artificially—well, through natural disasters, at least.

Still, no matter where I looked, I could see crazily fast winds ripping through the area. I couldn't tell if that was on purpose, but if this was happening because of the Wind Dragon King's overwhelming magic, he must have been quite strong. Even the wind at the entrance of the valley was so strong that it could blow horses away.

"What a bothersome presence, letting out wind strong enough to change the landscape. Looks like I'll have to teach this dragon a lesson."

"It is as you say, Master. This dragon must be reformed!"

"Efil-chan, you know Kelvin's just throwing around blame, right?"

Hah! Hah! Hah! It's true! Since Efil would lend an ear to all of my selfishness, I couldn't help but rely on her.

"Regardless, it's already decided that we'll be going to receive a blessing. Any amount of extra legitimacy is good, isn't it?"

"And you plan to justify yourself, Kelvin-kun."

"Urgh, that's pretty harsh..."

Just like an older sister (even though she was younger than me), Ange wouldn't spoil me like Efil did. Well, it was really just in comparison to Efil; in the end, she was still very sweet on me. This battle junkie needed everyone's support.

“Let’s just go in through the front since we took the trouble to come all the way here. Ange, can you pass through this wind?”

“If I take some breaks in the middle. There shouldn’t be a problem with my speed if I just need to carry the two of you. I can look for gaps in the wind to fit in with the time limit of Uncontainable to reactivate the skill. Here, please grab hold of my hands.”

We joined hands. Ange was in the middle, holding on to Efil and I to her left and right, respectively. If Ange used her unique skill this way, no wind would be able to obstruct us no matter how violent it was. We would just pass through like it wasn’t there. Then again, I wondered if I was going to be held in a princess carry once more, and was dreading it. After all, even I had some sense of shame. There was no way I could meet the Wind Dragon King looking like that.

“This kind of reminds me of that spy date we had!”

“You mean that extermination date? That’s nostalgic.”

“Uhhh, you mean that date in Parth? That really is nostalgic.”

Hm? What is this feeling? We should all be talking about the same thing, yet I can’t shake the thought that something is slightly off.

“Still, it’s too bad about that conversation with Edward-sama, isn’t it? We couldn’t uncover what Rizea was hiding in the end.”

“Aaah, yeah. He definitely seemed like he knew something, didn’t he? If only Sera-san was here, he’d probably have spilled the beans himself.”

“Come now, you shouldn’t be saying such disturbing things. Not that you’re really one to talk, Ange.”

“Ehe heh...Kelvin-kun might have rubbed off on me.” Ange whipped out a bashful look.

Yeah, they really do spoil me.

As for the conversation we’d had with Edward, at the end, I had directly asked why DarkMel had targeted Rizea in particular with her flying ship. He had kept his cool in response to my questioning...at least on the surface. But Ange was

with us. He couldn't hide the beating of his heart from her, and I could also read something in the way his eyes swam for a moment.

Edward himself could probably tell that we knew he was hiding something, so he had said just one thing: *"I owe you a great debt for saving my mother's life, and for being Lunoir and Ashley's friend. That being said, this debt is purely personal. As a servant of Rizea, I can only say, there is nothing I have to say about that incident."*

I had heard that Edward had a pretty high standing in Rizea's government. He knew why Rizea had been targeted. So when we saw through him, he had given us the highest respect while still upholding the duty his standing required. As a result of taking all that into consideration, he didn't claim not to know, but rather that he couldn't speak of it.

We decided not to push him further. Since he was like an older brother to Sylvia and Ema, we didn't want to sour our friendship, and he didn't seem like the type to cave to brute force anyway. It was clear that there was no way for us to drag it out of him at the moment, so we quickly gave up and said our goodbyes, heading straight to the valley.

Still, I hadn't given up entirely.

::Gerard? Sorry, could I trouble you to have Ellen-san write a letter? I'll upload the details to the Follower Network, so just get that info to her. What? There's a pink demon near her so you don't want to get close? That's not like you, Gerard. I'm not really sure what's going on, but that should also be part of your training, right? Fight hard!::

If I couldn't get the information, the plan was to have Ellen ask instead. I figured that if it was a message sent directly from his mother, Edward might let something leak no matter how small it was. Even if it was just a small complaint that happened to come out.

Whoops, that's right. I stored Edward's letter in Clotho's Storage, so it can be delivered to a clone in Gaun. I'll also get this to Gerard while I'm at it. Still, it's rare for Gerard's voice to waver like that. What could he be so afraid of? No...I can almost certainly guess what it is. He said it was pink, after all.

::There's a gap in the wind on the right-hand side. Let's take a break there.::

Efil, who had the Farsight skill, was reading the movements of magic power and wind to find safe spaces for us. I was the slowest one in the group, so I had to sprint full-force even while I was communicating telepathically with Gerard. Since my two companions were in competition to be the fastest out of all my companions, they couldn't help but worry about how slow I was.

Fine, I can't help it since I'm at such a disadvantage with these two. I could keep up by using Sonic Acceleration Dual, but the effective duration of it wasn't long enough. That was why I mostly had to hang on with pure guts.

::Hup! We're here! I'll release Uncontainable for a little bit, so be careful.::

::Got it.::

::Understood.::

Wow, the state of the inside of the valley is even worse.

That wall-like wind at the entrance was concerning, but the wind here blew in all directions with the ferocity of attack magic. If this were a game, then the play would be to find the right gust to ride all the way to the end, but the wind here was so sharp that it was almost like it was saying, "What are tropes?" It was like the blades of an automatic meat grinder so strong that you'd be dead the moment you touched them were going off all around us. If this had been a dungeon, it would have been really difficult to clear by normal means.

We're in a hurry, though, so forgive us for cheating a little!

::It's close.::

::Yeah. I can feel a large presence in the back. But...hmmm...::

::What's wrong, Ange-san?::

After reactivating her skill, Ange gave us a strange look.

::Well, I do feel the Dragon King's presence, but there's also something bigger. Two things, actually.::

There was a pause as I checked the presences. ::Now that you mention it, I assumed the big one was the Dragon King, but it's something else.::

::We should proceed cautiously. I will be on the lookout.::

We continued walking farther in.

But this presence...where did I...

I guess it won't do any good to think about it now. There's still some distance before we get to the back where the Wind Dragon King is. Sinking into thought and neglecting to be vigilant would just be foolish. Concentrate, me!

::Hey, isn't one of those presences the guildmaster—I mean, Analyzer?::

::What?::

As I was busy trying to psych myself up, my reliable Ange had noticed something and let us know about it. As one would expect, she was sharper than your run-of-the-mill pro.

Still, Riold of all people? Now that she mentioned it, I kind of felt like I knew that fox-like presence. So, it was Riold. I groaned internally. *That's not a good omen.*

When I had been reincarnated into this world, the first one to ever outwit me had been Riold back when he was a guildmaster, so even now, I felt like I would have some trouble dealing with him. It wasn't that it was hard for me to fight him, but more that it felt like he had a hand on a very human weakness of mine. Of course, the feeling was only personal. Now that Riold had been outed as an Apostle, there wasn't actually any reason to be afraid of him. Still, I wasn't good with what I wasn't good with. After all, how many times had I been betrayed by that sly old fox?!

::You're right, that's Riold. Which means the other large presence is another Apostle?::

::Wait a second. Hm...maybe? It might be one I've never met. At the very least, I can tell it isn't Tristan.::

If it's someone Ange never met when she was still an Apostle, that would mean Sachiel of the Second Seat? Why would he be here with Riold? Do they have some sort of business with the Wind Dragon King too or are they just laying an ambush for us? Agh, I knew I wouldn't be able to draw a conclusion just by thinking about it!

::I think the worst case would be if the Wind Dragon King has already allied himself with the Apostles and is about to strengthen that flying ship even further. If we have to face the Wind Dragon King, Riold, and Sachiel as enemies all at once, it'll be pretty hard for us to come out on top.::

::Fighting Emperor Sachiel will be especially hard, since we expect that he's sharing DarkMel's status. If this were to assume this to be true, and make our deductions thinking that he has the same strength as the Melfina you fought in Abyssland..." Efil couldn't bring herself to continue the thought.

Yeah, there's no need to force yourself to communicate it. Even I know what you're trying to say. If that were the case, we'd have practically no chance of winning; especially if the Wind Dragon King and Riold were to join in, things would be hopeless. Whoops, that was close; I almost let some drool leak out of my mouth.

::But we're not sure the other presence is Sachiel just yet. It'd be weird for someone who's hidden themselves this entire time to suddenly appear like that. The Wind Dragon King's blessing is necessary, so let's just move on with the assumption that we'll prepare for the worst and have a portable Gate at the ready for quick escapes. We can talk about this after."

::Understood. Let's move on, Ange-san.::

::My my, the two of you suddenly got so motivated,:: Ange replied. ::Well, even with DarkMel's strength, I don't think an Apostle would be able to properly utilize such a sudden influx of power. In a sense, we might be able to take advantage of him not being used to his own body? All right, your big sister here is rarin' to go!::

We dashed through the middle of the valley at great speed. We would try to reach the Wind Dragon King immediately while Ange's skill was active. In this situation, with Ange's skill, no ambush would hold any meaning, as all the attacks would pass right through us.

::I see them! I've marked everything within my eyesight. Linking it to you!::

Efil shared what she was seeing with Ange and me through the Follower Network. Unlike the valley that had winds raging all throughout, the Wind Dragon King's nest at the end was utterly silent. There was no wind and no

sound. Well, I didn't know if there actually was any sound there, but it definitely fit the image I was seeing.

The Wind Dragon King's chamber had several levels to it depending on where in the room you were, as if the concept of flatness had been tossed to the wayside. The dragon was situated on the highest point in the room. He had several pairs of bug wings—or I guess I should liken them more to fairy wings—on his back, clear enough that I could see through to the other side. His body was green and much smaller than that of the other Dragon Kings, being only about as big as Rosalia. Compared to Boga and Mdo in my party, it was a very adorable size.

He had most likely noticed that we had invaded his home. Even so, the Wind Dragon King stayed lying where he was, not moving an inch. I was a little lost for a reaction and was starting to suspect that he couldn't actually move. That, however, was when he opened his eyes and looked at us in a way that seemed plaintive.

::One vote for just smashing face, no questions asked!:: I suggested.

::I agree with Master!::

::It *is* obviously a trap. Count me in!::

We were all in agreement. That was just how suspicious the figure waiting for us in front of the Dragon King was. It was Riold, the former guildmaster, and looking at him now, I almost felt nostalgic. As always I couldn't tell what he was thinking behind that mask of a face he had. There was no sign of the other presence we felt, so whoever it was had probably hidden behind a wall or something. That one would be trouble as well.

"It's been a while, Kelvin-kun, Ange-kun, Efi—"

Riold had started to speak, but that didn't change what we had to do: launch a preemptive attack. Efil unleashed an accurate shot using her characteristic blue flames. Riold used the physical prowess he had hidden all this time to dodge the arrow with a speed and nimbleness that seemed incongruent with his age before leaping to a wall that stretched high, sticking to it.

Efil's attack had the aftereffect of bathing most of the low areas of the room

in flame. Next, Ange threw her kunai with incredible accuracy, but they were all turned away by Riold's sword.

"Oh my, not even a greeting for this little reunion of ours? I feel like Tristan. I'll say this just in case, but I don't intend to fight you three."

Still stuck to the wall, he deftly raised his hands in a show of non-aggression. Even so, we wouldn't stop our attack. We advanced, throwing weapons and magic at Riold while making sure not to involve the Wind Dragon King since we had yet to figure out where he stood.

::He's dodging everything.::

::He's not terribly fast, though. Maybe he's set his abilities to specialize in evasion?::

The effect of his skill, God's Eye, was a composite of magic eyes. He could do anything from predict attacks to boosting his kinetic vision, all at Rank S strength.

This'll be as hard as landing an attack on Ange, won't it?

Thud!

We all gasped in shock as a large suit of armor similar to Gerard appeared. Rather, it had fallen from the sky. It was gold and black, and was very conspicuous. The armor deflected all the attacks we had thrown out with its own body, acting as a shield for Riold.

Our detection skills immediately blurted out a warning at maximum alert, calling us to the height of vigilance.

Ha ha! My senses are very strong today. I know because I asked Colette to show me the information she had acquired while we were in Deramis. That is the armor of Rizean royalty. In other words, it's Sachiel himself.

*"*I will repeat Analyzer's words! We have no desire to battle you here! We have no desire to battle you!!!"

Seriously, you too? Wait, no way. Come on, they really don't want to fight?

The armor was only intercepting our attacks; it hadn't moved at all. Even though he was sharing DarkMel's stats, his magnificent emperor's armor was

starting to crack.

After a tense moment, I said, “It’s not fair that you won’t resist. This is supremely boring.” In the end, I gave out the order to stop the attack.

“Come on, I said that exact thing. Why did you only stop when he said it? Back when I was still the guildmaster, I believe I helped you quite a bit, Kelvin-kun.”

I’d like you to ask that of yourself. My only answer would be that Sachiel’s actions spoke louder than Riold’s words, I think. There was also something I wanted to ask Sachiel before putting him down.

“You’re Sachiel Ohma, right? Rizea’s Emperor.”

There was a pause. “You are correct.”

Sachiel’s form, still hidden in a cloud of dust, did not change. The armor was damaged in several places but not enough that we would be able to peek inside, so we still didn’t know his true identity. That was why I needed to ask now.

“Hey, you’re Mao, aren’t you? Saeki Mao, the Hero from several hundred years ago.”

I threw the question that had been bugging me from the beginning to Sachiel. I wasn’t sure he was; I just had a feeling.

Once again, a moment of silence preceded his answer. “Why...do you think that?”

“It’s basically entirely a feeling of mine. The way those names line up is too perfect, like you were aiming for it. You can get Saeki Mao from Sachiel Ohma just by changing around a few syllables. It’s almost as if you’re letting us in on the secret yourself. It’s suspicious. So, what’s the answer?”

Sachiel didn’t respond. Instead, he silently brought his hand to his helmet, removing it.

“Well, now...Selector, I presume?””

“Yeah.”

Soft black hair was set free from the helmet. The face that was revealed

looked to be about the same age as me, with the same colored hair. He met my eyes and smiled before saying, “I see. So you heard about that incident from Melfina? Kelvin-san...”

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Sachiel—*No, he's already confirmed himself as Mao*—with his helmet removed, gave a refreshing smile, as if a weight had been lifted from his chest.

"How much do you know, Kelvin-san? No, I suppose I shouldn't ask such boorish questions. You know me, and that's enough."

Yeah, nothing's happening. It's just like at the Crux Bridge; even if I look right at Mao's face, all I see is a Japanese-ish person. He totally feels like someone I'm meeting for the first time.

That was why it didn't really feel like a friend I'd once traveled with had betrayed me, and I wasn't all that shocked.

Still, I wonder if the reason I'm so sure he's Mao is because of Melfina, who's sleeping in my pool.

"Right. I'm truly, deeply surprised, but it doesn't change what we must do," Riold announced. "What's hardest to believe is that we've managed to create an opportunity to talk to you, Kelvin-kun, and the rest of your friends, but it's the truth. Seriously, I was so worried about that. The Wind Dragon King's blessing is necessary for you, after all. That's why I knew you'd come and why I waited here for you. Ah, as for the master of this place behind us, I'm only having him stay quiet for a little while. He's not your enemy, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I repeat," Mao chimed in, "we have no desire to fight you here. I know full well that it's an impossible request for you to believe us, but please do."

Riold was one thing, but I didn't think Mao was lying. *Still, a place to talk? That would mean that two of DarkMel's apostles came all the way out here just to have a conversation.* The only thing I could say for sure was that the Wind Dragon King was definitely a victim, and I felt sorry for him.

"Ah, I'm sure you have a lot of thoughts about what's going on, but first, I'd like you to hear us out," Riold continued. "It's okay, Efil-kun, you can keep that arrow nocked. If you didn't, it wouldn't be fair, no?"

Efil sucked in a breath but said nothing.

"From that response, I gather that Kelvin-kun isn't in the habit of attacking

people who don’t resist.”

“I actually wouldn’t mind attacking you anyway, you know? I consider the former guildmaster an exception.”

“Hah! Hah! Hah! You shouldn’t hold prejudices like that. You know, I tried to help you in my own way. Why else do you think all the doors to the Rizean side of the Crux Bridge were open?”

“You’re talking about the fortress gates, aren’t you? No wonder the things the Rizean soldiers were saying were slightly off...”

I truly couldn’t stand how he tried to paint it like we owed him a favor, even though it was his fault that we had almost been deemed enemies by the soldiers. Still, that was probably part of Riold’s plan as well.

If I lose my cool here, I’ll only be playing into that old fox’s agenda. Calm down. Calm down...

We’d gotten inside the Wind Dragon King’s chamber, but there was still some distance between us and the pair led by Riold. Efil had an arrow ready to shoot at the two of them, but Riold had said that he didn’t care. Mao was standing still with his helmet in his hands, while Riold had sheathed his sword, raising his hands again to show that he wouldn’t try anything.

::Efil, stay as you are, watch them vigilantly. If they make any weird moves, let’s see... I don’t care if you shoot Riold. Ange, you pay attention to our surroundings, there’s a chance they’ve laid a trap.::

::Understood.::

::You got it.::

I guess that’s as many precautions as we can take at the moment. Now then, the real problem is what they want to talk about...

“I’ll go first,” said Riold. “What to start with? It seems like you’ve already figured out quite a bit, Kelvin-kun, so that saves a lot of time and trouble. Still, riding that fine line is hard. Let’s see...you knew about Selector. That means you’re able to communicate with Melfina somehow and she gave you information about us. Correct?”

I made sure to say nothing in response. *Goddamn, he's so hard to deal with.*

"I can't be certain how much she told you, but our master DarkMel's goal is to fight with you for your enjoyment. The plan is to build the best stage, arrange the best opponents, all so you can die with the best feeling. That's why we won't fight here; you haven't finished preparing, after all. It's not quite the simplest thing ever, but you get that this is advantageous for you, don't you?"

"Everything but the last part about me dying, sure."

"Hah! Hah! Hah! Of course, of course. But DarkMel's designs do not stop there. The path to becoming the strongest is also the path that leads to loneliness. Right now, you have people who will serve as enemies in the form of these Dragon Kings and apostles like us, so you probably aren't really feeling it. However, what about the future? What happens after you defeat us, on the off chance it happens? Would you turn to fighting your friends to the death, since they hold as much strength as you do? That would be so sad. The peak is a lonely place, and DarkMel does not desire that for you. She wants you to fight as yourself with no regrets. She wants for you to be able to continue doing that forever."

It took a moment for me to process all that. "So, what is DarkMel trying to accomplish by killing me?"

I made a show of asking, but I'd already heard about it in my dream from Mel. What Riold was talking about was also basically what I'd been told by Mel. DarkMel would reincarnate me into a new world of her making with reset memories to go along with my reset life. The cycle of reincarnation would dance in her palm, and I would be able to live a great life full of battles.

If that were to happen, I would probably be fighting constantly, just like I did when I first came to this world. DarkMel's vision was appealing to me, and all the scarier for it. It was like an idea someone would come up with while playing a board game. All the bonds I'd formed up until now, as well as all the footprints I'd left behind me as I walked my path, had become irreplaceable treasures to me. If I died, I'd lose all of that, and that was something I would never allow.

"And that basically covers DarkMel's plan. Allow me to guarantee that she truly cares for you, Kelvin-kun. No one would willingly become a villain and risk

being hated by their loved one on a whim.”

There was a moment as I formulated my response. “I never hated her. Just, it’s my responsibility to correct her mistakes.”

“Is that so? You should say that to her yourself. Still, heh heh...you have such rotten luck when it comes to women. I’m sure you already know, but DarkMel is like a facet of Melfina. Personally, I wish you would all get along.”

“I’ll gratefully accept half of what you say as truth. Changing the subject, what was your goal in leaving behind the diary that noted the location of the Apostle’s stronghold?”

