
14
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DAIXT
KUROGIN (DIGS)
BLACK SUMMONER
SUMMONING THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION


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Black Summoner: Volume 14 [Complete]

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Part 1: Smothered Mate

Toraj's port:

Having been unwillingly subjected to a sweltering embrace from Prettia, I used all of my unshakeable will to keep my ego intact. I will never forget the kindness of the hand that Gerard gently laid upon me once I was freed from her thick, trunk-like arms.

Meanwhile, Dahak was shooting jealousy-filled looks at me.

I never wanted this. Stop that. In fact, I wish we'd changed places. Like, please switch with me. Please.

I had been met with a vision of hell the moment I'd arrived in Toraj, but since I had acted so cool, I couldn't afford to look weak here. I met up with Tsubaki, who was clearly trying to hold in an uproarious fit of laughter, and we took a boat to Toraj's port, which was already teeming with a great lineup of esteemed patrons.

"Yo, Kelvin! It's been a while!"

"Since the Beast King Festival, I believe? You look well...or not..."

"Ah, yeah. Some things happened a little while ago..."

A beastfolk party from Gaun led by Sabato had come. Apparently, he was the stand-in for the Beast King, who had stayed behind in his country.

The last time I saw them was...just like Goma said, during the Beast King Festival? I heard rumors that after that, they were worked pretty hard by the Beast King.

"Why... Why did I have to be dragged all the way here by Sabato-sama?" Guin lamented. It was a while before he continued, "I'm just going to be a hindrance..."

"Gah ha ha! Just take that as a sign of how much Sabato-sama trusts you, Guin!"

"Whaaaat..."

After all this time, it seemed Guin hadn't changed, leading to an exchange that seemed so familiar. Still, something seemed to be missing.

What is this feeling that something's off... Oh, that's right!

"You aren't going to hit Sabato, Goma?"

"Hey! Why are you saying such ridiculous things, Kelvin?!"

Well, without that, I don't really feel like I've really reunited with you guys.

"Heh heh heh. If, as I am now, my fist were to connect with Sabato, it wouldn't be like before. I'd like to hold back for today."

Sabato stammered out a response, "So she says! Too bad for you!" He rubbed his chest in relief.

Hey now, the Goma I know wouldn't be so kind and easy as to say that. She's more like...the type to react by just punching Sabato for now without thinking about it too hard. Hey, is that Goma not the real thing? It might be best to consider the possibility that this Goma is an impostor, like the Beast King switched places with her or something.

"Hm?"

"Oh!"

As I tried reading deeper into the situation, Azgrad arrived from Trycen. Our eyes met, and I saw that adult Shutola was with him. *They must have agreed to meet up beforehand.*

"Yo, Kelvin. You look good...or not. What happened?"

"Uh...Oh, well...a lot happened..."

Wait a second. Do I really look that bad right now? Like, enough to cause worry? Damn, Prettia's hug is scary. Efil, hold up a mirror for me.

"It's finally time, huh? I've been looking forward to it so much that I couldn't sleep last night."

"Oh, esteemed brother Azgrad, you're such a child when it comes to that, as always. Please say something as well, dea— Kelvin-san."

"Hey, Shutola, is that some sort of roundabout attempt to criticize me too?" I

had to ask.

“Uh... Oh no, Shutola doesn’t really get difficult stuff like that.” For a moment, Shutola transformed into her child form to make a really obvious act of not knowing what I was talking about. Not only that, she flashed the same smile that had sunk Gerard in one fell swoop.

Hey, come on, don’t try to worm your way out of it like that. I know you’re still fearsomely smart whichever form you take. You’ve lived under my roof and gotten used to calling me a certain name reflexively; you should know how I do things by now. Or wait...did you know and still do that to tell me to fix myself?

“I disagree. All men should retain about that amount of mischievousness. It really tickles my maternal instincts.”

“Uh...and this is?”

An incredible beauty with ridiculously large breasts suddenly appeared like mist and grabbed Azgrad’s shoulders. I had already felt her presence so I wasn’t that surprised by her sudden appearance, but I was truly shocked by the size of that chest.

That’s larger than Sera’s...maybe even Estoria’s!!!

I mean, come on. Give me a break; I’m a man too.

“This is my first time meeting you, isn’t it, Rank S adventurer Kelvin-san? My name is Salafia, and I am Rosalia and Azgrad’s mother. Thank you for always taking care of my children.”

“Oh, yes, thank you for being so polite. Putting your son aside, your daughter has done very good work and is always very helpful.”

“Hey, what did you mean by that? Putting me aside?!”

I meant exactly what I said. I hired Rosalia as a servant, so of course I take care of her. On the other hand, Azgrad would sometimes show up out of the blue just to play around in our underground training facility and have some tea with Huba and the others. Although he had calmed down a bit after becoming a king, he still stopped by as recently as last week.

Like, seriously, battle junkies are so much trouble. Anyway, this is Azgrad’s

foster mother, huh? The Ice Dragon King Salafia. Now that I'm looking at her, she resembles Rosalia a lot in places, like her black hair and fair skin. Shutola recently learned to use blue magic too, so I would have liked to have gotten her a blessing if Salafia hadn't already given it to Sylvia. Well, I can just leave that for a future Dragon King.

"The other Dragon Kings are still in the process of gathering here. Hee hee, how many decades has it been since all of us have gotten together? There are a lot of kids I haven't seen before, so I've been looking forward to today."

Salafia looked at the dragonz, who had just recently become Dragon Kings, with a faraway but peaceful expression. It's hard to describe, but she gave off a really motherly impression, like she was their mother too.

"Ah. You know, she might look youthful but Salafia is the oldest of the current Dragon Kings," Azgrad clarified. "Making an effort to look young really does have an effect, doesn't it?"

"Az-chaaaaan?"

"Oh, crap! Anyway, be seeing you, Kelvin!"

"Wait right there, Az-chan! Your mother hasn't finished talking to you!"

Azgrad took off at an all-out sprint, and Salafia chased after him with unbelievable speed. Her personality was...quite different from Rosalia's.

"This is just a thought, but is Azgrad planning on riding into battle on the Ice Dragon King's back?"

"Yeah. Esteemed brother Azgrad didn't like the idea, but Rosalia was relegated to Trycen's defense."

I shot a look at Shutola and said after a moment, "Was that your doing, Shutola?"

"Ehe heh heh..." Shutola put on an innocent smile.

Yeah...I can take that as a yes, right? Well, it's true he and Rosalia were a powerful tag team, and since Azgrad has the best riding skills on the continent, he should be able to handle Salafia, the Ice Dragon King. He has that much ability, at least, and he'll be more help that way.

Still...I get the feeling Shutola's gotten a lot stronger. She has both a girl's personality and an adult's all in one. And not just in combat, but mentally too. It's like...the adult Shutola is always cool and collected, and when combined with the child Shutola, who has the imagination to make bold moves, they can make the best of each other's strong points. Her presence has gotten a lot more reassuring.

"Still, it's pretty amazing, gathering this many people here today. There's Trycen, Gaun, and even Colette-chan from Deramis is coming. Not to mention Toraj prepared such an awesome fleet..." Shutola trailed off and paused to consider something. "Isn't this the first time all four major powers have joined together on such a large scale since the end of the great war?"

"You forgot to mention that all the Dragon Kings, Heroes, and Demon Lords are here too, as well as the strongest weirdos. It really is a first-rate gathering."

"And the one who brought those amazing people together was my dearest brother Kelvin! Your speech as the representative at the departure ceremony is coming up. You know, the one where you'll have to speak in front of everyone! Are you prepared, dearest brother?"

Huh? Speech? Representative? I haven't heard about any of that. Who's gonna do it?

"Huh? Wait...are you saying...the speech..."

"Of course it's you, dearest brother. Getting everybody's fighting spirit up before the big battle is an important job, so shape up!"

For a while, I had no words. "Shutola. To be honest, I haven't thought of anything. It's not really my thing, so could you get someone like Tsubaki-sama to—"

"You're going to do it, dearest brother!" Shutola smiled wide.

Instantly, my mind flashed white. Luckily, she had prepared some cue cards for me through the Follower Network.

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"And that concludes the representative's speech. Once again, let's give it up

for Kelvin Celsius and his wonderful words!”

Clap, clap, clap, clap!

Whew. I managed to get through it somehow, thanks to Shutola’s cue cards. I never thought there’d be a ceremony like this before the fight...

The port was adamantly closed to outsiders, so I had thought Tsubaki would be the only one who was not heading off to battle to be present. I really wanted to voice at least two or three complaints to whoever it was that arranged that ceremony. Who was it even for?

Hmm...maybe it was necessary to keep up appearances as a nation? I still doubt that anything coming out of my mouth would help raise anyone’s morale.

“Well done, Master.”

“Thanks. I really shouldn’t be doing things I’m not used to. And thank you for the cue cards as well, Shutola. It was perfect.”

I still couldn’t get rid of the feeling that my recital was a little stiff, even if I was just reading something pre-prepared. Maybe that was canceled out by the quality of the composition into something normal?

“You were really cool up there, big brother!”

“Yeah, it was like you were an athlete kicking off a big event!”

I have no idea what you mean by that, Rion. Did you mean I was refreshing and pleasant to listen to? Or too naive?

“Well then, friends! I will not be able to accompany you, but I believe you will manage to grasp victory! With this, the ceremony is closed!”

As soon as I felt relieved about having finished all the greetings, Tsubaki came out of nowhere and ended the ceremony. With that, the ships would finally set off towards the center of the ocean between the continents.

There were a total of twenty-eight ships, and the plan was to have them make their journey underwater. Each one was equipped with a magic item that allowed it to communicate with the others from afar, so it would be possible to coordinate even while underwater. In case of a breakdown, Clotho had also stationed clones of itself on each ship, so they had a backup. Colette and I, the

summoner duo, would be able to follow up somehow.

However, this meant that Colette and I would be riding on the same ship, which made me a little worried. The boat trip would take a couple of days, meaning, I would be spending some time with her in a closed space. This placement was decided to keep her from going crazy due to not having enough of “the holy smell,” but I couldn’t help but be worried personally...in various ways.

“Kelvin! That speech you gave earlier was quite something.”

As I wallowed in my own sense of gloom, Tsubaki walked over to me while waving her folding fan.

“Ah, Tsubaki-sama. Thank you very much. It makes me happy, even if it’s just empty flattery.”

“Don’t be so modest. That speech almost sounded like it was thought up by the princess of Trycen. It was good enough to make me think that. Right, everyone?”

“Ehe heh heh! Isn’t my big brother amazing?”

“Yep! Kel-nii is awesome!”

“Yes, I agree. My master is great.”

Seriously, what kind of embarrassing performance is this supposed to be?

“Hey, come on, cut me some slack. At any rate, Tsubaki-sama...I think it’s time for us to get going.”

“Indeed. This is as far as I can help you. Sorry, but I’ll be waiting for reports of your success.”

“Why’re you apologizing, Tsubaki-sama? We couldn’t be more grateful to you. Please, allow me to show my appreciation somehow once we return.”

“Really? Then if I could get your signature here on this marriage registration _”

“Okay! Everyone ready?! Let’s sail!” I made sure to interrupt her planned coercion by shouting as loudly as I could to my companions. And with that, our

ships set sail.

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“Cast off! Make sure that door is closed!”

The fleet, full of submarine-slash-airships, left the port in succession, setting out into the open sea. Even to Tsubaki, Toraj’s ruler, the sight of this many vessels departing was a rare one not seen since the last great war. Tsubaki stayed there, watching the fleet until the last one disappeared into the distance, as if she wanted to burn the sight into her memory.

For a long while, everything was silent. Once the fleet was gone, Tsubaki spoke. “They’re gone. Seriously, though, seems I’ve been rejected again...”

“How long are you planning on staying fixated on one person, Tsubaki-sama?”

“Agh?! Oh...it’s just you, Kagenui. I know you always appear out of nowhere with no sound, but I’d like it if you thought about how I would feel when you show yourself for once. It’s bad for my heart if you suddenly talk to me from behind like that.”

Tsubaki fanned herself in an attempt to get rid of the cold sweat that had sprung up on her. That, along with the rather cute scream she had let out, showed how surprised she must have been.

“My apologies. I could sense some kind of sorrow emanating from you from behind, Tsubaki-sama.”

“Sorrow, you say? How rude. And what do you mean by ‘fixated’?”

“Exactly as I said. Your attempts to recruit Kelvin-dono, from direct negotiations to invitations through correspondence, total sixty-four times. You have lost every single attempt. Surely even you must admit that it is time to give up, Tsubaki-sama? You should be thinking of marri—”

“You don’t need to be counting that sort of thing! Agh, you sound just like my dead grandfather; it’s none of your business! You know I’m the same age as Efil, despite how I look?”

“And she is only one step away from exchanging vows of marriage with the one you seek, is she not? Let us look at reality.”

“I came to my conclusion by facing reality head-on. Think of Kelvin’s black hair... There’s no way I would mistake someone who’s from the same clan as I. There’s no doubt, he is from the same land as our dragon god-sama. In order to maintain the purity of our bloodline, Toraj’s royalty must only marry those from the same clan. Thinking of the future, no one is better than Kelvin. And that was why I forced dragon god-sama to take a look at him; he gave me permission.”

“So that was why you two left together the other day. Still...”

“None of that! Oh, don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“Oh, a plan?”

Tsubaki snapped her folding fan closed and took something out from her breast pocket. It was a small container reminiscent of a perfume bottle.

“Keheh...you remember how Deramis’s Oracle did research on this area, right? This bottle is the result. That sly girl...she may look all pure, but she makes some bold moves. I can see how she managed to lay her hands on him before I did, when I called dibs.”

Kagenui hesitated to say, “I suppose I should ask... What is that?”

“An aphrodisiac. A powerful one concocted by a master kunoichi.”

Kagenui’s expression couldn’t be seen through the mask, but at moments like this it was easy to tell. The ninja had brought a hand to his brow and was stooped over.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am. Don’t worry, the fact that Deramis’s oracle was able to use it means that it’s allowed by the goddess. So it shouldn’t be a problem for me either. I know I shouldn’t be saying it myself, but look...I’m just as nice-looking as that oracle, no?”

Tsubaki had hit upon a critical point: the precedence set by the goddess that allowed its use and the oracle who actually used it.

“Using that may be somewhat rash, I feel. It is possible that the Oracle and Kelvin-dono already had that sort of relationship. There were rumors to that effect as early as the promotion ceremony.”

“Oh, shut it. From my research, Kelvin met the Oracle for the first time at that promotion ceremony. He may be lustful, but he’s not the type to do something so heartless as to lay hands on someone he just met in front of Sera and Efil. If they were to get involved, they would need to have known each other for a while. It’s more realistic to think that the Oracle fell in love at first sight with Kelvin and forced him into such a relationship! Do you understand? If that’s what she did, then precedence is set. I will not allow you to stop me!”



“Ghmm...” Kagenui couldn’t find any argument more convincing than what Tsubaki had put out, which was weirdly on the mark. Everyone was praying for those who set out to return safely, but there were also those who knew that further commotion awaited them upon their return.

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Aqua Swallow number 3:

The inside of the ship was unexpectedly comfortable. It was spacious and we each had private rooms, so it didn’t feel cramped at all. There were windows spaced out through the ship, so it was possible to see outside as well. There was no stress even after a few days of travel. Instead, it felt like we were on a small vacation of sorts.

Shiver.

However, after the ship dove underwater, I was beset by strange chills. *What? Am I catching a cold? That isn’t a good sign; we’re heading towards a huge battle. I should get Efil to make some porridge or something.*

“I’ll make something to warm you up right away, Master!”

“Oh, yeah...sorry and thanks.”

I didn’t even need to ask. Efil had sensed my shivers and headed straight for the ship’s kitchen. I could only applaud her good instincts and spirit of service.

All twenty-eight ships had a kitchen installed in them, but the only ones cooking would be Efil, Salafia, and Prettia. Each of them were aboard different ships and would be supported by chosen Torajii chefs. It was a measure to raise morale by feeding the crew food made by beautiful women because sharing food between ships was possible using Clotho.

Though a rather burly woman was mixed in for Dahak, her cooking was the real deal, so there was no problem. Of course not, because the plan was to obfuscate who had cooked what. Not to mention, Efil was on my ship! So no problem at all!

“Look! Look, Kel-nii! We can see the inside of the ocean!”

“Ah, a fishie! There’s even a groma!”

Rion and Shutola were looking out at the underwater landscape through one of the ship's windows. They would have gotten excited about the scenery above the water, but the scenery below was even better. It was only natural for them to get excited and make a fuss. Seeing the children like that made me happy as well.

We just set out, so I wonder if this is still part of the Dragon King's waters?

"Look at this too, Kelvin! It's amazing! Really amazing! Like, how should I put it...it's so amazing!"

Sera was having just as much fun as the children. Rather, she might actually have been having even more fun.

Are you okay with that, being a comparatively older girl?

"Hee hee, all of you are acting like usual. It's just as lively as ever."

After hearing that voice, it took me a moment before I felt I could turn to greet her. "Hey, Colette."

"Is it just me or did you leave a weird gap there?"

"Uh...I don't know what you're talking about?" I shot back somewhat robotically. It wasn't as if I didn't want to see her, but I just got the chills again with almost perfect timing.

Ah, is this what they call seasickness?! Melfina got it too, so I can't deny that possibility!

"Um, Kelvin-sama? If you aren't feeling well, you should go lie down in your room. Yes, it would be good if you just lay down. Then you'd snuggle up next to me and I could soothe you with white magic. Then you'd sleep. Just sleep."

"I'd love to do that, but...no, wait, Efil just went to get me some food to help with that, so I'll consider it after I eat. You're not that free either, right, Colette?"

"Not to worry! My highest priority is your health, Kelvin-sama. That body, which Melfina loves, is the most precious thing to me!" she exclaimed before letting out some pants and huffs.

"If you could at least try to hide how 'excited' you are, Colette..."

In a sense, it was her usual behavior, so I couldn't help but feel calmed by it, although as a result, I thought, *It's probably too late for me now that I'm like this*. At this point, the Holy Woman mode that she let through every once in a while seemed way weirder to me. Still, Colette was truly worried about me. That was why I wouldn't say any more than I had about her tendencies.

At any rate, as anyone could tell from the sight of Colette clinging to my waist, this ship, the third of the fleet, was occupied by the Celsius family minus Dahak, plus Colette. The allocation of personnel between ships was mainly done by party. Those from Gaun were on one ship, Touya's party was on another, and so on.

However, there were exceptions to the rule. As summoners, Colette's and my followers could come and go freely on other ships. So they were wandering around as they liked until the time came to fight. Dahak was on Prettia's ship, Captain Cliff of the Holy Order of Knights was with Touya's group, training them, and Sera was able to visit her family as she pleased.

They act so free...and meanwhile it's impossible for me, their Summoner...

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Master. I have prepared the finest dish for you."

"You haven't kept me waiting at all. Whoa! It's shining rainbow colors!"

The little cart that Efil had pushed in was giving off a holy light, as if it were backlit. It was so bright that I couldn't look at it directly!

Sniff, sniff... "This smell...it smells like Melfina-sama!" Colette exclaimed.

"Whaaaat?"

Mel smelled like porridge? No, wait, that's impossible. Mel, with all her appetite, definitely smelled sexier.

"Wow! What is that, Efil-nee?!" Rion shouted.

"It... It's so bright...but it's making me feel hungry because it smells so nice," said Shutola.

"Wait, could that be? The legendary dish you pulled out to win the previous cooking championship?!"

"No, this is different. This time, it's porridge," replied Efil.

“Aww, what? I jumped the gun!”

No, no, wait a second. The very fact that it’s shining like that means it’s legendary, I’m pretty sure!

“Oh, that’s right. Efil, what about that food you received from Clare-san? We might as well bring it out now that everyone’s gathered here.”

“That is just like you, Master. What a great idea.”

“Yay! I’ll go tell An-nee and the others through the network. Go on ahead!” Rion added.

“I’ll help you, Rion-chan,” Shutola replied.

“Understood. What should we do about refreshments?” asked Efil.

“Apple juice from Hak-chan’s orchard!” Rion and Shutola answered in unison.

“Ah, I want that too!” Colette joined in.

Those in charge of supplies in my house worked safely and reliably. The fact that Dahak was gradually becoming a stalker was, well, given his chosen partner... At any rate, Gerard and I had decided to close our eyes to it in hopes of keeping the peace.

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“This is a cooking revolution! I thought Efil’s food was the peak, so I never expected Clare to be hiding such a trump card!”

“Hrmm...I would love to be biased towards my adopted granddaughter, but Efil wouldn’t appreciate that. It’s a tie! I declare it a tie!”

Sera and Gerard spoke those somehow familiar lines while filled with surprise and wonder. I had also tried a bite of Clare’s special dish in between mouthfuls of the backlit porridge, and it certainly gave Efil’s cooking a run for its money. I wasn’t very well-versed in cooking, so I wasn’t sure how to express it, but honestly, I had no words. Like, imagine a multi-course Italian meal. It would seem high-class, but you wouldn’t be able to name it...something like that? Unfortunately, as lacking in intelligence as I was, I couldn’t come up with a decent food report!

“It was *so* good...”

“Delicious...”

“I’m so glad I was born...”

Rion, Shutola, and Ange had all finished their portions and had far off looks in their eyes, seeming dazed. The feeling of supreme bliss was still reverberating within them, and it seemed like they had been biting down on pure, raw happiness. Melfina’s greatest miscalculation was probably that she couldn’t be here right now.

Oh well. The food came with the recipe, so once everything’s over, we can just have Efil make it again. She’ll definitely be deeply moved by it. So much that she might even cry...

“It seems as if at least some small part of me had become conceited. From now on, I will put forth even greater effort, Master. I swear to you here and now as your maid. I will become a maid you can be proud of, Master!”

“I...see. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yes!”

Efil seemed more fired up than ever. I was already more than proud of her, though. I trusted and relied on her in every respect.

“Om!” *Sniff.* “Nom! This... This is Melfina-sama’s taste! And...her smell!” And then there was Colette.

That’s my porridge...

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“Crap. How could I have missed such an important detail!”

Half a day had passed since we dove underwater, and I had just realized something important. Something that I regretted so much, I would never live it down. Something full of memories.

“What happened? Is it really that bad?”

“Of course it is! Sera, think about it! While we’re trapped on this ship, we won’t be able to fight at all. Unlike our home, there’s no place that’s tough

enough or soundproof enough to withstand it. We have no place to train, and we won't be able to spar between comrades!"

There was no place on the ship where we could battle as we pleased, so I would only become more frustrated and backed up as time went on. Having to spend a few days like this, my skills would only dull. And I had no idea how long my sanity would hold out either.

"Ah, so it's a problem for you personally as a battle junkie."

"Wow, I didn't expect such a cold-hearted jab..."

Sera, who was singularly unmoved by my plight, was lying on my bed while reading a book and snacking on something made by Efil.

How is she so calm? At this rate, I won't be able to meet DarkMel in my best condition for battle! I need to ask her!

"Hrm, that certainly does seem like a crisis. We must find a solution immediately!"

"I'm glad you're thinking about it so seriously, Colette. But...could you let go of my waist already?"

After stealing half of the porridge that Efil had made for me, Colette was still clinging to me even half a day later.

Is this the kind of thing where she's fallen to a state where she doesn't know how to hold back because Melfina's gone?

"I fully understand that I am troubling you by doing this. However, I have not been able to see you for a long while, Kelvin. Please! Please allow me to stay this way for a while longer!"

"Okay! I get it, so wipe off your drool! I'll let you do whatever you want as long as you do that!"

"Whatever I want?!" Colette's eyes snapped open wide.

Damn this holy woman is scary. Gah, I never expected Melfina's absence to affect me like this! But I can't allow this fanatic to go to Rion. I need to act as a bulwark to defend my beloved little sister!

“Let’s play cards, dearest brother!”

“Hm? Is something fun going on in here?”

Just as that thought crossed my mind, in came Shutola and Rion.

You mustn’t enter right now, my little sisters! I know they’re good kids who listen! A message...I must send them a message through the Network to leave!

“Ah, O... Oh... Okay. Keep it in moderation, Colette...”

“Oh well. Rion-chan, let’s take ten packs of cards and play extreme concentration!”

“With...” Rion hesitated. “With my brain, that’d be... How about speed? There are two of us so it’d be perfect.”

“I’d be at a disadvantage in a reflexes game...”

The two of them safely retreated.

Whew, that was dangerous. Oracles are dangerous, no matter the age. I’m lucky they were willing to leave.

“Hey, hey, Kelvin-kun.”

“Whoa?!” I yelped in surprise. “Ange, when did you get here?”

In the time it took for me to blink, Ange had sat down on the bed on the opposite side of Colette. It felt like she was moving faster than usual, probably from the effects of Clare’s cooking.

“I saw all of you when Rion and Shutola left the room, so I just came in.”

“I’m begging you, please just come in normally. Unlike when you try to take my head, I can’t feel any murderous intent, so it’s really hard to react.”

“Wouldn’t Rion and Shutola feel like it’s unfair if I just come in normally? Your older sister here is smart enough to be considerate of people like that.”

“I...see...”

“Anyway, getting back on topic. In regard to letting out your stress, your older sister here has an idea.”

“Oh?”

From the fact that she already understood the subject at hand, I was sure that Ange had been eavesdropping from somewhere.

Was she hiding out in the ceiling? No, we're on a ship; there's no attic or ceiling space to hide in.

At any rate, since Ange could do basically anything a ninja could, I was sure she could have eavesdropped from pretty much anywhere.

"For all the frustration you've got built up, Kelvin, why not direct it somewhere else? For example, your hobby of golem making!"

"I see. So, let it out in a different way...but—"

"But you've already finished the final checks on the golems you've prepared, right? There's no need for a test run, so I don't think it's a good idea to mess with them too much either." Sera snapped off a piece of her snack with a nice sound as she gave her opinion.

She's right. I've already done everything I had to in preparation for the fight.

"Urgh! If Sera-san, who directly helped you, says so, then I can't argue!"

"No, no, your idea was good. Thanks, Ange."

"Urghh..."

I patted her head, but Ange still seemed frustrated.

"Now, now, let's drink some water and calm down. I'll hand some out to everyone."

"Oh, that's considerate of you, Colette."

"Thank you!"

"Sorry for making you do this, Colette—hey, wait a second." I grabbed her arm firmly as she tried to pour me some water.

There was silence for a moment before she said, "Is something wrong, Kelvin-sama?"

"Is there something in the water, Colette-kun? Where did you get it? I'm having some *really* strong deja vu here."

Though the container was different, I remembered this water. *I'll never forget that fateful night in Deramis. And I've just confirmed my suspicions with Analyze Eye.*

"It..." Colette stammered. "It's just normal clean water?"

"I'm pretty sure clean water doesn't contain aphrodisiacs in it."

"Guh...well, that's...uhhh...yeah, it's water that lets you be honest with you—oowwwww!"

My iron claw caught Colette's head in a vicegrip. At this point, neither social status nor gender mattered. I squeezed her head as hard as I thought she'd be able to withstand.

"Why would you try to drug me with aphrodisiacs with this timing..."

"Well...the idea was to let out your pent-up frustrations through a different avenue. So I thought this would be the fastest method to—ooowwwww!"

I guess being too smart has its drawbacks too. The part of her that's supposed to be controlled by her faith has come unhinged. I was right to have Rion and Shutola turn back; this could have been a disaster. Oops, can't allow my grip to loosen just yet. I feel like Melfina herself is telling me that. I should use this to let out some of my stress.

"Ow! Ow! It hurts! But this is also a form of love! In other words, this could be called a trial to test my faith! If I think about it that way, the pain in my head mysteriously turns to pleasure! No, I'm sure this is the sweetest of pleasures! Come, give me more Kelvin-sama! I am close to evolviiiiiing!"

Colette's breathing gradually got rougher and rougher as her eyes moistened. Instead of reforming herself, she had instantly found a new path to tread.

This so-called 'holy woman...' Is there really nothing more powerful than a pervert in this world?

"Hey, this is just a thought, but what if we use Colette's esoteric technique to reinforce the ship so we can fight all we want in a barrier? As long as we make use of a somewhat spacious room, we should be fine, right?" Sera put forth nonchalantly while flipping a page in her book.

Hearing such a good idea caught me by surprise. It was a good moment before I let out an “Ohhhh...” in unison with Colette.

And with that, my problem was completely solved. After an eventful few days of boat travel, we would finally reach our destination.

Pant, pant... “Um, Kelvin-sama? Your grip is weakening—aaanhhhhhh!”

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Battleship Elpis:

One of the rooms of the *Elpis* was a chapel. This place looked exactly like the final sanctuary that Elearis-acting-as-Iris had created, enough to give anyone familiar with it deja vu. The pipe organ-shaped altar in the back was even a safe zone. And currently, that pipe organ was reverberating with some deep notes. The player was DarkMel, the mastermind behind this current incident. Her petite fingers danced along the keys as she performed a famous hymn known throughout Deramis.

“Oho. For someone trying to become a god to be playing a piece praising them. How interesting.”



An old man started speaking from behind DarkMel. In that moment, her hands stopped playing the song, and the chapel naturally fell to silence.

“Aw, you stopped? Personally, I would have liked it if you’d kept playing a little longer.”

It was a moment before a reply came. “Analyzer. No, all our remaining brethren know each other by our true names. I suppose there’s no need for aliases anymore. What did you need, Riold?” DarkMel asked with a flap of her jet-black wings as she turned to face the former guildmaster.

“Not much, you just seemed very happy today for some reason. It’s the promised day with Kelvin-kun, so I figured I should come to give a final greeting...of sorts. Was I a nuisance?”

“Not at all. You could never be. Riold, you and Ange were the two hard workers who contributed the most from the closest distance. I could never treat you so disdainfully.”

Once again, DarkMel turned and played on the organ. It was a different tune from before. This one was something Riold recognized. It was the one that had been created when the great war that had embroiled all of the Eastern Continent had finally ended and the four great countries had built Parth.

Riold took a moment to be impressed before speaking. “You’re really dextrous, aren’t you? From what I can see, you don’t have the musical performance skill.”

“How long do you think I’ve been alive? Even without the skill, this much is easy for me. I just remembered what I didn’t know and learned to do what I couldn’t.”

“I see. So the black version of you is a harder worker than the white version? I haven’t had much of a chance to speak to you directly, but that’s how it looks to me.”

DarkMel smiled self-deprecatingly before responding. “I, as an organism, am a lazy thing, one that can’t put forth her full effort without losing something important to her first.”

The calm melody sped up just a tiny bit. Of course, Riold caught that.

“Whoops, my apologies. That was a bit insensitive of me. Let’s change topics. The *Elpis* is moving using your magic as energy, so by now you can control it as you please. However, though we’ve been flying so high up until yesterday, today our operational ceiling has been uncharacteristically low. What happened? It’s like you’re advertising where we are.”

“Now that question is unlike *you*, Riold. Today is the promised day, remember? I was invited on a let’s-kill-each-other-date. Isn’t it only natural to not only reach the meeting spot early, but make yourself obvious as well? I’m good at waiting, but I definitely want to meet him as soon as possible. You should already know that, Riold; why did you have to ask?”

“Once again, my apologies. That did not occur to me. It seems my consideration of you is still untrained and shallow. Please treat that as an extension of our small talk.”

In that instant and that instant only, Riold let embarrassment color his face. It seemed he really hadn’t thought of that reasoning.

“Hee hee, then allow me to make some silly small talk myself, Riold. Your wish was to ‘Birth a Hero from Parth,’ correct? One great enough to save the world.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s not certain whether or not Kelvin-kun fits that, but that was my wish. I also put in effort in my own way. So I wonder how things will turn out.”