I was referring to the mysterious journal that Sera and Ange had found in Riold’s room. Its contents were almost entirely normal things, and all the entries were contact information for the guild’s business associates. However, there was a single page that spoke of the Apostles, and the diary was the only unharmed thing in the library.

“Ah, of course I’ll talk about that too. Thank you for bringing it up, Kelvin-kun. To tell you the truth, I’ve been rather forgetful lately; probably my old age.”

“Don’t play dumb. The battleship *Elpis Album*, wasn’t it? Your diary had notes about the weapons on that huge thing, as well as their maximum strengths, the ship’s maximum altitude, and even a map of the interior layout. There’s no way you ‘made a mistake’ and put all that inside your diary just to ‘forget’ it somewhere. What’re you planning?”

“You can suspect me all you want, but it was honestly an act of kindness on my part.”

I had no response to that. *I wasn’t expecting anything. Yeah, I never expected him to tell me anyway.*

“Don’t make such a scary face. Okay, okay, I get it. I’ll talk. To tell you the truth, that was an order from DarkMel. She’s testing you guys. The ship is Creator’s legacy, as well as his masterpiece. She wants to see how you’ll conquer it.”

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While donning a smile that at first glance looked pleasant, Riold didn't even hesitate to declare it a test. For a moment, I thought he was just fucking around again, but Mao didn't deny it. It seemed he was actually telling the truth.

"A test?" I asked, and for a moment, I hesitated to follow up. "Why?"

"To make sure you'll be able to reach the heights required to fight her. As you've experienced already, the wind that Elpis outputs has insane power. It ties directly to DarkMel's magic, and you all should know how strong and far reaching that is. Even using Ange-kun's ability, I believe only those with as much speed as Ange-kun in top form would be able to reach the ship in time."

So he's talking about the method we used to get through this valley, huh?

Of course, I'd already considered such a method for the ship and had even talked to Ange about it. But the conclusion we came to was exactly as Riold had said: even if we activated her skill outside of the effects of the wind and used it to get in, only Ange herself would be able to get onto the ship in time by using her top speed. I wouldn't be able to do it because my buffs would run out partway, and others, like Efil and Serge, might be able to keep up, but trying to take down DarkMel and her group with just the three of them was tantamount to suicide.

That's why we needed to cancel out the wind using brute force. The documents on the flying ship that Riold had left behind detailed information on the strength of the wind it could produce, written down accurately as numbers. The math wasn't something I could understand, but Shutola, Colette, and Sera had been able to reverse engineer the formulas to calculate the amount of energy we would need to oppose the barrier. The final number? We needed the strength of every Dragon King's breath.

"DarkMel is waiting for you. She wants you to point all your power, your connections, my documents, and the strength of your friends towards her. I think, given how awkward she is, that's the only way she knows how to connect with you. In a sense, Elpis is a tool to measure how strong your feelings are. If you come with half-baked feelings, then she might wake from her thousand-year love. That's why you need to prove you can get through this obstacle before you face her. Don't worry, I don't care how much time you need to make

that happen. We'll be spreading Jildora's creations throughout the world in the meantime, though."

"I like that idea; thanks. But I don't think we can afford to be that relaxed about it. If DarkMel becomes the Goddess of Reincarnation while we're doing that, we won't be able to match her anymore. Am I wrong?"

Riold had been talking about DarkMel like she was already complete, at the height of her power. However, she had yet to truly become the Goddess of Reincarnation who presided over this world. She had just become something very close to that by taking Elearis's body and Melfina's power. In order to truly become the Goddess, she had to reach Isla Heaven—

"To tell you the truth, we've already found Isla Heaven. The floating continent does have a powerful divine barrier covering it, but it would be easy for her to pierce that barrier, as she has powers equalling a god's."

So they really were waiting for me?!

"Then what're you saying here? That DarkMel has been prepared to take that spot for a long time now, and she's just been waiting for me?"

"It's not that strange, is it? Her goal is all about you, after all. Now then, that's all I have. I just wanted to tell you this in the place of that girl, who's absolutely incapable of expressing her love properly."

So, she's going to wait for me forever. To think she'd actually say that to me after I became a Daemon who won't age. Yeah, DarkMel probably will wait. After all, she's the type of woman who pulled off a plan spanning so many decades. It probably doesn't make much of a difference to her.

Not only that, but DarkMel was convinced I would assault her flying ship. She undoubtedly possessed the strongest and most wicked power in the world. Speaking in extremes, she was thinking that since she was my ultimate goal, I—as a high functioning battle junkie—would naturally desire her.

"Thanks for the useful info. I'll be using it for future planning."

"Yes, please do. I believe Selector has something he wants to tell you as well." Riold said before stepping back, switching places with Mao. Without missing a beat, he immediately started to wipe down his monocle. It seemed like no

matter how I tried to needle him, he wouldn't care.

"So now it's Mao, huh?"

"Yes, you'll be speaking to me. My business is separate from Analyzer's; I'll mainly be talking about Rizea. You met Edward on the way here, didn't you? He didn't say anything about Rizea, did he?"

Right now, Mao was the king of Rizea, so he should have been alive for quite a long time. *I should assume this Mao is completely different from the one Mel told me about in her story.*

"Yeah, he was a man with a very strong sense of duty. I understand well why you trust him so much after meeting him."

"Yes, at his core, he's as straightforward as they come, comparable to Deramis's Oracle. On top of that, he seriously ponders ways to achieve peace, all while having the ability to make good on his plans. If we hadn't destroyed Rizea, the situation on the Western Continent might have calmed down much faster."

How should I put this? I kind of feel like comparing him to Colette defiles his purity...or like it's somehow actually rude... Well, it's true that Colette's beliefs will never change.

"Sounds like you trust him too. So why did you get in the way of the peace that Edward desired? Going as far as betraying all of Rizea, which you ruled for such a long time, and destroying the capital."

Mao didn't say anything, but I could see his expression tensed up a little. *Oh?*

::His heart started beating a little faster. Maybe you hurt his conscience? It seems he's not completely remorseless about what he did.:: Ange had heard our conversation on top of noticing his expression.

"You really hit me where it hurt," Mao admitted. "But my leaving Rizea was already decided as soon as DarkMel activated Elpis. So I needed to erase what was left of Creator's lab in the capital without a trace."

"Creator's?"

Creator...so, Jildora? Jildora was the one responsible for the destruction of the

country Gerard used to serve, and he should have been in the employ of Rizea in an elf's body. Since then, he'd built a lab in Rizean territory in order to, by my assumption, construct and research everything DarkMel wanted, from golems to flying ships.

"I know it's wrong of us to say this as the ones who made them, but the technology invented by Creator was all too powerful to fall into human hands. The only ones who knew about those facilities were me, as the ruler, and the few employees who worked in the lab, which included Edward. At that point, the lab had been closed for several years and Creator wasn't present. But it was still under strict watch, and was also a little *too* large. His facilities exceeded the bounds of the castle and leaked into much of the city, after all. In order to prevent any leaks, I had to destroy the capital along with the facility."

Ah, I get it now. That's why he issued the evacuation order. He wasn't trying to kill everyone; he just needed to finish off the laboratory. After seeing his giant golems and the flying ship, I knew full well how advanced Jildora's technology was.

"Did Edward also know what you were doing in the laboratory?"

"He believed in my words until the end, that it was for the good of all the citizens of Rizea. He might have his doubts now, but he is unconnected to our plan."

"I see..."

"You believe Selector's words that easily, Kelvin-kun?"

The monocled man in the back said something, but I didn't hear it. It didn't reach my ears.

"That is all from me," Mao concluded. "To tell you the truth, I came here to get a look at you rather than talk to you, Kelvin-san. You haven't changed, have you? I'm so relieved."

"Relieved? I don't get it."

"Yes, relieved. That is just a personal feeling, though." Mao flashed a smile that seemed to imply something before donning his helmet once more.

“Now then, it’s about time. We will excuse ourselves here. Once I leave, the Dragon King will once again be able to move. You can do what you like after that. Until we meet again, Kelvin-kun.”

Riold produced a Holy Key from a breast pocket and the pair warped off somewhere, disappearing.

::Whoa, did they change where the Holy Key teleports them to?!:: Ange asked.

::You’re saying they went somewhere other than their base in Abyssland?:: added Efil.

::I bet it’s the flying ship,:: I commented.

By the time I’d noticed, Mao had taken out a Holy Key as well.

“Well then, I’ll excuse myself here as we—”

“Wait a second.” I interrupted him. “I have one question for you, Mao. Why did you become an Apostle? You’re a Hero who saved the world, aren’t you? Unlike Serge, you didn’t leave any precious people behind either. Even if DarkMel reincarnated you, there shouldn’t be any reason for you to take her side.”

Mao, silent, lowered the Holy Key and made a motion showing he was thinking about the question. For a small while, silence reigned so that all that was heard was the wind raging outside.

“After I heard from Cecilia that you, the Demon Lord, were killed, I returned to my world with the servant I was in love with. Only a little time had passed, so nothing had changed with my home or my family. I was relieved by this turn of events, as it basically copied the tale of Urashima Tarou. But my family was surprised since I had suddenly brought back a foreign girl...”

“G... G-g-ghhihh...” From behind Mao, the Wind Dragon King started making noise as whatever was holding him began to come undone.

“Still, we managed to create a happy life together. I don’t know if it’s thanks to the Goddess’s favor, but my once sickly body had become proof against illness, the picture of health. I had three children with my wife, then

grandchildren...and while I watched over my family, I eventually met the end of my life through old age. My life was truly a happy one, and one that I have no complaints about. However...”

I could feel Mao’s gaze from behind his jet-black helmet suddenly flick over to me.

“However, I had just one regret: the fact that Melfina was forced to kill you. Originally, I should have been the one to shoulder that sin. That was why I decided to help her, or rather, DarkMel. It is a twisted thing for you two to have to kill each other again, but if that is her wish then I will happily help fulfill it.”

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Regrets, huh? Looks like I ended up getting a lot of people involved thanks to becoming a Demon Lord. Sounds like I’ll have to settle things with DarkMel myself, even if I do successfully recruit help from everyone. If I don’t, neither DarkMel nor Mao would be happy about it. Most importantly, how could I let someone else have this ultimate feast that was prepared just for me? That’s what my instincts are saying.

“Oh, he left.”

Mao had used his Holy Key to disappear. It was too late now, but I suddenly remembered that I should have asked him about his relationship to Rion. After all, when I had asked her before, it didn’t sound like she knew anything about it.

“Hm, yeah I don’t sense Analyzer or Selector anymore. Selector’s true identity was a shocker too. You all right, Kelvin? Oh, uh...” Ange trailed off.

“Ah, no need to worry. It wasn’t as much of a shock as I thought it would be. I was only told that story by Mel, after all. Still, thanks for worrying about me.”

“Please don’t push yourself, Master,” added Efil.

The two of them were still worried, even though I told them I was fine. *Is my expression that terrible? I’ll just pat their heads for now. Here.*

Stroke, stroke.

“G...G-g-g-Ghiihh! DDAAAHHHH! Finally, I can move! Seriously, what the hell?! Suddenly appearing and trapping me like that!”

Whoops. Totally forgot about him. It looked like the magic binding on the Wind Dragon King had come completely undone. The dragon seemed like a male, and also sounded rather young as he threw a tantrum, spewing wind everywhere.

The blades of wind were affecting where we were stood as well, leaving claw marks all over the walls and uneven floor. We ignored all that thanks to Ange's ability, but it was clear that he wasn't sparing us any thought.

"And you three! How dare you invade someone else's home to flirt! You just trying to rub it in my face?! Is this some sort of ultimate harassment?!"

Oh, it was the opposite. So he was thinking about us the entire time. True, if you thought about it, what he was saying was ultimately correct. It was adding insult to injury for the Wind Dragon King.

"Uhhh...excuse me, Wind Dragon King?"

"Fromme!"

"Huh?"

"It's my name! Calling me Dragon King just sounds stuffy, so use my name!"

"Uh...Fromme-san?"

"Wha...what do you want?" *Blush*. Suddenly, Fromme's voice got a lot more feminine.

Yeah, I can tell. He's definitely got an annoying personality. It was probably as free and whimsical as the wind he presided over. *If he's even moodier than Dahak and more gluttonous than Mdo, I'll just cry.* As someone who had yet to meet a decent Dragon King, I was feeling nothing but dread.

"So, we would love to have your help, Fromme-san. What do you think?"

I gave him a summary of the situation and asked him to aid us in attacking the flying ship. As moody as he seemed to be, he still listened to my entire speech. To be honest, I didn't know what to think of him. Not to mention, it was hard to read his mood while he was in human form.

"Will doing that screw with that old man and the armored one from earlier?"

“Well, indirectly, sure...”

“Then I’ll do it. I need to rain heavenly fury on those two for slipping past the security on my house and assaulting me in my sleep!”

Ah, so the wind valley is home security to him. I kind of wish he’d put up some version of a Beware of Dog sign...maybe a Beware of Wind sign. Also, assaulting you in your sleep? That makes Riold sound like some sort of pervert. It seems like Riold is the one who actually magically bound Fromme, so I guess it’s true. Good, keep saying stuff like that. I will allow it.

“I see, that really helps. To be honest, we’ve already recruited the Flame, Earth, and Light Dragon Kings. We’re also in negotiations with the others, so once everything’s set up, I’ll contact you again.”

“Huh? Earth Gramps aside, you even got the missing Light Dragon King and the Flame King who only knows how to go on a rampage to agree? Seriously?”

I’m pretty sure not a single one of those dragons are still the title holders. Apparently, Fromme didn’t know that many of the Dragon King titles had recently changed hands. Since that was the case, I explained as much to him.

“That’s how things are. Do you understand?”

“Huh, so they’re all different now? I’ve been asleep here the entire time, so I didn’t notice, even though the volcano where the Flame King used to live is pretty close! Aha ha ha ha!”

His mood changes really quickly...

“Also, there’s something else I’d like to ask you, Fromme.”

“What is it? We’re friends, so ask away!”

Oh? So we became friends without my knowing?

::Just go with it, Kelvin-kun. You might be able to take advantage of his mood and get the blessing really easily,:: Ange suggested.

::But would that satisfy our master’s greatest desire, Ange-san?:: asked Efil.

::Oh, right. Then what do you want to do? I still can’t support just throwing a knife at him in greeting, but...::

Stop that. I'm glad you're both so willing to spoil me, but I'm reasonable, so I won't do anything like that! Probably!

"I know it's a lot to ask, but I was hoping to get your blessing, Fromme."

"Blessing? Like, my blessing? The Wind Dragon King's?"

"Exactly that, yes."

"Hmmm...well, we're friends, so I don't really mind, but..."

Seriously, you get close to people way too fast. And your mood changes super quickly.

"But I can feel Blessings of Light and Earth on you already. If you get any more, your body might not be able to handle it and explode, you know?"

"What? Really?!"

It was true that I'd received blessings from Dahak and Mdo before coming to the Western Continent. However, this was the first I was hearing about a limit on the number of blessings someone could have. Sylvia had both the Water and Ice blessings, so I had totally thought that we could just pile on as many as we could get.

Huh? I also have Mel's blessing. Am I actually cutting it really close?

"Oh...sorry, that was a lie. From the way you're panicking, I guess you were telling the truth when you said you had Dragon Kings as followers before. I see..."

I was speechless. *I should have picked a fight after all. Maybe it's not too late for me to borrow a knife from Ange.*

"Okay, I get it. I'll give you my Blessing. By taking this, you accept that we're one-and-only best buddies, sticking together through thick and thin! It's a promise, got it?!"

"This is the first time I've gone from being strangers to best buddies with someone in such a short time..." *But I guess if I think about it as being able to play (fight) with a Dragon King any time I want, it's actually a pretty sweet deal.*

"Then I'll give it to you. Whoa, this is the first time I've felt so nervous. If you

really do explode, I'm sorry."

"Huh?! Hey, you're joking, right? Seriously. I'll be fine, right?!"

A gentle breeze blew through the core of my body. I had been granted the blessing while I was sweating in a panic. I managed to accept it without a problem, and now my status screen noted that I had the blessings of Earth, Light, and Wind.

Now then, that does it for my preparations. All that's left is to wait for everyone else to finish and get into contact.

"You've just woken up, so I'm guessing you're still feeling a little sluggish, right Fromme? Wanna spar a bit as a warm up?" I offered.

"Huh, really? As expected of my bestie, you're so considerate!"

"And it still comes to that in the end." Both Ange and Efil echoed each other. In times like this, being able to change your mood so easily turned out to be a great boon.

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Leigant Ice Mountain:

The northernmost tip of the Western Continent was a pure white snowfield that was widely known as a place of extreme cold. Since no storms could brew there, snow was able to pile up as much as it could, allowing visitors to gaze at the pure white scenery undisturbed. If any tourists had good timing, they would also be treated to an aurora, which is one of the reasons many considered the place to also be one of the most beautiful areas in the world.

However, in truth, what lay under the beautiful snow was not simple earth, but incredibly thick ice. That being said, there were thin sections too, and the moment anyone had the misfortune of stepping on one, they would instantly be sent to the world of water that spread out below. The freezing seawater would instantly rob any intruder of their body heat, dragging them deeper and deeper into the depths, a place referred to as the Domain of Demons.

"And that's why this snow is so pristine. Nobody leaves footprints on it; not even monsters."

“I know that already. How many years do you think I’ve lived here?”

“This place is so nostalgic, it hasn’t changed at all.”

A group of three tread casually upon this extremely cold land. It was the group from Trycen: Azgrad, Rosalia, and Sylvia, who should have gone to see the Water Dragon King, were here to see the Ice Dragon King, Salafia. They not only entered the snowfield, which not even the locals dared approach, but they were making easy progress through the deep drifts. They didn’t get lost, nor did they shiver in the cold as they proceeded with all haste.

“Still, I never expected Lunoir to come too. Shouldn’t you have gone to see the Water Dragon King?”

“Mm, true...but he accepted my request within three seconds, so I had time.”

“That’s some extraordinary treatment...” Azgrad sighed. “So, you’re saying you just happened to see us flying through the air?”

“That’s right. And since I have the time, I want to greet Salafia too.”

“What a coincidence.”

The reason they had met up was unexpectedly coincidental. Still, it went to show how comfortable they were that they were able to chat like this even in the cold.

The snow dancing in the wind parted to gradually reveal the white mountain that lay beyond.

“This is some nice weather. Proof that Salafia’s in a good mood, isn’t it?”

“True, the weather on Leigant Ice Mountain depends on my mother’s mood a lot. It can range from nice and sunny to a furious blizzard. Maybe she knows that you two are here to visit?”

“And you as well, right? The skies are perfectly clear, not a cloud in sight. The ice under our feet is also solid.” Sylvia stomped repeatedly on the snow in a show of testing it. There was no sign of the ice underneath giving way.

“Ah, right. The ice beneath gets thinner when she’s in a foul mood,” Azgrad muttered. “Yeah, I don’t want to have to deal with those freezing waters anymore.”

“That was your own fault. Mother only gets angry when you do bad things, Azgrad,” Rosalia chided him. “Most days, it’s like this. But thanks to those quirks, this place is considered the most dangerous out of all the Dragon Kings’ domains...”

“When she’s happy, it’s the easiest, but when she’s not, it’s the hardest. Yeah, the shoe fits,” Sylvia affirmed.

“It is a little weird to be making progress this easily. Snowy mountains are synonymous with death,” Rosalia commented. “The fact that she’s allowing entrance so easily like this isn’t something to be happy about.”

“Then you should hurry up and take over as the Ice Dragon King, Rosalia,” said Azgrad. “I don’t think the weather changing at the drop of a hat would be great either, though.”

“What’re you saying? I am learning the ways of the servant from head maid Efil, as well as the skills and everything else associated with it. I would never let my emotions show over any old thing. Not to mention, I would change this area to have constant weather rather than having it undulate with my emotions.”

“Wouldn’t it have been better to learn the ways of a ruler instead, then?”