“Why did you make such a wish?”

While fixing his gaze squarely on DarkMel’s back, as she wouldn’t turn around, Riold created a smile with a hidden meaning. As he was now, his expression could rival Tristan’s for evil looks.

“Hm...well, I am not from Parth myself, but I do have some attachment to that town. It’s not my style, but I did feel a sense of danger since the town didn’t have a defender. Parth is weak, after all. Among all those feelings, I was reborn as an Apostle due to the unknown workings of fate. The bad Goddess who appeared in front of me offered to make my wish come true in return for my cooperation. So...well, you can imagine what happened after that, can’t

you? It seems Condemner was enthusiastic about protecting her fatherland, but I wanted to gain something more than that. In order to protect Parth, I bet everything I had on Kelvin-kun. I wanted to create a hero great enough to destroy your schemes, protect Parth and the world, and become Parth's pride. Oh, now that I've said it out loud, I finally realized something: I'm actually quite greedy, aren't I? Oh no, how embarrassing."

"Yes, I already knew that. I knew you were an old fox when I chose to save you as a pawn for the end. It's because of your nature that I believe you'll put your all into your mission, Riold. Thanks to you, the finishing touches have been going superbly. You've grown enough that, depending on how you fight, you might even be able to take down Serge."

DarkMel continued to stitch together the flowing tune that was a celebration of Parth's birth. The tone of DarkMel's speech also rose and fell to the music.

"You want Kelvin-kun to enjoy himself, and I want him to become stronger. This contract works because both our interests align. All that's left is to believe in his abilities."

"You're right. What will you do after this? I won't stop you if you want to leave the Apostles. You can even join hands with the others. Ah, it might also be interesting if you were to try to take a swing at me right now too."

"I won't do that. You see, I'm the type who doesn't take bets I know I'll lose. Also, I am your Apostle. I won't be satisfied until I fulfill my contract to the end, and I wouldn't want my wish to be canceled halfway. I will do my best to make sure you and Kelvin-kun face off personally. That's all I wanted to say."

A moment of silence passed before DarkMel said, "Riold, I pray that you fight well."

"I'll turn those words right back at you. Have a good fight, my lord."

With those words, Riold disappeared without a trace from the chapel. It happened at almost the exact same time as the end of Parth's song, and DarkMel simply continued on to the next piece, which was also a hymn. Somehow, this one seemed more upbeat and excited.

"A composition to praise God? Heh heh, that's wrong. Utterly wrong, Riold.

There is only one person I ever think about. This piece is for you, honey. A piece to extol everything you are. This world, which I will manage, will be made with you as its center, constantly reincarnating. Ah, that's right. In the next world, I'll make me your partner instead of my white counterpart. It might be nice to travel together with you. Or we could be enemies, or maybe I could just be a spectator? You'll enjoy fights day in and day out, make friends, cultivate love, and at the end of your journey—"

DarkMel raised both her hands and slammed them down on the keyboard so hard it was like she wanted to destroy it. *Bang!* it went, creating a noise like an explosion of feelings.

"No matter what, I will kill you. It doesn't matter how, the one to flip the last page of the story will be me. That is the only thing I will not leave to Efil, Sera, Rion, Ange, Shutola, or Colette. No, I will never let them!"

The next moment, the battleship *Elpis* shook greatly. A beat later, a tremendous roar could be heard even in the chapel.

"So you're finally here, honey. I've been waiting. Mao, Riold, Tristan...the signal for battle has been raised. You'll show them our hospitality, won't you?"

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Aqua Swallow number three:

It seemed that the ark DarkMel was on, the battleship *Elpis*, was waiting for us at an extremely low altitude. The reason I qualify that with "seemed" is that our ship was still underwater and running on silent. Basically, I couldn't confirm it myself. So how did I get such a report? Well—

::Mm, that's what the Water Dragon King says,:: Sylvia reported.

::I see... Yeah, I get where it is generally. I'm having Shutola and Colette draw up a makeshift map, so once that's done, I'll copy it and send it to you all through Clotho.::

::I'm glad that information helped. So is the Water Dragon King.::

::Uh, so it's still impossible for him to thank me directly?::

::Yeah. Apparently, he's so embarrassed he'll die.::

::I...see...::

And that was how the Water Dragon King was gathering information from seaborne creatures and using it to paint a realtime picture of what was happening above the surface. Setting aside his fragile mental state due to extreme shyness, he truly was the king of the sea. The worth of that ability of his was immeasurable. However, even telepathic conversations using Clotho had to be done through Sylvia or Ema. Even though he was such an incorrigibly shy guy, in the end, he was outstanding!

“It’s done! Yeah, we did a pretty good job!” Colette exclaimed.

“What, already?! Isn’t that way too fast? It’s only been a few minutes!”

“Shutola-chan and I worked on it together. And even though we worked this fast, we still tried to do a very neat job, so no need to worry about its accuracy.”

“Hm...true, it really is a tremendously detailed map...”

I’d had them working on two maps using information supplied by the Water Dragon King through Clotho and the Follower Network. One for above the surface and one for below. Crew members from Toraj were manning the ship, so I had these maps made so we could give them detailed and concrete instructions on how to move the ships.

“Clotho, copy these and send them to all the ships.”

The Clotho riding on my shoulder absorbed the maps like it was eating them, placing them in its Storage. With that, the maps would be sent to its clones on the other ships.

Oh, the original’s already back. That was fast; they’re all already sent?

“Oho, so that’s how Clo-chan’s new skill works...”

Shutola watched Clotho with keen interest as it used its skills. Was it just my imagination, or did Clotho seem embarrassed to be watched?

The slime’s new Duplication skill could take a target item and make copies of it using magic. Basically, it did exactly what it said on the tin. According to Clotho, it was easy to make several copies of things created with paper and ink, like maps. However, the more complicated an object’s structure and makeup

was, or the more inherently valuable the item was, the harder it was to duplicate. For example, the weapons and armor we used would need Clotho to have the skill activated for several months straight with no breaks to duplicate. That description alone might have made the skill sound hard to use, but it really depended on what it was used for. By combining Clotho's Division and storage skills, it could be used as both a copy machine and fax receiver at once.

"I've had this thought before, but Clotho-sama really does incredible work behind the scenes."

"We all think that every day. Is it that obvious to you two?"

"It is. We can also send and receive images and sounds using expensive magic items, but those can only be used if both parties have the same item. There're a lot of restrictions to it."

"And given your specialization, there's a lot more give when compared to me even though I also use Summoning," Colette added.

"To be honest, it could completely overturn modern military science."

"Also, Clotho can serve as a nice cool bed on a hot day!"

The intellectual team of Shutola, Colette, and Sera all heaped their praises on Clotho, who seemed in some way proud. He was...jiggling more than usual.

But Sera, I don't think your last compliment there was going in the right direction. Actually, wait a second, Clotho...you're willing to become a bed? Hmm...I guess it would feel kind of like a water bed? Okay, I'm going to test it out later.

"Anyway, Captain, this is the third ship, so aim here, please."

"Understood. We'll show them the stuff Toraj's fleet is made of!"

Each map had the number of its respective ship in the fleet on it, and they were made so that if followed in battle, the ships would naturally take formation. Efil and the others' cooking must have taken effect, since the crew's morale was at an all-time high. As things stood, they'd probably get to the scheduled point just fine and all the ships would be in position.

After that, I just had to use my Summoning skill, send my friends to each ship,

and it would all be done.

But before that... Ahem, ahem.

“Everyone, this could be a milestone for us. It’s our final fight. Our enemy is the fallen angel DarkMel, born from Melfina’s hatred, as well as the remnants of the Apostles. I’m sure this will be the hardest fight we’ve ever faced, even with the huge amount of battles we’ve experienced. Without a doubt, she will be our biggest, fiercest foe. But we’ve built ourselves up enough. Enough effort, and enough power...all to bring down DarkMel! My order is very simple: blow the enemy away and come back alive! I’ve gone so far as to say such a shitty line, so you can all at least carry it out, right?!”

“I can. I will absolutely return to your side, Master.”

“Saving the princess is your job, my liege. So mine is to become your sword, and, if I may be greedy, your shield as well!”

“Mealtimes will be lonely without Mel, after all. I want to see her almost artistic way of demanding seconds again, so let’s get her back!”

“Sounds like everyone’s raring to go. We can’t fall behind in enthusiasm either, right, Alex?”

“Arf!”

“Trycen’s not a bystander in this either. I’ll send Tristan flying myself!”

“Aha ha, then maybe your big sister here should put some elbow grease in? I’ll refrain from taking their heads back... Well, maybe depending on the enemy.”

“Heh! This is the perfect chance to show big bro, my sisters, and most importantly, Prettia-chan how heroic I am!”

“I need to recover spent energy with sugar. I will contribute the most and get a special cake as a reward. Yes, a good plan.”

“I... I’b also a Dragon King. I won’t lose to Dahak...and Mdofarak!”

“I may not have much power, but I will support everyone with all my might. This body is something I’ve offered to Melfina, so no matter how much I throw up today, I don’t mind!”

With my order as the signal, everyone raised their voices in a hearty cry. Some of them shouted things I'd have rathered they held back from, but overall, I could feel full well how motivated everyone was to finish this fight.

Ah, I'm truly blessed with such good friends...

After that, I resummoned my Followers onto different ships, and after a final equipment check, we got to work. I fully believed that all of our actions up until now would lead to our ultimate victory.

As I was thinking about a second shitty line in my heart, Shutola trotted up to me accompanied by the sound of her adorable footsteps. She seemed happy, with a face full of smiles, but I could see an impish shade to her grin that could only belong to a child—a grin that said she wanted to play a prank.

"You didn't need a speech written by me this time, dearest brother Kelvin. You would have been fine during the ceremony, after all."

"It's different this time because I was close to everyone I was speaking to. More importantly, you said you were going to send Tristan flying yourself? Can't I do it?"

"Jeez, you have your own extra-special-class opponent, don't you? It's not good to be too greedy, you know?"

A certain suit of armor suddenly interrupted our conversation. "Whaaaat?! What should I do, my liege?! I was just being greedy!"

Weren't you just with Boga on a different ship? Even if I was extremely generous and agreed that you had the right to jump in here because it had to do with your "granddaughter," wouldn't it have been fine to do it over telepathy?

"Gerard, maybe we should start by learning about boundaries and self-restraint."

"You should too, dearest brother!"

"Grrr..." We both grumbled in unison.

At any rate, our ships finally broke the surface of the ocean.

Now then, it's time for our battle-date, DarkMel!

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Central ocean:

The many ships of the Aqua Swallow fleet jumped out of the water. Thanks to one of the functions of the ship that employed blue magic to allow people to stand on the deck while underwater for a short time, there were already combatants outside and ready. In other words, they were ready to start combat at any time.

“First wave, I’m counting on you!”

The beginning was a race against time. They had erased their presence while surfacing in order to catch the enemy by surprise with a blitz attack. They’d known the location of the enemy battleship ahead of time and had positioned themselves surrounding the *Elpis* from all sides as they pierced through the sky. On top of that, there were eight Dragon Kings soaring high in the air.

“Hey! I have no idea if that thing’s really a divine ark or not, but I’m gonna shoot it down!”

“What’s this? Seems like my idiot son’s gotten mighty big in his britches all of a sudden. Do you even remember how to use your breath attack?”

“I’m worried about that too. All I’ve seen Dahak do is chase after women’s skirts.”

“Ha ha! I think so too! That’s all Dahak does wherever he goes!”

“Grrr...it’s hard to deal with this with my mother here too!”

“My my, I think boys have to be at least *that* greedy, you know? My Az-chan is also pretty specialized in his greed, but in a different way.”

“Hey! What’re you talking about?! Stop with the useless small talk so we can hurry up and blast this wind barrier apart!”

“If you say “wind,” you think of me! As an expert on this, Fromme here will deal with it perfectly!”

“Hey, hey, why’re you so silent, Water-chan? You feeling bad? Is it a cold? Hey, hey, it’s me, Lightning-chan. You can tell me—”

The Water Dragon King stayed silent.

“We... We’re not coming together at all... Agh, we’ve already reached the planned point! Anyway, blast it with all you got! I’ll boost your power with my Dragon Bond!”

Azgrad chided the Dragon Kings, who were doing as they pleased, and brought them together with a paper-thin sense of cooperation. He was riding on Salafia’s back as he activated his unique skill, Dragon Bond. Its effect was to raise the stats and focus of all dragons in his party, making it possible to achieve some amount of teamwork even between party members who usually didn’t work together. With that, the Dragon Kings who would normally never team up shot their breath attacks with miraculous unity, forming a concentrated volley of fire.

Dahak used his Corrosive Breath, which could cause anything to decay, Mdofarak used all of the elements in her Sagittarius, and Boga was confident now in his dragon form as he launched Volcano Formation. Added to these breath attacks that were familiar to Kelvin’s group were the breaths of all the other Dragon Kings.

Salafia let out a snow-white breath so cold it could turn an area of subtropical climate into a frozen landscape in an instant, and Dahak’s mother and Salafia’s mom-friend unleashed a jet-black breath that returned all to the void. Meanwhile, Fromme, Torajirou, and the Lightning Dragon King let out a combo of breaths powerful enough to destroy countries. All these breath attacks assaulted the battleship *Elpis* from all sides.

An indescribable sound rang out as the barrier of wind surrounding the *Elpis* buckled under the influence of the eight Dragon Kings. This was accompanied by a great rumbling as a terrible shockwave spread like a ripple through the area.

“Ggnnnrrrrrrr!”

“Even though it’s coming from such an immense battleship, I never expected the barrier to rival the power of all the Dragon Kings! Our reverse princess’s magic isn’t to be underestimated! But!”

“Yeah, the way is open!”

Gerard was riding on Boga, and he shouted together with Azgrad as he looked forward. His gaze was directed at the parts of the *Elpis* that had been spewing out such powerful wind, which were now letting out black smoke instead. It was the consequence of the *Elpis* surpassing its limits in trying to resist the Dragon King's breaths. The smoke showed that the ship was in disorder.

"The barrier is gone! Advance at full speed! Attack that massive ark!"

All twenty-eight Aqua Swallows approached the *Elpis* at high speed. As that was happening, each ship deployed its cannons to bombard the *Elpis* now that it was exposed, hitting the battleship's armor. Seeing the attacks connect raised all the crew's morale, spurring them on in their work.

However, the enemy battleship wouldn't take all this abuse sitting down. Gun batteries of all sizes appeared from openings in the ship, unleashing a curtain of fire like a squall. Furthermore, the wind barrier funnels that should have been destroyed were now spewing angel-type monsters. The monsters and cannonfire flew towards the Aqua Swallows with considerable accuracy.

"Grk! I guess things just can't be that easy!"

"It... It's no problem! We can withstand this much!"

All the Toraj ships were enhanced by Colette's esoteric techniques. They had turned the ships into the toughest things in the world that would be able to withstand anything that wasn't Kelvin's Boreas Death Scythe or Setsuna's Iron Cutting Authority. However, there were twenty-eight ships in total. What they should have worried about over the destruction of the wind barrier was actually Colette's MP reserves. It was hard for her to maintain a technique on that level.

In preparation for this day, Colette had poured the rest of her skill points into Hearty Eating and stocked a large amount of MP recovery potions. She had been serious about what she had said before, as she had forced the potions down even if it might make her throw up. If she did, her MP would be recovered anyway, and because of that, her esoteric technique was functioning even now. Still, this situation wouldn't continue for long. Either Colette's iron will would break or the time limit that Kelvin had imposed would run out.

"Colette, we're going to be infiltrating the *Elpis* now. Can you hold on until we come back?" I asked her.

“So you’re saying this is my do-or-die moment as an Oracle? If it’s for Melfina-sama and you, Kelvin-sama, I, Colette Deramilius will, as the Oracle, show you the best performance in history!”

“Thank you, Colette. This is a special potion Melfina made before she was erased. I know it’ll be tough for you, so use this and show me what you’re made of. Now then, I’m off!”

“I’ll also be working hard in that ark, so let’s both do our best, Colette!” Rion added.

Colette received a bottle of shining liquid from Kelvin. The pure white ark was already close, so Kelvin and his group jumped off the deck of the ship towards the enemy.

“Heh...Heh heh... Kelvin-sama and Rion-sama, the people I should put my faith in, trust me. I even received a potion handmade by Melfina-sama! Telling me not to push myself...is just pushing it!”

As Colette was becoming worked up, the surface of each Aqua Swallow started to shine. The barrier that covered them was once only one layer deep, but then it increased to two, then three layers. The barrier’s sturdiness could no longer be compared to before, and now not even the battleship’s cannons could reach the main body of the Toraj ships even on a direct hit.

“Whoa, amazing!”

Kelvin had watched it happen from the corner of his eye, and the corners of his mouth relaxed as he felt relieved. Right afterwards, he received a telepathic message from Shutola.

::Dearest brother Kelvin, a message from esteemed brother Azgrad.::

::What is it?::

::Apparently, that last volley of breath attacks exhausted the Dragon Kings. They’ll be back after some rest, but it seems they won’t be able to bring out any big moves right away.::

::They *did* take on the *Elpis* and DarkMel’s MP together, after all. Makes sense they’d be exhausted.::

::But they said that they can at least keep the monsters coming out of that ark company. I'll support them to the best of my ability, so concentrate on your own battle, dearest brother!::

::Okay sure, I'm counti— Hm?::

As Kelvin and Shutola were telepathically conversing, a hatch opened in the bottom of the battleship, dropping something extremely large out.

"Now then, Jildora-san! It's our turn!"

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Compared to the *Elpis*, which was basically the size of an island, the dropped object was less than a hundredth of its size. Even so, it was hopelessly large. So large that it attracted the gaze of everyone fighting in the sky.

But the most important point about it was that it wasn't just large. The thing that had been dropped from the *Elpis* looked at first like both a living thing and a machine. It was hard to tell which it was exactly. After all, it had the characteristics of both. Its blue and white exterior, which was polished enough to reflect sunlight, resembled a Jildora-made golem that Efil and Gerard had once fought. Its futuristic design was terribly mismatched for this age, like it was a compilation of a bunch of technologies that shouldn't exist, just like the *Elpis*.

On top of that, parts of it also seemed to be biological. If the armor encasing it was like its equipment, then the biological parts would be the user. The biological piece was of the race at the peak of the food chain, an unmistakable species. It let out the same sense of intimidation as the eight Dragon Kings already in the sky. Inside the machine-like armor was a dragon that could be mistaken for a Dragon King.

"Welcome, all of you! Well done coming to this blasphemous and dangerous airspace while tempted by this divine ark, *Elpis*! Your first opponent will be me, the Controller Tristan Faaze! And as my assistant, the reborn Creator...new Jildora!"

The familiar voice, which caused clear disgust in some of the members present, came from the same position as the dropped object. The one who reacted fastest was Azgrad, partially because he was the closest.

“Huhhh? You... Are you really Tristan?!”

“Whoa there, what a nostalgic face. You seem to be just as starved for combat as ever, Azgrad-sama. I understand why you’d want to participate in this battle.”

“The hell did you just say, you traitor?! Because of you, Trycen was really messed up!”

“Of all the things you could have said, you chose *that* nonsense? I was surging with patriotism! So much so that I died in battle back then! In fact, shouldn’t you be looking at your father, Zel Trycen, as the reason for your country’s decline?”

“You bastard!”

Tristan wasn’t lying. What left his mouth was only the truth, though it was filled with malice. It was because he spoke the truth that Azgrad was so irritated, enough that he lost his cool.

“Calm down, young ruler of Trycen! Don’t lend an ear to his worthless ramblings!”

Azgrad gasped as he realized what had happened. “My bad! My blood went to my head!”

Without wasting a beat, Gerard shouted a warning from on top of Boga. With Tristan as their opponent, conversations were forbidden. The best move was to ignore everything he tried to say and attack while refusing to read the room. Kelvin’s group had adopted that as their basic strategy when fighting Tristan, which had been communicated to all the members participating in this battle.

“Mrr...you there, the knight in the black armor. Could you be the hero who brought Jildora-san down? Oh my, and if it isn’t the servant who once shot me dead riding on top of that three-headed dragon! This is perfect; the more extravagant and numerous the cast is, the more the production shines!”

By the time he’d noticed, Tristan had been surrounded by Efil on Mdofarak, Gerard on Boga, and Azgrad on Salafia. None of them would listen to him, and they had all taken battle stances.

“It truly is so sad that none of you will answer me. Then allow me to leak some useful information. Don’t worry, it’ll just be me running my mouth off by myself. If it just happens to enter your ears, then there’s no problem, right? This is about something you ignored but should be interested in—the reborn Jildora that I just introduced!”

KABOOOOOOM!

Tristan received no reply and was instead met with a fierce arrow of fire, a sword attack, and more flames from Dragoon. Though they were all blocked by a defensive wall deployed by the gigantic dragon-shaped weapon, the attacks made Efil and the rest’s refusal clear.

“It doesn’t matter to us if Jildora’s come back to life. It doesn’t change what we have to do. We will just slice both you and that dragon apart,” Gerard stated.

“Exactly. Everything turns to ash just the same under the influence of fire,” Efil added.

“I see. Nevertheless, I’ll keep talking to myself while ignoring you all!”

There was no change to Tristan’s expression as he stood on the other side of the dragon-shaped weapon’s shield. He simply gazed around at the battlefield where everyone was fighting, like he was licking the scene all over, clearly having the time of his life.

“Allow me to introduce him again! This is the last divine pillar left under my control: Deus Ex Machina! This is my trump card, and it’s become even stronger after the defeat of the other divine pillars. At this point, it is the strongest follower! However, I learned something in the last fight. Something of this level will not be able to claim victory against you people! That’s why...after crying, crying...crying...and crying some more! I used Jildora-san as material, offering him to Deus!”

Tristan flashily spread his arms wide, miming an inner conflict. Of course, it was all an act and a provocation.

“In exchange for the perfect material that was Jildora-san, it returned the perfect figure! Its name: Light Dragon King Suncress, a beautiful ancient dragon

who bravely challenged and fought the previous Light Dragon King Murmur! He was entrusted with Jildora-san's secret plan... Well, I don't really know the details but I'm sure it was all above board! They probably settled things with a true, head-on contest of wills! At any rate, he claimed victory over Murmur and became the new Light Dragon King!"

As Tristan was making his flowing speech, the machine dragon was absorbing attacks from all around him. However, nothing could get through his shield, much less reach Tristan. It seemed he was right to be so confident.

"This is, so to speak, the culmination of our joint effort! After all, the core of this masterpiece that it uses for power is a Jildora original, the last body he prepared using his own design! I wonder what Jildora-san was trying to accomplish with a body like this? It was easy to imagine, so I helped out. By making the body my follower I was able to put it under my control before I set the core in its heart! And now, it's time to reveal it! Its name: Jildora-Sun! An avatar of light that can rival a deity's power! Heh heh heh, finally I have the ultimate power, which I've spent so long pursuing, Jildora-san! Oops, I didn't mean to make it a joke, okay? I just gave it a name!"

Just as his long monologue ended, the concentrated attacks he was bathing in had stopped. They had concluded that trying to break through from the front with brute force wouldn't destroy the shield.

"Goddamn, just going on and on like that as he pleases!"

"What bad taste. I don't feel for Jildora, who I had a longstanding grudge against, but he sure has gotten himself involved with someone troublesome."

"Any amount of abuse or slander is better than silence. Do you understand? This is something made by Jildora-san with Jildora-san. It's his masterpiece. Even if the unthinkable happens you won't be able to wi— Bwaghh?!"

In that instant, Azgrad was stunned. Kelvin had appeared out of nowhere, vaulted over the shield, and punched Tristan in the face. Tristan, who had been flaunting his fake attitude just a moment before, flew off of Jildora-Sun's shoulder with incredible momentum and began his freefall through the air.

"Yo, Tristan. I had a score to settle with you, didn't I? So for now, allow me to punch you one."

“What? You already did...” Azgrad muttered to himself.



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“Mrr...grk!”

It was satisfying to see Tristan sent flying like that, but he quickly activated his Summoning skill in midair. Out from the magic circle appeared a large, purple, monstrous bird.

Uh...it’s a...Demise Guillemot? Yeah, that’s probably right. Having landed on the bird’s back, Tristan looked up at me, coughed up some blood, and flashed a disgusting smile with an already swelling cheek.

“Heh...heh heh! Finally, the star of the show arrives. I’ve been waiting for you, Kelvin-dono, wondering just when you’d come!”

“Unfortunately for you, my heart is set on a different opponent. You’re basically just some punk-ass deadbeat who owes me money that I saw on the way to some other business. And I’ve just collected.”

“Oh? It’s true that your fist worked wonders, but as you can see, I’m still quite far from being unable to fight, you know?”

“You just don’t get it. I told you, I’ve got more important things to attend to. Also—”

I calmly pointed behind Tristan. That was the most he would get out of me in terms of consideration and kindness.

“You’re fighting us, you asshole!”

“Azgrad!” Tristan gasped as Azgrad and Salafia charged him and the monster bird he was on.

With that, he would be chased even farther away. By punching Tristan off of the Jildragon, I’d removed him from his obstinate shield, after all. Basically, I’d succeeded in separating them.

::Efil, Gerard...thanks for going with me on this diversion.::

::Oh no, it was only natural.::

::Indeed. Watching Tristan get knocked off like that made me feel better too! Well, in the end, we weren’t able to break that defensive wall, even if all we did

was hit it with foolishly straight-on attacks. I'm a bit shocked...::

I had thought it might be possible for Tristan to use his Summoning skill to call that Jildragon back, but what had just happened proved it wasn't. Given how proud he was of it, it should have cost quite a bit of MP too. It would be easy to undo the Summoning, but Summoning the Jildragon back again would take an enormous amount of his remaining magic. Apparently, it was enough that not even his unique skill could support him sufficiently. If he didn't have the time to recover the MP lost by the max MP penalty imposed by summoning, he wouldn't be able to use Jildragon as he pleased.

::Okay then, I'm leaving the Jildragon to you guys. To be honest, though, I'm sadder about leaving that thing behind than Tristan. Aaah...such a waste. It's like letting go of a first-prize lottery ticket...:: One in the hundred million range, at that.

::Again, our king's bad habit rears its head. Come on, go already! Someone's waiting for you, right?!::

::Master, please leave this to us. I'm sure DarkMel-sama will not make you regret your decision!::

I thought it over for a moment. ::You're right about that. Once again, then, I'll leave this place to you guys!::

I cut away my desires and flew for the *Elpis*!

Oh, hmmm? Is it just me or did I just pass by some kind of red...shadow?

"Efil, Gerard, we're coming to help too!"

"Heh! Papa's gonna fight hard!"

For some reason, some unexpected demons joined the fight against the Jildragon. *Uh...hmmm? Sera-san, I don't think I've ever been told that this was part of the plan?*

::Kelvin! Tristan was trying to hide it with his usual fishiness, but this dragon's tougher than you think! So my father and I will help here first! That's what I'm feeling, anyway!::

::If that's what you feel, then I have nothing to say!::

I was thoroughly convinced. “Sera’s instinct” was a phrase that inspired absolute trust in me on the level of Prettia. As soon as she said that, I had no arguments.

::Call me if it gets dangerous!:: she cried. ::You can Summon me and I’ll be right there!::

::You make sure to defeat that thing before I do, okay? And I want to hear your thoughts on it afterwards!::

::Heh heh! Leave it to me!::

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“Roooaarrghhh!”

“So persistent!”

Azgrads Flame Lance Dragoon thrust forward, only to be intercepted by the monstrous bird’s talons before they could reach Tristan. Though Salafia was worn down from her full-power breath attack, the thrust still had immense power to it. It was a clear and simple thrust attack, relying on strength and acceleration to power it, and that had carried Tristan quite far from the *Elpis*.

“Hmph!”

Their long charge finally lost momentum, and Flame Lance Dragoon was turned aside. The two sides took some distance from each other to reset the situation as their eyes met.

“So I’ve been pushed all the way here, huh? Wow, you sure are a troublesome one, Azgrad-sama. You know, persistent men aren’t popular with the ladies.”

“Shut it! We’re bothering to keep you company, and *nobody* likes you. You should be thankful.”

“Oh dear, you aren’t swayed by the thought of women, I see. Could it be, you swing *that* way?”

“You’re dead.”

“Az-chan, you’re letting the blood rush straight to your head again. You can’t

pay his nonsense ramblings any heed," warned Salafia.

It seemed that Azgrad's personality just wasn't a good match for Tristan's, as he tended to burst out as his feelings demanded before his brain could catch up. No matter how tough and sturdy Azgrad was, he would struggle if he were alone.

"That's right, esteemed brother Azgrad. Stay calm no matter what, okay?"

"Oh? This is a surprise. You're with Shutola-sama."

Shutola popped out from behind Azgrad in her child form. Azgrad's large stature had completely hidden her small body, rendering her basically invisible.

"I told you, didn't I? We're your opponents. We're gonna clean up all that shit Trycen's stirred up!"

"I let you get away last time, but today will be the day I bring you down!"

"What wonderful patriotism, and your sibling love is almost blinding! I may have had some of the former, but I've never felt a speck of the latter. Dear me, I'm so jealous!" Tristan took a handkerchief from a breast pocket and dabbed his eyes before continuing. "But, as I thought, that sort of thing isn't necessary."

A new magic circle appeared in the air. This time, it was much larger than that of the monstrous bird. Particles of light gathered before resolving in a gathering of brilliant mirrors that reflected the light. But, rather than a gathering of flat mirrors, it was more like a gigantic golem had its entire body turned into one giant mirror.

"This is a Tyrant Regress, the evolved form of the Tyrant Mirror I once used. Obviously the size is different, but its abilities have also been greatly strengthened. Furthermore, look there."

Though Tristan said that, nobody looked.

"It would have been faster if you'd just looked..." Tristan sighed. "Currently, the *Elpis* is dropping angels. Do you get it? Not angel-type monsters, but true angels. They are also one of the legacies left behind by Jildora-san. I don't really understand the principle behind it, but apparently he used a blueprint of an angel to mass produce a large number of clones. On top of having barely any

sense of self, their lifespans are extremely short. As weapons, they're nothing but defects, but, well, today is a special day. We equipped them with highly specialized, powered suits and sent them off to fight for us in glorious battle. They are a race considered to rank at the peak of life, along with dragons and demons, so you know their power, don't you? Heh heh, it makes for a nice, fitting little effect for a Goddess's ark, so we're having them live earnestly while their lives still burn."

There was a moment of silence as Tristan's opponents came back to their senses.

"You done with that long-ass speech?" Azgrad asked.

"Oh my, you waited for me to finish? You could have attacked without caring like you did earlier."

The mirror golem came forward, turning the situation into one where Azgrad couldn't attack carelessly. Tristan smiled fearlessly, probably because he knew that was the case.

"Now then...I wonder if the princess who was brainwashed by the likes of Demon Lord Zel and the Demon Lord's imbecilic son who could barely do anything will be able to defeat me?"

"That's a stupid question. Shutola, answer him."

"We can and we will. The fact that our father became a Demon Lord just shows that he had enough strength, and that the world itself recognized him. And we have inherited our father's—that great king's blood!"

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“The blood of a great king? Heh heh, what a funny joke. Wouldn’t it be more like tainted blo—”

It happened instantly. As Tristan, who was protected by Tyrant Mirror’s giant body, was spinning those malicious words, several black knight-type golems deployed, surrounding him. It was like a bunch of ghosts appearing from the mist, done suddenly without any warning or preamble.

Tristan, who had been in the middle of speaking, stopped immediately as his eyes popped open, intensely wide. It was uncertain whether he did that knowingly or on reflex. After all, Shutola’s golems, her royal guard, had suddenly appeared on the opposite side of Tyrant Mirror, surrounding him on all sides. No matter where he looked, a royal guard was in sight.

Hah! Who cares if you’ve got a mirror golem! We knew about it already! Azgrad thought.

If we can’t cut it or kill it with magic, then ignoring it is best. What needs to go down isn’t the Follower, but the one who’s controlling it, Tristan! Shutola reasoned.

While Shutola hid behind Azgrad’s back, she cast the Rank A Blue Magic spell, Spy’s Fog, over all her royal guard, concealing them. This was an improved version of the Rank C Blue Magic spell, False Fog, and it created a fog that not only obscured vision but also presence itself. Its effect only lasted a short time, but it artificially gave its targets the effects of Covert Action equal to its rank.

There were some faint traces of magic as she jumped out, Tristan thought. *This is concealment through high-ranking magic, one that hides presences too. This is most likely Shutola’s doing now that she’s gotten stronger. Even though she was already a monster back when she was weak...now she can do something like this? Good grief, Kelvin-dono sure sent someone outrageous at me. To try to pit someone like me, a normal person, against an insane thing like her...*

However, Tristan was entirely calm. In fact, it seemed he had enough leeway to be thinking of what sort of line to hurl next, and his expression didn’t crumble one bit.

“Schwarzstilles...so you plundered Jildora-san’s works. My word, what has the world come to if a princess is stealing?!”

The moment Tristan said that, the large monstrous bird he was riding opened its mouth as well.

“Skreeeee!”

The sound rang in their ears. Right after that, all ten royal guards were knocked away. Shutola quickly used her magic threads to control them, stopping them in midair.

“What happened?!”

“They were pushed away by something like an invisible wall...I think? I’m pretty sure it’s an ability of the Demise Guillemot. From the sensation of my threads, it feels like some sort of sound shockwave.”

“So something like Boga’s stupid huge voice!”

“Heh, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t lump it in with such a barbaric thing. Guillie’s is a much more subtle skill.”

The large, purple monster bird—the Demise Guillemot—was the oldest of Tristan’s monster Followers. Having come from the Mixed Monster Order himself, where he had served under Tristan for a time, Azgrad of course knew about it. Shutola had also known about it since she was young, when she had learned about it in the process of expanding her knowledge base. That was why she knew that the Hound Guillemot he’d had back then had no such ability. This was most likely something it had gained in the process of Evolving.

There’s some miasma mixed in with the sound. If they were living things instead of golems, that attack would have been pretty dangerous. But now the only unconfirmed piece is his Voracious Baku Orgg.

Just like Tristan, Shutola was inwardly calm. Compared to Kelvin and the others, who were now like family to her, she was still weak. In any category of battle, she would rank at the bottom of the list. In order to make up for that, she racked her biggest asset, her brain, to grasp a chance at victory through strategy. How to seal the enemy’s plays and checkmate them? The young Shutola’s eyes took in the situation on the battlefield and processed all the

information to continuously find the best move.

“I’m happy you’re all focused on me, but I’d also appreciate it if you’d pay more attention to your surroundings.”

Having repelled the surprise attack, Tristan spoke coolly. At the same time, Azgrad’s side was beset by Tyrant Regress’s gigantic fist.

Information on the Tyrant Regress was included in the information Melfina had gathered on the Apostles. Like the large monstrous bird, it had evolved from a Tyrant Mirror. If, as Tristan had just claimed, the monster’s abilities had all been strengthened, attacking recklessly would in all likelihood actually hurt them. It would be best to avoid contact if at all possible.

When sister Efil fought it, it could only reflect either physical or magical attacks. If I were to try and predict how it was strengthened, it would either be that it can now reflect both at the same time, or the reflection itself is stronger now. Or it could even have been changed to absorption. It’d be a threat if it could reflect everything, but—

With her thoughts spinning in her head, Shutola tapped on Azgrad’s shoulder.

“Esteemed brother!”

“I know!”

With that signal, Azgrad took something out from a breast pocket and threw it. From behind him, Shutola stuck out a hand and fired an icicle, which was a low-ranking Blue Magic spell, at the incoming fist.

Kercrack!

One kunai stabbed into the Tyrant Regress’s fist as the icicle grew to twice its size and was reflected back at them. When the icicle touched Salafia’s body, it self-destructed. Then, Salafia evaded the giant arm and thus the attack itself without even being scratched.

“Oho, verifying its ability, I take it? You think that since you can’t figure out its ability, you can just test it with a low-power attack?”

Tristan was correct, but Shutola purposefully didn’t reply. What was more important was talking to her older brother. It would have been best if she could

have used telepathy to speak to him through Clotho, but it seemed telepathy was something Azgrad just wasn't good at, so she needed to talk to him directly to prevent confusion in this combat situation.

"And those are my impressions."

"Aaah, I see."

Shutola had been keeping up the attacks with her royal guard during the conversation in an attempt to shave away at any leeway Tristan had. She had been talking while managing multiple things at the same time.

"How fierce yet lovely you are during this dizzying aerial battle!"

"Tch! You never shut up, do you, you bastard! Hey, Shutola, can you restrict him even more with your ability?"

"I've already implanted the restriction that he can't let his comrades die, so no. My unique skill allows only one per person. I could release the current one, but I don't think it would be very advantageous for me to talk to him right now. We've been ignoring him all this time, so it'd be very suspicious. More than anything, I don't like the idea of talking to Tristan."

"Well, I get that, but..."

Not being able to let his comrades die meant not being able to order them to self-destruct. The curse that Shutola had placed on Tristan in Abyssland was still in effect, and it was currently only sealing the biggest strength of his hidden trump card: the Incendiary Bug King. Shutola didn't think she could hope to draw out anything more through conversation at present.

"That's why there's no need to talk to Tristan anymore, esteemed brother. It's okay to just straight-up ignore him forever! I'll support you, so calm your heart as you fight. But keep holding your fierce battle instincts precious!"

"You... Aren't you way more active now than you were as an actual child? Well, that suits me much better anyway!"

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Each of the ten royal guard units used a different weapon. While watching the state of battle, Shutola manipulated all of them to try and deal Tristan a blow.

However, the Demise Guillemot Tristan was riding on would always create that wall of supersonic sound to obstruct the royal guard's attacks. She understood that the range of the effect was large and stretched all around the giant monstrous bird, but even after commanding all ten units to attack at once, no one's blade could reach Tristan.

On the other hand, Tristan had his mirror golem Tyrant Regress as a means of attack, but his offense wasn't going well either. Tyrant Regress was gigantic, so it was massively powerful to match on top of its strong ability, but it was far too slow. Some time had passed since her all-out breath attack, so the Ice Dragon King Salafia, who Shutola and Azgrad were riding on, had recovered. On top of that, she was being strengthened by Azgrad's ability. In her dragon form, Salafia was about the same size as Dahak, so she was quite big for a dragon. Even so, that didn't cause her to lack agility at all. Though she couldn't attack carelessly, it was easy for her to dodge the golem's fists.

"Looks like this stalemate, this ebb and flow will continue for a while! What will be your next move I wonder, oh wise Shutola?"

Shutola refused to respond.

"I see. Your contemplation is the highest of honors. Well then, allow me to make a move!"

Tristan seemed in a strange mood, and he got even higher after noting Shutola's silence. Disregarding his behavior, he seemed to be truly enjoying this fight from the bottom of his heart, probably because both he and Shutola enjoyed board games.

"Guillie! Tyrant Regress! Show those evil relatives your true power!"

Responding to Tristan's loud order, Tyrant Regress let out an electronic noise from its vaguely human-shaped body. Soon enough, its mirror body broke into pieces.

"Huh? It broke on its own?!"

"That's probably not it. I think it divided into pieces like Clotho."

"Correct! For that splendid answer, Shutola-sama, have this present!"

Snap!

Tristan made a show of snapping his fingers. Following that signal, the Demise Guillemot under him let out a different sound from before as the hundreds of separate mirror golem parts started to fly around them.

Shutola gasped. Sensing something was wrong, she withdrew both hands with haste, making the royal guard units fall back. The royal guard were a squad that took orders in unison from her magic thread, but two out of the ten units were particularly close to Tristan, so they were slightly slower to take action.

The large monstrous bird unleashed a special, concentrated sonic wave. Instead of spreading out, it increased in power by staying focused within a certain direction. The attack resolved into several lines of attacks that were shot out randomly. A piece of mirror had deployed itself on each attack's trajectory, and they collided with the incoming masses of sound. Those clumps of sound energy swelled upon contact and bounced back faster as well, sending the attack in a different, even more unpredictable vector. From there, they made contact with more mirrors, and that repeated reflection upon reflection—until they made contact with the two royal guard units that had lagged behind.

A huge hole opened up in the princess's guards like they'd been pierced by a large invisible lance. It was as if the golems' toughness didn't matter at all, the attack easily crumbled their armor and kept on going to be reflected and strengthened even further. The attack had turned into an entire area that was filled with fearsomely powerful bullets flying all over the place, and Tristan was lounging elegantly right in the center, with both hands spread wide.

"What do you think? This is my domain that combines attack and defense. No enemy can stand inside it. Did you consider this possibility, Princess Shutola?"

Shutola did not answer. Instead, she whispered in Azgrad's and Salafia's ears.

"That sounds fine. Fahrenheit Odin!" Following Shutola's instructions, Salafia intoned a spell. Her shining ice breath settled on Azgrad's Flame Lance Dragoon, enshrouding it and drawing a spiral in the center. Azgrad's lance, which spewed a dragon's flames, had been further enhanced by the Ice Dragon King's power. That had combined so that fire and ice swirled together, completing a new magic lance.

I see. So the lance is a physical attack, but also a magic one combining fire and ice! Certainly, with this we might be able to do something about that stupid mirror thing!

With a grin that showed his teeth, Azgrad pointed his fused magic lance at Tristan. Salafia also leaned forward, indicating she was about to fly in his direction.

After a pause, Tristan said, “If I may, don’t you think that’s a bit...hasty?”

“Don’t mind him, esteemed brother!”

“You got it! Let’s go!” Azgrad shouted.

With that cry, Salafia charged forward with intense momentum. The tip of Azgrad’s lance was pointed at the Tyrant Regress pieces that made the outside membrane of Tristan’s deployed field. The fire and ice in the lance let out a roar as they sped up, creating a fang that threatened to swallow its prey whole.

“There’s a limit to terrible ideas,” Tristan spat, seeming to have lost interest.

He snapped his fingers, and a piece of Tyrant Regress reacted, shifting a part of the domain it had been maintaining. More accurately, it dodged one of the soundwaves it was meant to be reflecting, and the attack that had gone through countless buffs shot towards Shutola’s group.

The soundwave, which had at this point gone through countless reflections and strengthenings, rushed at them faster than the speed of sound. Even though Shutola had raised her level so much that she couldn’t even be compared to how she was before, she couldn’t follow the speed of the shot. It was even harder for Salafia, who was in the midst of her charge, to dodge. So the soundwave passed through one of her legs just as it had the royal guard, breaking down the molecules that made up her body.

“First is the standard opener, which hit a leg. Now then...I wonder what will be hit next?”

With every snap of Tristan’s fingers, a deadly bullet of sound was unleashed. With the amount of snaps, the attacks came down like a storm, and after Salafia’s leg came an arm, then a wing—it was obvious that if the large dragon were to fall from the sky, that would mean danger for those riding her as well.

“Ah—”

“What an unsatisfying ending. I truly could not be more disappointed.”

Between the blue sky and the blue ocean, Shutola’s and Azgrad’s blood flew. The holes opened in them from the fire they were showered with were too big to have come from regular bullets. Once all the bullets that had been bouncing around Tristan had been expended, there was nothing left of the siblings that had inherited an outstanding bloodline. Instead, there were two unrecognizable lumps of meat that fell to the ocean surface.

“So that’s the end of the only monster I feared. Truly disappointing...or should I say, it went too much according to plan?”

The moment Tristan put a hand to his chin in thought, he heard an explosive roar coming from the distance. What came was a combined attack of flames and ice breath. And the origin of the attack was unmistakably from Azgrad, who was sitting atop Salafia’s back.

“Heh! It seems bad premonitions always come true!”

“Yet you look rather happy, you asshole!”

If it was possible to vanish, it was also possible to do the opposite. The sight of Salafia and her riders charging earlier was a decoy created by Shutola’s Rank A Blue Magic, Spy’s Fog. While the decoy charged, she cast Spy’s Fog on the group so they could dodge the storm of soundwaves and prepare an attack from an unexpected angle.

“Unfortunately for you, that attack is too direct! Tyrant Regress!”

“Thought so! Even I, someone with muscles for brains, agree with you! That’s why...Dahak!”

While Tristan attempted to defend himself by taking the unleashed breath on a shield made of gathered mirror pieces, Azgrad called the name of his past partner.

“You got it! Thanks for buying some time! I’ve got *the special* ready!”

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Tristan attempted to receive the fire and ice breath coming from Azgrad’s

lance by gathering pieces of Tyrant Regress into a shield. On the other side, Dahak let out a cry from below the large monstrous bird that Tristan was riding. He had been in standby below, at an altitude so low he was almost touching the water.

"Yo, Tristan! I'll borrow a saying from my big bro Kelvin here. According to him, if you don't pay attention below you during a fight, you'll lose!"

"Dahak? I never noticed... Since when—" Tristan started, but then he realized the trick. It was once again thanks to Shutola's spell, Spy's Fog. She had used the royal guards she'd attacked him with in the beginning as decoys while Dahak got to a good position and waited for his chance.

"Heh hah! I've never heard of such a saying!"

"Shut up! You've separated them pretty good there, Azgrad! Keep it up!"

"You don't need to tell me that!"

Azgrad's attack hit the mirror shield directly and was continuously reflected off it in different directions. However, it didn't get reflected back at Azgrad, resulting in a counter, and he could tell from the feedback coming through his lance that it was all the mirror shield could do to stop the attack. Salafia maintained their position, and Azgrad—strengthened with Blue Magic—continued attacking with all his might, heedless of the consequences. At the very least, as long as the attack continued, the pieces that had combined into the mirror shield would be locked in place.

Dahak had been hiding and waiting for this chance when Tyrant Regress was separated from Tristan. Because he had a lot of shackles placed on him, like having used a lot of energy for his all-out breath attack, and being on top of water so he couldn't use his specialty, which required land, it had taken him a while to get ready. However, that had been solved through the efforts of Shutola and co.

"Sorry, but from here on out, I'll be unrivaled! Sprout, my plants!"

Something sprang out of the Black Loam Scales located on Dahak's back, resulting in a sight that defied common sense. A huge and thick plant that rivaled the size of Gaun's sacred tree had grown from the seed all at once until

it stretched into the heavens. Eventually, cracks ran along its striking growth as it started to split in two.

“This is a ‘Seed of Calamity,’ a special variant that I combined to my taste! Taste the pride of the Earth Dragon King!”

The Seed of Calamity was a plant of the most dangerous class that had been brought about during Gaun’s Beast King Festival when Dahak had faced off with Goldiana. As proof, an innumerable number of sharp blades peeked out of the open crack in the tree. That’s right, the tree had actually split horizontally, not vertically, and the two halves had resolved into an upper and lower jaw. This massive mouth closed in on Tristan and the large monstrous bird he was riding on from below. It was already so close that they were nearly inside its mouth. An unknown poisonous mist poured out from the edges of the plant’s mouth, and it was leaking a lot of drool.

For a moment, Tristan’s eyes narrowed as he sent orders to his Demise Guillemot. Having received its orders, the large monstrous bird flapped its wings in an attempt to rise through the air.

“I see no need to just sit around silently here. It certainly is terrifying in shape and also scarily fast, but Guillie won’t lose in speed either.”

“You’re right. I thought so too.” Shutola cut in.

Tristan gasped. Shutola’s voice came from above him as he was trying to rise. He reacted to this unexpected voice by looking towards the source only to see Shutola riding on the shoulders of two royal guard units. Rather, she was clinging to the head of a gigantic stuffed bear that was riding on top of said royal guards.

Azgrad was still bathing the Tyrant Regress with overwhelming heat and cold. So why was Shutola, who was behind him, here? Tristan tried to ponder the situation, but he quickly stopped. He had already arrived at the answer, and more importantly Shutola was already making her move.

Azgrad’s flashy attack had forced Tyrant Regress to gather and stay in one place, and that was more than enough. However, in reality that was also a decoy, and Shutola herself had hidden herself with Spy’s Fog to form a second “true” prong of attack with Dahak.

“Doing the same thing over and over!”

“It’s because you keep getting caught by that same move. So who’s the fool, huh?! Tristan Faaze!”

Boing!

Shutola’s bear made a comical jump, one that would fit having a fancy and stylized sound effect to it. The stuffed bear got off the royal guard’s shoulders with a resolute air. Its name was Georgios, and as it got closer to Tristan with its round and cute eyes, it swiped at him with vicious claws from its right hand that seemed at odds with its cute head.

“Gah... Bwargh!”

Was it supposed to be a sign of respect for her other brother? Georgios punched Tristan in the face just like Shutola’s other brother had done before hitting him with a set of three claws that left thick, deep marks all the way down to his lower half. The claws then carried on down to the large monster bird Tristan was riding, and Georgios finished things off by kicking off them with both legs, sending them down towards the other enemy that was closing in on them.

Boing!

Once again, the fancy sound could be heard as Georgios used Tristan and the bird as a platform to return to the royal guards. This had all happened so fast, it was almost unthinkable for such a heavyweight-class doll.

“Yay!” Shutola exchanged a high five with her stuffed animal, something the adult version of her would never have done (in front of other people). She was currently flying high, doing so well it was almost like she was invincible.

“Welcome, Tristan! Allow me to greet you in my own personal style!”

What awaited a seriously wounded Tristan as he fell from the sky with fierce momentum was the Earth Dragon King, Dahak, and the special plant that he’d so painstakingly raised. The plant’s maw opened wide. So wide that an onlooker might wonder if it actually had started to split in twain from the mouth. The inside of its maw was what seemed like an endless abyss, and by the time Tristan became aware of what he was looking at, he was already inside that

pitch blackness. The mouth closed greedily, and now there was no light to be found for him.

This is...a pretty serious wound, Tristan observed. *But what is this, trapping a Summoner?!*

He attempted to use his Summoning skill. It was unclear whether he tried to escape using the same method he'd employed to escape Kelvin in Gaun so long ago or if he was trying to resummon Tyrant Regress. Either way, whatever Tristan tried failed.

"That's too bad, Tristan. I can mostly guess what you're trying to do in your situation." Shutola commented from the outside. "You know we have sister Ange and Bell-chan on our side, right? We've studied your past tactics and have used them against you." She paused for a moment in thought. "Ah, could it be...you hadn't been revived yet at that point, Tristan? I'm not really sure, but if that's the case, I guess it's understandable!" she said, revealing an angelic smile.

"Grk...so this monster is itself a barrier?!"

The Seed of Calamity had been sown with a barrier on top of Dahak's selective breeding. It was the same barrier that Ange had once used against Kelvin, a special barrier that blocked Summoning. The two enemies back then (plus the old man) were now on Kelvin's side, and combined with Colette, who had specialized knowledge, it was well within their means to recreate such a barrier.

"I'll give ya another shot of bad news!" Dahak continued. "That thing's got some serious poison inside it, the same kind that that bastard Jildora once used, but super-enhanced. You know how frustrated we were when we let him escape? That poison is packed with many years of grudges. Well, try to enjoy it, will ya?"

Tristan let out a small, barely audible noise in surprise before he started to cough. "Guogh...oaghh!"

There was no longer any room for him to make a comeback. He had been completely checkmated, marking the end of the stage that the jester had set up.

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Dahak's lethal poison ate into Tristan. Countless specks started appearing on his skin, which then spread throughout his entire body. The symptoms of illness gradually started to bubble to the surface, and they were accompanied by sharp pains. A normal person might have died from shock because of all that pain, but Tristan was a reborn Apostle, so he had long ago surpassed any normal person. He kept his consciousness through the pain; he was just tough enough to not lose his life.

"Grr... Gagh!"

Tristan unintentionally extended his arm, but he was trapped in a natural prison of Dahak's making. There was no light and no one to save him. He had once been locked up in a sealed space by Jildora, but back then he'd been saved by Assassin. On top of that, he tended to use his unique skill to get out of trouble. However, right now he had access to none of that. Assassin had left the Apostles to enjoy her second life as Ange, and the Summoning skill that was his last hope was blocked by a barrier. Though he had gone through the trouble of getting Jildora as a Follower, he was so far away, and he was in a situation where he couldn't count on the help of other Apostles. In the board game terms he was so good at, this would be the endgame, and if it was a board game, this was a situation where he'd have to admit his defeat.

"Geh... Grghh!"

Though he tried to raise his voice, he couldn't articulate his noises, so it ended in a bust. Tristan's body was already in a state where he couldn't lift a finger properly.

So...I'm already at the point where I can't even speak... What a tragedy that this kind of ending is wasted on a mediocre person like me! Aaah, I'm so sad that I can't show this to anyone!

Still, Tristan laughed. If he couldn't talk or emote, then he could at least do so in his heart. To him, someone who had broken his humanity, enjoying his own death was a pressing imperative, and he was excited like a child about how grand and dramatic his death would be. His head was filled with thoughts of it.

Let's see...yeah, before I go, I should leave a gift for them. Though I'd already

intended to do that...this will be something that activates after my death, something like a curse... Heh heh, those were some wonderful plays, Princess Shutola. But it seems you've mistaken the order in which to defeat us. It's too bad I won't be able to see your face when you realize that and the world ends, but such regret is like spice. Truly the stuff of life! I will graciously accept it.

One of the bulges that was swelling from Tristan's skin burst as if it were a balloon that had been pumped too full of air. The juices inside scattered when that happened, and with the burst came pain incomparable to what he had been experiencing before.

Tristan screamed wordlessly. If someone had been able to see his expression then, how would they have described it? The answer to that was locked in the darkness and would probably never come to light.

This body will eventually come to its dramatic end, I'm sure of it. This is something I wished for, but I still don't like feeling pain. I may be a weirdo, but I'm not that *far gone.*

Squeezing out what little power he had left, he Summoned the last two Followers who were waiting in his pool: the Incendiary Bug King who was being prevented from self-destructing by Shutola, and the Voracious Baku Orgg that had never gotten to show itself at all. His Demise Guillemot was there too, and they seemed to be slower to be affected by the poison, probably because of their higher stats.

This is my final present. I'm sure you all wanted me to die horribly. It's easy to tell from this poison. But unfortunately for you all, that won't happen. I'll use this Voracious Baku Orgg to at least waste away peacefully.

Voracious Baku Orgg was a Baku-type monster that ate other people's dreams and stored them in its body. In preparation for this fight, he had fed the baku dreams filled with all sorts of emotions. Though they served many purposes, thanks to Shutola's efforts, they'd had no chance to be used. This dying moment would in all likelihood be Voracious Baku Orgg's last job. A small, unimportant job that would have no bearing on the battle: to show Tristan a peaceful dream.

But I'm sure that to all of you, that's the thing you'd hate most, isn't it?

No one could see Tristan's form inside the Seed of Calamity. So doing such a thing in a place no one could witness was really just for his own satisfaction. Tristan knew that, but it was the last bit of payback he could get.

All that's left...is what happens to my Followers... No, I will not throw them away until the end. This will be a saving grace for these children. Now then, launch...the last...fireworks...

Tristan's body no longer held its original shape. He had swollen all over and no longer looked human. Parts of the swollen bits had already burst, and each one was accompanied by a pain so intense he could have died. In the midst of such torturous suffering, Tristan breathed his last peaceful breath.

Wrapped in the dream shown by his Voracious Baku Orgg, what did Tristan see? Since his body stopped functioning seconds after the dream started, it was a mystery whether or not he was actually able to process anything.

A great roar resounded, and a feathered cap danced. Tristan's body, which had expanded to the limit, exploded all at once. This brilliant bursting caught the nearby Incendiary Bug King in its effect, causing it to explode as well. This caught everything in its effect, including the Demise Guillemot and Voracious Baku Orgg, causing great damage to all. Dahak's prided prison had been punctured by explosive flame.

"Whoargh?!"

Sensing something was wrong, Dahak cut off the Seed of Calamity from his back and escaped just before that happened. The tough plant that was sturdy enough to resemble the sacred tree couldn't withstand the energy welling up inside it, and it finally exploded as well. The resulting winds carried its remains at ferocious speeds as they scattered in all directions. It was relatively fine since they were over the ocean, but if they'd been over land it could easily have caused a great disaster. That was how incredible the explosion was.

Luckily, Dahak, who had been nearest to the explosion, got away with his wings only lightly singed. Shutola, Azgrad, and Salafia had all hidden behind an ice wall so they were unharmed, as were the royal guards.

"I... I never expected the poison I made to cause an explosion this great... Man, that surprised even me!"

“That’s wrong, Dahak.”

“Huh?”

“If it was only Tristan that burst, it wouldn’t have caused such an explosion. Most likely, he caused his Follower monster to explode. I don’t know what kind of method he used, but he got past the seal I made using Retributive Persuasion.”

“Uh...izzat so? Well, there’s no doubt he died because of my poison, right? Then it’s all good!” Dahak looked truly satisfied.

“Heeeyy, it’s fine to celebrate your victory, but what do we do about this mirror freak? It stopped moving after that explosion.”

Azgrad, who had been blasting his lance full force at it, had climbed up onto Salafia’s head to shout at them. As he said, Tyrant Regress, who had morphed into a shield shape to resist Azgrad’s lance breath attack, had stopped completely as if it had run out of batteries. However, it seemed it had retained its ability to float, as it stayed in place in the air.

“It sucks that we can’t touch it carelessly. It’d be best to destroy it now while we have the chance, but...”

At any rate, they had managed to kill Tristan Faaze, whom they had a long-lasting grudge against. He had been erased without a trace from this world, that much was certain. The first victory in this decisive battle went to the alliance from Trycen—two Dragon Kings who were also a former partner and mother, and a prideful pair of siblings.

Chapter 2: Magic Eye Monster

Central ocean:

Angels continued to be deployed from the battleship. The angel-type monsters the *Elpis* had been dropping ever since it had burst into the air had Rank S-level strength. However, these angels with their strange armor had power incomparable to those monsters. In dragon terms they would be ancient dragons, and in demon terms they would be archdemons. They had power far different from most of the three big species. These divine soldiers with all their impressive power flocked around the ark, and the resulting sight was truly dispiriting. However, no one present was going to give up so easily.

“Hiiiiyaaahhhh!”

Sabato, having been awarded the name of Gaun at the Beast King Festival, along with his favorite sword that he could control freely, and one other figure were intercepting the attacking angels with teamwork, protecting their ship.

“Just what I’d expect from you, Sabato-sama!”

“You too, Akgas! These things’re stupid strong, but they’ve got no coordination, and they haven’t even tried to take any sort of formation! They just chase after prey as they please, charging straight in like idiots! We can do this!”

Sabato and his group, who used to be Rank A adventurers, had become even stronger after the Beast King Festival. Of course they had, as they’d been personally trained by Leonhart, who put them through the ringer every day, from kicking them off cliffs, to dropping boulders on them, to finishing them off by pouring boiling oil over them.

Both their hearts and bodies had become tougher, and Sabato felt pride at knowing that he had strength befitting the name of Gaun. That held true for his little sister, Goma, as well. The distance he would fly when taking her retort-with-an-iron-fist couldn’t even be compared to before.

“Hey, Goma! Let’s do *that* to get everyone into the swing of things— Wait,

Goma?! Gomaaaaaa?! Goddamn, where did that Goma get off to?! Did she fall off the ship or something?!”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d worry about yourself before you worry about others, Sabato-sama! I’m still not used to using Sky Walk, and watching you fight like that is giving me the chill—wwaaaaghh!”

“Don’t just fall while you’re talking, Guin!”

Akgas caught Guin, who had slipped and was about to fall, by the scruff of his neck, causing him to let out a silly choking sound. It seemed they had just recently learned Sky Walk to be able to fight in the air, since they were representing Gaun.

“Hey guuyyysss!” Goldiana called to them in her characteristic “seductive” voice. “This is a critical juncture! But even if our enemies are angels, don’t forget you have an angel on your side too! Fight ooonnn!”

None of the other three could find the words to respond, as from beside the Aqua Swallow passed a certain peach-colored angel with a swarthy voice. At least, that’s what they thought they saw. Setting aside whether the meaning behind it was good or bad, Sabato’s eyes were stolen by her form for a moment. And...he decided to pretend he hadn’t seen anything.

“Okay, that was just a figment of our imagination! Don’t mind it; we need to stand firm!”

“Y... Yeah!”

“Oh crap...I feel like I’m about to hurl, for a lot of reasons...”

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Battleship Elpis:

While those outside the battleship, like that somewhat dispirited Sabato, were fighting for their lives, the members of the attack squad had infiltrated the battleship *Elpis* in their attempt to stop the giant ark and bring down DarkMel. One of the members was Ange, who held the title of Headhunting Cat. She was alone and was using her unique skill and speed to zip about the battleship.

“Oh, whoopsies! This seems like it, according to her instinct, but...”

Ange had arrived at an unfamiliar space furnished with machines and other equipment. These objects with an unknown purpose were strewn about to make a rather complicated maze, and it seemed they were activated, as all the while they were making mechanical noises and repetitive movements.

Ange took a moment to listen before she asked, “Are you there, Analyzer?”

“Whoops, I was found out already? Dear me, I can’t win against the ravages of time, I suppose.”

Analyzer, a.k.a. Riold, appeared from the shadow of one of the machines. His hair was graying with old age, but it was still well kept. He was wearing his familiar monocle as well as his guild uniform from when he was the guildmaster.

“Hey, Ange-kun. I never would have expected you to come here. I wonder if this is also some sort of fate?”

“Ah, so that’s what you’re going to call me. Then I should do the same.” Ange took a moment to adjust. “You say it’s fate, but aren’t you protecting this place because it’s important, guildmaster? In that case, isn’t it inevitable that I’d be here first given my speed?”

“I suppose you could say that?” Riold paused to think. “Yes, this conversation has me feeling nostalgic. Those times were truly fun. Even if it was an assignment, it was fulfilling to guide and watch over the growth of the youngsters who would one day shoulder Parth.”

“I had fun too. At some point it turned into true love, though, and I am happier now.”

“Heh! You’ve had that playfulness about you since your receptionist days. Even with these divine eyes, I never expected you to betray us.” Riold drifted off for a moment, immersed in his memories. “Right, then. Let’s end the small talk here.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Riold slowly lifted up his monocle as Ange took a stance with a dagger. The atmosphere creaked under the electric tension between them, and the instant it did, Ange disappeared.

Schkiiiiiiing!

A moment after Riold unsheathed a rustic, normal longsword, the sound of clashing weapons filled the air. Sparks flew as the two parties quickly crossed blades again, and then the sound of clashing blades could be heard in succession. Even then, there was no sign of Ange or even a shadow of her, and next a kunai flew at Riold from behind.

“I see. You’ve stayed loyal to my teachings and mastered your skills.”

Using his free hand, he caught the kunai bare-handed. His expression as he looked straight at Ange even though he couldn’t see her was that of a father rejoicing at his child’s growth. Seemingly in response to those words, Ange finally showed herself from the opposite direction of the Kunai.

“You taught me for years after I was reborn as an Apostle, after all. You can feel proud of your apprentice and boast about me all you like, guildmaster.”

“I do feel proud. However, it seems your guard is still weak.” Riold said as he pointed his finger at his own head in a gesture that seemed to be indicating something.

Ange understood what he was pointing at and took a moment to check. “Oh you’re good.”

One of Ange’s trademarks at this point was her black hood with cat ears. Half of one of the ears had been cut off and fallen to her feet.