After that, nothing else happened on their journey. They didn’t even encounter any monsters. They were now at the foot of Leigant Ice Mountain and were continuing with their small talk. It was still sunny, the picture of perfect climbing weather.

“I’m...hungry...” Sylvia muttered.

Azgrad immediately seemed exasperated, as she had just eaten jerky for lunch. Rosalia, on the other hand, produced a picnic basket.

“I packed a meal. Why don’t we take a break to eat once we’re halfway up? I don’t think it’s up to the standards of the head maid or Ruka, but...”

“Don’t worry, I approve of your cooking and have the utmost gratitude.”

“You’ve started brewing tea recently too. Are you trying to become a maid instead of a Dragon King for real?” Azgrad muttered.

“I’ll say this again, Azgrad: what do you think you’re spouting? There are

those in this world who are Dragon Kings even while practicing farming. Why would my activities as a maid be a hindrance to becoming one?”

“Oh...sure...”

Rosalia’s argument was so forceful that Azgrad reflexively pulled back. He had been thinking for a while now that Rosalia and Huba were getting too into their maid training (although at least Huba would ditch every once in a while), and it seemed his worries were right on the dot. To Azgrad, Rosalia was both a partner and something of a big sister. He was more worried about her future than reaching the Ice Dragon King safely.

However, this dungeon wasn’t something that could be taken lightly. At the top of the mountain they would be climbing—Leigant Ice Mountain—was the true nest of the Ice Dragon King: Rosalia’s mother, Salafia. They would be out of the snowfield’s devilish domain and the dangers that came with it, but would instead be faced with a different source of fear.

The base of the snowy mountain was a giant lump of ice, one that Salafia had made long ago. This ice was basically a lump of magic, and it acted like a pheromone to certain monsters. Monsters that were lured in by this would serve as their queen’s limbs to protect the mountain. There were Rank S monsters included in this number, and even if Salafia was in a good mood, it didn’t change the fact that this was a dangerous dungeon. Since there were many sheer walls that one would need to climb straight up, the climb alone would prove to be an incredible feat.

That said, the Ice Dragon King’s enthralled monsters wouldn’t attack the trio. In that sense, it would truly be a walk in the park.

“Aaah, I remember why I was so bad at dealing with that bastard, Clive. The way he used his power kind of reminded me of Salafia.”

“Really?”

“Putting my mother in with Clive is just rude. True, they both use the Charmed status effect. But it only shows how merciful my mom is because she doesn’t want to kill invaders. It’s not because she wants to use them for her own gain.”

“I’m sure it makes a real difference to the one who gets Charmed and then used to the bone without their knowledge or consent. Well, I guess it’s just barely within the realm of okay if she only uses it on invaders... Oh, no, she has a previous offense from when she kidnapped me as a baby. She’s not okay; your mother is definitely not within the realm of okay.”

“She... She should still be just inside that realm compared to the other Dragon Kings! She doesn’t take lives in vain, at least!”

“Calm down, you two. There’re enemies.”

Both Azgrad and Rosalia gasped in unison. A gigantic boar was charging at them, its hooves shaking the earth. It was clearly compensating for their movement, intending to hit them where they would be when it reached them. The fact that it was showing them hostility meant that it most likely wasn’t under Salafia’s influence. They could feel intense anger from it, probably because it had wandered into this place by accident.

“To think that there was one with its will still intact... This one’s pretty strong, ain’t it? It’s mine; don’t you dare butt in.”

“Wait, Azgrad,” Sylvia warned him.

“What? I’m not gonna let you have it, just so you know,” he replied without even looking back as he hefted his Flame Lance Dragoon.

“No, but a boar that big will have meat that is definitely worth eating. The first round of processing is vital to cooking wild game. Be careful not to cook it before killing it. Luckily, there is snow everywhere here, and with my magic, we can cool down the meat easily to preserve its freshness.”

That took Azgrad aback. “The hell are you talking about?”

“I can’t cook, but I’m confident in my butchering abilities. If we present it as a gift to Salafia, she might cook it for us.”

“Lunoir, you’re drooling.”

He remained quiet after that, but Azgrad followed Sylvia’s orders in fighting the boar.

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After Azgrad defeated the monster, they tied it up using a thick rope so that they could drag it up the mountain.

“Wouldn’t it be more efficient if I brought it up in my dragon form? Having you haul it up these steep cliffs has to be too much to ask...at least a little...” Rosalia suggested.

“Shut it. If I say I’m doing it, I will. Just a little more and I’ll be able to surpass my limits. If the journey is too lukewarm, I just have to heat it up on my own. Let’s go!”

Azgrad bit down on the rope before starting his direct journey up. There were few handholds useful for bouldering, and the wall was slippery due to ice. It was always going to be an extremely treacherous climb, but he insisted on shouldering the weight of the giant boar on top of that. At first glance, it would seem to be a reckless decision, but Azgrad used his grip to forcefully make new impressions in the ice wall, making his way up with sheer determination and guts.

“Mm, nice climbing,” Sylvia commented.

“Idiocy and whatever that is are two sides of the same coin, I guess,” Rosalia scoffed. “I’m going to fly up using my dragon form, do you want a ride?”

“Hmm...I think exercising lots will make the meal afterwards taste better. I’ll climb too.”

“Understood. I’ll see you up top.”

An instant later, Rosalia turned into a silvery white dragon and took flight. Given his situation, Azgrad’s climbing speed was impressive, but of course, he wasn’t nearly as fast as a flier like Rosalia. By the time Sylvia looked up, the dragon had already passed him.

“Okay, let’s work hard,” she stated, making use of the hand-and footholds made by Azgrad to climb at incredible speed.

It didn’t take long for Sylvia to overtake him.

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“Huff, huff... Pppffhaaaaa! I did it! I climbed it!”

Azgrad lifted and threw the giant boar over him with a resounding thud before climbing over the edge and lying down spread eagled. The ground was actually ice covered with snow, but the cold was comforting.

“You actually did it... I’ve been forced to see you in a new light, in a sense.”

“As if doing that helps me at all.”

Sylvia seemed puzzled. “You want to be looked at in a new light by me?”

“That’s not what I mean—wait, where’s Salafia? Have you guys met her already?”

Azgrad sat down cross-legged and looked around the area. They were at the peak of Leigant Ice Mountain, a place higher than the clouds, with thin air that was so cold their breath froze and misted the moment it came out of their mouths. The view from this height was truly awe-inspiring, but Azgrad was already used to it. While it did feel nostalgic, his business with the Ice Dragon King came first.

“We haven’t seen her yet since we were waiting for you.”

“Yeah. We ate while we waited.”

“You...those two boxes—no, never mind. Let’s hurry up and do what we came here to do.”

An ice temple was built around Ice Dragon King Salafia’s domicile. Also, the area leading up to it was markedly different from the rest of the territory. Unlike the road up to that point, which only had animal trails and was a grueling path, this area was paved so well that it was almost unrecognizable as being the same place. Ice shaped like bricks were laid in a clear pathway, with elaborate ice sculptures depicting strong knights, goddesses with wings spread wide, pegasi, and other fantastic animals lined up along the sides. By walking along this path surrounded by ice sculptures, one would eventually come upon the ice temple.

The temple itself was dazzlingly extravagant. It seemed dainty enough that it was almost unbelievable that it was made out of ice, and more than anything, it

was beautiful. In the surrounding white, it was astonishingly clear. Those who laid eyes on it for the first time probably wouldn't be able to resist sighing in amazement. However, that beautiful temple was basically home to Rosalia and Azgrad, and they didn't feel anything for the building other than nostalgia. As for Sylvia, whatever she felt was trumped by feelings of hunger.

"Toraj has a dessert called 'shaved ice,'" said Sylvia. "They take finely shaved flakes of ice and season them with sweet sauce before eating. It becomes even better by garnishing it with fruits as well. But if you eat it too fast, you get a sharp pain in your head. That happened to Ashley before."

"Why're you bringing that up here and now of all times and places?" complained Azgrad. "Talking about eating ice is making me feel cold too."

Sylvia sighed. "You don't understand a thing. Just like how hot pot still tastes good in the summer, having shaved ice in the winter has its own appeal. Both Ashley and Nagua agreed with me."

"Aren't they just being yes men?"

"Okay, okay, leave the idle talk there. I'm sure mom's been waiting for us, so we need to go see her already," said Rosalia.

"Wha... Hey, don't push!" Azgrad cried.

The dragon clapped her hands to get their attention before pushing them towards the temple. Azgrad was acting a little restless, most likely because he was feeling embarrassed since he hadn't seen the person who had raised him in so long.

"This place never changes, huh? It's as quiet as ever and is way too elegant for a guy like me."

"Is that so? I prefer this to it being too loud."

Past the entrance of the temple and through the connecting hall was the throne room of the queen, the quarters of Ice Dragon King, Salafia. It was floored with not red, but blue carpet, and the trio walked across it to finally come face to face with the one they were there to see.

"Welcome back, my beloved children. You've grown very well in the time I

haven’t seen you.”

A youthful, beautiful voice reverberated down to them from the ice throne. Salafia was sitting on it in her human form instead of her dragon form as she waited for Azgrad and the others. She looked extremely similar to Rosalia, with long black hair, white skin, and beautiful features. She was Rosalia’s mother, but she seemed young enough to be her older sister with an age gap instead. Her clothes had a blue theme and must have been designed with her icy title in mind, as the rest of her body was similarly adorned in the color.

Her breasts were unbelievably huge as well. That was the one place where she was clearly different from Rosalia. It wasn’t that Rosalia was small; in fact, her chest was on the large side, but she was incomparable to Salafia. The dragon king was like motherhood personified and ranked high above Sera and Estoria.

“Just like this place, you haven’t changed at all, Salafia,” Azgrad commented.

Sylvia nodded. “Mm, long time no see, Salafia.”

“I have returned, moth—”

“Welcome baaaack!”

“Bwaffghhff!” All three of them shouted, muffled, as they were simultaneously buried in Salafia’s ample bosom while trying to offer their greetings. Salafia had leaped powerfully from her throne to dive at the group chest-first. Because she meant no harm, they couldn’t detect this ‘attack’ and had all been brought to the ground.

“Ooh, you’ve grown sooooo much! So cute I love you I’m going crazyyy!” Salafia nuzzled them with practiced motions, giving them all affection equally.

It only took a moment for Sylvia to pipe up. “Toraj also had a sweet called ‘mochi.’ Those are delectable as well.”

“Seriously, why do you choose now to talk about something like that?! Agggh, jeez! Stop pushing your chest into my face! It’s dan—”

“Oh my, are you in your rebellious phase, Az-chan? What about you, Rosalia-chan?” Salafia asked happily while Azgrad was busy succumbing to the pressure

of her buxom form. It was a common occurrence, but Azgrad was in danger of suffocating all the same.

“Well, I know how he acts normally, but right now Azgrad is the king of a country. I believe he’d like you to see him as an adult instead of one of your children.”

“My, my...really? Is that so? Hmm, even your social status has grown. That makes me a little worried about some bad bugs approaching my Az-chan.”

In a mansion a long distance away, a maid in the middle of sabotage work sneezed.

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Salafia led Azgrad and the others to her parlor. Or rather, though it was called a parlor, there was no furniture inside, just a large window where one could look at the scenery of the peak.

“Sorry about this. I haven’t had visitors in a while, so I was saving my resources. Wait just a second.”

She breathed a little into the room. Her breath, which looked a sparkling bluish-white, danced through the space, creating ice forms that took shape one after the other from the floor on up. These formations became chairs, a table, and other decorations that livened up the room. After a scant few seconds, the empty room was filled with many pieces of frozen furniture.

“Yes, that looks good. Since you’re here and everything, I tried imagining Trycen-style furniture. How do you like it?”

“It’s too overdone,” Azgrad said, but he hesitated and hastily added, “But don’t get me wrong, it’s still amazing.”

“Mm, not too cold either.”

“Mother can actually control the temperature of her ice too. It’ll be a bit hard, but there shouldn’t be any danger of getting frostbite.”

“I’d have liked to have recreated the softness as well, if possible...” Salafia’s voice lilted as she spoke with regret. “I tried my best, but it’s just impossible with ice. Sorry...”

After that, she served them iced tea and ice candy as snacks. Azgrad had been clutching his head like he was in pain even before eating any of it, but Sylvia and Rosalia enjoyed the hospitality greatly.

There's something wrong with these ice users, Azgrad thought sincerely.

"Ummm, so what were we talking about? Getting rid of the bad bugs swarming around Az-chan?" Salafia flashed her best smile of the day.

"We were never talking about that. How do you run your mouth off with a smile like that..." Azgrad grumbled bashfully. "Hey, Rosalia, is this really what you'd call a queen filled with love?"

"It's just that her affection for children is especially strong. There are times where she might go too far and commit a crime, but that undoubtedly still comes from a place of love."

"Hey, now."

"Bugs?" Sylvia interjected quizzically. "I don't see any bugs around Azgrad..."

"My oh my, oh my! Lunoir-chan is so pure! Hey, Az-chan, if you want a wife, you should make it someone like her. In fact, why not just marry Lunoir-chan? You won't find anyone else who eats as well as she does, you know?"

"Please stop with the bad jokes..."

"Oh you're so shy!" Salafia cooed. "That's why you came with her, isn't it? I'm right, aren't I?"

Salafia liked Sylvia very much. She had met Sylvia quite a while after she had kidnapped Azgrad, raised him, and then returned him to his country after he had grown up. Sylvia had gotten rid of monsters in the area who opposed her, and as thanks, Salafia treated her to some homemade cooking. The main reason Salafia liked her so much was because of how much Sylvia enjoyed her cooking.

At first, Salafia had tried to set Azgrad up with other dragons. However, a human's lifespan was much shorter, so thinking that in the end, a human should be with another human, Salafia had started searching for other potential matches for him. Then, for better or worse, whether it was coincidence or fate, Sylvia was the one who had appeared, and Salafia set her sights on her. She was

so enamored with the idea that she gave Sylvia her blessing right then and there.

And Azgrad had unknowingly come back to her with the very person she had chosen. It was only natural that Salafia would misunderstand.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

If Nagua or Huba had been present, that assertion would have caused incredible confusion. Then again, Sylvia would have continued to munch on her ice candy regardless.

“We didn’t come here to talk about that. I’ll get right to it—the real reason we came!”

“Huh? You’re skipping past dating and going straight to marriage? No...already?!”

“No!!!”

From there, Azgrad had to enlist Rosalia’s help to get things on track. Rosalia relayed everything, ending with, “So that’s what’s going on. Please, we’d like your help.”

“Yeah, sure. My own children are asking me this; I’ll do it for free!” The answer was immediate.

Azgrad was a little taken aback, and after a moment, he responded questioningly. “You jumped on board really fast. I thought you’d, like, at least ask *one* question.”

“I don’t need to. After all, all the other Dragon Kings have already decided to help.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Munch, crunch, crunch.

According to Salafia, the Dragon Kings of Water, Wind, Lightning, and Darkness had already joined the ones who had immediately agreed (the kings of Fire, Earth, and Light) in the plan to take down the flying ship. It wasn’t clear

how she had gotten that information, but suffice to say she had already figured that an invitation would be coming her way.

“What?! We... We’re dead last?”

“Aww, don’t take it so hard. You had the longest distance to travel from your country, Az-chan, so it was only natural.”

“Still, how did you know all this, mother?”

“Heh heh, I *am* the oldest dragon after the previous Earth and Light Dragon Kings. Learning something like this is a cinch for me.”

“That would mean you’re a real old hag—”

“Az-chaaaan?” Salafia was quick to interrupt. “That way of speaking lacks some elegance, doesn’t it? I may be counting my age in the triple digits, but still! Let’s see, maybe we should have some swimming practice. It’s been a long time, after all...”

The beautiful scenery that could be seen through the window of the room instantly turned into a fierce blizzard.

“Now then, let’s get going. To your punishment, that is.”

“Uh, hey...stop! Don’t grab me by my scruff! Damn this stupid strength of yours!”

Azgrad was dragged out of the room by Salafia. Rosalia, for her part, refused to stop it and simply watched it happen.

“Azgrad never learns, does he? He still makes the same mistakes from when he was little. When will he learn...”

Crunch, munch, munch, crunch.

Sylvia’s snacking continued for a while longer before Rosalia piped up. “You’ll get a stomachache if you don’t hold back at least a little, Lunoir.”

“I’m fine. I know my limits.”

The plate on the table that Sylvia was eating from was still refilling with ice candies, creating a mountain of refreshing coolness. It must have been a show of hospitality from Salafia.

“Even controlling it remotely like this is easy for her. To cook with her own powers... My mother is frighteningly capable, isn’t she?”

“You can’t do this, Rosalia?”

“If I were to cook normally, I’m confident I could make something tastier than this. But as an aspiring Ice Dragon King, I would have to at least be able to make something like this with my abilities. Something this uniform in such large amounts, and she’s controlling it remotely... As I am now, I can only say it would be very difficult.”

Rosalia created a skewer of ice as she spoke and made a show of creating an ice candy around it. She only made a single one, but she put all her concentration into it and it was wonderfully made. Still, it was only a fraction better than what Salafia was producing.

“You aren’t going to challenge her now?”

“No, I’m not. In the first place, I’m still at a lower level than Dahak, Mdofarak, and Boga. I won’t do it now, but someday for sure...”

“Mm, I believe in you Rosalia. This ice candy is very delicious, after all.”

Sylvia had made Rosalia’s ice candy disappear in two bites. Then, without a change in expression, she went straight back to the pile of mass-produced ice candies. Rosalia couldn’t help but find that funny somehow, and she broke out into a giggle.

“Hee hee... Now then, mother will probably spend an hour punishing Azgrad, so I guess I’ll use that time to cook the boar. I have to at least show some filial piety sometimes. It’ll be nice if the kitchen hasn’t changed, but...”

“Mm, I’m looking forward to it.”

Rosalia pointedly ignored Azgrad’s shouts, which thundered over to them from a fair distance away as she made for the kitchen. If nothing else, she was determined to surprise her mother with her cooking.

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Gaun, Wild Beast Style Dojo:

::Mhm, indeed. Yes, understood. At the estate, then.::

Gerard replied to Kelvin's telepathic message before dropping cross-legged to the dojo floor and heaving a sigh.

"So, it's finally happening. They've been whipped into shape, at least. They shouldn't lag behind on the field of battle."

Touya, panting furiously in an attempt to get enough air into his exhausted frame, lay spread eagled behind Gerard, drenched in sweat. After a moment, he finally managed to slow his panting enough to say, "What... What were you talking about, Gerard-san?"

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, concentrate on recovering your stamina. How long are you planning on lying there?"

It had been several days since Gerard had arrived. Miyabi and Nana had split off to concentrate on training their magic while Touya stuck with the knight to train in swordsmanship. Setsuna must have had a significant influence on him, as after seeing her, Touya's growth speed had become remarkable even from Gerard's perspective. To him, this training had become enjoyable in a different way than playing with one's grandchild. He felt something similar to what he had felt in his past life as he raised his juniors and successors in knighthood.

"Hrm, this feels different from Rion and Ruka. It's been a while since I've felt the pure joy of training someone else."

"You mean something like an apprentice? Ha ha, that makes you my fourth teacher..."

"Isn't that too many?!"

There was Cliff, Kelvin, Sylvia, and now Gerard. Touya had a wonderful variety of teachers.

By the time he was able to pick himself up, the exhilarating sound of light footsteps approached the dojo. Of course, Gerard was the first one to react to the sound.

"I'm baaaaack! I got the okay from the Dragon King!"

"Whooooooooo! I knew you'd do it, Riooonnn!" Touya's new teacher lifted the returned Rion up and spun her around, just like Kelvin had once done in an

attempt to imitate a merry-go-round. The knight's mood was now very different than it had been a moment before.

"Uh...umm, Gerard-san?"

"Wait a second. Right now I am refilling on grandchild particles. If I don't, I won't be able to stay alive."

"Aha ha, you're making too big a deal of it, gramps!"