“In terms of pure speed, you would equal DarkMel, Ange-kun. However, just being fast isn’t enough to fool my eyes, you know? Ange-kun, even with your gift, you are vulnerable at the moment of attack, so you need to watch your timing.”

Ange threw a slew of kunai, but there was a throwing knife with explosive charm attached to it among them. Riold stabbed through the charm that would set off the explosion with his longsword and lifted it up showily. He had completely read her attack.

There was a moment of silence. Then, “Whew. And yet there shouldn’t be much of a difference in our stats. In fact, I should be winning in a lot of categories.”

“Aren’t you just too focused on what you can see?” Riold replied. “Look, I’ve lived quite a long time. Maybe that’s the difference?”

“That last line was really sloppy. Well, I have no intention of coming at you head-on like a fool.”

“Oh?”

Ange was all smiles, but what she took out next was a restraining weapon that she’d made with Kelvin. It was a chain complete with explosive charms. The flexible weapon assaulted Riold from both left and right in a pincer attack. In response, he jumped on the spot to dodge, but the chain wasn’t the only threat.

“An attack from above, huh? It *is* a blind spot, but not something I didn’t expect.”

The attack had been launched at the same time Riold jumped. It was made by someone who had once been his comrade, Bell Baal the Condemner, and was in the form of a fierce kick. However, she was dodged by a hair’s breadth, so instead she shot Riold a look that could kill.

“Tch! He dodged!”

“I see, so Bell-kun is here too. This team-up is pretty moving—”

“Oh dear, old man. It’s a bit early to feel so moved, you know?”

Surprised, Riold sucked in a breath. The third voice came from above Bell and was sweet, bewitching, and sultry in all the right ways. Estoria Kranweltz appeared, wielding a large blood-colored lance. Without paying Bell, who was currently in between them, any heed, she launched her weapon at Riold with exaggerated motions.

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With no hesitation, the blood-colored greatlance was launched on a heading to pierce through both Bell and Riold.

“Mmhmm...two birds with one stone, I take it?”

“You stupid woman!” Bell yelled.

As always, the two got along like cats and dogs. With a wry chuckle, Riold hid behind Bell, using her as a shield. He knew Bell wouldn’t just take the attack lying down, so he expected her to do something. And he was proven right: Bell used one leg to launch a wind attack at him while simultaneously using her other to deflect Estoria’s blood lance.

Kerclaaaang!

Riold intercepted the blow with his longsword and used the recoil to return to the ground. Meanwhile, Estoria was clearly unamused that her attack had been deflected. Because of a certain person, Bell’s face was filled with rage. Their surprise attack had been a bust, so everyone returned to the ground as well.

“Hey, what were you thinking, you stupid woman?! I had some hope for you, since I’d thought you were reformed, but I guess you’re still just the same as ever, huh? No matter how small your brain is because all your nutrients go into that ridiculous chest of yours, I’d appreciate it if you could at least learn to tell your friends from your enemies!”

“Oh my my! I don’t ever remember becoming your friend, Baal-chan? I was only helping Ange-chan, thinking I could stop your heart as well as that old man’s. So really, who’s the one with a small brain?”

“Wait a second, you two?!” Ange stammered, flustered.

Bell and Estoria had started fighting among themselves, heedless of Riold. So there was no way Ange could afford not to step in.

“You two haven’t changed at all, though that goes for Ange and me as well. It takes me right back to when the Apostles were still together, like it was just yesterday.”

Bell turned to him. “I mean, it wasn’t that long ago. And it’s impossible for me to ever get along with this idiot boob woman.”

“That is the only thing I will ever agree with you on. Ah, but it’s too bad,” Estoria drawled. “While some relationships never change, others do. I’ve found myself a wonderful man, and so has Ange. Hm? Wait a second, is Bell the only one left out? Oh no, that’s so sad!”

“Wanna experience a million deaths?! Not to mention, you’re just a stalker!”

“Heh, you just can’t reason with virgins. How many examples of love born from stalking do you think there are in this world?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna kill you.”

“Come on, you two?!”

Estoria sneered at Bell, who was so angry you could see veins bulging. However, if Dahak were to hear this, he would have been so happy he might have cried.

“Did you come all the way here just to fight among yourselves? Personally, I’d love it if I didn’t have to fight, but...that’s not why you’re here, right?”

Bell turned to Riold once more. “Of course not. Even if DarkMel or whatever her name is were to leave my homeland alone as promised, I don’t want her to destroy the rest of the world. More than anything, I won’t allow sister Sera to feel sad. Ah, but I’d welcome it if the vampire’s castle was to be destroyed.”

“That’s rare; I agree with everything you said other than that last part,” Estoria said. “I don’t want nonsense like that to happen either, and it’s only natural to get greedy once you meet your soulmate, especially since my honeymoon with Sir Gerard is waiting for me. If the only option left available to us was Baal-chan’s homeland, the only thing I would feel is despair!”

Bell and Estoria continued to knee and elbow each other even as they conversed quite seriously. From the mood, these were just small acts of harassment, but it in no way looked like they were holding back.

“Jeez, you two...but I feel the same as they do. Isn’t it the same for you and your wish, Guildmaster? It’s not too late to join us and work to defeat DarkMel, right? Um...Mist-san is also waiting for you to come back, I think?”

Riold said nothing in reply. Instead, he lifted his monocle and heaved a large

sigh. “If you are going to ask that while knowing exactly what kind of answer I’m going to give you, then you’re quite the fox yourself, Ange. My word, you really are my prided student.”



“Ah, so there really was something going on with you and Mist-san? I was just trying to lead you on!” Ange teased in a lilting tone. She sounded concerned, but she also stuck her tongue out and readied a dagger.

“I am working towards my own wish. You didn’t actually think sweet talk like that would work at this point, did you?”

“Well, I *am* the disciple you’re so proud of. I knew you wouldn’t be. I just wanted to get you back a little bit for being mean to Kelvin so long ago.”

“My word, what a scary disciple.”

The demon and vampire simply watched this exchange silently. Though they would fight, they could also read the room, so for this moment alone they stopped elbowing and kneeing each other as they whispered together.

“Hey wait a second, what’re those two talking about? Who’s Mist?!”

“How the hell should I know? Isn’t she Analyzer’s girlfriend or something?”

“What?! What kind of thieving cat took him and where did she come from?!”

““You... Your lingering attachments and feelings are way too much...””

That ended their private conversation. As each person’s excitement started to ramp up, the fight moved into its main stage.

“This’ll be the third warning, but do you really think you can win against all of us when you’re at such a disadvantage?” Estoria drawled. “Even if you are the fifth seat, don’t you think it’s reckless to try and take on the sixth through eighth seats all at once?”

“True, I am not that strong in combat. If we were to compare us in pure combat prowess, then it’s clear I would be far below Serge-kun. But I’m the type not to take fights I can’t win, you see. I believe I have a much better chance than Tristan, who’s playing around outside. At least, against you three.”

“Huh...”

“Hm...”

“Then why don’t we test that out for ourselves?”

The atmosphere around them creaked, so much so that it was almost audible.

It was many times worse than when Ange had first faced off against Riold.

The former guildmaster was the first one to make a move. He blinked, and the most obvious change in his right eye was the difference in color. His original eye color was like diluted ink, but it changed to a scarlet color like a raging crazed demon. The second change occurred in the environment within sight of that scarlet eye. As if the world were aligning itself to the color of his point of view, everything he could see caught on fire. Even the ground that Riold's three opponents had been standing on was engulfed in a wave of fire in the next instant.

"Wow, your eye sure is convenient!" said Ange, the sarcasm clear in her tone.

Each of the trio dealt with this onslaught in their own way. Ange used her unique skill to pass through the fire, advancing towards her enemy. Bell cast Degradation Block to defend herself against the flames. Lastly, Estoria split her body into numerous bats to avoid the attack—or not.

"Seiyaaahh!"

She allowed herself to be covered in fire to throw her blood lance at Riold with all her might. The lance flew in a straight line towards him while spraying blood, possibly because it was melting due to the fire. The closer it got to its target, the stronger the fire was and the higher the temperature of the flames that tried to intercept it. Even so, the weapon did not crumble.

"Come on! I'm putting my body and chest on the line here, so look alive! At least a little bit!"

"Shut it! You didn't have to specify your chest! You really didn't!"

Urghh, Ange thought, *I know they're serious but my ears hurt for some reason. No...it's my chest that hurts?!*

Leaving aside what was hidden within her breast, Ange boasted the greatest speed by far among the Apostles, only just edging out Bell, so it was easy for them to follow up on Estoria's blood lance. The pair dodged through the sea of fire that spread out before them, overtook the lance, and came at Riold's blind angle from both sides.

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“Debilitate Scrimmage!”

Bell concentrated her Blue Magic power to her greaves and leaped in using the opening. The massive amount of magic swelled, and her greaves transformed as she changed into the form of a splendid and proper demon. With her Barrette of Disguise undone, her horns, wings, and tail were exposed. She also used her magic to create armor for herself. Her sharp and fiendish greaves had great whorls of raging wind blowing around them. The target for her condemnation was a past comrade, but even then, she would not hesitate.

“Your neck...is mine!” Ange, with her single-cat-eared hood on, flipped her switch to assassin mode, which was her original job, ridding herself of the reason that acted to limit her instincts. Now, she would only aim for Riold’s neck, and she would chase him to the end of the world to claim it like a persistent shadow. The numerous weapons she had hidden under her black clothes and sleeves must have all been drooling over the prospect.

“Good grief, what noisy people. Look, Bell-kun, it seems this is a gift from her.”

The blood lance that Estoria had thrown, heedless of the fact that she was being burned by fire, made a beeline for Riold’s heart. But with a single glare at the blood lance, Riold changed the situation. As if resonating with his powerful gaze, the space directly in front of him twisted. Then, he directed his gaze near Bell, causing another twist in space to appear. The one in front of him swallowed the blood lance, which was spat out by the twist in space that had appeared right in front of Bell, who had circled around him.

Bell sucked in a breath, surprised. The lance, thrown with all of Estoria’s considerable strength, was a force to be reckoned with, even after being somewhat melted. To Bell, it seemed like the entire weapon was pulsating and that it could have been one of the blood lance’s properties. It was, however, clearly different from when they had laid the surprise attack. It was usually a good idea to share the details of your abilities with a friend and comrade if you were going to fight alongside each other, but it was an established fact that Bell and Estoria got along like cats and dogs, so it was impossible to expect that kind of cooperation.

“Hup!” Given that its properties were unknown and its appearance was what it was, Bell judged that she shouldn’t allow herself to take the attack. So she launched a slash of blue wind, Debilitate Slash, to intercept it. The attack carried the blood lance with it off into the distance while losing its blue color gradually.

“Ahhh! Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!” Estoria shouted.

“It’s your fault for throwing it recklessly all over the place.”

“It was a sacrifice play! I. Was. Sacrificing. Myself!”

“Aren’t you always boasting about your regeneration abilities?”

There was no spirit of cooperation at all between them. The argument only displayed that fact for all to see, and it didn’t seem like it would abate even during a battle.

“My word, seems like this fight will be easier than I thought,” Riold said to himself.

“Really now?”

Jangle.

Suddenly, Riold felt something wrong with his left leg, and he also heard something like the sound of chains rustling together. When he looked down, he found a blackened chain with a counterweight on it wrapped around where he felt something was wrong.

“Oho! If I remember right, it’s possible for you to allow that to pass through things until right before it wraps around its target. Let’s see...I believe this is a special weapon from Toraj?”

“Just what I’d expect out of you, Guildmaster. You’re really knowledgeable. I’ll be taking your ankle first! After all, it’s basically a neck for your ankle!”

Ange was using a sickle and chain, a new hidden weapon recommended to her by Kelvin. Normally, when she was under the effects of Uncontainable, when she threw her knives and kunai, the skill would cease to affect them the moment they left her hand. That was why everything she had thrown during the opening stages of this fight had been caught by Riold.

However, with the sickle and chain, she could throw the counterweight at an

enemy and the chain would remain in her hands. Because of that, it was possible for Ange to control whether it could pass through objects at will. If even light passed through the weapon, it couldn't be caught by Riold's sight.

"The ankle, huh? Your field of expertise has gotten wider."

"Oh no, my main aim is still your neck, okay? But it's too close to your eyes, Guildmaster, so I thought you'd end up dodging at the last second. I've simply learned how to compromise even after flipping my switch!"

That took Riold aback. "I... I see. That's good focus, I think. Also, your positioning isn't bad either."

From directly above, it would look like Ange, Bell, and Estoria were surrounding him, drawing a triangle between them. The biggest danger when facing Riold was obviously his God's Eye. By taking this formation, they could ensure that at least one person was not in his eyesight at all times. Even though they were arguing incessantly, Estoria and Bell were at least doing the bare minimum as a team.

"Oh, so you've still got enough leeway to feel relaxed, do you?" Bell commented. "I'll tell you now, that chain was made specially by Kelvin. It can't be cut so easily."

"Heh heh, I see you have a lot of trust in Kelvin-kun. Did your attachment to your sister spill over to him?"

That seemed to get to Bell, as it took her a moment to say, "I feel like just the stress from today will make me explode."

"Hey," Estoria butted in, "why not spend your time with me instead of that *thin* little girl there?!"

"Aha! If you pay too much attention to them, I'll end up taking your neck!" Ange warned.

It was a triangle of death, with each corner housing someone who would attack Riold ceaselessly. Ange was using her body and one of her arms to keep the chain locked in place while she used her other arm to throw her concealed weapons at him. Bell was creating blades of wind with her greaves and launching them along with a diverse array of kicks. Estoria had produced

another blood lance out of nowhere and was hucking them at full power, heedless of Bell's earlier warning.

I see, Riold thought. *Their plan is to make it so that even if I try to defend against one attack, one of the others will still be able to get through. It's a plan depending on sheer weight of numbers. I wonder if it was proposed by Ange-kun, since she knows my abilities so well?*

While putting power into his left leg, which had been bound tight, Riold stabbed his longsword into the floor. Then, he faced the incoming storm of attacks and spread his arms out.

"However, I believe this is the first time you've seen this?"

"Geh!"

"What?!"

His palms were facing Ange and Estoria, and they both let out sounds of surprise. Their eyes were also bulging wide. He had eyes in his palms, which was something impossible unless he was some sort of unusual species. Not even vampires or demons could sprout eyes on their hands, let alone humans.

"God's Eye allows me to use any and all eye skills. So a usage like this isn't strange at all, is it? By combining eye skills, it becomes possible for me to make compound skills, after all."

While Riold was spelling it all out for his opponents, the eyes sucked in the trio's attacks, neutralizing them. They instantly understood that it was some kind of power that manipulated space. But even knowing that, they had no method of stopping it.

"Ange-kun just passes through things, and Estoria-kun has such regenerative powers that she's essentially immortal. So I think I'll be returning these to you, Bell-kun. Please accept them."

A fifth eye opened up on Riold's forehead and glared at Bell. Unfortunately, it seemed that what Riold meant by "return" wasn't referring to the glare Bell had first thrown his way. The eye on his forehead was most likely of the same type as the ones on his palms, as it regurgitated all the attacks that had been absorbed so far. Of course, they were all aimed at Bell.

“Degradation Counter!”

The piled-up attacks collided with the barrier put up by Bell. Like a rubber ball, the barrier turned the attacks aside, sending them all flying off at oblique angles, where they then collided with the giant machines that were placed around the area. Not all the machines were destroyed, but the damage was immense.

“Whoops. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t break too much. Even if this ship is under DarkMel’s control and powered by her magic, this is the heart of the ship. It’ll be a pain to repair.”

“Tch! You’ve become even more demonic than me.”

“Uh, hmmm...I suppose that this has to be out of my strike range...I think?”

Ange paused for a moment to allow the other two their lines before saying, “Guildmaster...what *is* that form?”

At some point Riold must have activated his fire eye, since the top half of his clothes had burned away, revealing his upper torso.

“From here on, I will face you with all I have. So you should fight me in kind with all your power, techniques, and abilities. Of course, I will analyze them all.”

He didn’t just have magic eyes on his palms and forehead. Countless eyes opened up all over his exposed torso, and each one of them seemed to be different.

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From then on, the fighting became extremely fierce. At this point, almost none of the large machines placed at the heart of the battleship *Elpis* even retained their original form. The walls and floor were covered in blood, and there were gashes all over the place as if a large rampaging monster had rumbled through. Even now, ridiculous gouts of energy were clashing and shaving away at each other.

But it seemed the fight was almost at an end. The resounding sword clashes and explosions had stopped, and all that was heard in this large space was the rough breathing of cornered people.

“How sad. It truly is deplorable for people who have once been comrades to fight with their lives on the line. To say nothing of having to end your once-comrades’ lives with your own hands. That’s even sadder. Don’t you agree?”

Flames flickered as they burned in the machines, and in this place with dust kicked up from all over, the only one who was standing was Riold. There was a magic eye on the back of the hand that swung his unadorned longsword, and there were even more eyes lining his arm all the way up to his shoulder. They cast their sight all over his surroundings, leaving no blind spots, revealing his enemies’ positions no matter where they were. One was kneeling on the floor, covered in blood, one was just barely standing, leaning on her weapon, which had been stuck into the floor, for support, and the last had lost an arm.

Panting, Ange gulped in some breaths before saying, “Hmm...I think it’s finally time to admit we’re in a pinch? Yeah, this is bad...”

“Tch! You can complain when you’re dead, Ange. I’m telling you now, but I don’t plan on dying yet!” Estoria quipped.

“You can say that, but this situation is pretty tough for us. Aren’t I right? This isn’t some sort of punchline where you’re actually the strongest of the Apostles or something, is it?”

Picking up her blood lance that had been stuck in the ground, Estoria pointed it at Riold as she questioned him. Seeing that, Bell’s stubborn streak must have activated, as she brought her hands to her knees and forced herself to stand. Meanwhile, Ange, having lost an arm, picked herself up from the wall she was lying against.

In the beginning, they had been pushing their advantage since they had the numbers. However, ever since Riold had unveiled his new form, the condition of the battle had flipped completely on its head. The countless open eyes all over his body could each have a different skill activated, or he could even have several of them use the same skill for even greater effect. Through his expert use of this ability, he had tormented Ange and her group. It was no longer a matter of combining two different magic eyes to make a compound skill. At this point, the word “magic eye” had lost all meaning and become a way for him to one-sidedly solve all problems with unfair and overwhelming force. Riold had

become a completely different being compared to the man the girls knew.

If they tried to maintain their distance, they would be attacked without pause by flames and lasers, and if they tried to approach for close combat, they would be completely suppressed by a combination of Futuresight Eye, Eye of Mind Reading, and Observatory Eye. Even when Bell tried in her distress to employ Kelvin's specialty, the Sonic Acceleration spell, she was hit with Exorcism Eye, canceling out all her supportive effects. Because Riold had eyes all over his body, including his back, he had no blind spots, and even if they tried to hide, he could see through obstacles. Luck had been on their side when they had managed to crush one of the eyes, but he had just healed it right up.

They had done everything they could, put into action every plan they had thought of during battle. They had even tried bright flares and spreading clouds of dust, things which were commonly considered the weak points of eyes. But nothing worked. Even with three of the top fighters in the world, they couldn't even find a glimmer of a way to break through Riold's lock on the battle.

"I've told you this many times by now, my power isn't anything special. Sachiel, who's waiting in the wings for later—no, excuse me—people such as Selector, who's name is Mao-kun, and DarkMel, whom he follows, are much more monstrous than I. As for Serge-kun...well, let's see." Riold paused in thought. "If I were to fight her like this, then it's possible that I might be an even match."

All the eyes on Riold's body opened, and the three girls were sent flying like leaves on the wind, only to crash into the steel wall behind them. After their collision with the wall, they were kept there by some sort of mysterious continuous pressure, which put great strain on their bodies, eliciting creaking sounds.

"Grk...urgh..."

"However, she hasn't come here. I suppose it's the same for Kelvin-kun as well? They probably sent you because they trusted in you, but it seems their calculations were a bit naive. It's too bad."

"Don't...underestimate...us!" Bell struggled to shout. "Deus...Resound!"

A blue blast of wind came out of Bell's greaves, spreading throughout the

space. The wind itself did not appear to be offensive, and even when Riold tried touching it, it didn't hurt him, but its expansive properties were exceptional. Once the blue wind had filled the area, the pressure that had been driving the trio into the wall lessened considerably, and once it had completely filled the room, Riold's attack was nullified.

"Oho, so the effect of the magic eyes were lessened thanks to Bell's ability. That's troubling. I need to select a different one, then."

"You... Damn you!"

One of his magic eyes had been entirely sealed by Bell's Color Corrosion, but Riold had an essentially infinite number of them at his disposal. Bell herself knew best that what she had done was just a temporary measure.

After a moment, Estoria spoke up. "Whew, yeah I think this is a lost cause. Hey, you two, why don't we just give up? Even if I am nearly immortal, I'll die eventually if things keep going like this, you know?"

"You're giving up, Estoria?!"

"Jeez," she replied, almost teasingly, "don't let all the blood go to your head like that. Just try looking at this situation calmly, please!"

Bell stood up again, despite the blood flowing abundantly from her forehead.

"My word, arguing even at this stage?" Riold commented. "You should take a page out of Ange's book. Even now, she's trying to come up with a plan to win. See?"

"Oh my," Estoria said in a sultry tone. "I never thought you'd misunderstand. I'm such a sinful woman!"

Question marks popped up over both Riold's and Bell's heads. Riold possessed a magic eye that could read a target's mind, but all three of them had taken measures against charm-type effects by equipping the Goddess's Ring, so the best he could get was something like, "I wanna do that!" Even if he used it on Estoria right now, he would only get something like, "I haven't actually given up on the fight."

"I haven't given up on winning against you at all, you know? What I'm giving

up on is trying to win in the style we're currently pursuing. From now on, I'll be fighting more like myself."

"That's some confidence, Estoria-kun. True, you haven't been using the White Magic you're so good at. Is that what you're referring to? If that's the case, you don't have any power left in your gift, so you can't revive anyone too important. Just what are you getting at, huh?"

Riold's original pair of eyes narrowed as he fixed her with a stare. Even in the middle of battle, she was still able to replenish her blood lance and use it. She had replaced it over and over again as well. Judging from the state of things, Riold surmised that the blood lance was something she had made from her own blood, as she was a vampire. Either that, or she had some sort of storage ability that she was using to draw resources from.

And now, the weapon that Estoria had produced was...a bastard sword, something that a warrior would love to use. She had taken out two of them, in fact, with one in each hand.

"Seeing you use a lance was a fresh sight, but dual wielding bastard swords is even more novel. What does that change, though?"

"My oh my...my my my... Those sure are some words you've thrown at me, Riold."

Riold reacted with marked surprise, as her form and way of speaking had ceased resembling her old self once she had picked up the swords. She was now Mist, the current guildmaster of Parth's Adventurer's guild, and an adventurer friend from the past who had once been in a party with Riold.

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Riold had opened his eyes countless times so far, but this was the first time he had done so out of astonishment. Not just his original pair of eyes, but all the eyes on his body looked at Mist and froze. Ange, who had been trying to devise a path to victory more than anyone, knew that she couldn't let this chance go.

Even though she was wounded, she accelerated to her maximum speed at a moment's notice. Bell managed to match her movements without any prior notice simply because she had spent so many years with her. She was the first

to realize Ange's intentions, and she started to chant magic in order to offer as much support as she could muster.

"Sonic Acceleration!"

Support magic, which had been continuously shut down by Riold's magic eyes, now bloomed and became Ange's support. From their fight, it had been confirmed that Riold had at least 37 magic eyes in total. Even Ange, with all her speed, would find it impossibly difficult to destroy all of them. However, the weapon in her hand, Carnage, was as light as a feather, and Ange was able to receive help from her best friend. Missing an arm? So what! Ange resolved to bet everything on that one moment, and in that moment she was certainly the fastest in the world.

Riold couldn't help but let out a surprised noise. Ange had been utterly silent in her attack. There was no energizing shout or any such thing. She simply, silently, disposed of her target. She had stabbed all 37 eyes with her weapon at basically the same time. She had dug in deep with that weapon, gouging the organs out and seeding the deadly poison on it deep into Riold's body. Because it counted as a surprise attack, Ange's Assassin's Strike skill activated. Every single one of her stabs became a critical hit, and Riold, who had been essentially unhurt up until now, was dealt a grievous blow. His original two eyes weren't exceptions here, and as they were destroyed along with the others, the sound of his monocle breaking could be heard.

"Gladius Aile!"

"Branded Amulet Seal!"

Bell raised her leg high, conjuring a blade of blue wind that caused the air around it to reverberate in a roar. Mist ran forth with her bastard swords in hand, producing a talisman from somewhere and throwing it. The talismans stuck on everyone in the room. Though Ange and Bell would usually make sure that such things never got anywhere near them, they didn't have the leeway to mind at the moment. However, the second the talismans touched them, they could feel great power being granted to them.

My body... It feels heavy?! Riold thought with alarm.

He had lost his eyes and now also had a talisman attached to him. However,

its effect was the opposite of Ange's and Bell's, it seemed, as his body felt like it had turned to lead, given how heavy it had become. Having his ability to move hampered on top of losing all his eyes further widened the opening.

"Hagh!"

Bell's Gladius Aile came down at an angle to open Riold up from his left shoulder almost to his heart. He tried to block the attack, but it bit deep into his flesh, going deeper and deeper, trying to make headway farther inside. The slash brought forth raging winds in the area, and at the same time, Bell's leg also did damage. This was a double-edged blade, but even then, she showed no sign of pulling back.

"It seems that Rio was lacking a little in cold-heartedness. Kelvin-san would have seen through me instantly and gone for my head."

So as to not let him be sent flying by Bell's wind, Mist stabbed one of her bastard swords through Riold's chest while the other aimed for his right arm. The bastard swords connected, and his right arm bent at an unnatural angle with a snap while the other blade was wedged deep into his abdomen.

"I'll be taking the appetizer!"

Ange finally spoke, and it was a line that would be at home with someone downing a pint after a hard day's work. She quickly cut through the tendon of Riold's foot, and now she had reaped two "necks," which she had been so fixated on. But more importantly, Riold had lost his balance, and—

"Yeah, just like this! Victory is right in front of us!"

—he laughed. The pain he must have been feeling didn't show on his face at all. Instead, his voice had gotten uncharacteristically loud and excited.

"I won't be done in like this!"

A new magic eye manifested on his wound-covered body. Because they had to appear around and in the gaps of his many wounds, there were only three of them.

"Grk!"

"Gah hah!"

“Ah!”

Unfortunately, all three of them were almost right next to each other, so the laser fired by his Heat Vision Eye hit all of them. Though the hit wasn’t fatal, the laser had pierced through them, forcing them away.

“Now then, I wonder if this is all you have?! This battle is finally even, and the fight is just starting!”

“Heh! Heh ha ha ha ha ha! No—it’s ending, Riold!”

“Mist” revealed her true identity, changing form once again, eventually resolving into Leonhart the Beast King. He laughed.

Bang!

At the same time, the roof was destroyed, revealing a new presence. While keeping the trio of girls busy with his Heat Vision Eye, Riold looked up with his destroyed eyes in an attempt to figure out who it was.

“Urrghh, to think that my dark history would be this bad... It feels like my face will light on fire!”

It was the real Estoria, wielding Shion. She was wearing her nun habit, and her face was bright red, as she was acting very embarrassed. It seemed as if her shame was being converted into magic power, but Shion was actually converting something else. Her staff had gathered an astonishing amount of magic, and it seemed as if it could explode at any second.

“But...” Estoria stammered through her embarrassment. “This is for Gerard-san! I’ll...kill him!”

“Ha ha! I see, so that’s the real Estoria-kun! Good, let’s have a match!”

They showered each other in killing intent, and next, they attacked.

“Sa... Salvation Raayyyy!”

“Raarrgghh!”

In response to the falling rain of light, a new eye sprouted up from beside the crushed one on Riold’s forehead. It launched a giant laser, an attack from Heat Vision Eye. Estoria’s attack was the final straw for the machines in the heart of

the *Elpis*. This indiscriminate wide-area assault was a long, continuous one. Riold was trying to stop any of it that would hurt him, but there was so much rain that it was impossible for him to do it with just a single eye on his forehead. Eventually, he had to employ the three eyes that he had manifested before to resist Estoria's onslaught.

"Love... Love wiiiinssssss!"

"Then show me your power!"

Light clashed with light, and the attacks were evenly matched. One might think that attacks of the same power and number would continue clashing forever, but that actually wasn't the case. New eyes started to manifest across Riold's body, which were new sources of Heat Vision Eye. Though it was possible to manifest an eye with a different power, as things stood, he would lose out to Estoria.

Just as that was happening, Riold felt something stab him in the neck. Panting hard, Ange said to him, "I'll be taking...your neck...as a snack...Guildmaster!"

"Ange-kun!"

What had sunk into Riold's neck was a throwing knife that she had squeezed out the last of her strength to throw before falling. There was an explosive charm on the guard, and the moment Riold saw the knife, it exploded.

Boom!

The explosion was small compared to the ones that had been taking place so far, and in terms of might, it was on the weaker side. However, Riold was caught defenseless, and it was more than enough to halfway blow off his head.

"Agggghhh! Go flyiiinnggg!"

The moment Riold's defensive efforts weakened, Estoria picked up on it and went for the finishing blow. She fed her own obscene thoughts into Shion, turning them into an enormous amount of magical energy that was then used to fight. The rain of light became the largest squall seen today, destroying everything regardless of her allies' presence.

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Rio, the former guildmaster of Parth's Adventurer's Guild, had become an Apostle thirty years prior. Presently, only vague memories were left inside him as to why he became an Apostle in the first place.

In terms of age, he was just past twenty. Rio's party, who had made an excellent showing as adventurers, had started to become somewhat famous on the Eastern Continent. They had been promoted to Rank C adventurers at such a young age, and since then, the sight of them safely completing quests steadily earned them trust from the people around them.

The members of the party were from all over, with greatly varying ages, so it might appear as if they had no sense of unity or teamwork. But in reality, everybody who knew them knew they were the ideal party that trusted each other greatly. That was how strong their bond was. Starting with the leader, who was a well-experienced veteran mercenary in the prime of his life, the party consisted of an extreme womanizer even though he was a mage; an archer who was the only woman in the group, had a gentle demeanor, and was very popular; and finally, a cool-headed and calculating swordsman who wore glasses and was, frankly, unsociable, but the people around him knew that he was a kind person who loved children. It was a colorful party, but it could be said that each of them brought their own flavor to the table, which helped to endear them to others.

"Now then, where should we go once we're done with this job?"

"We don't have an established base, so our party can go wherever we please, like the wind. Why not keep going like that?"

"You say that now, but who was it who got lost in a dungeon just a few days ago? It was a lot of trouble trying to find you, so you need to reflect on your actions already."

"My oh my, my my my...you're so strict, Rio!"

"You're just too soft, Mist. That's why he hasn't changed his slovenly ways!"

"Rio...you're *that* worried about me? But I'm sorry, I don't swing that way. I'd be happier being worried over by Mist-chan."

"No, that's not— Yoouuuu!"

“Aha ha ha ha! Your face is so red, Rio!”

The party was always lively. Though they’d make snide remarks towards each other, it was an expression of love. Of course, at the time, Rio would have denied this strongly, but it was still basically correct.

“Here! Heeere! I want to try going to Parth!”

“Parth? Parth, the town of peace? True, we haven’t gone there yet, but the levels of the monsters there are really low. I hear the quests they have there are really easy.”

“Hmm...it *does* sort of feel like we’ve already outgrown a place like that. If they don’t have anything Rank C or higher, then we would have gone there for nothing.”

“Isn’t it all right to make that sort of trip every once in a while, though? Also, I wanted to visit Parth just once. It’s the place built by the four great countries to symbolize their unity and resolve to no longer make any mistakes. It’s literally a symbol of peace! Isn’t that just wonderful?”

“Oooh, you said some good things there, Mist-chan. But at least two members of our party don’t fit such pretty words at all. Our leader’s got way too scary a face, and Rio’s got a permanent scowl on.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“He’s right, it isn’t. Also, I’d much prefer that over being like you, with nothing but lewd thoughts in your head all year round.”

“Jeez! Fighting again...”

From there, they finished their quest, made for Parth, and arrived safely. Then again, Parth and the area around it were, just as the rumors said, so peaceful that it would have been stranger if they hadn’t arrived safely. Any monsters that appeared were weak, and it was extremely rare for any quest that appeared to be Rank C or higher. In terms of work, this place might have been lacking in challenge, considering how quickly they had been chewing through quests since becoming Rank C adventurers.

“Honestly, I think it’s pretty useless to stay in Parth for any length of time. We

won’t be able to clear the quests we need to get promoted, so I recommend heading somewhere else quickly.”

“Now, now. You’re so impatient, Rio. Just like how you need to brace yourself when it’s necessary, if you don’t relax when it’s necessary, you’ll lose out in life, okay?”

“Heh, Mist-chan sure got you good. Seems like you’ve got naught but holes behind those glasses of yours.”

“What does that even mean? I mean, I do think I understand what she’s saying. But...if we’re going to aim higher, then we need to put in more effort!”

“Leave it there, everyone. You all get that everyone’s made a decent point, right? Let’s compromise and stay in Parth for a few days. In the meantime, we can plan out where we want to go next. How’s that?”

“No objections here!”

“Good grief, such a silver tongue...”

Rio had a reason for not wanting to bother with any quests that didn’t fit their ability. Their party was excellent. It was, but they were still a long way from becoming strong enough to rise to the realms above Rank C—like Ranks B or A, or the highest rank of S. Rio knew that the biggest reason adventurers hit a wall was the lack of growth of their stats and skill points. Rio and his group were talented, but they were in no way prodigies. That was why they needed to put in more work than others, or at least that’s what he believed.

“You can make fun of me for wanting something impossible. But I’m aiming to become a Rank S adventurer. Please don’t forget that, okay?”

“Yeah, I won’t laugh at you.”

“Me neither.”

“None of us will, at least.”

The next day, they visited the Adventurer’s guild and took a monster-hunting quest. While heading out to complete it, Rio and the rest of the party found themselves in a predicament. They were headed to the most difficult area in Parth’s territory, the Rank B dungeon, the Sangria Forest. They thought that no

matter how high the difficulty was rated, they would be fine since this was a dungeon in Parth. The carelessness caused by their impression of Parth would put them in danger.

They found themselves unable to recognize Elder Treants that disguised themselves as wilted trees in the forest, or deal with Death's Head Bees that swarmed to attack anyone who entered their territory, or counter Bloodmushes that possessed powerful poison and would spread their spores ceaselessly through the area. Poisoned and heavily wounded, they barely managed to survive the dungeon as they stumbled back towards the entrance. If they had encountered even one more group of monsters, someone would most likely have died.

"Sorry...it was my fault for giving the go-ahead for this."

"You're wrong, leader! I'm... It's because I suggested we go hunting in this dungeon that we—"

"Move your legs instead of your mouths, you two! I won't allow anyone to die!"

"Oho, now I have a reason not to di—"

The mage was about to spout one of his usual smug lines, but he was suddenly cut off. Because he was part of the back line and thus running in the rear, everyone had to look back, wondering what had happened. But the next noise came from ahead of them, near the entrance to the dungeon, and they couldn't see the mage at all.

"Where did he go?"

"Ah, there! He's fallen out ahead!"

The group returned their gazes to the entrance of the dungeon, towards where the sound had come from, and they saw the mage there, fallen. They couldn't tell if he was breathing or not, but he wasn't moving.

"Why is he there? Shouldn't he have been running behind us?"

"Rio! Mist! The reason is behind us! Crap!"

"Huh?!"

Rio and Mist reacted at the same time. Their leader's voice had gotten them to look behind them once again, where they saw a giant tree, so large it was unbelievable. It raised a sinister moan as it moved towards them using countless roots.

"Gughabhabagobaghaaaa!"

"A...boss monster?! Why is it so close to the entrance?!"

"I'm sure he got sent flying there from behind us. Damn, we just can't catch a break today."

Sangria Forest's boss monster was the wicked elder tree. For this party, who had struggled against the regular monsters, fighting it would be nothing but reckless. Rio, who was the most quick-witted of the group, instantly thought to retreat. Then, he started to calculate the odds of getting someone out alive, and how to do it.

After a moment's thought, he spoke up. "Everyone, I'll be the rearguard. Pick him up and go ahead of me!"

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When Rio regained consciousness, everything around him was pure white. The space he was in was so completely empty, it was like anything other than white was being wholly rejected. The strange scenery was making him a little dizzy. But the first thing on his mind was the woman who was standing in front of him. She wore white clothes and had long silver hair. There was a strangely different air about her as she quietly spoke.

"I shall grant you the light of a divine miracle. Believe in the gods and deepen your faith."

It took Rio a moment to work up the wits to respond. "My apologies, but I'm an atheist."

That was his first meeting with Elearis, who he was told about by Iris Deramilius, who would later become the Arbitrator and his ally.

"I see, people like that do exist. Truly novel; it could be said to be an ideology that I never would have thought of."

“No, I don’t plan on forcing other people to agree with me, nor do I want to deny their beliefs...but, more importantly, where am I?! Am I... Could I be...um...dead?!”

“That is the conclusion you came to while proclaiming you don’t believe in gods? You seem to be a very wise person with a flexible, adaptable mind. That is good.”

“Sure, whatever. More importantly—” Rio was about to repeat his question when the figure placed her index finger against his lips, shushing him. Rio couldn’t feel her presence as she moved, and nothing about her actions had told him she would do that, so this act dealt Rio, who had done so much training and studying to hone his craft as an adventurer, quite a large blow. It was understandable that he wouldn’t be able to speak on top of that.

“You are. You fell to the wicked elder tree in Sangria Forest, losing your life at such a young age in the process. Do you still remember what happened at that time?”

Rio said nothing as he calmed himself and attempted to organize his memories. The last thing he remembered was the sight of countless branches being launched forward by that large tree, and then raining down upon him.

No, what’s important is what happened before that. Remember... Remember! What happened to Mist and the others?!

Rio rapped his fist against his head over and over, trying to jog his memories. The figure in front of him simply watched him as he did so; there was no sign of her even attempting to stop him.

Rio gasped.

“It seems you’ve remembered. You forcefully pushed aside the objections from your friends and became bait.”

“Yes...that’s right. After that, our leader picked up our fallen friend, and Mist finally understood after all her yelling... Heh, I ended up causing trouble for our leader all the way to the end. But I’m glad. Truly, truly glad! Everyone got away safely, didn’t they?”

“Yes, they did. One of them was gravely wounded, so there might be lingering

symptoms depending on what measures are taken, but there is no threat to his life. The other two are also fine."

"I...see."

All the power seemed to have left him as Rio slumped to the floor. The regret from suggesting something too advanced for the group and the relief that they were doing okay mixed together into a complicated cocktail of emotions, and it showed on his face.

"Hee hee, you're exactly the type of person I thought you were."

"Ah, that reminds me...I never asked what's going to happen to me now. This...isn't heaven, I believe. So what happens now that I'm dead?"

"Okay then, let's get right to the point."

From there, she started talking about something that Riold would normally never have believed. It was about the purification of the world and the revival of the Goddess—most likely the same spiel that had been given to all the other candidates. But the fact that Rio felt like he could start believing it if he let his guard down, which ran counter to how her words sounded, confused him greatly.

"Do...you really expect me to believe such a yarn? No, even before that...even supposing what you're saying is true, I would never help you! Destroy the world? That's idiotic!"

"That would be the normal response. I'm serious, however. The reward will be reviving you, bringing you back into the world, and granting one of your wishes."

"That's a contradiction of what you just said! Granting my wish in a world you're going to destroy? How would you do that?!"

"It depends on your wish. And, if I may add, I am purifying the world and not destroying it. I am simply returning the world to the correct path."

"That's just sophistry!" Their perspectives seemed like they would never intersect.

Eventually, she put her hand to her jaw and said, "That's troubling. If things

keep going this way, then the logic of the world would dictate that your soul returns to death."

"Whatever you say, my decision will not change!"

"Please, listen to what I have to say once more, Rio. If you were to refuse, then as long as I find someone else compatible, then there will be no meaning in your resistance, right? So wouldn't it be the wisest choice to put your wish on hold for the moment and come work under me anyway?"

Rio took a moment to think before replying. "Why are you so fixated on me? The mere fact that you're able to call on the souls of the dead means your power is anything but normal. Since you can pull off the impossible, you shouldn't need me this badly."

Rio was sure he knew exactly how capable he was. He wasn't lying when he had declared that he wanted to become a Rank S adventurer, but given his current strength, there was no need for her to be so persistent in recruiting him.

"Of course I would. You house great potential within. Enormous potential—enough to rival the ancient Hero, Serge Flore."

Rio fell silent, and after careful consideration, he decided to follow her. It was clear to everyone that he was subordinating himself to her in order to rebel, but she seemed satisfied nevertheless.

"Be at ease. This is not something that will happen in only a few years. It will take decades to complete the purification, possibly even centuries. You will have plenty of time to think of your wish, okay, Rio?"

He seemed unsatisfied, and after a moment, he said, "About my name...is it possible to change it since I'm being reincarnated anyway?"

"Your name? Yes, of course it is. I don't plan on having a hand in how you live in the world, but you want to be reborn as someone else? Would you like to change your appearance too?"

"No, I'm fine with just my name. I plan to live much the same as I already have. I'd like to make it so that even with my new name, I can use Rio."

That gave her some pause. “I don’t get it. If that’s the case, then is there some sort of meaning in changing your name?”

“There is. No matter the reason, I am aiding in your evil deeds. I need to carve that evil into my name, so my new name will be Riold. Please change it to that.”

“Hee hee! I’m liking you more and more. Fine, I will make your name Riold when I bring you back into the world.”

The figure clasped her hands together, her fingers interlocking in prayer, and the area around Rio started to shine faintly.

“Ah, that’s right. I will grant you a gift so that your power is more worthy of being an Apostle of the Goddess. I don’t know yet what it will be, but please know that you will be given some sort of unique skill.”

Riold seemed impressed, as after a moment he said, “You think of everything, don’t you?”

“I do. You’re a precious compatriot of mine, after all. It’s only natural, right?” She smiled like a saintess, and Riold found his vision and consciousness slowly fading.

“Grk...”

“Please, try to get used to your new body first. My subordinates will contact you after a while. Oh, yes, let’s entrust you to Seer. You will receive your Holy Key then.”

In that instant, he awoke from his dream, his soul flipping sides across the border of the living and the dead.

“I’m looking forward to seeing your power, Riold. You come highly recommended by Selector.”

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Having become Riold, when he next woke up, he found himself close to Sangria Forest, where he had died. It was a place where ferocious monsters gathered, but it seemed Riold had not been attacked. While considering whether or not the previous conversation had been a dream or not, he slowly got up.

“Whoa there, finally awake, are you? You took a long nap, but your sleeping face was cute, at least. It was worth hurrying over.”

Riold only made a noise of surprise in reaction to the voice that called out to him all of a sudden before he turned around as quick as he could. *This is—*

This time, he was truly surprised. Part of it was because of the unknown voice, but it was mostly surprise at his own physical prowess. He had yet to check his status, but just moving a little gave him a clear enough glimpse; his physical strength was on a whole other level. There was no doubt, this was the strength that Riold had aimed for, the strength he had yearned for so much.

“How is it? Your body feels entirely different, doesn’t it? You’re already like that, and it’s just the beginning. If you keep training yourself, you’ll become even more amazing.”

“Yes, I was very surprised...” Riold trailed off for a moment before continuing. “By the way, who are you?”

Riold had managed to get a vague sense of where the speaker was from their conversation, but he still had to check. He looked towards the voice to see a woman with blue hair sitting down on a large rock. Physically, she looked to be in her late twenties, and she was dressed like an adventurer. Other than that, Riold’s first impression was that she was beautiful.

“I’ve heard about you from Arbitrator. My name is Seer, just call me that from now on. Just so you know, in terms of the Apostles, which you’re about to join, I’m a pretty old hand. You can just think of me as something like your senior. We’ll probably only be together a short while, but I’d be happy if you treated me well, Trainee-kun.”

Riold let silence reign for a moment before he spoke. “That way of speaking, it’s like you’re assuming I’ll fail.”

“Oh, is that how you heard it? Sorry about that, then; it’s a misunderstanding. After all, if you become truly accepted as an Apostle, that will mean my retirement. Training you into a splendid Apostle is my last mission, so to speak.”

“Huh? Retire? From an evil organization?”

“Puha! You... You make some really funny metaphors, don’t you? I ended up getting hit by surprise. That’s unlike me.”

Seer laughed so hard she was clutching her belly from her seat atop the rock. Riold had asked the question seriously when he had no intention to, and he couldn’t help but turn red because of that.

“Whew, man, I really laughed hard. By the way, you wear glasses. Does that mean your eyes are bad?”

“Yes. I’ve been a bookworm ever since I was a child, and because of that, without glasses I only see blurs—”

“Hey,” Seer interrupted, “why don’t you try taking off those glasses?”

“What?”

Suddenly, she was in front of Riold, taking his glasses off. It was after his initial surprise and similar exchanges that he realized his gift: God’s Eye. Under the instruction of his senior-slash-instructor, Seer, Riold continued to uncover his power one discovery after another, and it was pretty close to omnipotent.

“Wow!” he stammered. “With this power, I feel like I could do anything!”

“Hmm, okay, I see it now. Riold-kun, your power certainly is amazing, but I think you should avoid using it excessively. In fact, you’re banned from using it until I say so.”

“What? Banned? Why?”

“Why? I mean, it’s obvious that the rest of your body hasn’t developed anywhere near as much as your power with your eyes there. Here, a mirror.”

Seer produced and stuck an expensive-looking hand mirror out towards Riold from somewhere. There had been no indication that she would do any such thing, and Riold, having suddenly been confronted with his own face, widened his eyes, wondering what she could be talking about.

After a while of staring, the only words he could muster were, “Uhhh...” His words gummed up in his mouth. Even after being shown himself in the mirror, it seemed like he didn’t know what kind of reaction he should have.

“You don’t understand? Hrm...you’re the type that can pay attention to your surroundings but are completely clueless about yourself, aren’t you? Don’t just rely on the power of your eyes; you really need to cultivate your insight into yourself as well.”

“Well, I can kind of understand that, but...in the end, what did you mean about my body?”

“The wrinkles on your face. It’s faint, but they’ve grown. You should be in your early twenties, right? It seems like you’ve aged a bit from before.”

Riold had no words in reply. As he sat there, dazed, Seer continued talking. In her words, the more he used the power of his eyes, the more his lifespan would be shaved away, and the older he would get. In other words, if he wanted to retain his relationships and maintain his lifestyle, any sudden changes in appearance would be undesirable. It also wouldn’t be good for his job as an Apostle.

“But if that’s the case, wouldn’t this power be useless?”

“Right now it would be. You seem like you have a good head on your shoulders, so you know that humans can Evolve, right?”

“Ah, yes. I know of it, at least. I’ve never actually met anyone who’s managed that, unfortunately.”

“No, no, you already have. Or are you just pretending you haven’t?”

Rio thought for a moment. “Do you mean you and...Arbitrator?”

“Correct! Well done!”

After an exchange that was full of leading questions, Riold was taught about human Evolution in more detail. Unlike most monsters, humans rarely, if ever, Evolved. However, once they did, their lifespans grew by leaps and bounds to become equivalent to an elf’s. Riold had read something to that effect in a book before, so although he didn’t fully believe what he was being fed, it didn’t seem

that untrustworthy to him.

“Basically, you just need to Evolve! That is the basic requirement for your power!”

“You say that like it’s easy, but it isn’t.”

“Of course it’s not. You need to face at least *some* hardship or it won’t be good for you as an Apostle. So, as for what to do until you Evolve—”

“I know. I won’t go see my friends from when I was an adventurer until then. Even if I were to Evolve quickly, I’ll wait until enough time passes that my current face seems natural.”

“Mmhmm, are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Even you were able to notice the changes in my face. Mist and the others, who I’ve traveled with for years, would probably see through me at a glance. And that wouldn’t be good for me as an Apostle, would it?”

“Oooh, good. You understand what you need to prioritize over your feelings. You really will make an excellent Apostle. I wasn’t a good one, so I can guarantee you that.”

“Being guaranteed something like that doesn’t make me happy at all...”

“By the way, is Mist your girlfriend or something?”

“Pffwhttt!”

From there on, Riold would spend his days training with Seer. He was starting his journey over from Level 1, but his body had already surpassed that of his previous self, so it was more like training to stop being human. Months passed, and eventually years as well.

Having finally Evolved into a Saint, Riold obtained a means to hide his status and had grown to be able to control his God’s Eye skill. Seer, who was more or less his mentor, retired from the Apostles once Riold was able to strike out on his own. She disappeared somewhere on the Western Continent, laughing about how she would enjoy what remained of her life until the world was purified.

While performing his duties as an Apostle, Riold traveled around, searching

for the people who had once been his comrades. While searching for people like that would normally take a lot of time and effort, it was easy for Riold thanks to his almost omnipotent eyes. Within a few days, he had confirmed the safety and whereabouts of his friends, and the first thing he did was breathe a sigh of relief after hearing that they were all still alive. Then...

“Rio?”

“Uh, hey. How’ve you be— Wah?!”

The all-important reunion. While he was lost and moving about aimlessly, trying to decide what to do about it, he’d been found by his friends and subsequently pulled into a hug. His friends were all still in a party together and had been searching for Rio, who had disappeared. They had found it strange that they couldn’t find his corpse in a dungeon that didn’t have any carnivorous monsters, which was why they had gone this far.

“You! You! Making me worry like that!”

“I don’t like leaving a debt unpaid! Good job staying alive, you huge idiot!”

“Waahhhh, I’m so glaaaaad!”

“Sorry! I’m sorry!”

Having finally reunited, the four of them once again formed a party and resumed work as adventurers. Having become an Apostle, Riold tried to match his previous strength as best he could while supporting his friends from the shadows so they would reach new heights. Whether it was his way of atoning was unclear, but he continued as adventurers with them while using his God’s Eye for their benefit, ignoring the side effect.

Whether through his efforts or not, the party reached Rank A when their original limit had probably been Rank B. It was high enough that they had their names listed in the adventurer’s directory. It seemed Riold was rated especially highly by the guild headquarters on the Western Continent, and he was given the title of “Analyzer” even though he wasn’t a Rank S adventurer. It overlapped with his name as an Apostle, so whether or not that was a coincidence...

The four of them continued to be great examples to other adventurers even

after retiring. Each of them became guildmasters of their own guild branch. Mist went to Toraj, their leader to Gaun, the mage to Trycen, and Riold to Deramis. From there, more years passed until finally, Riold went to the guild in Parth. Though quite a lot of time had gone by since he'd retired from being an adventurer, he continued to take on the guild's work, the Apsotle's work, and even more work training new Apostles. His days were exceedingly busy.

However, Riold had never forgotten his own calling. Finally, he had found a means to stop the purification of the world.

"Hey, you're that Kelvin-kun from the rumors, aren't you?"

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Battleship Elpis:

Riold's consciousness was cloudy. Memories of the distant past were being called back up, but at the same time thoughts of the single ray of light he'd recently found were running unbidden through his mind. Riold, the Analyzer, fluttered the lids of his crushed eyes as he focused what little consciousness he had left on what seemed like a voice talking to him.

"Are you an idiot?! Why did you have to involve the rest of us in your attack?!"

"Bwuh...I mean...I didn't have the leeway to think of all that..."

"Actually, you should at least be able to tell your friends and enemies apart to begin with! You tried to run me through as well during that first surprise attack, didn't you?!"

"Well, that was the Beast King-sama, not me. Not only that, but it was the me from my dark past..."

"No, my disguise is something that doesn't just emulate outer looks, but what's inside as well. I couldn't help but act according to your true feelings. That's why it was an accident. So, well...forgive me."

"ESTORIAAAAAAAA!"

"I... I'm so sorrryyyyyy!"

He could hear some sort of delightful conversation happening. The mood felt

somehow nostalgic, and it reminded Riold of his time as an adventurer. But he couldn't just eavesdrop on this conversation forever. He checked on the state of his own body. He was missing his limbs, his skin was charred, and all of his eyes had been destroyed.

I see. So I lost, he thought.

As an Apostle, this result should be considered an abject failure, but to Riold, his loss was a huge relief. He had never wavered from the path he believed in, and the bud that had grown from his trifling interference had grown greatly and was now making progress on its own. The idea of a united army consisting of all four great countries, Rank S adventurers, Heroes, Demon Lords, and even former Apostles who should have been their enemies would have been impossible to even imagine only a little while before. It could not have been done without creating bonds with people, and it was certainly a great feat to have accomplished.

"Are you awake, Guildmaster?"

"You've got a really sharp tongue, Ange-kun. Just who was it who made me this way in the first place? My word, who do you take after?"

It seemed the condition of his throat was good, at least, so there was nothing interfering with him making conversation other than the intense pain running through his body. No, it was more than that. He wanted to talk to his beloved disciple who had defeated him, even if he had to withstand great pain to do it.

"Of course it's you; I'm your disciple after all. I'm sure you were so moved by my growth that you woke up, right? Hee hee, I grew a lot, after all!"

"No, if anything, I was impressed by Kelvin-kun."

"Gwah! I... I see... Well, if you're praising Kelvin, then...I guess I'm fine with that?"

"By the way, Ange-kun, do you see my monocle anywhere? That was a birthday present from Mist. I know the lens was shattered by you, but I'd be happy if even the frame survived."

"Grk?! You old fox, right on to the sensitive subjects!"

With a frustrated groan, Ange took out a small package from a breast pocket and placed it on Riold's chest, as he was still on the ground.

"Look, I actually went and searched for it. It's a wreck, but I gathered every piece!" Ange boasted. After a pause, she continued. "So, do you have a message you'd like me to deliver to guildmaster Mist?"

"Hah! Hah! Hah! A message? Do I really look that bad right now?"

Ange was at a loss for how to reply to Riold's question. It wasn't at the level of "bad." His limbs had been torn off, all his eyes had been destroyed, and there was a huge gash at the base of his neck. It was stranger that he was still alive. More than anything, Riold's face and body had withered greatly. His body, which had been very youthful and manly for a 50-year-old, now looked far older than his age. Ange didn't know that this was the side effect of using God's Eye so recklessly. She didn't know, but it was simple for her to deduce that he didn't have much time left. She didn't even feel the need to finish him off, as he was already only a shade of his former self.

"Ahhh, your reaction tells me everything I need to know. Not to mention, I know my body better than anyone. Your kindness in offering to send a 'message' really seeps into these old bones, Ange-kun. You should have said 'last words'—"

"Agghh, jeez! So, do you have any?! Or don't you?! If you don't, then we're going on ahead!"

Ange's outburst got Bell and the others, who were arguing amongst themselves, to look her way. It seemed they were at least listening, even though they were fighting on the surface.

"I don't. I have nothing. Rio the adventurer is already dead, and what remains here is like a mere vestige of my former self. All my old friends should understand, Mist included."

"Are you really okay with that? In the end, I still don't know what kind of relationship you had with Guildmaster Mist..."

"I am. Adventuring has always been a job where you don't know if you'll live to see the next day. Whatever relationship I had with Mist, it doesn't matter

now. I'm sure Mist thinks so too. I will meet my end watched over by an excellent youngster. I'm more than happy with meeting my end like that. You all are worthy of resisting DarkMel. Having confirmed that, I have no more regrets." Riold paused as something came to mind. "Well, if you really want to know, then pay a visit to the Adventurer's Guild headquarters. One of my seniors is there."

Riold's voice had been gradually getting softer. Even if Estoria had healed his gaping wounds, he wouldn't have been able to escape the shackles of his remaining lifespan.

"Guildmaster..."

"Analyzer..."

"Mister..." Estoria said.

Even so, Riold had a kind expression on his face, which put complicated emotions into the hearts of his former allies. Only the beast king, Leonhart, seemed skeptical as he kept his bastard swords drawn.

After a moment's pause, Riold spoke up again. "But allow me to leave you with a last bit of advice. Be grateful, for this is something I came upon by looking with my God's Eye. Make sure you pay attention."

All three former Apostles reacted with a gasp of surprise. Without them having noticed, the eye where Riold used to wear his monocle had regenerated. Everyone readied themselves to fight, though Leonhart was a step behind.

"First, Bell-kun: you should be more honest. Being able to control emotions and restrain yourself is certainly important. But being able to communicate your feelings is just as much so. You can easily say when you hate something, so all that's left is to be able to do the opposite as well. You'll be a lot happier being able to bring your feelings of 'like' more to the forefront, you know?"

"Huh? Oh, okay..."

"Next, Estoria-kun: you're the type to change your style and personality to suit your partner. You need to do something about that. Especially since your rival for the one you're interested in is so *colorful*...ahem, a very formidable one. Don't you think it'd be best to compete for his affections as your true self?

In your case, I would prohibit you from going too far, which is the opposite of Bell-kun's case."

"Huh? My true...self?"

"There's no time, so I'm going to pass on giving advice to Leonhart-dono."

"What?!"

Riold had started to give advice with flowing speech, unlike how he was talking before. While everyone was prepared to fight, they all listened to what he said with rapt attention.

"Lastly, Ange-kun."

Ange didn't reply right away, but soon enough she said, "Yes."

"You're good as you are, I think. However, if I had to say something, then...please, live a happy life."

"What're you saying, Guildmaster? I'm already happy!"

Riold didn't reply, and after a moment, Ange sensed something was wrong. "Guildmaster?"

Having said all he wanted to say, Riold's last eye had lost its light.



Chapter 3: Hero and Holy Sword and Love

Central Ocean:

While Kelvin and the others were in the process of boarding the battleship Elpis, the fighting was extreme outside of the ship as well. The horde of armored angels that endlessly poured out of the ark didn't seem to have any leaders, but sheer weight of numbers along with the high individual strength of each one allowed them to press the combatants on the Aqua Swallows hard. None of the representatives from each country wanted to make a poor showing, so they all forcefully raised their own morale while also strengthening their teamwork.

"Seriously, where the heck did Goma go?!"

"I'm gonna fall! I'm gonna faaaaallll!"

Because the beast king, Leonhart, had snuck onto the ship by posing as Goma, the real Goma was still back in Gaun, defending it along with her brother. Neither Sabato nor the rest of Gaun's adventurer party knew this, so they had no choice but to make up for the hole left by her absence with fighting spirit and guts. It could have been considered one of the Beast King's trials, but Sabato and the others likely had no awareness of it.

"If she's not here, then we'll just have to make do on our own!"

"We caaaan't! I'm already done fooooorrrrrr!"

"Well, I guess at least this is better than what's going on over there. Guin, if you run so obviously, they'll aim for you!"

"Gyaahhhh!"

All of the fights happening on this battlefield, which was changing at dizzying speeds, would go down in history. However, everyone would agree what the fiercest ongoing fight was. It was the fight between a fusion of dragon and god, and those opposing it, who had ascended to an entirely new dimension of power.

The Light Dragon King Suncress was wearing the armor of Deus Ex Machina. The original Jildora was mounted in this unit's heart and was providing enormous amounts of energy. This incarnation of light, named Jildora-Sun by Tristan, was truly the culmination of all of Jildora's work, and something that could be called the ultimate life form. It was, so to speak, a machine-dragon, and it was being opposed by Efil on Mdofarak, Gerard on Boga, and Sera and Gustav, who were flying under their own power.

"Melting Blaze Arrow!"

"Skyfall!"

Gerard and Efil pressed forward with their strongest attacks to start the fight. An arrow of blue flame and a jet-black slash assaulted their target from either side. The fearsomely strong attacks, those that if launched at any normal Rank S monster wouldn't even leave behind a speck of dust, crashed into the Jildragon.

"Heh hah hah, we did it!"

"Father, that kind of line is NG, something absolutely not allowed during a battle. Kelvin and Rion said so!"

"Mm? Why?"

"Setting aside the reasons, apparently, if you say that to an enemy you dealt a fatal blow to, they'll come back to life in perfect condition! It's a mysterious phrase that can alter reality!"

"Really now?! Papa's shocked!"

"Sorry, you two, but could you please try to feel a little more tension?!"

Possibly because of the flag Gustav had set, the Jildragon's presence could still be felt even after it took the swirling fire and dark slash. In fact, it was swelling with even more magic power than before. Once the clutter from the attacks cleared up, they saw that it had created what seemed to be shields made of light on both arms. It must have been able to summon the shields instantly, as once the attacks ceased, they disappeared.

::The same result as the beginning, is it? It's tougher than expected...::

::A shield big enough to envelop that entire giant body, huh? Seems like trying

to break that will be extremely hard.::

Judging from the feeling they got when their attacks landed, Efil and Gerard temporarily considered the Jildragon's barrier to be as strong as the wind barrier around the *Elpis*, only much smaller. With the fact that the wind barrier was only just broken by a combined blast of all the Dragon Kings' all-out breaths at once as a point of reference, they had realized that even Efil, with her specialization in high firepower, would find it difficult to break through with her explosive sniping.

::Boss Gerard, should we attack with you?:: Boga asked through the Network.

::We're still kind of tired, but if we have to, we'll do our best!:: Mdofarak followed up.

::No, even if you all push yourselves now, it'll only be a drop in the bucket. For now you all should refrain from attacking and watch to see if it does anything strange,:: Gerard responded.

Mdofarak and Boga, who the two were riding on, had yet to recover from delivering their breath attacks. It was better to have them focus on their recovery rather than tiring themselves out further through useless attacks.

::I've got a question: even if a Light Dragon King were fused with a Divine Pillar, would it really be that strong?::

::Yes, I thought that too,:: Gerard responded. ::Even if Jildora is its core, he's probably nothing more than Tristan's puppet. Maybe this is a reaction to the fact that the number of Divine Pillars has lessened, and so this one's strength increased by that much?" He paused for a moment. "Mmm, what a vexing question!:: he said jovially.

Efil and the others' doubts were reasonable. Efil was powerful enough to have taken on the previous Fire Dragon King alone, and Gerard was just as strong as she was. Even though the Jildragon was a fusion of two races that were said to be the peak of all life forms, it was strange that their combined attacks had done absolutely nothing.

::There's one more thing I thought was strange.::

::Sera-san?::

::This thing hasn't even looked like it would attack this entire time. The only time it moved proactively was when you two shot your attacks. Once that shield was gone, it just sat there doing nothing, right? I can't feel any motivation at all from it.::

::Now that you mention it, you're right...:: Gerard started to ponder.

Because the three of them were exchanging messages at high speed through the Follower Network, not much time had actually passed. At most, it would have been a couple fractions of a second. Still, the Jildragon was capable of creating an incredibly strong barrier, so if it was capable of defending against those attacks, Sera had expected it to also be able to take advantage of this fraction of a moment to attack.

::Even while we're talking like this, that thing isn't really doing anything. I...don't think it's laying a trap or anything either. Hmm...::

::Maybe this is happening because its master and Summoner, Tristan, was taken far away by Azgrad's surprise attack? Like, maybe its only order is to defend itself or something.::

::Is that how it works? Sera and I are Summoned by our liege as well, but we have a lot of freedom, don't we?::

::That's right! He doesn't give us orders, like, ever, so we're very free!::

Gerard and Sera puffed their chests out with pride—their argument was incredibly persuasive.