Age-wise, Touya would also fit into grandchild territory, but as Gerard had said, something was different when it came to him. The heart of a grandfather was as inscrutable as a maiden in love.

After a moment more, Rion asked, "You done?"

"Yes, I am satisfied."

"I get it. Everyone's off in different places. Shutola-chan and Efil-nee aren't around either, so it's fine; you can't help it."

"Wow. How should I put this? That's super magnanimous of you."

"Indeed, I have completely fallen."

That had, in fact, already happened a long time ago...

"Still, you went off to the Thunderous Peaks where the Lightning Dragon King is, right? Is everything settled already?"

"Yep! I went prepared to fight and show my strength, but I wasn't expecting the Lightning Dragon King to warm up to me right away. In fact, I got The Lightning Dragon King to agree to help and give me a blessing within the day. Then I stayed for a couple days, and while I was playing—"

Gerard interrupted her there. "You stayed over? Wait, Rion...is the Lightning Dragon King male or female?"

"Huh? She's a girl?"

"Then all is well! I hope you two get along from now on!"

"Yeah, I do too!"

"Ha ha..."

Whoever ends up marrying Rion's gonna have to suffer through a lot of hardship... thought Touya as he plastered a wry smile onto his face. However, Rion herself was considerably off in who she placed her feelings of love in, so what Touya was thinking would most likely not come to pass. The only one who would apply for that role was already approved of by Gerard.

"Huh, everyone's here. Did something happen?"

"Oh! It's Setsuna."

Was this another example of the phenomenon where once people start to gather, others follow suit? Setsuna, who hadn't shown herself in a long while, finally appeared in the dojo still in her karate gi.

In that instant, Touya realized that she had gotten far stronger than he had, even after putting so much effort into training. *I can tell just from looking her in the eyes. The gap's gotten really big...*

It was because Touya had been with her since childhood that he could tell this intuitively. The atmosphere around Setsuna was very different from how it had been before, even though she looked the same on the outside. To Touya, her entire vibe had become more polished, and she looked like she was overflowing with confidence. It was enough to convince him that she had definitely managed something incredible.

"Hey, all! Everyone's favorite old man is here too. Wait, where are Miyabi-chan and Nana-chan? Where are the oases for this old man's eyes?"

"Ga! Ha! Ha! Too bad for you, they've gone to the Cavern of the Divine Beasts to train their magic!"

Miyabi, Nana, and her partner, Mun, had gone to the nearest dungeon that would provide the most training for them.

"Hmm, Gaun's most difficult dungeon? This old man used to go there a lot. That's nostalgic. But having them go there alone is a little worrying. Maybe this old man should go lend a hand!"

"Wait a second now; I don't think they need help from someone as steeped in desire as you are. They've already experienced the worst that Toraj has to offer —the Dragon Sea Cave. They've gotten stronger since then, so they shouldn't

need a guardian.”

“Don’t stop me, Gerard-dono! This old man is purely, sincerely worried about those two, with no ulterior motive! You understand, don’t you?!”

“No, I don’t. And that’s why I’m stopping you...”

Gerard grabbed firmly on to Nito’s clothes as the other man valiantly tried to run outside. Beside him, Nito’s successor, Setsuna, shot him an incredibly cold look. But the old man still acted freely, as if he were already used to such things.

“High school girl particles... Heh, you understand such sweet words, don’t you, Gerard-dono?”

“Not at all, but now I’m convinced I should stop you.”

“Ah, crap! So this person prefers them even younger?! I’d still like you to wait and think about this rationally. If you do, you’ll see that this old man is much safer than you!”

“Gerard-san, please hold him like that for a moment. I’ll split him in two.”

“Aye, understood.”

That gave Nito pause. “Uh, that’s a joke right? Actually, everything this old man has said up until now has been something of a gag. If you’d take it as su—abuwaghh!”

“Eurgh...your personality’s certainly gotten more extreme, Setsuna...”

The old man had certainly been punished.

“So, you said that you got word from Kelvin-san that talks with all of the Dragon Kings have concluded?” asked Touya.

“Indeed,” said Gerard. “Well, ‘talks’ makes it sound more impressive than it is, but...”

“Ehe heh...true, all I really did was play around, after all,” Rion noted. “Alex is currently sleeping in my shadow because he’s tired from all the playing.”

The description “sleeping because he’s tired from all the playing” might have sounded cute, but her words likely weren’t meant to be taken literally. At the

very least, from Touya's point of view, it was definitely "training."

"So, we're all to gather at the estate for now. Rion and I will be leaving Gaun," Gerard announced.

"What?! Really?!" cried Touya.

"No need to be so distressed. If you need more training in the way of the sword, that corpse over there, Nito, is quite skilled. He's Setsuna's master and is also a storied veteran strong enough to match me. He should do nicely."

"Which means I'll gain my fifth teacher!"

"Touya, watch what you say with such sparkling eyes..." Setsuna trailed off, worried. "Well, I suppose this would be a good chance for teacher Nito to learn about the existence of male high schoolers as well as the female ones, I suppose?"

"Heh... Heh heh...this old man finds that idea strangely appealing..." Nito had revived.

"So that's how it is," Gerard concluded. "I know you've just gotten back, Rion, but we need to prepare to leave."

"Huh, already? But gramps, shouldn't I greet Prettia-chan first?"

The knight froze for a moment. "G... Goldiana-dono is training with Serge and needs to concentrate. It wouldn't do to distract them. It'd be putting the cart before the horse if we were to go give our greetings and throw them into disarray."

The grandpa was desperate.

"Gramps..." Rion said in a smug lilt.

"Y... Yes?"

"It's an adult love, isn't it?"

"Erm...yes."

Rion had misunderstood and thought that Gerard was playing some high-level game of love. Though the knight was able to escape the current danger thanks to that, he couldn't help but feel that it would have consequences down the

line, and it caused him some anxiety.

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Parth:

We left the Western Continent the way we had come, and it was several more days before we returned to Parth. By now, the sight of the clock tower that served as a tourist attraction seemed nostalgic.

I immediately took Efil and Ange around the town, and it reminded me of when we had first met. Still, there was something else on my mind.

“Urgh, my hips hurt...”

“Aha ha, it’s because you stretched yourself too far, Kelvin-kun!”

“I’ll give you a massage when we return to the mansion, Master.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I had ended up trying out flight with the blessing I’d received from Wind Dragon King Fromme the entire way across Crux bridge, after all. Thanks to that, I was still feeling the strain on my body, in my hips in particular. I regretted having to learn the lesson that it was always best to get used to things slowly, the hard way, but now I was thinking it was a price I would happily pay for Efil’s massage.

Heh heh, in the end, the merits far outweigh the rest.

“Still, eating on the move is nice isn’t it? I wonder if it’ll become popular in Parth now?” Ange mused.

“It’s a bit uncouth, though...”

“You say that Efil-chan, but you’re eating too.”

Efil stammered back in embarrassment, “Please don’t tease me, Ange-san!”

Efil and Ange were enjoying a dessert from a store that had opened while we had been away. It had fruits packed into a wrapping made of thin cooked dough, and it looked much like a crepe. It seemed the main selling point was that it could easily be eaten on the move, and apparently there had been an uptick in women who could be seen walking while eating it or a skewer from a

stall.



Maybe it was because they were eating sweets, but the two of them were full of energy, as if they had forgotten the fact that we'd spent a long time on our mission. Mdo had once superstitiously remarked that sweets made women more beautiful, and that might not have been an outright lie. Somehow, their skin seemed glossier than before.

I want to have Melfina try this once she comes back. She'd probably scarf it down with a smile on her face. Her return would also add some expenses—no, it'll be way more than 'some.' My bad, I said nothing.

"Yo, if it isn't Kelvin and friends! It's been a while!"

"Ah, hello, Uld-san. And hello to your party too."

On the way back home, we ran into Uld and his party in front of the Fairy's Song, which his wife, Clare, ran. They must have just returned from a quest, as they were flecked with dirt and dust, and covered in small scratches. Still, his well-muscled form was shining in the light of the sun as usual, so it didn't seem like there was any need to worry about his wounds.

"It's been a while, Uld-san."

"I see you've been working hard. Are you pushing for that Rank A promotion?" Ange had slipped back into receptionist mode.

"Oh... Oh! It's Efil-chan and Ange-chan! Should I take the chance to pray to them?!"

"You absolute idiot! You're a member of the fan club—of course you should! We are so grateful!"

"Ah, again?! You guys should leave that stupid fan club already! How many times have I told you?!"

"You're the only one of us with a wife and kids! You wouldn't understand how we single men feel!"

"Yeah, that's right!"

"How many times are you guys planning to bring that up..."

The members of Team Rusted Silver never change, do they... Huh? That archer

hasn't joined the conversation at all; only the swordsman and the mage have been talking. Usually all three of them join in. What happened?

"Hey, bow guy! You say something too!"

"Yeah! Give it to'im good!"

"Uh..no. I...well, I don't really care... Oh, it's almost time! I'll be going back to the guild first. Adieu!"

"Huh? You, what— Hey?!"

"No way! Has he betrayed us?!"

"He ran! Catch him and kill him!"

Apparently, there had been some changes in Team Rusted Silver. The three of them ran towards the guild, leaving Uld and us behind.

"Goddamn, they always...oh? Kelvin, you look really tired. Did something happen?"

Even while letting out a large sigh, Uld still managed to see how I was doing. Just what one would expect from the representative of all people with common sense, and the one who had saved me from Sera. Still, the matter of the Dragon Kings was confidential information that involved several countries and their secrets. Uld was only a Rank B adventurer, so I couldn't actually tell him about it.

Let's just play this one off.

"I can't hide anything from you, Uld-san! To tell you the truth, I hurt my hip really badly last night."

"Hey now, you all right? You're not that old..."

"Ha ha, I'm nothing but ashamed."

"He's right!" Ange jumped in with an impish lilt in her voice. "You always get carried away and move too fiercely, Kelvin-kun."

"You were in your own world at the time, Master. We were with you, so we should have stopped you."

"Aww, don't say that. It's so embarrassing!" *Let's act surprised here.*

“Ah, so you hurt your hip like that... No wonder Efil-chan and Ange are glowing. Still, Kelvin, you shouldn’t talk too openly about such things. I have no idea what the others would say if they were around.”

“Huh?”

Uh...what? I had no idea what Uld was talking about, which was a rare thing. *Yeah, I just don’t get it.*

Setting that confusion aside, I invited Uld to lunch at my estate as a show of gratitude. He was happy for the chance to eat Efil’s cooking, so he immediately said yes. If the rest of his party had been around, I would have invited them too, but...we weren’t free enough to run after them, so there was no chance.

“Oh, hey, this is the first time I’ll be coming to your home, Kelvin.”

“I’ve been wanting to invite you for a while now. But what with all the jobs and promotions and the Demon Lord, there was no time...”

“Ha ha! There was nothing you could do about the Demon Lord popping up. Any Rank S adventurer has got to have people wanting their help from all over. But that just makes me happier we’re still friends, Kelvin.”

“Uld-san...”

His treatment of me was so...*decent* that I couldn’t help but be moved. *Uld, are you an angel or something?*

“Whoa, this is your house, Kelvin? It really is huge...”

“Oh no, it’s tiny compared to Colette’s and Azgrad’s homes.”

“You know you’re comparing your house to literal castles...”

“Welcome back, Kelvin-sama.” As we approached the gates, the golems guarding my property reacted.

“We’re home. Did anyone arrive before us?”

“Sera-sama and Dahak-sama returned yesterday.”

Oh, so the group I expected to take the longest ended up arriving first.

“Ah, Master!”

The gates opened and we walked through the front grounds. Just before we reached the mansion, Ruka came leaping out of it...from the second floor. It seemed she was overjoyed at our return. Ange complimented her on a wonderful landing while Efil scolded her for her lack of class. However, Ruka had missed us so much that she took even that as a wonderful thing. Her smile never broke the whole time. Uld and I couldn't help but grin in turn.

"Where are Sera and Dahak, Ruka? In the living room?"

"Yeah! I think Sera-sama is relaxing on the sofa. Hak-chan should be around back in the fields, I think?"

"I see. Then I suppose I should go see Sera first. Please show Uld-san to the dining room."

"It's been a while since I've seen Lady Sera too," Uld countered. "May I greet her with you? That is, if it won't be a bother."

"Ha ha, never! I'm sure Sera would be overjoyed."

"I will head to the kitchen to prepare food then, Master."

"Sure, I'm counting on you."

With that, we decided to head to the living room. Once we opened the door —

"Ah, Kelvin!"

"Oh? If it isn't my fool of a son. It's been a while."

"We've let ourselves in. Your face is as miserly as always."

—there were more heads of red hair than I'd expected.

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Kelvin's estate, living room:

"Kelviiiiin!"

Sera, who I hadn't seen in a while, dove at me and I caught her. *Was she imitating Rion? Oohh, the volume... Mm! Whoops, now's not the time for that.*

"Uh...father, you came..."

Sera wasn't the only one in the living room. She was accompanied by my father-in-law, Gustav, and my little sister-in-law, Bell. This unexpected ambush reminded me of the nightmare that was a certain banquet. *Is there any alcohol... Good, none in this room.*

"'Father'? Is that huge guy your dad, Kelvin?"

Uld peeked in through the gap in the door behind me. *Ahh, yeah I can see how he'd misunderstand.*

"No, he's Sera's dad. Calling him 'father' is, well..."

"Oh, I see. You don't have to go any further, Kelvin. I'm at the age to see my daughter married off myself."

"Oh, Uld, you move so fast! M... Me and Kelvin, married?!"

I'm just glad she doesn't seem too opposed to it. That reminds me, Uld's and Clare's child is a girl? Clare did say that the maid outfit Efil first received used to be their daughter's. That clothing was what set Efil on the path of a maid, and it was something very precious. I still hadn't met their daughter, but I was grateful to her from the bottom of my heart. And by extension, I was also grateful to her parents for raising her. *You guys really are divine.*

"See my daughter married off... Married off..." My father-in-law muttered to himself, visibly getting more and more depressed as time went on.

"Uh, hey, Sera's parent-san." Uld sounded worried. "Why are you looking so down all of a sudden? There isn't even a shadow of the majesty you had just a moment ago."

"Oh, uhhh...my father-in-law is quite fond of his children..."

"What he is makes 'fond' look cute in comparison. He's a straight up overly

doting fool—the king of them, in fact.”

Hey, come on, Bell! That just made your already depressed father fall to the floor! You know the words of his daughters can hurt him the most, so hold back at least a little, would you?!

Well, if I actually said that and tried to cover for him, that would just put me in my father-in-law’s sights for defying one of his daughters. So I kept that scolding locked in my heart.

“Who’s that?”

“That small one is Sera’s little sister, Bell.”

“Don’t call me ‘small.’ Actually, who is this guy?”

“Uld. He’s an adventurer. He also saved my life.”

“I’m so sorry about that, by the way, Uld!” Sera cried.

Bell cocked her head in confusion. “Why is my sister apologizing?”

Well you see, there is a reason loftier than a mountain and deeper than the ocean for that. More specifically, it has to do with how bad your family is at dealing with alcohol.

“By the way, your outfits today are certainly rough, to say the least. What’s up with that?”

Back when I had seen them in Grelbarelka, they’d been wearing something like military clothes...or something that resembled Sera’s combat clothing. Today, though, the two of them were wearing outfits similar to how I would dress on a vacation day: comfortable and easy. Bell was wearing shorts and hadn’t even tried to get up from the sofa this whole time. Meanwhile, Sera was wearing a familiar chinese dress.

“This was in the travel set papa prepared, and it fits perfectly. I stand out in my usual clothes, and this is light and really comfortable.”

“It is my mission in life to provide stability and tranquility for Sera and Bell. However, Sera already had something better than what I had prepared. The one who made it is undoubtedly a genius!”

“Of course! My clothes were all custom-made by Efil! I’ll ask her to create some for Bell next time!”

“I don’t really—”

“I’ll ask her!”

Bell hesitated for a moment. “Yeah...okay.”

Bell’s strong against her father but weak to Sera, huh? They really shine when they stand together, so Efil would probably get excited about making clothes for her. She’d say something like, “It seems really worth doing!”

“Still, you two really resemble each other, even if you are sisters. You look exactly like Lady Sera as a chil—mgfhwfh!”

“Uld-san, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” It sounded like Uld was about to say something taboo, so I had hurried to put a hand over his mouth.

“*Whisper whisper* (Uh...what’s not a good idea?)”

“*Whisper whisper* (I know she’s tiny, but Bell is Sera’s twin. So she has a complex about how different they look; it’s dangerous.)”

“*Whisper whisper* (Ahh, I see... Hey, is that girl really as strong as Lady Sera?)”

“*Whisper whisper* (It’s not just Bell; the entire family is strong enough to fight evenly with me. My father-in-law is so doting, he’s especially sensitive to people hurting his daughters. If you touch on that, he’ll go berserk.)”

“*Whisper whisper* (G... Got it. I’ll be careful. You really have it tough, Kelvin...)”

Good, with this we should be able to avoid the worst-case scenario. If the Baal family ended up hurting Uld, I’d feel so sorry that I’d never be able to show my face to him again.

“What’re you two whispering about over there?”

“Oh, nothing, just about how cute you two are.”

“Huh?”

“Oohh, good observation there, my foolish son! And you seem to have a good head on your shoulders too!”

“Well, Lady Sera is popular enough here to have her own fan club, after all,” Uld replied. Even the people in my party are members. As their leader, it leaves me feeling conflicted, but...”

“A fan club?! I see, a fan club... Still, even if the chances of someone misunderstanding something and making stupid choices is low, it’s not impossible. If things have come this far, then there would be some danger—”

I wasn’t sure what was going on in their minds, but it seemed complicated. *Well, I’m just glad that nothing’s going to blow up. That’s a load off my mind.*

“Okay! If you’re Kelvin’s family, then you’re my family too! You look like you can handle a drink! I know it’s still noon, but let’s live it up with some booze! I just so happen to have a bottle I bought at the bar, thinking I’d drink it at home!”

“STOOOOOOOOP! Uld-san, that’s the one thing that can never happen!”

That was the day I had to lay down the law and outright ban alcohol on my property.

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Having finished a proper lunch without any alcohol involved, Uld returned safely to Clare and the Fairy’s Song. *Whew, I somehow managed to keep Uld-san safe!*

I, on the other hand, was still in the dining room with the Baal family, who had yet to finish their meal, and Bell had been strangely quiet for a while now.

“If it’s that good, you can feel free to cry tears of gratitude, you know?” I told her.

“That—That’s not it!”

“Heh. We have seconds too.”

Bell seemed reluctant, but she still said, “I’ll take some.”

“This is good too, Bell!” Sera offered.

It didn’t turn out to be anything serious after all; she was just moved by how amazing Efil’s cooking was and was trying not to show it. She was eating her

brown sugar jelly dessert bite by careful bite so that she could fully enjoy the taste. All the while, she was fighting against the waves of tears welling up in her from being so moved by the taste as she slowly brought each bite to her mouth. Efil had done a great job, although that was par for the course.

"So, did something happen today? For you two to come here with Sera... Is Grelbarelka okay? For all of the royal family to leave is—"

"My word, you say the exact same things as Victor, foolish son. There is no need to fret, Victor is taking care of everything!" My father-in-law stated proudly.

Hey now, that actually worries me greatly! You should appreciate Victor at least a little more. He may look scary, but he's a really good guy!



“Your thoughts are showing on your face, Kelvin. But don’t worry, the work I gave Victor was also mostly delegated to Sebasdel, with some more going around to Reinhart and Vegalzeld.”

“Ah, if that’s the case, then it’s all right.” I had the feeling that the burden on Sebasdel’s shoulders was great, but that was probably just my imagination.

“So, allow me to answer the question you posed earlier. We have come to learn about the home into which Sera will be wed.”

Oh...I see.

“I’m half-joking; don’t freeze up like that.”

“Oh, is that so? Half-joking... Half?”

“It isn’t our main goal, but I thought I might as well while we’re at it.”

“Um...then what is your main goal?”

“I heard about things from Sera. You’re picking a fight with the Ark and the one flying it, right? Allow us to participate.”

Chapter 2: Everyone's Wishes

Battleship Elpis:

The giant battleship made its way through the skies. In opposition to its sublime form, to the general public, it was now considered a nest of angels or some sort of dragon mutant, and had become a symbol of calamity that dropped powerful angel-type monsters. While it normally would stay above the clouds, whenever it dropped the angels, it came within sight of the ground.

The size of the ship itself was extraordinary, big enough to fit the entire capital city of a large country. The fact that such a huge thing, which would leave any onlookers speechless, was able to fly was nothing short of stunning. How was such a large thing floating, let alone flying? The short answer was: through an unimaginably large amount of energy. Researchers and mages the world over, along with the countries they were in service to, could only despair and be amazed as they thought about how many years it would have taken them to achieve such a thing.

"Just what I'd expect from Jildora-san! Look at all these facilities; this is truly a crystallization of wisdom! How many sacrifices had to be made to reach these heights? Someone mediocre like me surely couldn't even imagine it!"

The man's voice reverberated through the research facility that was originally meant for the now-deceased Jildora. The gray furnishings and equipment seemed almost modern, something that shouldn't have existed in a world with this level of advancement. There were even giant glass cylinders filled with cloudy liquid, in which strange living beings slept.

The man who was currently intoxicated with excitement in this space was the tenth seat, Tristan Faaze the Controller. It wasn't clear exactly what about this facility had him so moved, but while he usually seemed like he was acting, at this moment, he was truly excited from the bottom of his heart. It was clearly strange seeing him like that, and the man who had followed his voice and happened upon him couldn't help but feel troubled.

"My word, from the noise down here I knew it was you."

“Oops! Well, well...if it isn’t the fifth seat, Analyzer! I feel nothing but regret for worrying you, one who possesses a much higher standing than I do!”

The new arrival in Jildora’s laboratory was Riold, who had just the other day met with Kelvin. Seemingly exasperated, he adjusted his monocle and heaved an obvious sigh.

“Seat order among the Apostles no longer holds any weight. You should know that.”

“True, since there are only three of us now. Assassin betrayed us pretty much immediately, Reviver completely changed her way of life, and Condemnor went home. It was too bad about our loftier members too. Arbitrator became a stepping stone for our master, and Protector clings to her vestiges. More than anyone, though, I’m sad for Creator, who I was closest to! Jildora was a treasure to humanity!”

Riold paused for a moment. “I don’t believe I heard Survivor’s name in there?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, there was someone like that, wasn’t there? He was a good senior who took care of me, even if it was only temporarily. Right, I shouldn’t forget him.”

Tristan’s attitude had completely reverted to its usual state. Everything he said seemed like a lie because of that, but Tristan likely didn’t care to hide anything. So Riold decided not to point it out.

“Why’re you here Analyzer? Did you need to talk to me about something?”

“That could be interesting, but I had to report something to you. Selector and I met Kelvin-kun the other day.”

“What?!” Seemingly drawn in by the mention of Kelvin’s name, Tristan reacted very obviously. “Why... Why didn’t you invite me?!”

“Oh? This is the first I’m hearing of how attached to Kelvin-kun you are.”

“The fate that ties us together is in no way shallow, even though my past with him may be lacking compared to others. More than anything, he is our lord’s soulmate, whom she has spent many years dreaming of. I don’t know what kind

of excuse you made to go see him, but I, for one, am extremely jealous!”

“Heh heh, really, now? My apologies, then. I’m feeling guilty.” The tanuki and fox laughed shallowly together, creating an atmosphere that felt dubious at best.

“There’s no point in harping on about what’s past. I’ll just look forward to the next opportunity. Anyway, what did you need?”

“Oh, right. Kelvin-kun and his group will be coming soon, I think. He will have a plan to raid this ship, bring us down, and fulfill his promise to DarkMel.”

There was a lull as Tristan took a moment to think. “I see, that’s great news. Still, wouldn’t that mean he’s gathered quite the number of people to attack us? At the moment, we are the enemies of the entire world. And, as I just said, most of the Apostles have left the battlefield... In fact, some of them have gone over to the other side. Actually, I believe most of them have.”

“And on our side, we only have you, me, Selector, and DarkMel. True, we are heavily outnumbered, but we have this battleship, *Elpis*, no?” Riold said, pointing to the rear of the laboratory. The spot he pointed to was shrouded in darkness, and what was inside it was only faintly visible, though his unique skill allowed him to perceive it clearly.

Tristan, however, happily loosened his expression as he seemed to be giving thanks for having found the object shrouded in darkness, which seemed like both a living thing and a machine.

“Of course, Analyzer! You’ve got great eyes!”

“Flattering me won’t do anything. So, is that the last legacy left behind by Creator?”

“Heh heh...the battleship, *Elpis,* is of course wonderful, but I’m confident that *that* is Jildora’s greatest masterpiece. He was planning to offer it to our lord as a body to contain her divinity if needed.”

“Insurance for if the plan failed, I see. But everything went to plan—DarkMel claimed her body, and absorbed Arbitrator’s power as well. So it’s no longer needed, right?”

“How could you say such a blasphemous thing?! This is still very valuable in combat. There’s no way we can afford not to take advantage of it.” Tristan paused, seemingly hesitant or embarrassed. “It also connects to my wish.”

“Wish?”

“What did you wish for, Analyzer? Since you became an Apostle, that means you want something enough to pay a price for it, right?” The tone of Tristan’s voice had suddenly changed, causing Riold to look his way.

“My wish wouldn’t interest you; it was just an insignificant and boring thing. But I’ll turn the question back on you: what did *you* wish for?”

“Me? Mine was also insignificant. I wanted to lead this world down the path of chaos and watch it end! That’s something everyone has dreamed of at least once, don’t you think?”

Tristan raised both arms up to the heavens, and his voice was filled with joy, but Riold, who could see into people’s hearts, knew that everything he did was a paper-thin act.

“Yes, you’re right. But you’ve changed your mind by now, haven’t you?”

Tristan twitched. After a moment of hesitation, he responded, “Yeah, I did. When I really thought about it, even if I hadn’t wished for something like that, our lord would have made it happen anyway. Since that was the case, wouldn’t it be better to get rid of one of my regrets instead? That’s what I thought.”

“I see, and the regret being?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! The fact that I let Jildora-san die! That man is the most supreme and ultimate being; he should have been kept alive for maximum efficiency! Ah, what a tragedy!”

“Uh-huh...”

Riold watched the excited Tristan through his monocle. In that moment, he changed out his magic eyes.

Hmmm...I knew he was acting strangely for someone who usually never took notice of any deaths. It seems like he’s being bound by some sort of curse. But this curse might make things interesting...

Having finished his inspection, Riold silently closed one eye.

“And that’s exactly why I changed my wish. I am not the type of heartless person who would let his friends die! My wish is—”

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“My wish is to resurrect Jildora-san! He is worth it!” Tristan declared to Riold, his arms once again held high. Resurrecting the dead was a miracle that was not normally possible, but because DarkMel had the ability to reincarnate people, she could do it. The curse that Shutola had bound Tristan with, to preserve his comrades to make full use of them, was now applying in a way she had probably never expected.

“The resurrection of Creator, huh? Now that Reviver is gone, that’s going to be a big deal. So, what did you ask DarkMel for, exactly? When he died, he was in the body of a young man. Did you ask for him to be returned like that?”



“Oh no, I wouldn’t do something as wasteful as that. I just want Jildora alive, not free to do whatever he pleases. That would be troubling. He needs to be under my control.”

That gave Riold pause. “I see. Meaning?”

“Knowing you, Analyzer, I’m sure you’ve already read what’s in my heart. Do you really want to make me say it out loud? If you do...heh heh...that would be wonderful.”

“I don’t mind if that’s how you think of it. So will you tell me?”

Riold understood the crazed man that was Tristan all too well. His actions, which seemed such an obvious act, weren’t done on a whim or for a joke. He made it a habit to act human in an attempt to get rid of the twisted ideologies and extreme values that made him not look on people as people, which he had had since birth. But in the end, he could only be himself. So he tried to at least be human through this act, but at some point, everything had gone wrong. The human that Tristan was trying to play had become crazed as well, not someone with normal thoughts or values.

Ah, that’s right. Didn’t he have a disowned little brother who was a murderer? His name was...that’s right, Cashel. He behaved just like I planned, if I recall...bringing the almost-dead remnants of the Black Wind, those losers, with him after they escaped from Goldiana’s training, only to become good fodder for Kelvin-kun. Still, is the Faaze family cursed or something? For both siblings to be insane...

Riold knew everything, and he used that knowledge to scheme. Why? Because that was the mission given to him, and it was also connected to his wish. The order he received from DarkMel was to continuously present Kelvin with trials and challenges that no normal person could survive. Though he could no longer hold a position that would allow him to do that, Riold was mostly satisfied with how things had turned out.

“I understand. Well then, allow me to presume to teach you. Actually, Jildora-san has already been resurrected! And in this very lab, to boot!” Tristan spread his arms wide. But there was no one around to respond to his voice, only the relentless electronic sounds of the machines surrounding them reverberated

through the silence of the room.

After realizing that Tristan was waiting for his response, Riold replied, “I see, so you really were here for an important reason.”

“I’m a little unsatisfied by your reaction, but whatever. The body Jildora-san was resurrected into is the artificial body that was prepared before he died...one based on his original body. I can’t presume to know why he prepared such a body, but I can probably guess.”

“If he’s already back, then why not just ask him?”

“Heh heh, that’s pretty mean of you, Analyzer. You should know that I can’t.” Tristan turned to look at the rear of the laboratory.

“This is something I heard from Jildora-san himself a long time ago. His wish was to create the ultimate life-form, which will never lose to anyone. If you trace back his roots, he wasn’t originally a researcher or scientist, but someone who purely pursued strength. That root of his never changed, I think.”

“You were friendly with Creator even before becoming an Apostle, right? It’s rare for him to let someone in so completely.”

“Let me in? Not at all. Jildora-san and I were just using each other...though he is currently under my control.”

Two sharp glints of light lit up in a pair of eyes in the darkness that reigned in the rear of the laboratory. Riold reacted somewhat late. “Did you wake that up?”

“Yes, it looks like the experiment was a success. It’s attuned well with Jildora-san’s body as the core. With that, I’ll be able to control him freely, making use of his accumulated knowledge and everything he prepared for his goals, regardless of his will. Ah, friends really must be kept alive to make use of their abilities. They are irreplaceable, precious resources!”

“Hm...I wonder if this is also fulfilling Creator’s dream, albeit indirectly? Setting DarkMel, who is a deity, aside, I believe no stronger life-form exists in this world...”

“It’s heartening to hear you say that, Analyzer, but I wonder... There’s still

Goldiana, who's praised as the strongest on the surface, and Protector, who possessed the strongest combat ability among all the Apostles, is still alive. More than anything, you can't underestimate the depths of their strength. It'd be too dangerous. After all, I was killed once already, even if it was just for a way to be reincarnated."

Tristan gave a self-deprecating laugh, but his voice was too bright for it to sound serious. The look in his eyes was terribly innocent, like a child happy because they just got a new toy.

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Gaun, a certain hinterland:

"Hm?" Two voices sounded in unison. The owners of the two voices who spoke out in this remote area of Gaun were currently locked in furious battle. One was Peach Ogre Goldiana, while the other was Serge the Protector.

They were fighting in a clearing that existed in the middle of a thickly vegetated forest. This place had once been ravaged by a giant who had appeared rather suddenly, and it was now thought of as a graveyard for all the destroyed trees. It was far away from any settlements, and because of its horrid past, all beastfolk avoided it. That, however, made it perfect for Goldiana and Serge's purpose. There was no other place in Gaun that was less likely to be observed by others.

Both of them were hailed as the strongest by others. And now that they were facing off, there was no way nothing would happen. They had instinctively sensed each other's power and simultaneously arrived at the answer that the other was the perfect partner for their training. No more words were needed at that point, so they spent the following days sparring with each other. As for Sister Ellen, who was with Serge: she was preparing lunch a little ways away.

"Did you feel like someone was just talking about us?" Serge asked.

"I did! Totally! I suppose that's the price of fame. I'm far too beautiful, and lovely maidens are always the subject of rumors!"

On top of everything else, the pair got along pretty well. They might have been able to understand each other precisely because their interests and

preferences in gender were so different.

“Personally, I’m more surprised by how strong you are rather than your looks, Prettia-chan. How are you able to fight evenly with me? Are you really human?”

“Oh no, I’m just a normal Titan! But I’m so happy you looked for what was inside first rather than my looks. Everyone else is always transfixed by this stunning beauty! Also, I’m the one who’s surprised! You were still able to keep up even after I brought out Rose Ishtar Final Edition!”

“Ah, that was an amazing one! It was, like, so...amazing!”

“Hee hee, I don’t hate being praised so directly! You know, you’re able to use any and all weapons freely as well, Flo-chan. This is the hardest I’ve had to fight since Sera-chan.”

“Heeyy! It’s time for lunch, you twooo!”

Sister Ellen popped out from amongst the trees to call the pair over for food. Responding to that, the two happily turned around.

“Oh, okaaay!”

“Mmhmm, we’re coming nowww!”

With a hop and a step, the maidens ran to their meals at unbelievable speeds, all while still acting as if they were simply strolling casually.

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Goldiana, having cleanly finished the food that Sister Ellen had prepared, served everyone tea afterwards as thanks. The strongest women in the world (and one extra) enjoyed this carefree tea party atmosphere for a while.

“Still, Hu-chan’s strength is crazy. I wonder what you have to do to get like that?”

“It just happens sometimes, totally!” Serge replied enthusiastically and in a sing-song tone. “But you know, I’m the most powerful fighter in the world and you can fight evenly with me, Prettia-chan. To me, you’re the strangest creature I know. Especially in close combat, you’re like an ogre, just like your namesake!”

“Ehe heh, the legendary hero just complimented me! I was only able to come

this far in my pursuit of beauty because of love. Kyah, I said it!”

“Love? I won’t lose in that regard! Right, Ellen?!”

“I think the love Goldiana-san is referring to is very different from what you’re talking about, Serge.”

“Whaaaat?! No way! I’m throwing around lots of love, right?”

“Too much, and far too indiscriminately, if you ask me. And it’s really just to satisfy your own desires. Goldiana-san’s love is true, the kind you only give to your one-and-only, and is very devoted. It is affection cultivated from an unshakeable conviction that she is able to sacrifice herself for her loved one. Yes, I think her love is beautiful. Your appearance aside, I believe you are beautiful, Goldiana-san.”

“Oh, you two! Don’t flatter me so much! I’m burning up!”

“Aha ha, you sure do get a poisonous tongue sometimes, Ellen. Whoa, hey, you’re literally burning! Like, actually burning!!!” Serge put out the fire coming from Goldiana’s face with her tea, solving the problem for the moment.

“Ouchies, that was hot. And surprising...”

“Aha ha ha ha, I’m the one that’s surprised! You’re something, to have surprised me twice in one day, Prettia-chan!”

“Did the oil on your face ignite or something? The sun is really strong today, so maybe...something like that could happen.”

That wasn’t actually the case, but unfortunately, no one was around to point that out and play the straight man.

“Still...true love, huh? I wonder if I’ll get stronger if I find it too? I’ve already taken all the promising combat skills...”

“That’s actually all you’ve taken, Serge.”

“Oh, really now? That’s no good, my girl! You’ve got to learn to cook at least one dish!”

“I want to be the one getting soothed, not the other way around,” Serge complained. “Cooking myself seems kind of...wrong.”

“Heh...seems like it’ll be a while yet until Serge awakens to true love.”

“Grr...you know, if there was a girl I knew was *the one,* I’d start thinking more like an adult too! Probably!”

“By the way, what’s your type?” Goldiana asked.

“Type? Type...well...” Serge hemmed and hawed for a while, tilting her head left and right to try to jog her brain. Finally, she seemed to come to some sort of realization, hitting her hand into her palm to signify as much.

“First: she has to be from Japan too, and have black hair like me. Blonde hair is good, but the best in my book has gotta be pure black. No dye jobs either!”

“Oh no, I’m out of the running.” Goldiana playfully lamented.

“Me too.”

That first condition immediately eliminated Ellen and Goldiana, who had long silver hair and golden twin drills respectively. Neither of them actually wanted to be in contention, but it was still a little frustrating.

“She has to be the devoted type who can’t bring themselves to leave even the most useless of men alone, but I still want her to have somewhat upturned eyes and to be kind of strict...” Serge’s imagination was running wild.

“Um...Serge?”

“Oh, it’d be nice if we were childhood friends! She could wake me up from my sleepy stupor every morning! She’d be a hard worker, but not really blessed with luck, the type where I could want to help her just as she helps me!”

“Flo-chan? Did you hear that?”

“Also, she’s got to be at least somewhat strong; otherwise, she won’t be able to fight alongside me. But Rion-chan would be a little young for me, I think? Still, her strength is around the borderline. I’d like someone around there on the scale. Oh, and also, I want to teach her so many things every night...heh heh heh heh!”

Serge laughed boldly as she continuously added to her fantasies. Ellen and Goldiana, who knew what she was on about, could only shake their heads in exasperation.

“Hey now, you’re asking for too much!” Goldiana cautioned her.

“She never was able to stop herself once she started talking about ideals, even though she’s interested in any girl as long as she’s cute.”

“Has she not found her ideal girl yet?”

“Her super specific ideal girl changes along with her whims. If Serge were to ever seriously fall in love with anyone, it would have to be because she just happened to meet a person who perfectly embodies the ideal picture she has in that moment.”

“That’s...difficult.”

“It’s even more difficult because she likes girls. It’s impossible to find a girl who meets all those requirements perfectly a...nd...”

“Ellen-chan?”

Sister Ellen trailed off suddenly, freezing with her eyes wide open. Goldiana, who was sitting across from her, immediately recognized this strangeness and turned around to look. Ellen was looking in Goldiana’s direction, but her eyeline was clearly pointed somewhere behind her.

“Greetings! Sorry for interrupting you, my name is Shiga Setsuna, and I have a message from Kelvin-san!”

A distinguished female voice could be heard from amongst the trees of the forest. It was Setsuna, who had been training with Nito in the other dojo. Having seen her, Goldiana’s eyes widened just like Ellen’s had.

Setsuna’s hair was jet black, she was the devoted type who tried to lead everyone as the student council president, and her eyes were slightly upturned. Not only that, she had the childhood friend trait and was strong thanks to having become a Titan—even though Ellen and Goldiana didn’t know all those details, they realized that Setsuna perfectly fit Serge’s ideal vision. It was only natural for them to freeze up.

After a moment, Ellen said, “There really is a girl who fits all her requirements.”

“Yep.”

“What?” That naturally got Serge to look over at Setsuna. Then, she approached Setsuna at a speed faster than the eye could follow and grabbed both of her hands without a word, gripping them tightly.

“Whoa?!” Setsuna yelped. “Uh...ummm?”

Serge stayed silent, just gripping and feeling Setsuna’s hands in hers. After a while of doing that in silence, Serge looked straight at Setsuna and resolved herself to speak.

“I like you. I’ve...fallen in love! Let’s start dating with marriage in mind, Setsuna! Yes, let’s!”

It seemed like Setsuna couldn’t keep up. It was a moment before she got out a, “Hu—wha?!”

It was a once-in-a-lifetime proposal for Serge. Seeing the heart marks in Serge’s eyes, Setsuna blew past confusion and straight into fear. But the one who reacted to this confession first, instead of Setsuna, who had frozen up like a wax statue, was the sword at her side.

“Wait just a damn minute! This old man here has dibs on Setsuna-chan! I won’t allow you to have her, even if you are the Protector!”

“Wha...Whaaaaat?!” Serge did a double take.