::That... That's just how Master is...:: Efil replied. ::With Tristan, it seemed much more like he was thoroughly controlling his Followers. Even though he's being limited by Shutola-sama's ability, I believe that behavioral principle shouldn't change.::

::So, you're saying that Tristan is so preoccupied with his own fight that he doesn't have the leeway to send orders to that Jildragon? And the Jildragon can't do anything other than defend itself without Tristan's orders?::

After some thought, Gerard noted, ::Doesn't that mean this is a really good opportunity for us?::

::It definitely is. A perfect opportunity.::

::A huge chance!::

The trio's opinions had aligned through their telepathic conversation. Once again, they faced the Jildragon and readied their weapons.

"Sera, your papa would love to participate in the conversation..."

"Oh, do you want to become Kelvin's follower too, Papa? If I remember right, he *does* have slots left."

"As a strict father, I absolutely refuse! But if you insist, Sera, then your Papa could totally consider—"

"Oh right, the plan!"

"Hm? Sorry for interrupting you, then!"

Gustav easily handed the reins of the conversation over to his daughter. His Demon Lordness was as severe as ever.

"We need to do something about that shield and clean up the Jildragon as fast as possible! It's decided!"

"Sera, you... Are you a genius?!"

Yep, as severe as ever.

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"With that decided, the early bird gets the worm! Efil!"

"Yes!"

"Ah, no fair!"

Efil quickly fired a Pyrohydra, and Gerard jumped off Boga to join her on Mdofarak as they advanced on the Jildragon. Having lost the initiative, Sera activated Blood Scrimmage and fully decked herself out as quickly as she could.

"Mm, good. Though I am not a fan of how some of Victor's techniques are mixed in there, my Blood Dominion is alive and well within her! Bell seems to have inherited Eliza's power, and coupled with Sebasdel's kicking techniques, which when used by him are just abnormal, my daughters will be the height of

beauty! Heh, it is not a question of whether my Sera and Bell are talented, it's a question of how talented they are. Mm? Wait, doesn't that mean the future of Grebarelka is looking incredibly bright?"

"Father, leave the useless chatter for later! Hurry and get ready to fight!"

"You're right! I have always thought so!"

Having heard Sera's "command," Gustav immediately started preparing to fight. Clenching his fists, he tried to summon the rage that would give him power. However, it seemed that no matter how hard he tried, he wasn't having much luck in activating his ability.

"Mm? I don't seem to have enough wrath. It's because when I'm with Sera, my feelings of happiness always seem to win out... Okay, me: imagine seeing my foolish son and Sera getting along well■■■■■!"

With his urge to kill instantly maxing out, Gustav's power awakened. Veins popped up all over his skin before tearing, soaking him in an immense amount of blood. The blood formed a strong weapon through the use of Bloodbending, while reinforcing his horns and wings as he took the same form that he had used in his fight against Kelvin, wreathed in blades. The crimson scimitar in his hands had grown to excessive proportions.

"Wow, father! You really know how to make your abilities look cool! That form of yours is full of good taste!"

"Not ■s go■d as yo■rs! Let's w■n!"

It was hard to tell whether Gustav's expression was an angry or happy one as he charged in along with Sera. If he were to try and approach someone with that expression, though, they would probably back up at least one or two steps. But the one they were charging at was a silent Jildragon. One that would simply defend, no matter who was attacking it. Once again, it raised its arms.

The first thing to make contact with the Jildragon's shield was Gerard, who was the first to leap forward. This time, he didn't send a flying slash but rather charged in with Demon Sword Dainsleif to try and smash the barrier. Matching the timing of the Pyrohydra's acceleration, he lowered his sword so that the tip was pointing at his target.

“Hrnghhh!”

The demon sword clashed with the barrier. In that instant, a fierce shockwave was created, which scattered the Pyrohydra that Gerard was standing on. With that, he had lost his foothold, but as he fell, he put his weight on the sword that was in contact with the Jildragon’s shield, carving a line straight down it.

“Ngghhhh!”

Demon Sword Dainsleif absorbed the magic of everything it touched. His first attack, where he used Skyfall, also had this property, but it was much weaker than if he were to touch it with the sword directly. Gerard raised his abilities with the use of his unique skill, Self-Transcendence, which he then increased even further for a time by slashing down armored angels that passed nearby, to activate Glory Within Mine Hands. By taking advantage of the hand he was dealt, he buffed himself further and further until he was able to leave a clear scar on their enemy’s prized inviolable shield.

“Hah!”

He made one last slash as he fell. Having poured all his energy into it, this attack was especially powerful and large. It robbed the shield surface of much of its remaining durability and magic power, which was all absorbed into the pure black blade.

“Whoa! What wild magic power! This is the first time I’ve seen something this stubborn in my long life! Boga!”

“Got it, boss! I was waiting!”

Boga was already waiting under Gerard’s falling form. The knight would have been fine even if he had hit the ground from that height, but things were different since he was over the ocean. Because his body was a suit of armor, Gerard did not match well with being in the water, and he couldn’t swim. He could materialize himself, but his pride as a knight wouldn’t allow it. He knew instinctively that he would have a mysteriously strong rejection of that option.

Having spent a long time as the Sword Guru’s partner, Boga knew about Gerard’s personality and instantly sprang into action.

“But before that—I should return the surplus to you! Skyfall!”

Just before Gerald landed on Boga, he swung his sword, unleashing an especially large jet-black slash. Thanks to the magic power absorbed from the Jildragon, its size was incomparable to the one that had been blocked before. The attack was aimed along the lines of the scar he had just opened up in the shield, though it diverged a little bit so that when it made contact, it produced a huge shockwave.

“Argh?!”

“This time, I really did faaaaallllll!”

“Guuiiiiiiiiin!”

The Torajiian ships had retreated from the battlefield, since it wouldn’t be funny if any secondary casualties were to occur thanks to the exchanges of fire happening in this battle that belonged in another dimension. They had gone quite far, but even then it wasn’t enough to spare them from the shockwave. The boats rocked, causing the clumsier passengers to fall over. Guin being sent flying was also caused by this. The unlucky beastman’s scream echoed across the sky, but the others were too busy to mind.

“I felt something that time!”

The flying slash had gone up and landed on the shield, cracking it with a pleasant sound like breaking glass. Then, the barrier protecting the Jildragon crumbled to pieces.

“Oooh! That’s amazing, boss!” Boga shouted, impressed. “If you could do that, maybe you could’ve broken the ship’s barrier too?!”

“I just returned that stupid large amount of magic to its owner. The barrier on that ark also blew away anyone who tried to get close, so it would’ve been an entirely different problem. Also, we still have work to do.”

The Jildragon’s shield had been deployed at will from its arms. If they wasted time celebrating it breaking once, their enemy would use that chance to make another one. In order to prevent that from happening, a parent-child pair of demons immediately charged in, bringing their characteristically red color to the fight.

“We need to hurry, father!”

“■! I wo■■t f■ll beh■■d you, Sera!”

Matching the timing of Gerard shattering that troublesome shield, Sera and Gustav flew towards either arm of the Jildragon. The pair punched or sliced at their chosen arms, which were trying to redeploy the shields, eliciting a dull and shrill metallic sound.

“Owwww! This thing is so hard!”

The Jildragon’s body was fully sheathed in Deus Ex Machina’s armor. Its arms were not an exception, and even after taking a blow from Gustav’s sword and Sera’s fist, helped by her momentum, the armor didn’t have a scratch on it.

“N■! N■w is the t■me to use t■■t!!”

“That’s a coincidence; I was just thinking the same thing!” Sera shouted with a smile. “*Don’t get in my way!*”

“‘List■■ to wh■t Sera says!’”

The pair’s blood had attached itself to the arms at the same time they attacked, and it had quickly spread from the Jildragon’s arm throughout its whole body. With two people’s worth of blood, the strength of Blood Dominion was doubled, and almost the entire body was already under Sera’s and Gustav’s control.

“We could just start controlling it like this, but I think Kelvin would happily let it go. So Efil, I’ll leave the rest to you!”

“Please do.”

The Jildragon, now defenseless, faced an arrow packed with blue-green fire, which was as much power as Efil could muster. This arrow, with the buffs of Bursting Heat, Blue Flame, and Efil’s power all added to it, flew from her bow.



“Gaaagghhh!”

“Wah!”

“■■?!”

It was probably its last act of defiance, all done in self-defense. The one part of the Jildragon that had yet to be encroached upon by blood was its head, and a part of the armor that ensconced it released itself to reveal the mouth inside. From that opening, the Jildragon emitted a white laser that was probably its breath attack to intercept Efil’s arrow.

“Gah...ah...”

Their enemy’s bright white counterattack was powerful, probably as powerful as a Dragon King’s breath. However, it was badly matched against this opponent, and the Jildragon had lost control of its own body except for the head. There was no way an arrow with all of Efil’s power behind it would be turned aside by something so incomplete, so the Jildragon’s head was pierced through without any further fuss, turning the entire thing into a ball of fire as it fell towards the surface of the ocean.

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Even after it fell into the ocean, Efil's flames continued to cook the Jildragon. The seawater around it was being boiled along with the dragon's meat, and more seawater tried to rush in to fill the gap made by the boiling seawater, only to get boiled as well. A large amount of bubbles formed on the surface of the water, dyeing it white and marking the spot the machine dragon fell as if an underwater volcano had erupted.

After watching the bubbles for a while, Sera spoke up. "Yeah...our blood got washed off because it fell into the water, but I'm sure it's dead."

"If Sera says so, then I'll have to give it my stamp of approval as well! That thing is dead! For sure!"

"Y..." Efil hesitated. "Yes, you're right. I am sure my arrow pierced its head, so I believe that's the case."

"So the rest of the body will be tossed about by the waves as it continues to be burned by neverending fire, huh? I suppose this was a fitting end for the culmination of Jildora's work." Gerard mused. "With this, we've finished the Jildragon. What do we do now? Should we clean up the armored angels coming out of the ark?"

Regardless of the fact that they'd defeated the machine-dragon, countless angels were still pouring out of the *Elpis*. Of course, the warriors aboard the Aqua Swallows were still fighting bravely against them.

"As things stand, there'll be no end to them no matter how many of them we take down. I believe it'd be best to get rid of the root cause while everyone else can still maintain the front line."

"In which case, we need to bust into the ship that my liege and his group have already infiltrated. It shouldn't be a problem if there are more people inside. I'm on board with Efil's idea."

"Now that I have ensured Sera's safety here, next will be a team battle with Bell! But I cannot bring myself to leave Sera's side no matter what...so I will just have to follow Sera until we rendezvous with Bell. That's the only way!"

"Say, Gustav-dono... could it be that you intend to make your decisions like that forever?"

“Of course! Let me ask *you*, then, what other choice exists?!”

“Hmmm...”

Gerard couldn’t help but speak up. If Kelvin had been there, though, he would probably have pointed out that Gerard more or less acted the same in front of his grandchildren. That being said, Kelvin was also much the same in front of his little sister Rion. Basically, men tended to be overprotective.

“At...” Gerard stammered, trying to recover. “At any rate, it seems everyone is in agreement. Are you fine with busting in as well, Sera?”

“Yeah. It seems that ark’s put up another weird barrier, and it’s hard to pass telepathic messages through. It’d be best to check with my own eyes—” Sera was suddenly interrupted by exactly what she had been talking about.

::...ra! Sister Sera!::

In the middle of her sentence, she received a telepathic message. The cute, fairylike voice belonged to Shutola in her child form.

“Ah, wait a second. I just got a message from Shutola. It might be a report on their fight with Tristan.”

“Then allow me to listen in,” Efil suggested.

“Me too!” Gerard jumped in.

“Mrrm...and once again I am left out. Oh well, I’ll just spend this time playing with these angels. Should I be capturing them?” Gustav thought of his foolish son-in-law, and once again his rage meter maxed out as he entered combat mode. It seemed his plan was to mark the armored angels with his blood to increase his number of companions.

::This is Shutola, right? I can hear you!:: Sera responded.

::Me too!:: Gerard chimed in.

::Everyone? Good, it sounds like I got through. I’ll report what happened, then.::

Shutola had contacted them to let them know that they’d succeeded in bringing down Tristan. It seemed that Dahak, Azgrad, and Salafia, who had

fought with them, were okay. Though they hadn't gotten through the fight unscathed, they'd apparently only received light wounds and could rejoin the battle immediately. She also reported that Tyrant Regress, the only one of Tristan's Followers that was left behind, was now completely inactive, so they had settled for heavily restraining it.

::Just what I'd expect from you, Shutola! Well done defeating Tristan! We'll be having a party today!::

::Gerard-san, calm down. Sit. Sit!::

::Aha ha! If grandpa Gerard is like that, I suppose you're all done too?::

::That's very astute of you, Shutola! We've just finished beating the Jildragon ourselves! Heh heh!::

::What, really?! Wooow!::

::Heh, HEH!:: Sera messaged with emphasis, puffing up proudly.

Efil explained their situation to Shutola in her place. ::...and that is our situation. Thanks to you cornering Tristan without giving him time to take a breath, the Jildragon was only able to put up nominal resistance. We are truly thankful.::

::Hmmm...I don't think that's it. You guys really are strong...::

::Gah! Hah! Hah! Praise me more!:: Gerard burst out proudly.

::You can feel free to praise me too, you know?::

::Wow! So amaaazing!:: Shutola did as asked and paid them a compliment, satisfying Sera and Gerard. The timing was perfect, as Gustav was just about done.

::Whew...but at least that's some of my worries dealt with.::

::Worries?::

::Yeah. Now that Tristan's out of the picture, his Followers will be released from his control, right? I think it might be because Tyrant Regress was originally a machine, but now that no one's around to give it orders, it simply isn't moving. That was lucky, but it wouldn't necessarily extend to the Jildragon as

well, which seemed to be an amalgamation of various life forms. I couldn't predict what kind of reaction it would have. In that sense, I'm very glad that you all defeated it.::

::I see,:: Gerard replied. ::Then it was the right decision to defeat it quickly, I suppose. Of course we would—all of us are united in thought!::

::It certainly was a nice decision!:: Sera added. ::We're going to bust into the ship now, Shutola. What're you guys gonna do?::

::Once we've finished dealing with Tyrant Regress, we'll meet up with you.::

::Then we'll wai— Hmmm?::

::Sister Sera? Did something happen?:: Somehow, Shutola's confusion was transmitted through telepathy after Sera suddenly stopped talking. She then heard Sera groaning over telepathy, so it sounded to her like something had gone wrong. It seemed that Gustav had returned, and he was wary of their surroundings.

::Hmmm... Just now, I got a *really* bad feeling...::

::Coming from you, Sera, that's so ominous it's not even funny. Could you stop it with the jokes?::

For a while, Sera didn't respond. ::I think...we should prepare for battle. Just in case.::

Efil, Gerard, Sera, and Gustav strained their eyes to look in all directions, creating a web of vigilance. Meanwhile, a black shadow approached them from the bottom of the ocean.

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Battleship Elpis:

It seemed like a spacious congress hall. Many chairs were lined up facing the center, forming neat rows. The chairs themselves were truly varied, and among them there were even chairs of a futuristic make that didn't exist anywhere else in the world. Each chair was unique, but none had any occupants, so silence reigned in the room. Even though battles were raging outside of the battleship, it was like this area was an entirely different world.

“So you’re here. You’ve kept me waiting quite a while, Kelvin-san...and friends.”

“Yeah, we’re here. Still in that same armor, as usual huh? Well, it *does* suit you. Oh, but before that, I have to apologize. I was running late for our appointment, so I had to bust through some walls. It won’t fall out of the sky just because of that, right? I’d seriously hate it if this thing fell before DarkMel and I got a chance to fight. It’s fine, right?”

“This is a place that was prepared solely for you two. I’d also hate it if it fell so easily.”

A total of five people: Kelvin, Rion, Setsuna, Sylvia, and Ema, had arrived at the Room of Selection, where Saeki Mao was waiting.

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In this strange space packed with chairs of all kinds, Mao was sitting on one that was just a large stump as he talked. Calling a stump a chair seemed to be a bit of a stretch, but Mao had chosen it himself.

“Still, this is strange...” Kelvin trailed off in thought. “According to the rough blueprint that I got from Riold, DarkMel’s chapel should be just ahead. Does the fact that this room is a dead end mean that he gave us a fake one?”

“No. Normally, that would be correct,” Mao answered. “You’re right that DarkMel’s chapel is farther in. However, we’re in a state of emergency, aren’t we? Think of it like the fire prevention shutters have all come down, blocking the way.”

Kelvin thought about it for a moment. “I take it you’re talking about this place as the shutter?” Once again, he looked around the room. It was spacious, with a uselessly high ceiling. But there was nothing but chairs inside. It didn’t seem like the walls were hastily made; they were solid like the work you’d see in a castle.

“This place is called the Room of Selection, and it’s something I prepared for exactly this situation. The chairs here are all copies of the favorite chairs of Apostles throughout history. It shows the piled-up history of the Apostles, you could say. Today has been a long time coming, hasn’t it?”

“Oh, are you one of the more ancient Apostles, Mao?”

“Yes, well...my position and job has changed every time, but I *was* the first one Arbitrator selected.”

“So you’re the oldest! Given my role in all this, I don’t know if I should be saying it, but...thank you for sticking with DarkMel through all her selfishness.” Kelvin faced Mao directly as he gave a deep bow. It was a proper bow and very Japanese.

Mao’s mind seemed to go blank. After a while, he started laughing. “Pfft, ha ha! DarkMel becoming a goddess and threatening to make the world hers all for your sake is just simple ‘selfishness?’ The way you see things is so interesting, Kelvin-san.”

“It’s true, isn’t it? What she’s trying to do is essentially manipulate the world for my sake. No matter the cause, to other people she’s just causing a huge bother. It’s true that this is the best possible present for a battle junkie like me, though! That’s why I’ll happily dig in!”

“Ah, good. To tell you the truth, the only thing I was worried about was if you’d be creeped out by how far she went. If you started to say that her love was too heavy and you couldn’t...or something like that, I have no idea how DarkMel would react. Not even I, with my powers, could predict that.”

Mao stood up from his stump, his armor clinking and clanging together as he did so. The black and gold armor and helmet obscured his face, preventing Kelvin from being able to see his emotions.

“As I just said, DarkMel is farther in. However, I cannot allow you all to pass so easily.”

“I see...so we have to defeat you first?”

“Exactly—no, wait a second. I’m getting a message from DarkMel...yes...yes...huh? Are you sure?”

Kelvin decided to stay out of it, saying nothing. It was as if someone’s cell phone had rung during an important conversation, and Mao had immediately responded to the message, acting like he was literally picking up a phone while still in his armor. Meanwhile, Kelvin and the others waited patiently.

After a while, Mao returned to the conversation. “Whew, sorry about that.”

“You seem to have it hard too. So, what did DarkMel want?”

“Uhhh, well...it seems she’s finding herself unable to be patient now that you’re right in front of her, Kelvin-san. She wants to allow you and only you to go on ahead. She’s been patient up until now, but she’s like this as soon as it’s almost time. So, what will you do? Personally, I don’t mind either way, but it may not be nice to make your partner wait too long.”

“That’s a leading question, isn’t it?”

Mao had suggested that if Kelvin was going to be the only one passing through, he would quietly stand aside. However, if he were to insist on going with his friends, he would act as planned and stand in their way, becoming a wall. In other words, he was rehashing Serge’s refusal to let Rion and the others through in the Evil Deity’s Heart. Just like last time, DarkMel wanted to have her rendezvous with her lover alone.

“I’ll tell you this now: there’s no need to feel disappointed about not being able to fight me. Because of my unique skill, Sympathetic Resonance, which you’re so familiar with, I share the same abilities as DarkMel. In fact, that’s all I am as an Apostle, so if you want to fight someone stronger, I recommend going to DarkMel rather than fighting me.”

“Hey, come on, are you really telling me to fight such a person by myself?”

“Yes. That is DarkMel’s wish, and it should be yours as well, Kelvin-san.”

After a moment of silence, Rion spoke up. “Do you really need to think about it this much, Kel-nii?” She had been silent up until then, but now she voiced her opinion as she gripped Kelvin’s hand. “We’re fine, so you go on ahead. After you leave, we’ll defeat Mao-san and come after you right away.”

Kelvin didn’t respond immediately. “Are you sure it’s okay if I go?”

“It’s not okay!” Two voices said in unison. Both Setsuna and Ema fixed Kelvin with reproachful stares as they spoke their objections together. They had, however, already half given up.

“Thinking normally, it’s much more efficient to have everyone defeat this Apostle in one go. Touya would do the same, wouldn’t he?” Ema started.

“He would. But, well, you should just do what you want this time, Kelvin. Honestly, the scale of this whole thing has gotten so big, I can’t understand it on my own.”

“Mm, I’ll leave it to Kelvin. That will make things go best, probably.”

“Just leave this place to us, Kel-nii!” Rion let go of his hand and gave him a push on the back. It seemed that he’d known the answer all along.

“Are you sure, Kelvin-san?”

Kelvin thought for a moment more before saying, “Yeah, let me through. But if possible, I’d like to see you again—still alive, of course. When I do, I’d like to fight you. I’m sure of Rion and the others’ victory, but don’t you go losing in some weird way, you hear?”

“Ha ha, you’re so hasty, Kelvin-san. Or should I say, you’ve always been that way.”

“If you’ve got the time to laugh, then hurry up and open the way. How do I even go forward from here? Do I just break the wall?”

“Ah, wait a second, please. Don’t break it! Your scythe will split this entire ship in half!”

Kelvin had created his giant scythe and was just about to swing it when Mao hurriedly stopped him.

“DarkMel’s chapel is connected to one of these chairs. If you sit on the right one, you’ll instantly arrive at your destination.”

“Another weird mechanism... So, which one do I sit on?”

Mao simply smiled, saying nothing.

“ARE YOU TELLING ME TO JUST GUESS?!”

The number of chairs in the Room of Selection easily cleared a hundred, and they all differed in type and age. Searching for the right one here by trying each one individually would be quite back-breaking.

“Oh, one more thing. You only have one chance to find the right chair.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Unfortunately, that feature was an order from DarkMel. She believes that you’ll be able to choose the right one, as if it’s your destiny. Of course, you can just figure things out from there if you’re wrong. You’re still welcome to go the intended route and defeat me before facing DarkMel with a dicey atmosphere between you two. So, what will it be? By the way, this stump is my chair, so take that one out of the running. Of course, you could also doubt me and try it anyway?”

“You know, I can tell you’ve got a smile a mile wide under that stupid helmet of yours. I just know it. Even if you press me for an answer...well, I guess I just have to rely on instinct? I’ll use this common one that you’d find in any eatery. It suits her much more than some super fancy and luxurious throne.”

Kelvin walked over to the seat that just happened to catch his eye and sat on it. The instant he did, a magic circle deployed under his feet, and both he and the chair were wrapped in a bright light before disappearing. It was so sudden that the rest of the party could only watch silently.

After a while, Mao finally reacted. “Wow, he really guessed it in one,” he whispered.

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Now that Kelvin had disappeared from the Room of Selection, the only ones left were Mao, who was its master, and the five people left behind to fight him. Mao, probably just realizing that he’d been left behind with only women, made a motion to scratch the top of his head, even though he just ended up scraping against helmet.

“Now then, it seems things are going to go exactly as Kelvin-san said,” he mused, almost to himself. “Are you all okay with that?”

“Before that, could I ask you something?”

In response to Mao, who wanted to confirm that they were about to fight, Rion walked to the fore of the group and raised her hand.

“You’re...Kelvin’s adopted little sister, right? What would you like to ask?”

“Uh, well, there’s been a question I wanted to ask you, Selector-san...I heard about you from Kel-nii, and it reminded me of a story I heard from my grandpa

when I was little. He said that those from the Saeki family with the kanji for sakura in their names are more susceptible to strange experiences. At the time, I thought it was just superstition or something my grandpa said to scare me as a prank. Before I reincarnated into this world, my name was Saeki Rio. I heard that your last name, Selector-san, was also Saeki, and that you also had the kanji for sakura in your first name. Is that right?"

While he was a little put off by the fact that she asked all this while drawing her weapons, Mao couldn't help but figure out what Rion was hinting at.

"Yeah, I do."

"I see. Then, and this is just conjecture on my part, are you my ancestor, Selector-san?"

Mao thought about it for a bit. "Now then, I wonder? I'm sure that Japan is filled with families with the last name Saeki, and I think you and I lived in different times. My family has inherited the names with the sakura kanji in them for generations, and we always have weak constitutions, and suddenly disappearing before suddenly reappearing is a common occurrence to us. But...well, I'm sure that happens to everyone."

Setsuna and Ema, who had been watching this, both thought, *How could such a thing ever be common?* However, when they considered it, they found that they knew very good examples, such as a childhood friend who attracted such coincidences like a magnet, or a wicked beast that would stir up such troubles on their own. So they changed their opinion to: *It's not common, but it definitely exists.* Meanwhile, Sylvia instantly thought of her own mother, who was far removed from common sense, and accepted the premise.

"You're not going to deny it?" Rion asked.

"I won't. If I could give you the answer, I would. But to be honest, I don't know myself, since DarkMel never told me about it. Still, I don't think that has too much bearing on what's happening here and now. In many ways, you are DarkMel's enemy, and I will not betray her. You want to hurry to Kelvin-san's side, and I want to stop you. Since that's the case, hasn't our course of action been clear from the beginning? Assuming you are here to support Kelvin-san, that is."

Mao put his hand on the abdomen area of his full plate, and a part of the armor changed into a different shape, settling on something that looked like a sword hilt and seemed like a grip of some sort. He grabbed this hilt pulled forward, drawing a huge sword that definitely befit a legendary hero. The blade, which gave off a bright light, looked a lot like Serge's weapon, which they'd clashed with before.

Shocked, it took a moment for any of them to react. "A holy sword?"

"Indeed. It is the Holy Sword Will, which has been a trusty partner to generations of heroes. I was a hero, just like Serge, so I have my own Will. Ah, I'll tell you this now: the Wills possessed by Serge and the Hero of this generation aren't fakes; they're all the real thing. You there, the ponytailed Hero: do you know why there are so many Wills?"

Mao had pointed to Setsuna, so Rion shot her a glance.

"Yes, well...to the public, the Holy Sword Will is something granted by Deramis' pope, but in actuality the Hero receives it once they are transferred to this world. There is only one per generation of Heroes, and in our case Touya was the one who received it from Melfina-san. Once the Hero completes his duty, the holy sword returns to the Goddess as the Hero or Heroes are returned to their world, or so I was told...is that correct?"

"Yes, mostly. It truly feels like a legendary weapon, a manifestation of the goddess's miracles, doesn't it? Well, Serge's is an exception since DarkMel was maneuvering in the background, and I was given mine back when I was reincarnated as an Apostle...also, your case is a special case among special cases. A Hero Summoning not done through Deramis's Oracle? That should be impossible. I'd like you to understand that that's why you weren't given a holy sword Will of your own. And that's to say nothing of the fact that DarkMel had sabotaged Melfina, who was your companion at the time, which she was not conscious of."

"Hmm...well, I was never unsatisfied with that. Even without a holy sword, I have the sword made for me by Kel-nii!"

While Mao took a stance with his Will with an apologetic expression, Rion responded in kind by readying her twin swords: Black Swords Aklama. Behind

her, Setsuna, Sylvia, and Ema had already gotten ready to fight, and the air in the Room of Selection was like a powder keg.

“I believe that takes care of our remaining business. Now then, let us start.”

“Oh noooooes! I’d like you to wait just a little bit!”

The voice that interrupted them was very deep and burly. On top of that, it was a manly voice filled with refined love. It sounded like the voice was coming from nowhere in particular, but that was when a thunderous roar ripped through the Room of Selection, reaching all the way up into the rafters. At the same time, something extremely muscular fell through the ceiling that had just been destroyed.

Rion and Mao happened to be standing right in the center of the room. The impact of the roof falling down on top of them was incredible, raising a cloud of dust large enough to obscure both of them. However, from among the wind-scattered dust, a flashy shock of pink hair could clearly be seen, and the owner of it could not be mistaken. Eventually, the dust cloud settled, revealing a large figure that looked like a lump of muscle as it stood up slowly—

“Prettia-chan, arrives!”

With a hard-to-describe pose, Prettia made an all-out appeal with her nice voice. Her body, considered the most physically strong in the world, had been covered with full-body tights that she had shown off before. Goldiana Prettiana had indeed arrived.

“Whoa...” That whisper came from the bottom of Mao’s heart. In a sense, this was a common reaction that was totally understandable.

“Prettia-chan!”

“Heyo, Rion-chan. I came to help!”

Even among all those familiar faces, Rion was the only one to greet her with a smile. They all understood very well that they had been given a very reassuring reinforcement, and they were also thankful, but Setsuna, Ema, and Sylvia couldn’t bring themselves to honestly express joy as they opted instead to give an expressionless greeting.

“Hey, come on, Prettia-chan!” came another flamboyant, lilting voice. “Don’t just go on ahead like that!”

This time, the origin of the voice was from right beside them. Turning to face the owner of the voice, they found Serge sitting on a chair. She had also arrived at some point. The chair she was sitting on might actually have been hers, since it seemed to be one that most commonly belonged in a middle or high school.

“Oh my, didn’t you also dash off, scrambling to be first, Flo-chan? I simply imitated you.”

“Ehe, is your plan to just always be ready with excuses? I won’t fall for that, Prettia-chan!”

Serge’s finger snapped in Goldiana’s direction in a very pointed...point. The pair, who had utterly decimated the tense atmosphere from before, got along as well as always.

“Well, thanks to us hurrying, we were able to make it before the fight started, as you can see,” Serge said, her tone as lilting and playful as ever. “Hey, hey, Selector! This is the first time we’ve actually met face to face, right? Thanks to your introductory speech being so long, we managed not to be late. Thanks, man! So, what is it? Which Will were you talking about? Let me in on it! I demand it!”

“Flo-chan, a lady should watch her words!”

“Aha ha, you two really get along!”

Meanwhile, Setsuna and Ema, who were in the back, were lost as to how they should respond to this ridiculous situation, and Sylvia had started snacking on beef jerky.

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Thanks to Serge and Goldiana’s sudden intrusion, the situation became a lot more chaotic. It seemed not even Mao had predicted this would happen, and he could be seen shrugging even through his armor.

“So it’s the arrival of the strongest on the Earth and the strongest Apostle. My my, this is going to be a handful.”

“That’s weird...that line sounded like sarcasm to me?”

“Now, now, Flo-chan. Calm down. Look closer—isn’t that a good set of armor?” Goldiana placated Serge, but she herself seemed worked up.

Good compared to what? Mao somehow suppressed his desire to ask the question, as well as his desire to back away, and he succeeded in not showing his fear. It was impossible to see what kind of face he was making under his helmet, but at the very least, as a straight person, it was certain that he was terrified on the inside.

“It’s more the current truth than sarcasm. While you were with the Apostles, Guardian, you certainly were the strongest. I could not have held a candle to you. However, now DarkMel has almost completely revived. This power is not my own, but it still overwhelms yours. I’d appreciate it if you understood that.”

“Heh! Heh! Heh! I see, I see...in other words it’s time for me to supplant you as the strongest once again!”

“Hm? Oh...well, something like that I guess?” Mao’s reply stank of compromise.

“That makes me so happy! It was worth searching for strong presences. This is the first time I’ve ever been on the challenging side, including before I was reincarnated!”

“Oh really? What about that intensely hot fight you had with me? That wasn’t you challenging me?”