“Please don’t word things in a way that’ll cause misunderstandings, instructor Nito!” Setsuna cried. The sword she was wearing was actually the blade that was Nito’s true body; he had come along with Setsuna to this place.

“Oh, it’s just Survivor. I was wondering who that was. It’s not good to sexually harass young women like that, okay? Hello, officer? Over here!”

“I haven’t done anything! This old man is innocent, totally innocent! Back me up, Setsuna-chan!”

“But I feel like what you just said constitutes sexual harassment...”

“Retracted! This old man will take it back! Okay?!”

“Hey, hey, Setsuna...let’s just leave that middle-aged man alone. Why not train with me? I’m the most powerful fighter in the world, so I’ll be much more useful than that perverted old man. Plus, since we’re both girls, there’ll be no

need to hold back, right? Come on, let's do it! Yeah!"

"Be careful, Setsuna-chan! Protector may look like a really cute girl at first glance, but on the inside she's no different from any other backed-up old man! This real old man is saying so, so it's true!"

The argument between the former Apostles only grew fiercer as time went on...all with Setsuna still stuck between them.

"I see. She does seem rather unlucky."

"Makes one want to support her."

Eventually, Goldiana and Ellen got tired of watching and stepped in, successfully saving Setsuna.

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Kelvin's estate, courtyard:

A week had passed since we returned home. That entire time, both Bell and my father-in-law stayed with us. After three days of this, I started to get seriously worried if his government work was going to be okay. What was more upsetting was how he always kept watch over us whenever I talked to Sera. As one would expect, he wasn't able to follow us into our bedrooms, but he still managed to interfere using the Baal family's uniquely incredible instincts. Meanwhile, Bell was simply sitting back, enjoying watching all of this happen, so I essentially spent this time being abused by the family.

I need to think up a way to counterattack...

"Hey bro, why so glum?" Dahak asked.

"Hmm? Sometimes things just don't go well, you see..."

"Haha! That's a good joke. The only other person who's as successful in life as you, bro, would be Prettia-chan!"

I had decided to take a break and was gazing out at the plantation field when Dahak, in his work clothes, decided to talk to me while he tilled. When I answered, it only resulted in him laughing at me.

Getting lumped in with Prettia doesn't really sit right with me either. No, wait...you actually know what kind of life Prettia's had up until now? Hrrmm...I kind of want to know, but I kind of don't. So, this is what you call the urge to see something scary, like when you want to watch a horror movie.

Man, though, Dahak's field really got huge, and there are so many different species here. From what I heard from Efil, the greengrocer we used to frequent before Dahak came along actually buys produce from Dahak now. Though Dahak said he didn't need any money, since he does all this for fun, the greengrocer was so surprised by the quality of the produce that he forced him to accept payment. I believe Dahak was pretty bashful about that. He was just planning to share his harvest and it became a sale instead.

There were two reasons Dahak's field had grown this large. One was simply that his power had grown after he became the Earth Dragon King. Thanks to that, a bunch of strange plants had started showing up in our backyard. *I*

wonder what kind of plants those are...maybe they're the insectivorous kind. Actually, given the size, they could eat humans, or even monsters too. Where did he even pick those up? Yeah...I'll just make sure this place is off limits to anyone not involved and pretend I never saw it.

The second reason was that Dahak had acquired more helping hands for his farming work. While he was absent, the maids Ruka and Ellie, as well as the golems, maintained the field in his place. However, none of them were actually farmers; they were simply following the detailed manual that he had left for them.

So, Dahak had formed a new team around him.

"Dahagg, I'be finished spreading the fertilizer like you said."

"Oh, thanks. But my name's Dahak."

"Da...Daha...gg!"

There was a pause before Dahak said, "And yet you can speak perfectly fine as a dragon. Oh well, just get used to it at your own pace."

"Dahagg, this earth isn't lively. Do something about it."

"Dammit I *know* you can speak properly, Mdo! I know you're just faking that; you makin' fun of me?!"

The comedic trio—or rather, the farming peasant trio made up of three dragon lords, Dahak of Earth, Boga of Fire, and Mdofarak of Light—made up this team. After returning from all over the world, they had polished their abilities as Dragon Kings, but mentally, they were still the same.

"By the way...I know why you're here, Dahak, but why are Mdo and Boga working here as well?"

"A foolish question. I am always aiming for the top," Red Mdo, wearing a large straw hat, said proudly.

"I feel bad for saying this even though you explained so confidently, but that doesn't tell me anything."

"Master, you're just too bad at reading people..."

“E...” Boga stammered, still unsure of his tongue in human form, “Eben I understood that one...yeah.”

“Can’t be helped. Let’s show our bro *that* thing!”

“*That*?”

Dahak stuck the hoe he was carrying into the dirt and lined up with Mdo and Boga at his sides. I watched curiously as his eyes flew open wide.

“Dahak plantation, Chief of Vegetables! Emperor Greens Dahak!” he shouted, striking a pose.

“Dahak plantation, Chief of Fruits. Sniper Princess Mdofarak.” Mdofarak followed suit with a swish.

“Da... Dahagg plantation, Chief ob Rice. Flying Mountain Peak Boga!” Finally, Boga completed the formation.

As each of them took their incomprehensible poses, it dawned on me. *Those are the signature poses Rion thought up, aren’t they? I get it because I’m an older brother. So, is that it? Will there be an explosion behind you like in tokusatsu shows?*

Outwardly though, I said nothing.

After a moment, Dahak spoke as if what had just happened explained everything. “And that’s how it is.”

“No, no, what does ‘that’ even mean?”

Dahak and the others looked satisfied, as if they had just completed a good day’s work. Even Mdo was strangely enthused about the whole thing.

“They wanted to help me in the fields after they came back. Personally, I loved the idea of having more dragons to help, so I welcomed them. Like that, m’lady Rion taught us our signature poses, so we’re totally ready for the final fight!”

Totally ready...for the final fight?! I decided to question Mdo first.

“I learned a lot in Deramis. But the most important thing was that I could not bring out my full power after only eating low-quality sweets. So the answer I

settled on was that if I had desserts handmade by sister Efil made with the highest-quality ingredients, I'd be invincible! That's why I decided to create the best fruits possible."

"Her passion is the real deal, bro!"

Huh? Ah, okay... Then what about Boga?!

"I gan enjoy anything, from rocks to dirt...bud when I was training with red-hair, I learned how delicious da rice from Doraj is. I think we need do deach children in da future about id...yeah."

"And that's why you decided to cultivate rice?"

"Yeah...dat's right."

"His passion is the real deal, bro!"

Yeah, okay, I get it. I understand how passionate you all are. But still, is it necessary right now?

"Red-hair lea...learned how do cook rice, doo!"

"Red hair... Wait, do you mean Ema?! Seriously?!"

That leader of creating dark matter is able to do something as complicated as cooking rice now?! Holy crap!

Clatter!

I heard the sound of something dropping behind me, so I turned around and saw Efil. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed her hips had given out and she'd fallen. I hurried over to her.

"Efil, are you all right?"

"My... My apologies. What a disgrace..."

I held out my hand and helped her up. It was rare to see Efil fall flat like that.

"Thank you, Master. Um...so is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That, um...Ema-sama can cook rice now..." She trailed off, seemingly unsure.

"Ah, that. I was surprised too. Boga, were you telling the truth?"

“Y... Yeah,” Boga stammered. “She washed the rice herself, then used her...magic? Do heat it.”

Seriously? I thought. Hearing that it was the truth surprised me a second time. After all, even with Efil the Perfect Maid teaching her, all Ema ever made was more dark matter. It was honestly unbelievable that she was actually able to cook rice now.

Without a word, Efil brought her hand to her mouth and concealed her face by looking down.

“Efil, what’s wrong? Are you feeling under the weather?”

“U... Urghhh...” Efil groaned, trying to hold back her tears.

I could only react with shock. *Wh... Whaaaaat?! Efil’s crying?! Wai— Uh, what do I do?! I mean, wait, why is she crying?!*

“Boga!” Mdofarak roared. “You made sister Efil cry! Apologize, now!”

“Muh... Me? Whad did I say?”

Mdo and Boga started to panic and argue. Meanwhile, it had been so long since I had last seen Efil cry that I was trapped in a bog of confusion.

What did I do back then? I hugged her close and gently stroked her head, I think...

“That’s great. I’m so glad...even Ema-sama is able to cook her own rice now!”

I sucked in a breath hearing that before I managed to stammer out, “That’s right, your efforts have paid off, Efil. Next will be miso soup!”

Leaving aside whether she really was able to steam her own rice now, it was at least true that Efil had finally been rewarded after all those setbacks and all that anxiety.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kelvin’s estate, underground training area:

It was now afternoon, and I was going to spar with Bell. It seemed that she had completely recovered, so she asked me to be her opponent. Because Bell herself wanted to do it, father-in-law immediately gave his consent. He could

rival Gerard in how soft he was on his daughters.

“Hah!”

“Hoh!”

This was the first time I had ever faced Bell directly, and her footwork was far past the realm of just “sharp.” Even without magic, she was flying all over the place and attacking from any unexpected angle she pleased in an attempt to steal my consciousness. On top of that, because she was using her legs to attack, her reach was long.

Sera did good to win against her at the Beast King Festival and at the Demon Lord’s castle. Then again, Bell did forfeit their match during the festival.

“Hey, come on, this can’t be all you have, right? You were the one who defeated papa. I chose you to be my opponent to end my rehabilitation, so get at least a little serious.”

“That’s right! I won’t forgive you if you take it easy!”

“Don’t worry, this is just a warmup. You haven’t used any Green Magic or your abilities either, right? My father-in-law’s shouting, though, so I guess it’s about time to get serious.”

“Hey, you fool of a son! If you harm Bell’s perfect white skin...you get it, right?”

The audience is way too intense!

Setting my father-in-law aside, Bell, who was a pro at handling Green Magic and had Sera levels of combat instincts, was perfect for me as a sparring opponent. The fact that she was able to come up with things I never could, like adding a rubber consistency to wind to make the Rubber Counter spell, earned her huge points.

“Die!”

“Whoa?!”

Also, she was a murderous girl with a foul mouth. *She doesn’t* really *mean that, does she? I mean, that just earns her more points in my book. The closer this is to a real fight, the more fired up I get!*

“That’s so nice. I’m jealous of Bell... Hey, father, can I join in?”

“Heh, so the most beautiful, pretty, perfectly cute, miracle pair of sisters in the world will fight together? That’s just fine. Sera, I will allow it! Go put an end to that foolish son-in-law!”

“Father-in-law?!”

But that’s also...a really good idea!

BAM!

Sera landed in the arena, which should have been built to be very sturdy, in an exaggerated manner.

“I got my father’s permission! Bell, let’s fight together!”

“I don’t really think you needed his permission for that...but if you want to, sister, I won’t stop you. It’s the little sister’s job to make her big sister look good.”

“It’s good that you’re honest!”

I’m pretty sure she’s being the opposite of honest. I bet your little sister’s super elated on the inside.

“Kelvin! I heard you got the Wind Dragon King’s blessing! I also got one from the Darkness Dragon King, so there’s no need to hold back!”

“You say that, but Rion got one too. Everyone’s steadily getting stronger, and I couldn’t be happier. So will you show me your newfound power?!”

Our fight was only beginning.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kelvin’s estate, balcony:

“Owwww...”

“What, so you still lost even after talking such a big game?”

I had ended up narrowly losing my bout with the Baal sisters. Actually, I guess there’s no point in putting up a front; I’d been utterly crushed. I had managed to hold on for a while, at least, but their teamwork in no way seemed like it was

a rushed, first-time thing. They acted like a veteran party that had worked together for years. It didn't matter what strategy I tried, or if I tried to focus down one of them with magic; both sisters were high-level all-rounders, and they could deal with anything I tried to pull. On top of that, their instincts and luck were of the highest tier—there were no openings for me to take advantage of. I couldn't underestimate their unique skills either. It was way harder than facing down their father alone.

After literally being beaten black and blue, I headed to the balcony to cool my head and take in the breeze. To my surprise, Gerard was already there, watching his grandchildren playing around in the yard. From a doting parent to a doting grandparent, it seemed that today I was inextricably linked to artisans at pampering.

"I hate that I lost, but more than that, I'm happy."

"Oh, so you've finally awakened to the pleasures of masochism..."

"I know when you're just poking fun by now. How long do you think we've traveled together?"

Whew. I used to feel confused, wondering if he was serious, but I was now able to gracefully let Gerard's ribbings slide off me.

"Right...it's true that I have served under you a long time, my liege. Do you remember, back when we first visited Toraj, when we watched the Heroes leave by boat..."

"Huh? Oh, aaah yeah, that's nostalgic..." I trailed off, already putting my focus on trying to dredge up that memory.

But I still wasn't used to how suddenly he could switch from a joking mood to a serious one. *Uh...Toraj's port, Toraj's port... Remember the scenery of that time!*

We were seeing off Touya and the others, we were waving a lot, and when it was time to go back—

"When we fulfill the terms of our contract, I will acknowledge you as my one and only king."

Ah, that's right. He said that to me through telepathy. The terms specified avenging his old fatherland, Alcahl. Since he finished Jildora off in that last fight, you could call the terms completed. Is that what he's trying to say?

"Hey, come on, don't bring up such an important thing during a mood like this one."

"Gah ha ha! The mood, the place, the time...none of it matters! Not to mention there are so many women around you all the time, whether it be Efil or Sera or anyone else. I don't have the time to be picking my moments, and this isn't something that should be put off for later. It's important to me, so I wanted to talk to you one-on-one like this."

After saying that, Gerard abruptly got up from his seat at the balcony table to kneel before me. His actions had me imagining that I was currently sitting on a throne; it was the very picture of a knight swearing loyalty to a king. I no longer felt it was appropriate to rib him for acting like this even though he was just a grandparent who loved his grandchildren too much.

As long as Gerard wanted to treat me like his king, I knew I shouldn't get up on my own, because I couldn't disrespect his sense of loyalty. So I simply waited for his next words.

"Back then, I was overjoyed about such small things as being able to defeat a Rank S monster. However, all that piled up to become the strength that I have today, and it helped me make lasting friends who would wade with me into battle. You, my liege, were the one who rescued my heart as it was on the verge of breaking under the weight of lingering regrets that would not be fulfilled and the refusal to leave until they were. I, who once lost my wife and child, would never have imagined the time would come when I could spend my days in happiness surrounded by grandchildren."

Gerard paused, and out of bashfulness, I felt I had to fill in the silence.

"I couldn't have done it all on my own either. All that was thanks to everyone who saw fit to come with me."

"What are you blabbering about? It is because you were at our center, my liege, that everyone gathered like this."

“Is that...so?”

I had been killed by DarkMel, come to this world with Melfina, formed a contract with Clotho, and gotten Gerard to obey me. I wasn’t aware I was at the center of any of that. As far as I was concerned, I was just doing whatever I liked.

Agh, my friends all overvalue me way too much.

“My liege. Here and now, I, Gerard Fragarach, offer you my loyalty in the truest sense of the word.”

In that moment, the feeling of power that Gerard was exuding changed. It grew heavier, and yet still felt warm, like many emotions were wrapped up inside it. I couldn’t tell if this was brought on by his unique skill, but I knew Gerard was moving on to new heights. It seemed like I didn’t have the time to sit on my ass even after obtaining some blessings. If I did, I’d be the one left behind.

“I humbly receive your loyalty. Make sure you live for a long time, for Rion and the others as well.”

“Gah ha ha, I’ll try my best!”

After that, the mood around us returned to the loose and heartwarming one it had been before as we watched over Rion, Ange, and Ruka playing tag—

“Ah, that reminds me. Since we’re here and everything, want to see my real face?”

Pop.

“What? WhooaaaAAauuggh?!”

It was so sudden that I couldn’t help but let out a weird scream. How did Gerard look? That was something only a knight and his king would know.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kelvin’s estate, parlor:

I was currently facing some guests in my parlor. One of them had come without any notice through the teleportation gate under our estate. She was

the leader of Toraj: Tsubaki. As always, she was pulling off the kimono she wore well, and her attitude that it was totally natural was only exceeded by the suddenness of her appearance.

Yeah...well I guess it's just the usual. Let's pretend it's all right. After all, according to Boga, it was thanks to her instruction that he and Ema are able to steam rice now. Apparently, it took all the cooks in her castle to achieve that.

"Aauugghh! This tastes terrible!"

"Ah! The head chef collapsed while crying!"

"How could this be? The head chef skipped past his talking phase and went straight into crying because of how bad it was..."

"Grk! I've never seen anyone this terrible at cooking! In a sense, it's like a miracle!"

"I just heard from Tsubaki-sama that she is the exact opposite of a genius, one so untalented in cooking that even Efil-chan had to swallow her tears and give up on teaching her..."

"Now that the head chef has fallen, there's nothing the rest of us can—"

"You idiot! Now is our chance to repay Efil-chan for all she's done for us!"

"A... Assistant head chef?"

"To tell you the truth, I actually hated the idea of letting that maid in the kitchen at first. I treated her coldly and rudely. But even to someone who treated her that way, she faced me with an earnest and pure smile. All I could do back then was have her teach me cooking, and I couldn't repay her in any way. That's why I want to return the favor however I can. Even if you all give up, I won't. That's how Toraj men should be, right?"

"Ah, yeah. You're right. I was also one of the people who felt the blazing heat of the kitchen surprisingly turn into a soothing warmth. I don't know how much help I'll be, assistant head chef, but I'll try my best!"

"Me... Me too! Who cares if she has no instincts or potential for cooking? Who cares that she's basically a lump of all the negative cooking attributes you could

possibly have? Just bust through all that with sheer effort!”

“Let’s do it!”

“Yeeaahh!”

“You guys! Heh heh, jeez! Okay then, first we start with the basic wash! It doesn’t matter that you’re one of Tsubaki-sama’s favorite Rank S adventurers, Ema-san. I won’t hold back. Don’t you dare give up on me! I’ll take that rotten-to-the-core cooking ability of yours and force it to bloom!”

“Um...”

“R... Red hair, is something wrong? You look wilted.”

With so many ups and downs like a drama piece, Boga had managed to quickly learn the skill despite his clumsiness, while Ema had taken three straight days and nights to obtain the skill, leaving behind a trail of casualties.

After hearing that story, Efil was only more moved and the tears would not stop flowing. Thanks to that, she was currently resting.

“I’ve got to say, it was really hard. After all, not even I, one who actually is interested in how terrible cooking tastes, would touch any of it! Ka ha ha!”

“Ha ha...”

Tsubaki was talking cheerfully, but the chefs who had actually taught her had probably suffered through a lot of hardship.

Efil had it even harder, since along with Ema, she also had to deal with the equally bad talents of Sylvia and Ariel—that’s three times the hardship! That’s right, Efil isn’t at fault here. They’re the ones to blame; I’ve just reaffirmed it.

“Seeing the way my subjects band together to tackle national crises gets me in the heart every time.”

“National crises... Well, I guess that fits in terms of difficulty. Yep.”

“Right?”

Nagua needs to up his cooking game in order to prevent more national crises from happening.

“By the way, Tsubaki-sama, I’ve been wondering about something for a little while...”

“What is it? Don’t slow roll it; you’re my friend, Kelvin.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to tell me this, Tsubaki-sama. Actually, that was on purpose, wasn’t it?”

“Ka ha ha!”

“Aghh, jeez... So, who is that person with you?”

Another visitor from Toraj was with her. I had been glancing his way this entire time, but Tsubaki had completely ignored that during her story, so I had to bring it up myself.

The second visitor had stayed silent this entire time. *I think he’s a man...who’s taller than Tsubaki-sama by a head even though he’s sitting?* The reason I questioned that evaluation was because I couldn’t see the person’s face. They were wearing a large conical hat that covered their entire head, just like a beggar zen priest from a period piece would wear. They made no move to take their hat off, even after being shown inside.

Along with the hat, my mysterious guest was also wearing a Toraj kimono, and since Tsubaki had brought this guest along personally, I was pretty sure she knew who it was, but...in all honesty, it was hard for me to pretend that this guest didn’t exist because of how incredibly suspicious they were.

“Sorry about that. This great personage here’s very shy, you see.”

Aaah, no wonder this...zen priest? Has been tugging on Tsubaki-sama’s kimono sleeve this entire time. I was confused because, given the way the guest looked, I was thinking their positions would be the opposite of what they turned out to be.

“Uh, from the way you spoke, does that mean...”

“Indeed! This is the great Dragon God-sama, our country’s guardian dragon: the Water Dragon King-sama!”

The now-revealed dragon silently nodded. Though Tsubaki had introduced him, he still wouldn’t say anything.

“Ah, thought so...”

The Guardian Dragon doesn’t really show himself to the public, so there were suspicions that he was a shut-in...or so I’d heard from rumors. Still, though, I bet no one expected him to be this bad. What happened to the story of Sylvia and Ema fighting him so resolutely? Is there no decent Dragon King in the bunch?

Poke, poke.

“What is it, my lord?”

Whisper, whisper, whisper. The Water Dragon King whispered into Tsubaki’s ear.

All you have to do is speak a little louder, come on.

“I see, I see.”

“What... What is it?”

“He’s saying...that he can’t handle this anymore. He wants to see Sylvia and Ema.”

“What did he even come here for?!”

All of a sudden, the Water Dragon King wanted to leave. *Seriously, what’re you acting all proper for now?*

“Ka ha ha, this is probably his limit in human form. He actually did pretty well this time.”

“Um, the Water Dragon King is Toraj’s founder, right? I heard about him from Sylvia. So why is he so shy?”

“Hm, he truly was a great person, but the passage of time is cruel, you see. Now he’s just a closeted pervert. Wanna know more?”

“No, I’ll pass. More importantly, why did you bring him along with you?”

“Well, my lord said he wanted to meet you face to face, Kelvin. It was a rather sudden request—it caught me completely by surprise.”

He asked for it himself and this is how he acts?

“To be fair, my lord has been doting on Sylvia like his own daughter after

giving her his blessing. Since you defeated her, Kelvin, he might have been a liiiittle interested in you."

I couldn't help but read into that statement, and it took me a moment before I replied, "Doesn't that just mean he hates my guts?"

Seriously? Another doting parent? Well, he'll be welcomed here. This rational battle junkie has no blind spots.

"Who can tell? Unfortunately, I don't have any children of my own, so I wouldn't understand those feelings. Or are you saying you'd be willing to teach me, Kelvin? If you want to become Toraj's king, I wouldn't mind, you know?"

"That's way too much of an upgrade from imperial guard. Let's just move on to the main subject."

"Mmrrr, as mean as always. Toraj's future would be solid as steel if you were to become my husband, Kelvin..."

The fact that Tsubaki so clearly said 'husband' showed how proper she was. If I were to accidentally give the wrong impression in any way, the preparations would all be done by tomorrow. Since I could feel how proactive she was, I couldn't let down my guard even a little.

"Oh fine, let's move on." Tsubaki begrudgingly acceded before letting out a cackle and a smile that fit her age. However, in the next moment, she went back to being a ruler. "We've finished preparing the fleet you ordered. We're ready to go at any time."

"Finally... Thank you for your help."

Everything we needed for the final showdown (personal training, the help and blessings of the Dragon Kings, and Toraj's airborne fleet) was now assembled.

◇ ◇ ◇

Toraj, hangar:

"Oooh, so you really do have a hangar for ships."

"Indeed we do! The airborne fleet is a lynchpin of our country, after all. It's the topmost of top secrets!"

After consulting with Tsubaki, we immediately went to Toraj. She came with us through the gate, so everything was easy as could be. However, I couldn't help but feel we were being a little too hasty.

If I'm being honest, since Tsubaki-sama went through the trouble of coming to my home, I should have shown some hospitality and treated her to some of Efil's cooking...

Tug.

"We've returned home, my lord, so won't you perk up already? I had to wrest myself from the allure of Efil's perfect cooking as well, you know?"

Tug, tug.

"Uh, he's been tugging on your kimono this entire time. Is everything all right?"

"It is. He just went to an unfamiliar place and met so many unfamiliar people. His nerves and tension have piled up and turned his body to lead."

"I...see..."

Seeing such a huge dragon dressed up like a priest, sitting silently while hugging his knees to his chest, would scare the children!

After finishing up my conversation with Tsubaki earlier, we had left the room and gone into the hallway, where I was surprised to find the Water Dragon King sitting in a corner as described. So, out of consideration for his mental state, Tsubaki and I had decided to hurry back to Toraj.

Are you sure you don't want to improve yourself, Toraj's guardian dragon?

"Huh? Kelvin-san?"

"Oh, if it isn't Ema!"

We reunited with Ema at the entrance to the hangar. *Oh yeah, Ema* did *stay in Toraj after training with Boga. I totally thought she'd try to meet back up with Sylvia.*

"Sorry for calling you here on such short notice, Ema," said Tsubaki. "You'll be participating in the fight against that white ark too, won't you? I figured you'd

want to see the fleet with Kelvin, since we're going there anyway."

"Thank you for the consideration, Tsubaki-sama." Ema said, pausing for a moment before deciding to continue. "By the way, who is that large person?"

"Ah, this personage is—"

"Heh. Ema, it is I, the Water Dragon King, Fujiwara Torajirou!"

I was so shocked, I let out a noise as I did a double take. *You can talk?! Wait, you actually seem like a Dragon King all of a sudden! What happened?!*

"Ka ha ha! Oh Kelvin, I understand why you're so perplexed, but I never thought I'd see you make such a face. Even a Rank S adventurer gets surprised twice a day, huh?"

"I'm human too, you know. Of course I can be surprised. Still..." I turned my attention to the conversation between Ema and the Water Dragon King.

"Why are you dressed like that, Water Dragon King-sama?"

"I am a Dragon King and Toraj's guardian dragon. In short, I am famous in this country; I cannot be careless and expose my face to the masses."

"But it just makes you stand out more."

"Hm, really, now? Well you got me there! Haaa ha ha ha!"

The Water Dragon King was now so loquacious that his melancholic manner back at my home seemed like a lie. He even managed a hearty laugh.

What is this? Is that really the Dragon King?

"Is that actually the same person under there?" I asked.

"It's because now there are more people that he's familiar with and opened up to compared to those who he hasn't. That's how he always is among people he knows. Isn't it funny?" Tsubaki replied.

Funny, you say... I repeat, do you really not want to improve yourself, Toraj's guardian dragon?

"Let's just leave the funny dragon alone for now and hurry into the hangar."

"Wait, 'funny dragon'?" I paused for a moment, hesitant and confused.

“Agghh, fine, whatever. Hey, you two, we’re going in!”

“Ah, sorry! Let’s go,” Ema responded.

“My apologies. Let’s get going,” the dragon added.

So, under these conditions he’ll even talk to me like it’s normal?

I decided to keep it a secret that I wished he would have practiced being able to do that beforehand if he’d known it was possible. If I took the time to pick apart and retort at every single thing this Dragon King did, I’d be stuck here forever.

Let’s just let it pass.

Clatter, clatter, clatter.

The huge door to the hangar opened on its own, revealing an employee who seemed to be in charge. He was dressed like the people in Toraj’s castle who were there to charge the teleportation gate with magic. The job title was probably ‘Royal Court Mage’ or something similar.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Tsubaki-sama. Everything is ready.”

“Mm, good work. The guest I told you about is with us today, so I’m counting on you to guide us.”

“Understood. Please, come this way.”

The inside of the hangar was larger than I had imagined, with so many passageways up and down that I felt like I could get lost. Actually, since this place was supposed to be hidden, they had probably designed it that way on purpose. The impression I got was that it was a hangar only in name, and actually a labyrinth to defend against invaders in truth. If not for our guide, I would probably have tried to brute force my way through by making holes in the walls.

So we followed the guide, walking for around ten to twenty minutes until we reached an open space that was clearly made of something different from the place we were in before.

“Whew, anyone would be tired after that much walking, but we’re finally here,” Tsubaki announced.

“So, this is the ship that’s the pride of Toraj, huh?”

If I had to describe it in words, we were in a large indoor port. Though we were surrounded on all sides by walls, everything was submerged in water other than some sections with high flooring. It all smelled like the ocean too, so the water was undoubtedly salt water.

When I looked at the water, I could see dozens of ships arranged together. The floating vessels looked like galleons, and they were made almost entirely out of wood. They were equipped with large cannons along their flanks, and it was easy for me to surmise that those were probably the ships’ main sources of firepower.

“I call this type of ship the aqua swallow. To be honest, we were supposed to unveil these in the previous war against Trycen, but for *some reason* we didn’t get the chance.”

“Ah, as I recall, the Magic Knight Order retreated before the battle started? To leave before fighting...how rude.”

“Uh...yeah? I feel like what you’re talking about is a little different from what I was talking about, but sure, basically.”

If it happened to me, I’d definitely be angry. I’d hold a grudge.

“The aqua swallow may look like a normal seafaring ship, but its abilities don’t stop there. It can surprise attack by going underwater, and it can even fly through the sky. Its operational range is incredibly wide!”

“So it doesn’t just fly, it also dives?”

“Indeed it does! Actually, we spent the entire time waiting for Trycen’s army underwater!” Tsubaki snapped her folding fan closed and pointed it at the ships.

Hmmm... She was describing them as way more capable than I expected, and I couldn’t help but doubt her. *Does that mean it’s like a submarine that can fly? Isn’t that pretty incredible?*

“Heh heh, it seems like you’re surprised again. We in Toraj are as good at magic as those from Deramis. And when it comes to blue and green magic, you

could even say we are superior. This aqua swallow is the crystallization of all of Toraj's technology, magic, and techniques."

"I see. Magic...meaning it uses magic as a fuel source?"

"Even to you, Kelvin, I can't say. That is, unless you decide to become my husband." Tsubaki finished that statement with a lovely wink.

Ha ha, then I'll never be able to find out.

"Still, this really is amazing. For such a huge ship to fly!"

"Even Ema praised me... I'm glad!" Tsubaki gloated with a smile. "But I know how large the gap in ability is between us and that ark. Even if we launch a hundred aqua swallows, we wouldn't be close to a match for that battleship. Kelvin, this time, the best we can do is carry you there. Don't expect anything more."

Tsubaki and the staff had probably experienced the difference in strength between the two ships so painfully, they were sick of it. The smile that was on Tsubaki's face no longer seemed true to me.

"Oh no, that's more than enough. Everything after that is my job."

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Toraj Castle:

We were invited by Tsubaki to stay the night. She was the type to never let you refuse if what she said was possible and safe or innocuous enough, so I just gave in. And since I now had the chance, I decided to stop by and give the heroes of the kitchen thanks in place of Efil.

After I let Efil know through telepathy that I would be staying the night, I jumped on a boat to Toraj's castle. At some point during all that, the Water Dragon King had disappeared. When I searched for his presence, for some reason I could feel him inside the water. I tried to casually bring this up to Tsubaki and was told that he could swim back to his nest on his own, so he had probably just left since he was already satisfied.

Acting freely all the way to the end, huh, Toraj's guardian dragon?

Nothing of note happened after that, so I was able to spend a relaxing time in the castle. We lazed around in a kotatsu that Toraj had recently been trying to mass produce as Tsubaki bragged about other newly created strange products. I felt somehow nostalgic about the time we spent there.

At some point, we entered a scary period in which it was decided that Ema would cook rice in order to practice and also show off her new skills. I couldn't help but break out in a cold sweat, but I knew what the result would be. Ema's rice was normal. However, seeing it in person was so moving that my tears ended up serving as a bit of salt for seasoning. Ema got excited and started saying enthusiastically that cooking the rice would be her job from now on.

But your party doesn't just carry rice around constantly—I bit back the natural retort that was welling up within me. It was the one kind thing I could do for her.

"Okay then, Kelvin-san. Goodnight."

"Yeah, goodnight."

We were in neighboring rooms, so I said goodnight to Ema in the hallway and went straight to bed. Strangely, as I entered the guest room's bed, I could feel my consciousness flying away to dreamland immediately. At that point, I had probably already felt what would happen—that I would be seeing a very special

dream.

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After a while, I got up, saying, “Mmnn, as I thought.” It was the same dreamscape that I had seen once upon fa time. The beautiful garden was as haphazard as always, with a whole bunch of objects from my memories scattered around the place. I had come to the exact same place where I had encountered Melfina before.

“How long has it been? I feel like it’s been a long time.”

“Really? I feel like it was just yesterday.”

Melfina appeared with a frivolous greeting, wearing her own clothing. However, probably because there was no need to be concerned about prying eyes, her angel’s halo and wings were in full view. Her blue hair in conjunction with her pure white wings and shining golden halo seemed much brighter than usual, and I couldn’t muster a reply.

“What’s wrong? You’re really staring hard at my face... Hee hee, did you fall in love with me all over again?”

Mel smiled. What she said might have been conceited, but she must have been just that happy to see me because her smile was as wide as ever. That smile was familiar to me, like she was looking at an abundant feast.

However, it was *wrong*.

“You’re DarkMel, aren’t you?”

The Mel imitator widened her eyes for a moment like she was surprised. However, that quickly turned into a smile as she started emitting jet-black miasma from her entire body, hiding her form in darkness.

“Hee hee...hee hee hee...how did you figure it out? I should have been acting perfectly like Melfina and yet you saw through it.”

The swirling darkness abated, revealing DarkMel’s true form. Her white wings, a sign of purity, and her golden halo were dyed black. Her hair had become the same color as mine as well. The most striking change, though, was how old she

looked. Whereas before, she had looked like a girl in her late teens, now she was even smaller, at an age even younger than Rion. However, her face stayed the same, even as she made her entrance, flapping her jet-black wings and scattering feathers around her.

"It was *too* perfect. When I met her before, I could tell she was enduring something underneath her smile. Though she tried to hide it, she actually looked to be in pain. There's no way I wouldn't notice that disappearing, right? I knew you weren't the real Melfina immediately."

"Wow, I'm so happy! It brings me (DarkMel) joy to know that you were looking at me (Mel) so closely!"

"I see. That's comforting."

DarkMel seemed to be truly happy. Melfina and DarkMel were both originally the same angel, so it wasn't wrong for her to be happy about that, though I admit it made things a bit complicated.

"Still, you're not really astonished, are you? Even though me appearing in your dreams is a surprise on the level of the final boss coming out early..."

"I am surprised, a little. So, are we going to fight in this dream? I'm okay with that."

"Too bad. There's nothing we can do in this place. I'm just speaking to you in your dreams through the other me because she's your follower, after all. Just like the other me once met with you in secret, I believe?"

That caught me off guard, creating a small beat before I could say, "So you noticed."

DarkMel made a show of cutely tilting her head, but I only took that as confirmation.

"You knew, and you let it go?"

"No, it was honestly unexpected that the other me would steal information while I was asleep. Remember? It's really hard for me to wake up once I fall asleep. It was like a sneak attack."

Ah, so they really are alike in that regard. Which means that the food budget

aboard that battleship is probably ridiculously high. Crap, I'm getting concerned about things I shouldn't be.

"That's why, to show re— Hey, did you just think something really rude?"

"It's just your imagination."

"Is it now? Maybe I'm flying too high because I finally get to talk to you, honey. Aah, I'm having so much fun!"

"I don't think that's the sort of thing you should be saying while tearing up."

"Oh? Huh?"

Large droplets of tears were flowing from DarkMel's eyes. It seemed she hadn't noticed until I pointed it out to her. It was so sudden that even I, who pointed it out, was lost for words. I didn't know what I should say or if I should try to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"That's strange. I should have thrown this emotion away a long time ago. My apologies, I ended up putting a damper on our reunion, honey. I suppose I should say something like...whoopsies?"

After wiping the tears from her eyes, DarkMel was no longer crying. She stuck her tongue out cheekily and quickly returned to her previous smile. For a moment I thought, *Is this some sort of strategy?* But I quickly dismissed the notion. Her goal was already clear, so pulling something like that now wouldn't accomplish anything. Thinking back to how Melfina had given birth to DarkMel, the strength of her determination was already proven, so there was no way she would try anything to lessen my will to fight.

But still...

"Do you really have no path other than this? You know, about fighting with me to the death—"

"I don't." DarkMel interrupted. "I have sacrificed everything for this, all for you. I cannot turn back after all that. I don't need to."

Yeah, I get it now. She's the perfect woman for me. My most beloved, and my strongest enemy. That's right, she's an enemy. One who threw away everything for my sake. The best, strongest, and dearest enemy just for me. Then what I

have to say is already decided. It's what DarkMel herself wants, after all.

"I see. Then goodbye, DarkMel."

"Yes."

"I'll be the one to bring your end. I won't allow anyone else to have this. I will definitely be the one to finish you off, DarkMel."

"Heh... Heh heh... Heh ha ha ha! Aaah, wonderful! You want me that badly?!"

She made an expression more lascivious than anyone would expect from someone looking that young. But I didn't hate that side of DarkMel. In fact, I couldn't hold her any more dear.

"Everything is ready on our side. The world is important, but my business with you is my first priority. Keep your schedule open next weekend, you hear?!"



“All right, then. I’m looking forward to it!”

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Kelvin’s estate, dining hall:

Upon waking from my dream, I immediately returned home. After I got permission from Tsubaki to use the teleportation gate, she declared that she was coming with me.

After returning together, I called everyone to the dining hall. Just as I had promised DarkMel in my dream, it was time to talk about when we would stage the final battle.

That being said...

“So delicious! Just delectable! Efil, you’ve gotten even better, haven’t you?”

“I am honored by the compliment, Tsubaki-sama,” Efil replied.

“Please come back already, Gustav-sama! How long are you planning to leave your country’s seat of leadership empty?!” Victor cried.

“Bah! That’s what you’re for, Victor! How dare you follow me all the way here!”

“Hey, hey, Setsunaaa,” Serge cooed. “Feed me! Aahhhnn...”

The other three Heroes looked on in silence as the former hero clung onto their friend.

“Come on, stop doing these kinds of things; it’ll cause a misunderstanding! Look at their eyes, especially Touya’s!” Setsuna pleaded.

“She’s right! This old man will become the sacrifice instead! Here, Flo-chan, I’ll feed you as much as you like!” the pope cut in.

Goldiana thought contemplatively for a moment before remarking, “That might be its own form of love. Don’t you agree, Sera-chan?”

“Well, I’ve learned one thing in all my time spent alive. That being: love surpasses race! After all, Kelvin and I are now bound by it. That means it should also be able to overcome gender as well. I wouldn’t be surprised if it did!”

“My! How insightful!”

“Hey, uh...Sera. That talk about races and genders is directly damaging me, so could you stop that? Seriously.”

“Um...Gerard-san...with me, there would only be a racial wall...wouldn’t that be okay? Squee! I said it!” Goldiana shrieked.

“I... I’m at my limit... Not enough of Melfina-sama’s scent... Gwurfhh!”

“Come back to us, Colette-chan! Quick, put her in between big brother Kelvin and Rion!” Ruka shouted.

Like, we just could not get coordinated at all! The meeting we were currently holding in my dining hall was only being attended by part of my force, and the personality present was already...*dense*. Even though my dining hall was designed to be pretty damn big, we were so crowded at the moment, we actually didn’t have enough seats at the long table.

What the hell is going on?

We had not only rulers from all the largest countries, but also Heroes and Demon Lords both past and present, from all over the world. We even had the world’s greatest weirdos and perverts.

I know I’m the one who called them all here, but I never expected them to come so quickly.

I had expected and prepared to talk to my family, but now it was like I was having a meeting of all the world’s bigwigs.

Who’s even in charge here? What? It’s me?

“Ahem!” I cleared my throat. “Everyone, I have called you here to discuss none other than the upcoming battle—”

I was interrupted by the noise of the crowd! Though I tried to talk, there was no sign of the gallery quieting down. Of course they wouldn’t; they were a gathering of eccentrics all crammed into one room. It would’ve actually been creepy if they had quieted down.