“I’m equal to you right now, Prettia-chan, so I suppose rather than a challenge, it was a mutual agreement to lift each other to new heights?”

“Wow! You know just what to say. I’m so happy!”

The mood between the two was harmonious as they squealed together, but they had already prepared themselves for battle. Goldiana was letting out a pink aura from her body from the thick layer of Rose Ishtar that she had deployed. Meanwhile, Serge had changed her Will to bow form, making it Artemis.

“Rion-chan, and the rest of you too!” Serge called out in her characteristic

flamboyant lilt. “I don’t think what Selector said was a lie, so it’s going to be dangerous if you guys don’t get it together even more than when you fought me, okay? If you think it’s too tough, you should get out right away.”

“Oho, that’s surprising. So you rate me that highly?”

“I do, I admit it, Selector. That’s why I won’t fight you one-on-one. You could say this is a fight between men and women for the title of strongest! I won’t let you say it’s unfair!”

“There is no fair or unfair in battle. But...a battle between men and women, huh? What a perfect turn of phrase.”

One of the members wasn’t really in either camp, but Setsuna and Ema bit down and held back on saying anything. They knew that this wasn’t the right mood for it, so they also clenched their fists to help.

“How should I put it?” Setsuna muttered. After a moment’s pause, she continued, “It feels like this cool stage I got with Kelvin-san gone was totally taken over by someone else...”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that they’re the best reinforcements we could have hoped for. Secchan, Sylvie, Ecchan...let’s win this!”

That seemed to cheer her up greatly. She sucked in a breath and said, “Yes, let’s!”

“Mm,” Sylvia chimed in, “this is perfect. I just finished my snack. This will be exercise after a meal; let’s get a bit intense.”

“My Solforme won’t lose to any holy sword!” Ema shouted. “I’ll show you the results of my special training with Boga-san and get praised by mom!”

“Ahhh, uhhh...I’ve been quiet, but this old man has been on Setsuna-chan’s belt this entire time, okay? This old man’s heart is still united with all of yours, just so you know. Also, when you held back from putting in a retort just now, were you going to tell everyone that this old man was here too—”

“Let’s go, Selector!”

A shout to signify the start of the battle came from several people at once, mercilessly cutting off Survivor’s speech. Goldiana was leading the pack. She

raised her right arm, a pink mass gathering around it to form a giant arm. With a swing more beautiful than any other, it headed right for Mao's face.

"Mgghrrnn!"

"Hah!"

Mao used his holy sword to oppose Goldiana's strong attack. After a moment of apparent parity, Goldiana withdrew her arm before launching a fierce kick as if she was just substituting limbs. However, Mao was also able to react to this, using his large sword to once again stop the attack. Meanwhile, Rion was behind Goldiana, and she saw that the arm Goldiana had withdrawn was bleeding.



His blade and her fist only clashed for a moment, but it already managed to get through Prettia-chan's love energy. That Will...it might be sharper and heavier than I imagined! she thought.

A fierce exchange of blows and slashes occurred between Goldiana and Mao, but each one resulted in Goldiana's body being damaged. Meanwhile, Mao's holy sword and armor remained undamaged. Leaving aside the amount of destructive power his holy sword must have had to damage Goldiana's body so easily, it was plain to see that his armor's defensive value was also absurd. Still, Goldiana wasn't the only one who had attacked.

"Let me in on this too!"

Serge ran through the air, launching holy arrows from her holy bow Artemis. Her speed was only second to Ange, the assassin, and because she was using Skywalk at the same time, it was hard to predict where she was going to be. The arrows she shot were also furnished with the same special trait, and they fell on Mao with erratic trajectories like lightning bolts. They matched up perfectly with Goldiana's attacks, with the arrows hitting like threading a needle through every opening and gap there was.

"Nice support, Flo-chan!"

"I see...I thought you were only capable of solo play. So, you were capable of such teamwork, Protector."

"Heh, I'm actually better at fighting with a party, I'll have you know!"

Serge spoke as if she was just joking around, but she actually clicked her tongue in her heart. Because Goldiana had been tying up Mao's sword, almost all of the shots she made with Artemis had hit their mark. That being said, it didn't seem like any of the arrows found their way through his black and gold armor.

It doesn't matter how hard that armor is; being able to take an attack from me unscathed is just lame. Maybe it's immune to the light element or something? Oh man, if that's the case then he'd be the worst matchup for me as a Hero. Both Will and my magic will be useless. Well, in the worst case I could just join Prettia-chan and communicate with the language of physical combat

without using my Holy Fist skill!

Serge's decision-making was swift. Having decided on a course of action, she moved fast and returned Will to its sword form and threw it into its scabbard before jumping into the heat of battle herself. Kicking off the air, she attempted a flying kick, which was blocked by one of Mao's arms. However, she felt more solid feedback than when she had hit him with shots from Artemis.

"He's so solid, even when I hit him directly! What the hell! Is that armor made of Will or something?!"

"You have a set of holy armor named Galahad yourself, don't you? It's the same as—"

Kercrink.

The sound of something freezing came from below Mao's foot. But Mao did not look down. He could tell just from the sound that his foot had been frozen.

"Mm...Iceberg Wall."

The only one capable of casting blue magic here was Sylvia. She had entrapped Mao's foot in a square lump of ice before drawing her ice saber, Noble Orbit, and approaching. Beside Sylvia was Ema, already swinging with her Solforme, which emitted a massive amount of heat.

"Allow us..." Sylvia started.

"...to assist!" Ema finished.

"Oh my, this is our chance!" shouted Goldiana.

"I'll match up with these capable girls!"

Goldiana, Serge, Sylvia, and Ema attacked simultaneously from four sides. Mao, at the center of all this, had his foot stuck in place, so he couldn't get away fast enough.

"How's this?"

"Hrnnn! Doki Doki Smash Love!"

"Zolb!"

"Uh...uhhh...Flo-chan's Beautiful Leg!"

Mao tried to shift his holy sword, but Serge kicked it square on, sending it up into the air and eliminating its usefulness. Now that he was defenseless, the other three rammed their killer moves into his armor. A fist stuffed with love smashed into his torso, a huge sword that could melt anything came down on his back, and a saber that could freeze anything tried to slip in through a gap in his armor.

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Caught between a large fist and a large sword, Mao's armor creaked. He was facing a pink strike in front and a burning one behind. Both were immeasurably powerful by normal standards, sporting insane levels of potency. The attackers could feel their blows landing, and because they had matched each other's timing well, it increased the destructive strength of their individual attacks as well.

However, Mao's armor was even tougher than all that. The fact that it had kept its shape after being hit from both sides at once was already absurd. The more his attackers stepped in to follow through on their attack, the more they realized that their attacks weren't good enough to pierce the armor. In fact, the armor protecting Mao hadn't taken a single scratch, much less a dent.

It's still undamaged under this heat, Ema noticed. *What the hell is it made of?!*

You're telling me it withstood a hit from me in this state?! Goldiana marveled. *What deeeeeeeep love!*

Just as Mao's greatsword Will was able to wound Goldiana's steel body, armor Will was not something to be underestimated. Also, Mao didn't have any tricky abilities like a Demon Lord's Mara Pisuna, nor did he have any strange or mysterious powers working for him. His parameters were simply high, that was it. Even Sylvia, who had tried to slip her weapon inside the armor, noticed it.

I should have managed to reach his body, but I haven't gotten through, she realized. *He himself is incredibly tough.*

She had unleashed a subtle yet strong thrust at a gap in Mao's full plate. However, the tip of her saber was unable to break skin, so it simply stopped there. Mao had not used any skills or spells. This was simply the work of the stats he'd gotten from DarkMel—that was how much of a threat he had

become.

“Frenzied Blizzard.”

If a direct strike didn’t work, she just had to try something different. The spell Sylvia intoned went through her saber to call a storm full of hard and sharp ice inside Mao’s armor, causing an irregular sound to ring out continuously from within. Because the armor was so tough, it would not let anything through from the inside either. Using that, Sylvia had turned the interior into a makeshift blender. Thanks to that, the armor that should have been protecting Mao had become a tool to increase the power of Sylvia’s spell. Of course, the scene inside his armor could be described with a single word: disastrous.

“Whoa...not even I would be able to get off scot-free if I took that directly...” commented Serge.

“Oh no!” Goldiana reacted with her characteristic flamboyance. “My skin would get all rough!”

“Mm. I got the idea for this from the shaved ice I ate in Toraj.” Sylvia had personally named this attack Shaved Ice Attack. It was a much more brutal thing than its name suggested.

“Everyone! Let’s move on to the next one!”

“Whoops. Retreat!”

Rion could be seen far above their heads, moving with a clap of thunder. Meanwhile, Prettia, Serge, Sylvia, and Ema all quickly withdrew their fists and weapons before jumping back.

“There’s a good amount of water inside right now, a perfect chance.”

“Thanks, Sylvie! Fury Bolt!”

Rion raised Aklama, and at its tip a clump of lightning gathered, turning into a giant ball. In the past, the wolf divine pillar, divine wolf Galonzolf, had unleashed a similar attack, but the scope of this one was on a whole other level. Or so it looked, but the next moment, the sphere shrank until it was palm-sized. When Rion swung her sword down, the ball of lightning sped forth.

Mao made a noise of surprise as he sucked in a breath. The ball was, of

course, aimed at him, their enemy. His holy sword Will, which had been kicked up by Serge, was now acting like a lightning rod, falling towards him without a single deviation. This was Rion's Rank S Red Magic spell, Fury Bolt. The ball of lightning would continue to stay on any target hit by it for a while, shocking the target continuously for massive damage. Any normal person would be turned to ash, and no matter how tough the target was, just touching it would definitely result in them passing out. They would also suffer from a drop in agility and the paralyzation status effect, greatly hampering the enemy's movements. The spell had many fearsome effects hidden within it.

"That's not all!"

Thanks to the Lightning Dragon King's blessing, Fury Bolt was over twice as strong as normal, and lasted longer too. It traveled through Mao's greatsword into his armor, shocking him all the way. As it did so, it made a great thunderous noise and caused the armor to give off a bright light, so bright it was hard to look at directly. Mao had gone from the nearly inhuman Shaved Ice Attack to a Shiny-Light combo—the only word to describe it was vicious.

Still, I don't think this is nearly enough to defeat Selector-san! Rion suddenly thought, and it was the same thought that had occurred to the others as well. It wasn't enough to defeat Mao, who had gained a goddess's powers. They thought that they would need one last push.

"I'm going."

"Awright! Let this old man watch from this special seat!"

Setsuna took it upon herself to make that last push. She took her iai stance in front of Mao, who was still under the effects of Rion's lightning. There was no reason for her sword stroke, which she prided on being the fastest, to miss. Her katana, Nehanjakujou, used its special attribute to speed up even more, pushing her skills up to an even greater height than it had reached under the tutelage of Survivor, Nito. Everything was equal in front of Setsuna's Iron Cutting Authority.

"Yeah, your power is the only one I'm afraid of. I'm going to have to dodge that."

That surprised Setsuna, and she made a noise to show it. The effect of Rion's

spell had yet to dissipate. Setsuna's sword-drawing technique was so fast that it could even catch Serge. Even so...Mao dodged the iai strike by a hair's breadth before creating some distance between him and Setsuna.

"It doesn't matter how durable I am now; your sword will surpass all that and easily bisect me. That was the only thing I was afraid of. And now, I know that I'm at the level where I can somehow withstand everyone else's attacks. As I thought, it isn't Protector, the Rank S adventurer, or Kelvin's little sister I'm most wary of. It's you, current Hero-san."

Once Mao got that out of his mouth, Rion's Fury Bolt finally dissipated. There were no signs of charring or damage on his armor, and no smell was coming from inside that would suggest burning either. Even after taking all those attacks, Mao had still taken basically no damage. That showed just how big the gap was between his stats and everyone else's. It was so astoundingly, disgustingly one-sided that it almost came back around to being funny.

"But I still managed to get some revenge, at least." Setsuna said.

"What?"

With a clang, a part of Mao's helmet slid off and onto the floor. Though it wasn't deep, a line appeared on his cheek and welled up with red blood, a delayed sense of pain accompanying it.

After a moment, Mao responded, "I thought...I dodged it properly, didn't I?"

"Sorry, Selector," Nito chimed in, "you won't be able to outmaneuver Setsuna-chan, who was trained directly by this old man here, with just your high stats. After all, Setsuna-chan has learned all the secret and hidden techniques of the Wild Beast Style that no other disciple of mine could, no matter how talented they were. As of now, her sword isn't just fast and able to cut anything, you know?"

"Please don't give away too much, Master Nito. Also, there aren't any secret techniques or anything."

"Aww, it's fine, isn't it? If you won't use this old katana, then at least let me look cool..."

The talking katana was in perfect condition today as well.

“Oh no! I can’t afford to lose to Setsuna-chan, now can I? I should reveal my final form too!”

“It doesn’t look like I can afford to hold anything back to save for the fight against DarkMel. Prettia-chan, be in whatever form you want...in the last boss fight against the goddess, that is!”

While Setsuna and Goldiana were drawing Mao’s attention, Rion quietly crouched down on the spot and reached into her own shadow.

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“Rooaarrrgggghhh!”

The demon in peach-colored tights—Goldiana—struck a pose that would turn a professional bodybuilder green with envy, all while maintaining her *amazing* expression and shouting with her deep growly voice. Every time she shouted, the pink aura filled to bursting with love that was deployed around her muscles—Rose Ishtar swelled like it was her own muscles, becoming stronger and deeper in color. Although Goldiana’s official title was Peach Ogre, her current form was anything but. Not even Mao, the Selector, could predict how she would change.

“But I’m not the type to just watch it happen, you know?”

“Thought so!”

Mao tried to stop this evolution, but Serge charged at him with a sword in hand. They clashed, and at this point, Mao noticed that his opponent’s sword wasn’t Will. The weapon was wreathed in lightning that flowed dazzlingly down the blade just like Rion’s earlier attack.

“This goes for the sword too, but haven’t your movements changed a lot for the better from before?”

“I wonder? Both of those things might just be your imagination.”

It wasn’t his imagination. Serge’s weapon had changed, and she was also reacting much faster than before.

It’s not just Serge who’s changed either, Mao noticed.

Sylvia, Ema, and Setsuna ran forward to follow up on Serge’s efforts. As they ran, they left behind traces of electricity on the floor behind them. Just like with Serge, it was clear that their agility had increased. Next, Mao turned his attention to his only opponent who was not accounted for: Rion. He had theorized that all this change was somehow thanks to her. Rion was crouching down, and Mao could feel a rough and wild flow of magic was traveling from her to the other four.

Rion had cast the Rank S Red Magic spell: Superconductive Lightning. It was a strictly better version of Lightning Enhancement that raised agility and reaction

speed. Not only was the buff incomparably stronger, it also affected the entire party, so it was somewhat like an Area of Effect spell. With that, Mao would no longer be able to keep up with the party's speed. They would likewise not be able to deal decisive damage to him, but with teamwork, they would be able to concentrate on defense and buy quite a lot of time.

On top of that, Rion had borrowed the demon sword Caladbolg from Alex in her shadow, and she had been pouring as much Red Magic as she could into it. By sneakily passing this sword to Serge, they could cunningly provide her with a means of attack. Rion, who was quite attentive in her private life, could be very thorough in her support on the battlefield as well.

"Hrgh!"

"Dagh!"

"Krk!"

Thanks to Rion's support, the other four were breathing perfectly in sync. All four were exhibiting teamwork on the level of Sylvia and Ema, who had been raised together. Even the affected combatants themselves were internally surprised by the state of things.

"I told you, Selector, I'm good at fighting in a party. And that goes double for a party filled with cute girls!" Serge shouted.

She had most likely not gone as far as to say the last part. But Serge had been making great contributions as a sort of lubricant for the party's teamwork, almost as if her nonsense had been true all along. Thanks to her perfectly timed interventions, Sylvia, Ema, and Setsuna were able to comfortably maneuver around the battle as they pleased. Sometimes she would open up a gap in Mao's defenses, and sometimes she would take a troublesome attack for the others. Because of that, the combination of the four people on the frontlines had reached a high level, creating an arena where each one of them was able to exhibit their powers at the highest level. Even though their individual strengths were far from enough, the girls were able to use their numbers advantage to create an exceedingly tough obstacle.

And there was one more reason Mao couldn't forcibly break into the attack: the strange sword technique that Setsuna had inherited from Survivor, Nito. In

truth, Mao was able to see the movement of Setsuna's sword clearly as she swung it about. No matter how fast her sword was in those instantaneous bursts of attack, her maximum speed could not reach the peak of Mao's vision. Even if she were to throw out an iai strike, he could see its trajectory and simply dodge it. However, when he had dodged, he'd still been cut. Specifically, he had taken a minor cut when his helmet had been sliced, and it had been shallow enough for him to instantly recover, but he had still been hurt. If Setsuna managed to hit a critical spot, she could, in fact, kill him instantly, and that was why Mao couldn't carelessly rush in.

"Hey, hey, hey! What's wrong, Selector?!" Nito called out mockingly. "Are you that afraid of the swordsmanship given to her by this old maaaannn?"

Not only that, but Nito was free to rile Mao up as much as he wanted. Thanks to that, mentally Mao was at his limit in a lot of ways. The mocking was much more infuriating than he could have imagined. Nito was also somewhat affecting Setsuna, but, well, that was probably within an acceptable margin of error.

"I'm sure there are a lot of reasons you aren't able to attack freely. But the biggest one has gotta be you yourself, Selector!"

"You're so uselessly observant!"

Thanks to Sympathetic Resonance, Mao had gained power with permission from DarkMel. Power that rivaled a god's. However, it was a different matter entirely whether or not Mao could fully bring out such power. The event where DarkMel had absorbed her strength from Melfina and become a demigod was, in the grand scheme of things, rather recent. Him developing the ability to control something as grand as a deity's power so well in such a short time was proof of his talent—or rather, proof that Mao had studied and trained like his life depended on it. It was as if an amateur had landed himself in the driver's seat of the world's fastest car. Controlling and manipulating that overflowing power, that unsuppressable font of magic, could not have been easy, even if he was a reincarnated hero. Just about the only thing he could fully use was the toughness of his own body.

If possible, I'd have liked Kelvin-san to get used to fighting this power with me

before moving on to DarkMel, but...well, if this is what DarkMel wants, there's nothing else for it. Still, they've really got their teeth in me.

In this even situation, Mao let out a faint sigh of wonder. He had realized that if he didn't bring out his next move, this fight was going nowhere.

"Will, remove my shackles."

All four of the people currently fighting him made noises of surprise before jumping backwards in unison. Right afterwards, Mao's armor and greatsword started to shine. With a light reminiscent of scattering stardust, he manifested a pair of white wings made of light on his back. It seemed he was now going to be using his divine powers in earnest, as the weak sense of killing intent he had been giving off rose dramatically along with the strength of his light.

"I'll give up on control and restraint. It doesn't seem like you all are weak enough to need that kind of mercy."

Having completed his transformation, Mao once again took a stance with his greatsword. The floor under him cracked with each step he made.

"Wow, he's totally different from before..."

"That's pretty immature of you, mister..."

"Mm. You were holding back?"

"Not holding back. He just couldn't control his power. Sylvia, make sure to stay cautious!"

"Mm, I am always serious and giving it my all."

"Sure, sure. Now isn't the time for a sibling quarrel. Selector's hardened his resolve, and we've also finished our preparations." Serge shrugged before pointing at a certain something. Behind where she and the others had been fighting, Goldiana was busy transforming—or rather, she had been.

"Whew...the big drawback is that it always takes time when I want to do this. It's not very practical in a fight. It also uses up a lot of energy, so I can't even keep it up for long!" the Titan complained in her usual flamboyant tone.

Mao looked up at her and sighed once again. This time, it wasn't a sound of admiration. He had been so exasperated by how silly it was that he had frozen

on the spot and started to regret all the life decisions that had led him up to that point.

“This old man thinks that’s cheating too...”

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Things that surpassed human understanding tended to be rejected by them, being called words like “monster,” “inhuman,” or “demon.” Such things weren’t usually based on looks, but rather on the abnormal power of the subject in question whenever unusual situations came up. This held true for Rank S adventurers such as Kelvin, Sylvia, and the beast king Leonhart. Compared to the average adventurer, they were inhumanly strong.

However, the opponent Mao was currently facing off with, Goldiana Prettiana the Peach Ogre, had greatly exceeded even such descriptions. Strength aside, her appearance had also taken great leave of its original human form. Her body, which had always been so filled with muscle as strong as steel that it seemed like it could burst at any moment, had swelled to four or five times its original size. Furthermore, her skin had turned a shade of pure pink. At that point, there was no aura or energy coming from her body. Her body itself, which was definitely present, had manifested all that surging pressure into physical form.

With a flap of a pair of wings, a fierce wind was whipped up. It was not Mao making use of his divine wings, though. Goldiana, who had completed her transformation, also had angel—no, peach-colored goddess’s wings. There were a total of eight wings, and together they were large enough to completely cover her gigantic back. They looked strong enough to give the illusion that they could even lift big Goldiana, in spite of all her extra weight. She had a halo around her head too... Was that a joke? Whatever it was, it had most likely gone over the heads of everyone present.

“Ha ha!” Mao couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you really human?”

“Nope, I’m a Titan!” You could almost see the accompanying heart mark coming from Goldiana, who replied in her usual deep and thick voice while twirling her twin drills. Her beautiful hair, which looked like it was made from spun gold thread, seemed like the only thing that remained of her original form, but that actually made the entire thing creepier.

“So... So big! She was already over two meters tall, but now she’s at least ten?!”

“Mm. A new breed of giant.”

“Setsuna-chan, that’s an ally, so don’t go cutting it, okay? Promise me. Specifically, you must never use this old man to do so. That would be out of the question.”

“I won’t!”

Mao was of course stunned, but Goldiana’s allies were likewise shaken. The only ones still in a calm state of mind were Goldiana’s battle buddy Serge, who had gone through what was essentially a fight to the death with the Peach Ogre and helped with the birthing of Rose Ishtar Final Edition, and Rion, who believed in Goldiana’s potential and knew that they would remain friends no matter what form she took. That just showed how impactful her new form was. It had taken over the entire battle.

“Now, now. I understand why you’d be so shaken. After all, this is the first time since the start of the world that someone who has so perfectly embodied ultimate beauty has been born!”

“If... If that’s how you feel, then I’m going to be troubled for a response... As a former Hero, I have no idea what is appropriate to say in this situation.”

If it was necessary to describe Goldiana, who had absolute faith in her own beauty, in one phrase, it would be: a goddess of muscle. Her *intense* facial features and hair had stayed the same, and though her body had changed, its basic shape hadn’t. It was just that her size, coloring, and clothing had all gone out of whack. It was only natural that Mao’s conscience was conflicted about whether or not to say what he was honestly thinking. Setsuna, meanwhile, was sympathizing with Mao because she knew she would never want to face the current Goldiana.

“Okay, everyone, get back a little. I’m going to start making some serious moves.” Goldiana said.

“So she says. Come, come; we’ll just get in Prettia-chan’s way, so let’s retreat!” Serge must have decided to entrust everything to Goldiana, as she

immediately turned and started to corral the others all the way back to where Rion was.

“Huh?! Wha— Wait!”

“Ema, I’m hungry. Do you have anything?”

Setsuna followed Serge’s instructions for the moment, while Ema seemed dissatisfied and Sylvia had already turned her attention to something else.

“Now then, I’ve kept you waiting a long time, haven’t I? But the prima donna of this stage is finally ready. Would you be my partner?”

“Of course, that is why I’m here.”

As it stood, Mao needed to look up to be able to see Goldiana’s face. He once again took up his greatsword and concentrated, as the fight was now resuming. However, the opponent that should have been in front of him was not there. His vision had gone entirely pink, as if he was right in front of a pink wall.

As it turned out, that analogy wasn’t entirely incorrect. From Setsuna’s point of view, as she was watching from her position in the distance, it looked like Goldiana had just snapped into position. It wasn’t because of Mao. In fact, it was the opposite. Goldiana herself had moved so fast she left behind afterimages as she approached Mao with incredible speed.

So...fast!

Put in simple but specific terms, Goldiana had hit him with a tackle with no tricks behind it. However, she was *fast*. She moved her huge body with unbelievable speed, fast enough that even Mao could only see that a pink wall had suddenly appeared in front of him. She had also instantly accelerated to maximum speed from the first step. Having become both a wall and a bullet, Goldiana one-sidedly ran Mao over even as he tried to defend himself with his greatsword. He was sent flying, ending up deep into the wall of the Room of Selection. And an instant later, the peach-colored goddess once again descended in front of him.

“Doki Doki Smash-Dunk!”

Mao could barely get a complete word out in surprise before he was caught

up in a flurry of heavy hits thrown by Goldiana's massive arms. Caught in between a wall and a pink storm, Mao tried to respond with Will, but there was no sign that Goldiana was stopping her attacks. Though her fists were split open by Mao's greatsword, they immediately regenerated, becoming whole again by the time she needed them to rain the next blow down upon her opponent. The speed of her combo was the same as her tackle, too fast for the eye to follow. It was so fast that by the time Mao realized he'd been hit, the fist had already been withdrawn, and before his sense of pain caught up, the next blow was already coming. In fact, it seemed to him that Goldiana was slowly speeding up, strengthening the storm of blows she was inflicting.

"Hrmphhh!!!"

In the midst of the flurry of fists, an uppercut was snuck in, bursting upward like a bird taking flight. It hit Mao's jaw squarely, pulverizing the wall behind him as he was forced upward as high as he could go in the Room of Selection before getting lodged in the ceiling. This series of blows, which hadn't even taken ten seconds, had overwhelmed all the girls' senses.

"Did... Did she beat him? Is he down?"

"Nope, not yet," Goldiana replied. As if to respond to that, Mao freed himself from the ceiling and came falling down at great speed. He spread his wings of light and had his greatsword pointing down. While spreading thousands—no, tens of thousands—of motes of stardust, he came crashing down upon Goldiana, who had taken an anti-air stance. In this instance, his greatsword Will had turned more into a lump of light rather than a sword.

"I see, is that your trump card?"

Mao's attack bisected Goldiana's massive form. From her right shoulder outward, he sent her arm and leg flying. However, Goldiana never stopped regenerating. In the blink of an eye, she had grown back all her lost parts and was already whole again by the time Mao started to talk.

"Amazing. So you can withstand my Cosmic Breaker as well..."

"You're the same, aren't you? You're still standing after taking my all-out attacks."

“I see. So you’re saying that we are equal in power?”

“No. In terms of personal strength, even now I’m far from matching you. The fact that you’re so spry even after taking all those attacks is proof of it. But as I thought, you can’t truly exhibit your all, can you?”

Mao was silent for a moment. “I am giving my all.”

“No, you aren’t. You aren’t taking this seriously at all. Subconsciously, you’re still trying to control your power. If I had to guess...it’s because if you mess up and break the ship, you’ll interrupt Kelvin-chan and DarkMel-chan’s fight. That’s the only thing that cannot happen, the only thing you don’t want to do. Am I right?”

Mao didn’t answer.

“That silence is the answer. But, as things stand, we’ll get nowhere, I think? Since neither of our attacks works on the other. Personally, I do think that continuing this dance forever is charming, but...”

Actually, that wasn’t true. The time limit for Rose Ishtar Final Edition was coming up fast. That was why Goldiana was planning to hand off the closing of the curtains on this fight to someone else. And she had already put her plan into action.

“Human-Wolf Union: Triple Wield, Kagerou Mode. And activate—Imitator.”

Without anyone knowing, Rion had stepped onto Mao’s shadow.

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Touching Mao’s shadow, Rion pulled it out. What was “it”? Mao’s shadow, of course. The shadow Rion grabbed crept and slid up her arm, then the rest of her, until it clung to her body in its entirety. It dyed her black—black as Aklama’s blade, pitch black. Rion herself, who was usually a cheery person, also changed into the face she wore when facing another person: an expressionless mask.

“What is that?”

“Alex’s and my trump card. If I had to describe it like Prettia-chan, it’s my Final Edition.”

Once again, Mao turned his attention to Rion. She was clad in shadow, changing the air around her. Her expression had completely morphed as well, and he no longer felt like he could let his guard down around her. Most importantly, it was immediately clear to him that the power she was housing in her body had changed. The reason was similarly wrapped in mystery, but at the moment she was a more troublesome enemy than Goldiana. All the experience he had accumulated and the instinct he had honed through many battles to the death would not stop warning him. His recognition of who he should be most wary of shifted to Rion. This decision that he had made instantaneously was not wrong. In fact, it was right on the mark.

The only mistake Mao had made was standing right in between Rion and Goldiana. On top of that, he had shown surprise at Rion's change, focused on her, and tried to get a measure of her power. Even though that had been done in the blink of an eye, it meant that he had put Goldiana out of his mind.

"Loving Hold!"

"Wha—?!"

While Mao was distracted by Rion, a pink wall had rushed him from both sides. Having caught him with his guard completely down, Goldiana rushed in. Her enlarged arms came at him with extreme speed before wrapping him up in a deceptively gentle hold, as though handling a delicate flower. Even through his armor, Mao could feel Goldiana's body heat. Was her kindness turning into energy that radiated from her? The principle behind it was a mystery, but it caused a strange feeling within Mao that caused him to loosen the tension in his body.

"Whooaaargghh!"

If Mao had lost focus for just a little longer, he would have been sent to dreamland within a couple more seconds. He had already been dozing off, but in order to dispel that feeling, he shouted with all the power he could muster. It ended up sounding like a scream, but not even he knew exactly what kind of emotion he was feeling at the moment.

Trying to cut your way out will be useless, Goldiana thought. *You know how strong my current healing ability is; you've experienced it firsthand.*

She was right. No matter how much Mao tried to hurt Goldiana with his divine power or stats, she would instantly repair herself and go back to normal. This also applied to the Loving Hold that Mao was currently trapped in, and no matter how much he thrashed about, he would not be able to escape.

“Krk! But with your power, I can’t—”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m not the one who’ll defeat you. That’s her job.”

With Mao in her arms, Goldiana quietly stopped on the spot. It was a sacrificial tactic, offering up her body so that their enemy would be easier to hit with all of Rion’s strength.

“So it really was you, little sister!”

Thanks to the effects of Creeping Darkness, Rion donned a shadowfied Alex. Then, because of Imitator, Alex copied Mao’s Sympathetic Resonance from *his* shadow. Rion, now in Kagerou mode, was now able to use Sympathetic Resonance. If Mao was sharing DarkMel’s stats, then Rion would as well. At the moment, Rion had obtained power equaling a god—DarkMel’s power.

“If you have the sturdiest shield, then I just need to hit you with the strongest spear. That was always the plan. Hey, Mao-san. This’ll definitely kill you no matter how impressive your defense is, won’t it?”

Mao sucked in an alarmed breath. She was right, it could. It didn’t matter that he had DarkMel’s stats; if he took Rion’s attack with all her new strength, he would die. Still, he had not yet given up.

What preposterous resolve. But this was a well thought-out plan. Honestly, I never expected to be put in such an unfavorable situation. I respect all of you from the bottom of my heart. But that power’s not something so easily handled. Even if I can’t move in this situation, it’ll be a hard task to aim properly and attack. If you don’t hit a critical spot, then I won’t die in one hit!

Mao’s mind spun. Sympathetic Resonance shared DarkMel’s stats in a spread, applying to all stats evenly. Basically, it would even out strength, endurance, magic, everything to have the same number. That was why Mao was expecting that even if Rion’s attack was to hit, as long as it didn’t hit a bad spot, it would not be able to reduce his HP to zero in one shot. There was also no way such

uncontrollable power could be aimed properly, and even if it grazed him he would live. On the other hand, he expected that such an attack would force Goldiana to let go.