“Hey, Kel-nii...”

“Hm? What is it?”

I’d already half given up by the time Rion tugged on my sleeve and called out to me.

Rion’s cute today too, I thought as I ran away from reality. *Yeah, please stay like that. It’s really soothing.*

“This actually occurred to me before, but doesn’t this dining hall and long table make us look exactly like an enemy organization having a meeting in a manga?”

“Huh? Oh, uh...well, maybe?”

She’s referring to scenes where the enemy leaders all gather together for a meeting in action manga, anime, and movies, right? The kind where they all go to a really appropriate-looking meeting room or gathering hall and spout suggestive lines about various stuff. It’s true that when that happens, they’re always around a table like this.

I was lost in thought for a while when I suddenly realized what she was getting at. “No way! You want to try it?”

“Just a little! A small little show! They’re all still really excited, so I wanted to experience that atmosphere...”

Apparently, Rion had wanted to try acting out that sort of thing for a long time. Having so many powerful and *colorful* people gathered was rare.

I guess she saw this as the perfect opportunity to propose this to me? I get how she feels, but doing this at her age would be—

“Can I...not?” Rion visibly drooped.

“It seems everyone is here. So we will now commence this meeting.”

There was no way I couldn’t do it, right? Not with my little sister making that face.

“This was sudden, wasn’t it? Did something happen?” Rion piped up. Of course, she was really into it. She had both her elbows on the table in a pose a certain character was likely to adopt.

“It’s a busy time. I would like it if you finished this swiftly.” Surprisingly, Miyabi was the one who came into our conversation.

Wasn’t she busy staring dumbfoundedly at Setsuna and Serge just before? And yet she naturally slipped into our conversation. *And she tilted her trademark witch’s hat diagonally so that it hides her face... What is...*

Now it was our turn to be stared at with wide eyes by Touya and Nana.

“Heh heh...Kelvin, is it really true? If so, then things are about to get interesting.”

Sera had jumped onto the bandwagon. For some reason, she now had a wine glass in hand and was playing around with it as if to show it off. Sera’s combat uniform looked a lot like what a villain with a military style would wear, so she really looked the part.

Gah! I just thought she looked a little cool! But wait a second, me. We haven’t talked about anything yet. What’s about to get interesting? And that glass is filled with grape juice, right? It’s not actually wine, is it?

“That’s just cruel, big sis. How could you say it’s interesting when your caretaker, Victor, is collapsed on the ground?”

“Hmph, so Victor has fallen...but he was just the noisiest and naggiest of the Four Demonic Generals.”

Bell was dragged in because Sera was so into it, and now with the two happily playing along, their father was the next to join. The aura and atmosphere he put out was amazing, probably because he was an actual demon and used to this sort of role.

Wait, why are you two also playing around with a glass? Is that some sort of tradition, even though the entire Baal family is terrible at handling their alcohol?!

Bell’s cocktail glass was filled with something fizzy and was even garnished with a cherry.

Hey, that’s just sparkling water, right?! I can believe in you, right?!

Victor, for his part, had read the room and kept his mouth shut. He had

completely blended in with the atmosphere so as to protect Bell's setting. He had some colored paper in his hands and had written "It's grape juice and sparkling water" on it.

Ah, so the phrase 'the capable subordinate takes on a lot of hardship,' was made entirely for Victor, I see...

"Let's take a moment and calm down, Master. Here, have some tea." Efil chimed in.

"Ah, yeah...you're right. Thanks. Make sure to serve some to everyone else as well."

From there, more and more people took the hint and got into the act until finally it was like a full on play with everyone involved. At last, after a lot of fuss, everyone was on the same page. Since I had this chance, I decided to use the opportunity.

"And so, next weekend, we will be having our climactic battle with the White Ark. The location will be the ocean in the middle of the three continents."

"Ho! Ho! Ho! These old hands are itching to get into the fray!"

"Keh heh! Allow us, Toraj, to handle transport with our aerial fleet. Though once you get on, your return isn't guaranteed. It might end up being a one-way ticket."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll be fine. We have the protection of God on our side, so our victory is already written in fate! As the Oracle serving God, I guarantee it."

"What're you saying, Colette?" the pope interrupted. "We're fighting that very god you're talking about, you know? Flo-chan here thinks that something's wrong with that logic. Like, there's not enough data. We should just ignore fate and kill them all! Heh heh!"

"Oh my, do you have some sort of problem with god? Then maybe I should step up as a replacement?" Goldiana suggested.

While some used their status and personality to their fullest, there were also those who built the character they were playing too much and were having it

collapse in on themselves. Still, thanks to the meeting room play that was going on, I was able to broach the subject I wanted to without problems. I couldn't have been more grateful to Rion as a result. Also, in all honesty, it was a little easier for me as well. If I thought of it as a method to communicate with people, this sort of thing seemed more legitimate.

"Hee hee! This is fun, isn't it, Rion-chan?"

"Ah, Shutola-chan! That was some realistic acting back there. You really got into the role of the cool female leader!"

"Eheh heh...it reminded me of the meetings back at the castle."

"Um, castle? What do you mean?"

"It's a secret!"

"Awww, just tell me!"

And that was how we, while all being separate individuals, came together for the final battle.

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Kelvin's estate, yard:

A couple of days had passed since that meeting, and the day of the battle was finally getting close. Because the date was set, it felt like time was flowing faster than usual. During that time, Victor showed his stuff and was able to force my father-in-law back to their country. That might have been one of the reasons time felt like it was flying by, but more than that, it was because my excitement over finally clashing with DarkMel was growing by the day.

I had declared that I would defeat DarkMel, and she had accepted that declaration. I might have had the option of sympathizing with her, but she herself didn't want that. DarkMel had spent the last thousand years preparing for this day, all in order to entertain me.

That was why I decided to enjoy it to the fullest. I would take everything that DarkMel had built up and devour it all. Her power, her skills, her magic, her secrets, her miracles—everything. Absolutely everything. That was my duty as the one who had caused her to fall into the depths of despair. Or rather, I

actually *wanted* to do it. I desired DarkMel's everything.

I'll eat everything she's built up and save Melfina. For sure.

"You've got a bad look on your face right now, Kelvin-kun." Ange commented as she passed by me.

"Huh?! Not a cool one filled with a sense of purpose?"

"Nope. The usual—a cool one filled with greed."

That's weird. I thought I was making a pretty good expression there...

"Kelviiiiin! Don't just stand there lost in your thoughts! Come help us prepare! It's your job to make the final checks for the list of items we're stocking in Clotho's storage!

"Okay, I get it! I get it already, so don't shout so much, Sera."

Having been lectured by Sera, I returned to my spot in front of Clotho and received a slip of paper from Efil. At the moment, we were preparing for the journey. That being said, our basic plan hadn't changed. We'd just give everything to Clotho to store and go empty-handed.

"Sorry for interrupting while you're busy, Master. Clare-san and Uld-san have come."

"They have?"

Were there plans for them to visit? I wondered, but it wasn't long before I saw the two of them coming from the front gates. Uld was in his usual adventurer garb while Clare seemed to have slipped straight out of work, as she was still wearing her apron and triangular handkerchief. She was also carrying a large basket in her arms.

"Kel-chan! We heard that you're going to head out to the angel's nest. Is that true?!"

"Sorry about this, Kelvin. Seems like Clare heard the rumors from somewhere, so we ended up coming without any prior notice."

The plan to bring down the battleship *Elpis* was only known to a select few people and was otherwise kept top secret. Secret enough that only Rank S

adventurers would know about it. The fact that Clare had heard about it despite that meant that someone had flapped their gums.

To be fair, it'd be impossible to expect that bunch to keep a secret, so I guess I should've known this would happen.

"Yes, well...it's supposed to be a secret even among adventurers, so it'd be great if you don't go around talking about it."

"Oh, really?! Ow!"

"See, didn't I tell you?! My word, I told him, but he refused to believe me!"

I tried to calm Clare down, as she was repeatedly slapping Uld's muscular back fairly hard. The fact that Uld, who was a pretty strong adventurer, was reacting like those slaps hurt said a lot about how strong Clare was.

"So, what did you need? Did you come just to confirm the rumors?"

"That was part of it. Here, take this with you." Clare handed me the basket in her arms.

Oh, this is pretty heavy.

Since we were coming anyway, I figured I'd share my best cooking. From the look of things, you'll be setting out today right? Eat that with Efil-chan and the others. Think of it as support from me."

"Great, thanks! Oooh, it smells really nice."

Even though it wasn't open, the wonderful scent of the food inside the basket tickled my nose. I felt saliva pooling in my mouth.

"Hm?" I heard Efil say, sniffing the scent of food in the air.

Whoops, so Efil was able to smell this.

She came over and we both took in the smell of the food. It was rare for Efil, who prioritized manners when in front of people, to do this.

Efil took a moment to process what she was smelling. "I don't believe I recognize this. What dish is this, Clare-san?"

"Heh heh! You'll find out when you open it. I've written down the recipe and put it in the basket too, so you can make it yourself next time. This is the last

recipe I'll be able to teach you though, Efil-chan. You really are a good woman."

"Clare-san!"

Clare's motherliness was off the charts. Efil was tearing up as she hid her mouth with her hands.

To think that there are still hidden recipes that Efil doesn't know. What is up with Clare-san's repertoire? It seems nearly infinite.

"Heh heh, now you can go get married with pride! Right, dear?"

"You got it! It's rare to see a woman as good as Efil! If you come back safely, Kelvin, make sure to say what needs to be said!"

"Umm...what does that..." Efil wondered aloud.

The two of them circled around me, pounding me on the back while flashing Efil full-faced smiles. *Ow, that hurts.*

"You... You two," I stammered out. "I know what you're trying to say, but saying it so loud is..."

"Huh?" Efil finally realized what they meant. "Uh, ah! Whaaat?!"

Look at how bewildered Efil is after figuring it out. I know what you guys are trying to say, but saying it with Ange, Sera, and the others around isn't good! They're all looking this way, wondering what's going on. Also, that line raises flags, so you should be careful, Uld-san.

"Well, Clare's the only one for me! You know, she was actually as beautiful as Efil in her younger years. Do you believe it? Back then, she competed in a beauty contest that was being held in Parth—"

"You didn't have to specify 'younger,' dear!"

"Gwoarfhhh!"

Clare hit Uld with a full-force flying kick, sending him up and away, only to be caught by Gerard, who was passing by.

Wow, good job sending Uld-san that far when he's so big. I can see the whites of his eyes. Is he okay?

Clare's kicking form was unbelievably magnificent given her plump frame.

Between that, the revelation of her past beauty, and her repertoire of dishes that surpassed Efil's, today was full of surprises. I had known Clare for quite a long time by now, but I was still finding new sides of her.

"Whew, that felt good," she said, flashing a refreshed smile after kicking her husband to the curb.

I respect Clare-san a lot, but I wouldn't want Efil picking up this side of her too...

"Well then, Kel-chan, Efil-chan...we're always acting silly like this, so when you get back, come have a drink at our place again. We'd be happy to hear about a wedding too, but the best thing would be to see your healthy faces. It's a promise, okay?"

That got me in the feels. "Yes, I promise. Right, Efil?"

"Yes, definitely! When that happens, I'll be sure to bring cooking that will compare to yours, Clare-san!"

"Oho, that's mighty confident of you. As your cooking teacher, I don't plan on losing to you anytime soon!"

They might have come today not because of some rumors, but because they sensed that something was going on with us. And that was why they tried to support us as much as they could. A warm feeling came seeping into my heart.

"It's time, Kel-nii!" I heard Rion shout.

"Go give'em hell, Kel-chan!"

My body, my heart, and everything else was totally ready. At this point, there was nothing more to be afraid of outside of Mel's food budget, Colette's episodes, and whenever Sera drank.

"You're all ready, right?! All right, let's get going!" I shouted.

"Heeeyyy," Gerard got my attention. "Uld-dono isn't waking up. Is it okay to leave him?"

Before leaving, we made sure to heal Uld.

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Kelvin's estate, in front of the teleportation gate:

We stood in front of the teleportation gate that was set up underneath the main building. The plan was to go through it and into Toraj. It was goodbye to my home, which I had gotten used to living in during this time, until the fight was over. A lot had happened up until now, so I was going through a lot of emotions.

Still, I guess getting lost in these feelings isn't like me. I should just act like this is one of our usual trips, but with the express purpose of bringing back Melfina as a souvenir. Yeah, let's go with that. All that's left is...yeah, I should go talk to Ellie and Ruka, if only to formally ask them to take care of the house. They both know what's going on, so they're probably pretty worried.

"Listen here, as long as you do exactly what I've written down in this manual, there won't be any problems. Got it?" Dahak insisted. "I've raised these vegetables with earnest love and effort, so I'm counting on you! This is not a joke!"

"Oh, you're such a worrywort, Hak-chan!" Ruka said jovially. "Mom, the golems, and I are all here so you don't have to worry."

"I want you to be especially careful with my fruit field," Mdo explained. "It's almost time for them to ripen, and when that happens, sister Efil will use them in a special dessert for everyone. I can promise you that."

"Um...if possible, muh rice paddies too..." Boga interjected hesitantly.

"Please be at ease; we will make sure to look after everything," Ellie assured him.

The dragonz were meeting with Ellie and Ruka, shouting about manuals, pleading, and whatnot. *So the worried ones were Dahak and the others. Mainly worried about their fields, though.*

"Heeeyy! You guys don't have to be that worried. You know how hard they work, right?"

"Well...well yeah, but..." Dahak didn't seem entirely convinced. "Those vegetables, they're all like my children! Of course I'd be worried. No amount of worrying is too much!"

“I actually agree with Dahak for once,” Mdo joined in. “My fruit children are also very sensitive, and I worry about them as if they were part of my own body. My blood sugar will go up and I won’t be able to sleep at night.”

“Uh...so if I were to put it simply, it’s like they’re your lovers...or something?”

“That’s it!” the two of them shouted in unison.

“I...I see...”

These Dragon Kings have completely awakened to the farming life. They’re so far gone, there’s no coming back.

“Don’t make them take care of the prohibited area as well, okay? There’s a reason it’s prohibited.”

“There’s no need for that,” Dahak assured me. “I made sure to harvest it all in preparation for today. I only asked them to take care of the super safe, super delicious Dahak brand vegetables! Someday, I want to send these pieces of my soul out to all the vegetable junkies in the country!”

What does “vegetable junkies” even mean? As that thought got stuck in my mouth, I heard Efil giggling from beside me.

“Sister Efil! You would know how this feels, right?!”

“Yes...I believe it is a very noble sentiment. Just like how I think of my master, am I correct?”

“Just what I’d expect out of our sister Efil,” Mdo heaped praise upon her. “You’re endlessly thoughtful and filled with love.”

Moved by Efil’s words, all the Dragon Kings nodded in response. I was pretty sure that if I said the same thing, Mdo at least wouldn’t have been convinced.

Dammit, is feeding all that matters in this world?

“I need to talk to them as well, so may I borrow the two of them?” Efil asked.

“Go ahead.” Mdo answered. “If it’s for you, sister Efil, I would put all my effort into helping, even for free.”

“Zooo...should we go ahead?” Boga suggested.

“Yeah,” Dahak agreed. “Okay then, bro, I’ll go on ahead. Maybe I’ll spend my

waiting time harvesting some crops!”

“Toraj’s strawberries are especially delightful,” Mdo added. “I have saved up my allowance for this day.”

“I...uhhh...ummm...”

“Take caaare! Leave the fields to us!” shouted Ruka.

“Ah, that’s right! I’m serious here—”

The Dragon kings all left in different states. One seemed very lost as to what to say, one hummed while opening her purse, and one had turned around to get one last word in before accidentally passing through the gate.

Aren’t they acting too *normal?*

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat to get my servants’ attention. “Ellie, Ruka...while we’re gone, Rosalia and Huba will also be unavailable due to private matters. That means...well, you could say that the survival of this place rests on your shoulders.”

“I understand.”

“Yeah, I understand!”

Even Ruka, who was usually very energetic and acted like a girl her age, tried acting somewhat like a proper maid in front of the head maid Efil.

Maybe I went too far saying it rested on their shoulders...or maybe not.

Our designated battle site was part of the world as well, but everyone left behind would have to shoulder the responsibility of protecting their homelands. The Beast King and his children would do so for Gaun, Pope Phillip and the ancient Heroes would do the same for Deramis, while Tsubaki took care of Toraj. Lastly, Trycen would be protected by Murmur, who had been dispatched from Deramis, as well as General Dan, Huba, and Rosalia. Just like them, the two in front of me would have to protect our home along with Uld and the other adventurers.

It was a pretty big heap of responsibility, and it made sense why Efil would want to psych them up and brace them for what was to come.

Huh, me? Oh, I was so excited that I didn't sleep much last night. Yes...I'm reflecting on it.

"I'm counting on you two to take care of the estate until we get back. Also, I'm pretty sure that when we do, Mel's gonna be ravenous, so prepare some food. She'll probably...eat more than she ever has."

"Heh heh, then I'll need to buy a lot of groceries." Ellie said mirthfully.

"I'll do my best to help with the cooking too, for the head maid!" Ruka exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha! How reliable!"

Ruka was still an apprentice in title, but to me, she and her mother were both proud, full-fledged servants. On top of their basic maid duties, they were now easily over level 100 and their strength could not be underestimated. They'd grown enough in that area to be able to call themselves heroes.

I remember when I first met Ellie and Ruka back when...that's right, during the Black Wind incident in Toraj. They were among the prisoners we rescued from the bandits' base. I never would have expected that they'd end up working as servants in my house. Those Black Wind guys were irredeemable, but it's because of them that such a miracle was able to occur, so I'm at least thankful to them for that. I don't know what happened to them after they were hauled off to prison, though. Maybe they were executed?

"It is about time for us to leave," Efil reminded me. "Tsubaki-sama will pout if we make her wait too long."

"You're right. Okay then, we're off. Don't forget to lock up at night; it'd be awful if thieves get in."

"I will deal with them if they do, Master. Be careful out there!"

"I pray for your safety."

While being seen off by the reliable guardian deities of our home, we stepped into the activated teleportation gate.

"Yeah, just leave it to us. There's nothing in this world I'm afraid of!" I shouted, turning around just before we entered the gate. All I got in response

was an ambiguous smile, though.

That's weird. I was saying that seriously. It was the result of squeezing out what little courage I have to try to act cool...

Oops, now's not the time to be discouraged. Once we get to the other side, we have a ship waiting for us at Toraj's port. I can't be showing Tsubaki-sama any weird faces at such an important time.

So having changed tacks and psyched myself up, what awaited us was—

"Oh? Oh noooo! If it isn't Kelvin-chaaannn! You feeling good?!"

A dynamic, *dangerous*, squeezing hug, complete with heart pose.

"Ooughhhff..."

"Aah! That's not fair, big bro!" Dahak cried.

Sorry, I lied. There *was* still something I was afraid of.

I'm with Gerard on this. I don't think I'll ever get used to Prettia-chan's sudden appearances.

Afterword

Thank you for buying “Black Summoner volume 13: Dragon King’s Blessings.” I am Mayoi Doufu, and by now, I just want to enjoy the outside. I would also like to thank the web novel version readers who bought this book as well. Thank you for your continued favor.

Volume 13 is all about the various dragons. It was pretty moving for me to see Mdofarak, of all characters, getting her debut on the cover. I was actually doubtful it would ever happen, enough for me to wonder, *Oh man, did the me back when I first had Mdo appear ever consider she would become so cute?* Oh well, who cares? She’s cute, so it’s fine. Volume 13 is basically like that feeling.

Lastly, I would like to thank the illustrators Kurogin-sama and Daixt-sama, who illustrated the dragonz to be so cute and cool; my proofreader; and the unforgettable readers. All of you helped in making this book.

Well then, I will ask you to continue to take care of *Black Summoner*, and I pray that we meet again in the next volume.

-Mayoi Doufu