“Bursting Heat!”

“Metanoia Doll.”

However, Mao’s expectations were immediately betrayed. The supportive spell that Ema cast on Rion, the Rank S Red Magic that Efil loved to use, Bursting Heat, doubled the power of the target’s next attack. With that, Rion’s attack had reached a god-killing level where it would deal huge damage even if it only grazed him.

The only question left was whether or not it would hit, but now the chances of that happening had risen dramatically. The reason was the Rank S Blue Magic spell that Sylvia had cast: Metanoia Doll. The spell caused snow to fall on Mao’s body. This coverage was thin and could be shaken off easily, but it was coming continually out of nowhere, so no matter how much he resisted, there seemed to be no point. And that was ignoring the fact that he couldn’t move at the moment anyway. However, Mao found it strange that the snow was also falling on Goldiana, who should have been Sylvia’s ally, which made them look like a statue of a very burly goddess.

“Mm...with this, the target is larger. Metanoia Doll’s snow transmits damage, so no matter where you hit on the snow, it will damage the enemy.”

Metanoia Doll was an original spell that Sylvia had created for just such an occasion. It had a pretty narrow use case, since the effect was hard to apply if the target kept moving. However, with a gigantified Goldiana holding on to Mao, it was the perfect time for the spell. And it paired perfectly with Rion, who would be inflexible in applying her newfound power.

“You... You’re planning on attacking both of us together?!”

“Well struck,” Goldiana answered in her usual lilting tone. “Correcting your past misconceptions is worth a lot of points!”

Mao struggled, but Goldiana would not budge. It was hopeless.

“Rion, make sure to keep a good grip on your weapon! If you make a mistake

and end up stabbing me, I'm definitely going to die! When the time comes, just swing with all your might. That's all you need to do; I'll make sure of it!"

"Okay!"

"Awright! Then it's your turn next, Ecchan!"

"Right! I'll show you my Boga-style jet-stream... I've named it Perusus!"

Serge appeared and held onto Rion's sides, while Ema was back-to-back with Serge, holding Solforme in a stance. Then, Ema's weapon started to spew flames. Like a rocket engine, it instantly carried all three of them upward. Once they had gained some momentum, Ema separated from the other two. Then, Rion, with Serge carrying her, arrived directly above the goddess statue.

"We've got him! This is the end—show your best stuff!"

Serge pitched Rion like a ball as hard as she could. All but a black comet, Rion fell from the sky, heading straight for Mao. In a strange coincidence, her appearance mirrored Mao's as he had fallen with his holy sword just before.

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The speeding black meteor crashed into Mao, who was being held by the snow goddess statue. In fights like this, irresponsible empathy or mercy was absolutely unnecessary. In accordance with that belief, Rion pulled out her god-killing power in full. The slash dealt by her black sword Aklama swallowed everything before busting through the floor and destroying the *Elpis*'*s* bowels. The flying slash's momentum did not wane at all until it was finally released from the ark itself and touched down in the ocean underneath. A huge hole taking up a fourth of the battleship's surface had suddenly been opened. Luckily, it didn't seem like the attack had caused any damage to the other ships outside or any friendly combatants, but the ridiculous event had turned everyone outside's eyes into little dots.

"Haaahhhh!"

In the depths of this opened hole, Rion let out a huge breath before falling over. From the plan that had been thought up and worked out over and over, to her friend's abilities stacking up on her one on top of the other, Rion had taken all of that and their feelings upon her small back as she used up a power that

was too great for her. She had concentrated and used her head far more than she ever had in her life, she thought. As a result, it seemed, her consciousness, which had been stretched taught, had snapped like twine, and her body would not listen to her at all. At this point, she couldn't even lift a finger.

"*Whine*? (Are you okay?)"

Seemingly worried about Rion, Alex jumped out of her shadow and licked her cheek.

That continued for a short moment before Rion spoke up. "Aha ha...that tickles!"

She had squeezed out what little voice she had left before giving Alex the best smile effort would allow. Really, she would have liked to have patted Alex on the head, but she no longer had even an ounce of strength to accomplish that. Of course, it seemed Alex knew that, so he simply snuggled up to her side silently.

"Oh myyyy! Such a harmonious couple!"

"Prettia-chan?" Rion paused as she turned towards the voice. "Wait, what's with all that blood?!"

When she tried to face the voice that had suddenly called out to her, what greeted Rion made her reflexively push her voice into a scream that only deepened her already serious wounds. It was Goldiana. Her aura had been released, and she was barely standing by leaning on the wall behind her. Her full-body tights had been destroyed in most places, leaving only the spots that were most important to cover. That was why Rion could immediately see just how wounded her brawny body was.

"Sorry. I...couldn't hold back..."

"Whaaaat do you think you're letting out of your mouth?" Goldiana greatly emphasized her initial "what" with a lilt. "I've properly received all of your love, Rion-chan. It's kinda brought me to the brink of death, but I'll be just fine after a few hours' sleep. So don't worry, okay?" Even through her wounds, Goldiana never lost her characteristic flamboyant speech.

"Eheh heh...that really lifts the weight off my shoulders..."

Goldiana gave Rion a wink that actually seemed to twinkle as she tried to act as okay as possible. It was clear she was pushing herself, but Rion appreciated her consideration and accepted it without argument.

Ah, that reminds me, Rion immediately thought. *Clotho's Storage should have recovery potions in it. I need to give them to Prettia-chan...*

Now that she'd had the idea, Rion quickly communicated what she wanted to Alex through telepathy to have him retrieve the potions. However, the message she tried to send was blocked.

"No...way..."

"Way..."

Rion doubted the information she just unintentionally learned. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mao, though he was missing his left arm and had a huge hole in his gut. The suit of Will-armor he had been wearing had completely peeled off him, and he didn't have his greatsword in hand either, although rather than having lost it, it was more like he had given it as tribute. Behind him, Sylvia and Ema had fallen with a greatsword stuck in each of them.

"Sylvie...Ecchan!"

From where she was, Rion couldn't see how they were doing. *I need to stand up and save them!* Such thoughts were strong in her mind, but her body had long since surpassed its limits. Mao slowly, leisurely walked towards her, and while Alex stood in his way, there was no possibility of the wolf coming out on top, given it couldn't even hurt Mao.

Using her flagging mind to its fullest, Rion tried to think of a plan to cooperate with Goldiana and fight. However, it seemed Goldiana had passed out, as she was slumped over on the wall. It was obvious she had been pushing herself quite a bit.

"I really...thought I'd...die...from that...last...attack.
I...also...underestimated...a god's...vitality!"

Mao's voice was coming in stops and starts, and it was so hoarse it seemed like it could just crumble and stop at any moment. If he'd had a normal body, he would surely have been dead right now. However, Mao was able to stand up

and even resume battle in the body he had. Ridiculously, his body was clinging to life even now. His sheer strength of will to commit to such a thing was monstrous.

“Hey now, Selector, I can’t allow a sneak attack!”

“Ser... Serge!”

At some point, Serge had come to stand beside Alex. The Demon Sword Caladbolg had been returned to Alex’s mouth, and Serge was once again wielding her holy sword Will, probably because Mao’s light-immune armor was gone.

“I’ll leave Rion-chan to you, wolf-kun. I’m gonna go and finish off that zombie a little.”

“Heh...heh heh...it’s...useless. Not even you...can...hurt...me...”

“No, you’re the one who’s been checkmated, Selector. After all, you haven’t even noticed that Secchan is right behind you.”

Surprised, Mao sucked in a breath as he turned around. Serge was right, there was a presence behind him. It wasn’t Sylvia or Ema. He could tell, being a Hero as well, that the presence was that of a similar being.

“See? Checkmated. You even fell for that bluff.”

All of a sudden, something rushed in at him, and he grabbed it with one arm. A sharp pain struck his fingers as he touched what turned out to be a longsword. It was the exact same as the Will that Serge was holding.

“Quickdraw: Eagle Eater.”

The moment Mao had recognized Serge’s blade, Setsuna had come in swinging with a technique from above. By the time Mao realized what was happening, her sword was already in its sheath, so it was already too late.

“I’ve already used Iron Cutting Authority, so this is goodbye.”

“Yeah, seems like it. Thank you for your hard work all these years, Selector. Now it’s time to rest in peace.”

“Wh...oa...I seem to have...lost...in a weird...way, haven’t I...”

The technique Setsuna had used was the Wild Beast School's final secret technique: Eagle Eater. In the space of a single swing, she launched hundreds or thousands of slashes in all directions and ranges around her at godlike speed. Because she'd hidden herself and used Skywalk to approach while holding her breath, her attack, timed to perfection, bit into Mao while he was completely unprotected. Saying he was minced would have been too tame. Each piece that was left of him was as small as could be, and it was so fast that all his blood, which would normally have spurted out, was contained instead. The next instant, Mao's body seemed to be replaced by red liquid before it splattered onto the floor.



“Even though Selector has the power of the Goddess, he’s got to be dead after being turned into that. I’ll say this for now, at least: good job up until then.” Serge said to Mao’s corpse before she paused for a moment. Then, seemingly recovered, she continued, “And good job to us, too! Oh you, Secchan! Using the Will I duplicated like that! C’mere! That was soooo perfect!”

“I didn’t have the leeway to think about things like that, it was just a coincidence. Hey, don’t grind your elbow into me, please... Hey, no! We need to heal them! Please, heal Ema-san and Sylvia-san! They’ll die!”

“Ahhh, that’s right. Don’t worry, they’ll be fine. Selector’s the type to not accept anything but a happy end, so I don’t think he took their lives.”

“Still!”

Prodded by Setsuna, Serge reluctantly went to heal the two adventurers. As she had said, they were still breathing, and as long as they received good healing, they would fully recover. Meanwhile, Setsuna went to take a look at Rion and Goldiana before healing them with Mel-stamped potions.

“I’m so sorry, Secchan...for making you do everything at the very end...”

“Don’t say that. You did great, Rion-chan. It’s thanks to your efforts that I was able to do that, so you can go ahead and puff your chest out!”

“Arghh...you can’t say things like that to me...”

“Huh?”

While receiving emergency treatment, Rion ended up taking mental damage for some reason. Setsuna was completely clueless, so Alex laid a paw on her shoulder.

“Woof... (Just let her be...)”

At any rate, with that, the Apostles had been eliminated. The only fight left was between DarkMel, the root of all this, and Kelvin, who had a deep connection to her.

Chapter 4: Consumed with Love

???:

As soon as Kelvin sat on the chair he'd chosen, his surroundings changed instantly. Now, he was enveloped by the noise of hustle and bustle, an atmosphere that seemed somehow nostalgic. Nothing that was being said in the hubbub seemed to have any connection to the rest, with lines like "Today's fish was a triumph!" or "Apparently, there was a new path found in that dungeon," or "If you wanna fight, do it outside!" Next, Kelvin noticed that there was a table shaped like a counter in front of him, meaning he was sitting at a counter seat. Across from him he could see the forms of other patrons of this "establishment," but strangely, all their faces were blurred and he couldn't recognize any of them.

"Wait, why would I really be teleported to an eatery?!"

"Because of me."

That muttered complaint got a reply from the person sitting next to him. The space next to him was piled high with empty plates that seemed freshly finished, and new plates were being added still. The side profile of the person constructing this tower was very familiar to Kelvin, and very beloved by him. At the same time, the appearance of the person was very young, and the hair color was completely different. Still, the way she ate was the same.

Next to him sat the avatar of Melfina's evil emotions, DarkMel.

"Mgmg...gulp. As amazing as ever, owner. Thank you for the meal."

Kelvin could think of nothing to say at the moment. Though DarkMel thanked the owner of the eatery for her meal after finishing, the owner similarly stayed silent. None of the people around them showed any interest in them either. Normally, a pile of plates that high would have attracted attention whether the diner liked it or not. It was as if Kelvin and DarkMel didn't actually exist.

"So, what is this place, and where is it? Is it a recreation of someplace from your memories or something?"

“Hee hee! Just what I expected of you, honey. You see through everything. This is a recreation of a memory of mine. Of course, the current you probably doesn’t remember it. But you did well noticing that this place wasn’t real.”

“Anyone would think this place wasn’t real after seeing you get no attention after eating all that while looking like a child. I’ve thought this all the time with Melfina, but where do you even store all that food in your body?”

With another look at the mass of dishes DarkMel had piled up, Kelvin heaved a deep sigh. In her current state, DarkMel looked very young, basically the same age as Shutola in her child form. Even so, she had managed to eat the same amount that Melfina usually did. Kelvin was feeling even more exasperated than usual, and that was only natural.

“I, DarkMel, am basically the other side of the coin of me, Melfina. Basically, another facet. When I, DarkMel, was sealed inside the Holy Lance, it became necessary for me, Melfina, to consume enough to feed two people. So now that Melfina is trapped, why wouldn’t I, DarkMel, have to eat as well, even with my young appearance? You still get hungry while sealed away.”

“I...see...”

Having gotten a much more reasonable response than expected, Kelvin adopted a somewhat troubled expression, as he didn’t know how to react. At the same time, he was still greatly puzzled. Though DarkMel looked smug, even eating for two people wouldn’t explain the amount she’d just eaten. Kelvin hesitated over whether or not to point that out. After some wavering, he decided to simply watch with a warm look.

“Um...is it just me or did you think something rude just now? What is with that look?”

“I believe I told you this before, but...it’s just your imagination.”

“Is it now? Yes, well, I suppose it must be. After all, we will shortly be welcoming the time we have both been waiting and wishing for, one of absolute bliss. There’s no way you’d ruin it with some joke.”

“And yet you brought me to an eatery. Honestly, I never expected this to be the place I’d be teleported to.”

“At first I considered bringing you to a decorated church and welcoming you while playing an organ, but I felt it was somehow...off. After all, that was the chair you would most likely pick, honey.”

“Well done. You can self-analyze. True, when I think of you, I would never pick a pew or chair from a church. I can also say that the previous me wouldn’t do that either.”

“You really are saying some rude stuff, aren’t you?”

Kelvin and DarkMel were having a pleasant chat, and from the outside, they just looked like two people of opposite genders who got along really well. This was, of course, assuming that whoever the onlooker was ignored how young one of them looked. Even so, they definitely seemed to be in love.

After a while, Kelvin asked, “Are you...okay without crying now?”

“You’ve tripped me up again... My tears all dried up after the last time I met you, so there’s no need to worry! More importantly, don’t you want something to eat, honey? This will be your last meal, you know?”

“It won’t be. Also, I’ve already buffed myself with Efil’s homemade cooking.”

Food made by Efil quite literally had the ability to confer effects on those who consumed it. Of course, DarkMel knew what Kelvin meant by that, but she still seemed somewhat unhappy about it. It was like she wanted to scold him and tell him not to bring up other women.

Regrouping, she cleared her throat. “You have met many people in this world, honey, and have been influenced by many things. I’m glad that you’ve had so much fun.”

“Yeah, I really have. I’m grateful to you for reincarnating me.”

DarkMel continued, “You have influenced this world far more than I expected, honey. If not for you, honey, your comrades would never have gathered here. Even before that, they would likely not have led happy lives. If Touya and the other current Heroes had tried to defeat the Demon Lord themselves, they would have killed Gerard, the black spirit knight on the way to Trycen. Due to her curse, Efil would have, in the worst case, had her arms severed by a worthless master. Not even Sera would have been guaranteed to be safe, and

Rion would never have been reincarnated. Clotho and Alex would probably have been killed by some unknown adventurer. You are also the only person who would have even tried to bring the three dragons in alive. If not for the speed at which the allied army came together, Shutola would have met a tragic end while still brainwashed. Ange would have been the same, bound by the trappings of her past life, never having regained her current brightness."

After a while, Kelvin replied, "Yeah, maybe. But that didn't happen."

"It might yet, you know? If you lose our fight, I will take the seat of the Goddess. When that happens, I will reincarnate the whole world, creating a new one. These people will not be there. It will be a whole new existence, with new adventures and new friends—and you will open the curtains on a new life. Then it will happen again, and then again, forever. All held within my hands."

Their chat was now over. DarkMel got up from her seat as if to say as much, turning her back to Kelvin and manifesting her black wings.

"You're so hasty, DarkMel. All of that's only for after our fun, isn't it? I'd appreciate it if you didn't just assume I'll lose."

DarkMel paused. "Do you really think you can win? Even though I displayed such a gap between our abilities last time?"

"And did *you* really think I'd just come here knowing I'd lose? That I'd plan this huge ruckus, even though you know me so well?"

Kelvin's expression held no hesitation or fear. The only thing in his eyes was a strong will and true belief that he would win. Seeing that in his face, DarkMel smiled a little.

"Now then, it's about time to get started."

"Yeah, let's. But before that...how about it?"

DarkMel seemed puzzled. "Ah, hee hee. You're right."

Let's go back to square one. As if to say that, Kelvin went to the entrance of the eatery while DarkMel once again sat at the counter. Her legs didn't reach the floor in that somewhat tall chair, so she swung them back and forth as she seemingly waited for someone.

“Yo, I came as promised. Did I make you wait?”

“No, I just arrived as well. At most I’ve only been waiting about three minutes.”

Kelvin had called out to her, and seeing as he was the one she had been waiting for, DarkMel was overjoyed as she hopped off the stool. What kind of farce was this? Why were they doing this? The answer was simple: they wanted to. There was no deeper meaning.

“I see, then...”

“Yes, let’s...”

Cracks ran through the scenery around them as the false dream world crumbled. What the falling pieces revealed was a familiar oracle’s sanctuary. This space, where no one would interfere, had the pair smiling full smiles for many various reasons.

“Let’s fight!”

“Fight to our heart’s content!”

◇ ◇ ◇

Sanctuary of the Black Goddess:

DarkMel and I shouted at the same time, and the scenery of the eatery completely crumbled away along with the dream world. Instead, it was replaced with DarkMel's space, swirling with enormous magic power. Its properties were the same as the oracle skill I had seen before, but the space *looked* pretty much like space. Luckily, there was breathable air, so apparently it wasn't a vacuum. And it seemed that the invisible floor underneath them had indeed been given proper collision. Meaning that DarkMel had nobly gone out of her way and done her best to prepare a place for us to have our last battle. It was very heartwarming to imagine her worrying over what she should do for the final battle, and it fit well with her current young appearance.

"I will not disappoint you or make you regret your decisions. I am the best enemy you will ever have, honey."

However, that appearance was anything but heartwarming. Her equipment looked like a color-inverted version of Mel's Valkyrie series armor, and the fallen angel's wings she had been manifesting were now fully formed, larger and wider than seemed to fit her young body, and spread to their full length. Her jet-black fallen angel's halo was also sparking with similarly black lightning, giving her a very aggressive appearance.

That spirit is right up my alley.

"Holy lance: activate."

A familiar pair of divine spears appeared on either side of DarkMel, the very one who had become such a fine woman. The spears floated in space under the control of her will; one was Luminary, and the other was Elearis's Eclipse. Though they were holy and divine spears, at present they were overflowing with black and sinister magic power, like miasma. I wasn't sure if it was because they'd been exposed to DarkMel's magic, but my detection skills told me that I should never go head-to-head with them. Most likely, those things would destroy me with a single touch.

"Ridiculous power as always. I still can't tell where the ceiling is."

"Oh my, are you planning to cry about it being unfair now?"

“Nope. I want to stroke your head and tell you that this is the best!”

I readied my black staff and wove some magic. DarkMel had shown me that much power before the fight. I needed to return the favor. *Ahh, my heart is dancing!*

“Sonic Acceleration Penta.”

An immense burden was placed on my body. But, with my toughness I could easily take it. The creaking pain sharpened my senses and excited me. I was perfectly fine.

After watching me, DarkMel said, “Overcharging magic, I see.”

“Exactly. As you well know, my MP is the only thing I’ve got massive amounts of. I’m going to make up the difference between us with this.”

Up until now, thanks to issues with stability and effect duration, I had only been able to use up to Quad when it came to Magic Overclock. Now that I had the blessings of Mdofarak, Dahak, and Fromme, I had broken through my limits. Each use of Penta cost me almost 5,000 MP, turning me into a big eater on the level of Melfina and DarkMel. But by paying the huge price in resources, I could reach DarkMel’s level.

“That certainly is a logical method. But I will say, it’s a little reckless. I’m sure you’ve strengthened yourself with blessings, but that’s just barely maintaining the balance. Because it’s so powerful, the duration of the effect is short, and that hasn’t changed. The opening that shows in the moment it ends, no matter how small, could be the end of you. Understand?”

“How about we try it? You’re tired of talking by now, right?”

DarkMel was silent for a moment. “You’re right. Let’s do that.”

We looked straight at each other, and a small moment was born and passed. Still, that silence only lasted for an instant. In the next blink of an eye, DarkMel would surely disappear from my sight. So I jumped straight towards her, getting close. As I did that, I cast Boreas Death Scythe using my staff and added Fly to my legs at high speed. I had become about twice as fast as Ange, so I had succeeded in getting to see DarkMel’s face from close up. Then, I realized that her eyes had been following me the whole time.

The holy lances that had been sent towards where I had just been swung around. I was locked on to DarkMel as I approached her, with Luminary and Eclipse tailing me. Of course, she was in control of them, meaning that instead of having lost sight of me, she could totally see through this speed I had pushed myself to attain.

Was a hug what you desired? her expression seemed to say with a forbidden amount of seductiveness for her young looks.

However, I hadn't the time to be led astray by such things. My sharpened senses quickly detected the lances that had been flying at me, so I used the speed and momentum I'd built up to tip forward and dodge the attacks that were aimed at my head. The holy lances flew overhead, the wind pressure remnant magic they left behind confirming their passing.

This is more dangerous than Efil's blue flames. As I thought, her attack's in the five-digit class.

"That's some pretty good speed! And you're even starting to control it, honey!"

While I dodged, I swiped at her with my scythe. DarkMel seemed completely unfazed as she nimbly avoided the attack and heaped praise upon me. She had plenty of leeway, seeming like everything was easy for her. My perception, having been trained against Ange with Sonic Acceleration cast upon her, had been raised well and paired with my Parallel Processing skill.

"You ass... I'll make sure to catch you!"

"Hee hee hee, I'm right here!"

A drama then played out, with its actors chasing each other through the air from spot to spot. If someone were to only look at the lines being said, it might have seemed like a conversation between two lovers, but this wasn't something so filled with romance. DarkMel laughed boldly as I chased her and sent slashes at her with my scythe. Meanwhile, her two holy lances flew at me from unexpected angles with terrific momentum. It was like a long-distance race, with the lances following me like mad, and if they ever caught up I'd die. In just these few seconds, I felt like I made several laps around the entire area, which seemed to stretch out infinitely. I tried my best to hide my feelings of

enjoyment and happiness under my expression.

“You... Are you enjoying this more than I am?!”

DarkMel didn’t answer.

Don’t just shut up there! Now there’s no way to tell who’s enjoying this fight more! As someone putting their life on the line, I couldn’t afford to lose out here.

“Obsidian Prison Penta x2!”

In response to DarkMel’s high-speed movement and attacking holy lances, I created a set of black metal bars that surrounded her on all sides. It resembled Obsidian Fortress, but this one was specialized for use as a cage. Its shape was inflexible upon creation and could not be made into anything fashionable like a penthouse or fort. It was a prison that emphasized instantaneousness and durability to capture its target. By overclocking the spell, not even Ange with a speed buff would be able to avoid being caught by the deployment of this spell, as long as she wasn’t using Uncontainable. And not even Gerard’s strength would be able to break it.

“Oh?”

DarkMel was not an exception, and neither were her holy lances that had been chasing me. No matter how small or fast the target was, this spell would contain them. To prove that, DarkMel was in fact trapped inside at this very moment.

“I’d say it’s about time I used my own magic, wouldn’t you agree honey? Defiling Clime.”

Her voice sounded like she was in a good mood, but then pitch-black water that looked like it was colored by ink started to flow through the gaps of the iron bars.

The amount of overflowing liquid was immense, pouring out ceaselessly from the gaps in the prison. It was more viscous than normal water, and looked as if something muddy was mixed in. That, coupled with its pitch-black color, indicated that it was the exact opposite of clear, drinkable water. There was so much of this muddied water that it made me hesitate to get closer. It exited the

prison and dripped onto the invisible floor, slowly eating up the space we were in.

“That isn’t one of Melfina’s spells. Your original, I presume?”

“Are you really asking that? The magic I, DarkMel, wield has always been different from the magic I, Melfina, wield.”

It seemed that DarkMel could still speak normally from inside the prison, no matter how much water was overflowing to the outside. It was her own spell, so that was only natural, though. Still, even after using Analyze Eye to see through the characteristics of the spell, I hadn’t come away with any useable info. Something was fundamentally different from all the magic I’d seen up until now. That was all I could understand.

“You should be well aware of the White and Blue Magic that I, Melfina, used, correct honey? The powers of shining light and life-giving water—truly Goddess-like, no?”

“And the magic you use is in no way shining or light-filled.”

“Indeed. The magic I, DarkMel, use is Black and Blue Magic. This spell, Defile Clime, is a combination of darkness and water attributes. Didn’t you combine your wind with Efil’s fire into a spell once? If I remember right...yeah, didn’t you call it ‘Dryer?’ You could call this the ultimate form of a combined spell like that.”

“Ha ha! That’s some confidence. Thanks for going out of your way to tell me.”

Dryer? Dang, she pulled out a blast from the past. It was developed by holding back on the power of two different spells and combining them to somehow use them in place of a household appliance. It was a combined spell in name only.

Meanwhile, DarkMel’s spell was perfected enough to be able to be referred to as a true example of combined magic. Instead of intoning two different spells and forcing them together, she had incorporated two attributes into one spell from the beginning to produce a new kind of magic. It was something I couldn’t yet pull off, and honestly I couldn’t even imagine what kind of effects it could have.

Creeeaaaaak!

Things only started to seem strange right after DarkMel and I stopped talking. The Obsidian Prison trapping DarkMel started to warp, as if being torn apart from the inside. All I could see from the other side of those metal bars were some small, small fingers. DarkMel's fingers, pure white as if to symbolize weakness in contrast to the blackness of her wings and hair, bent apart the prison that I had constructed using the best of my magic. As if she was merely playing with clay, or like a child simplemindedly destroying a toy, DarkMel forced the prison completely out of shape, revealing herself once again.

From the newly made gap, black water gushed out with even more force. It looked like the prison was an eye that was crying uncontrollably. However, DarkMel was in that swirl of liquid and wasn't getting dirty at all. It seemed like the water was only going to dye something other than her in its colors. Those bars weren't something you could destroy with just pure strength, though.

"Facing you like this now, honey, I find that I can't stop myself from talking."

We exchanged looks before DarkMel said that, sounding like she was truly having fun. She was like a young child who was playing pranks on the person she liked. However, in this case, it was the girl doing the pranking instead of the boy.

"Just warning you now: you shouldn't touch this Defile Clime."

"Yeah, I got that just from looking at it."

The fact that she had broken the jail after the water touched it made it clear that the water itself had some sort of effect. Luckily, the cage that was enclosing the holy lances was still present, and all that seemed to be happening there were intermittent banging noises. The lances would probably break free in time, but as long as I didn't let that water touch the cage, it would probably hold for a while yet.

"Now then, let's start again. Cruel Demise."

I sucked in a breath in alarm. I only had a moment to think that the other cage would be all right before DarkMel chanted her next spell. This time, the black water that had spread through the area sprouted many tentacle-like appendages that started to move.

“I expected that black water to start attacking me, but...what’s with that form?”

“Doesn’t it seem scarier this way?” DarkMel gave a bright smile, and with that as the signal, the tentacles rose through the air towards my position.

Basically, the entire floor was wet with the muddied water by now, and more was flowing out from the remains of the prison she was sitting on. This water was forming shapes and things that I found it hard to accept physiologically as they wriggled in front of me. Frankly, I could feel my mind slipping away from me just by watching them.

The tentacles were fast. Though not as fast as DarkMel, they were still as good as Ange in her base state. *So it may reach up to five digits.* If they managed to touch the other prison that held the holy lances, those weapons would probably break free just like DarkMel had. That alone would be really annoying, so I was going to try and stop that to the best of my ability.

I deployed Rubber Counter Penta around the cage. After that, I made another cast of Fly—and kicked off! With the cage surrounded by rubberized air, I kicked it straight up. It would be safer than leaving it down below with that hell of tentacles.

Feel free to fly off as far as you like, divine lances.

“Would you please not treat others’ weapons so roughly, honey?”

“Sorry, I’ve just got a bad walk. It’s not as bad as how you sleep, though!”

“W—” DarkMel stammered, “Wow!”

For some reason she seemed a little flustered, but unfortunately for me, I didn’t have the leeway to mind it. After sending the cage with the holy lances away, it was finally my turn. The furious attacks by those squirming tentacles had already started. I dodged all of them, looking for an opening to hit them with an Air Pressure Penta. It seemed to have some effect, since the tentacles faltered. But, the sensation I felt was—

“It’s all Penta, Penta, Penta with you. Are you sure you should be casting those so often? You did the same for that wall you put up earlier too, didn’t you? No matter how much of a giant lump of MP you are, isn’t it about time you

ran dry?”

DarkMel persisted in chatting with me and making merry. I didn’t have that sort of leeway and was instead forced to focus on cutting down the encroaching tentacles from a distance with slashes from my scythe. Before I noticed, the throng of tentacles had adapted to my Air Pressure.

No, it’s not the tentacles. Did something change with my magic?

“It seems like you’re worrying about it so much, we can’t even continue this game of catch, so I’ll just tell you. Anything that touches Defile Clime, whether it be living thing, object, or magic, has its strength or power changed so that its stats are the lowest possible in the world. In other words, no matter how much you try to up the power of your spells by overclocking, it’s all meaningless—”

“Disaster Ray Hexa!”

Mel let out a noise of surprise. I’d responded to her lecture with a magic attack I’d learned from a certain Hero. I’d stepped up the overclocking to Hexa, the most MP-consuming level. In return, though, its power and speed were apparent. DarkMel solidified her defenses around her with the tentacles but realized that I would sweep it all away with the gigantic laser I’d unleashed. So she leaped off the jail she had been sitting on. However, since she’d been late in running, my spell still managed to graze her cheek.

“Oh, so my attacks do totally work on you.”

“Good... Very good, honey!”

DarkMel brought a hand up to her charred cheek as the corners of her mouth rose. I was probably making the same face.

My attack worked against DarkMel. That had been the best news of the day. Scarily, though, the black water had the ability to reduce the power or strength of anything it touched to the lowest levels. DarkMel had said as much herself, full of confidence, so it likely wasn’t a lie. Still, that property wasn’t something that would apply instantly. My Disaster Ray, which had been strengthened to its limit in terms of destructive power and speed, had reached DarkMel—that was proof of my theory. Depending on the subject, it was possible for an attack to be completed before being totally defanged. It was also possible that as long as

whatever it was quickly withdrew after touching the tentacles, I could discount this threat from my attack and defense. It was still scary that whatever touched the tentacles would slowly get weaker, but I felt I could do something about it with some effort and cleverness. In fact, if I didn't I would lose.

"You still insist on using Magic Overclocking even after all this—I can only say that is so you! At the same time, I find it a mystery, a great mystery! I want to unravel the reason your MP seems to be infinite, honey!"

Up until now, DarkMel hadn't allowed me to come close, but now her stance seemed to have changed. She charged at me with ferocious speed while laughing. She seemed to be empty-handed, with no weapons or anything. However, around her the mass of tentacles was still active.

I can't afford to let my guard down, but I'm gonna enjoy myself anyway!

"I owe you for that explanation earlier. I wouldn't mind just telling you, you know!"

"Oh my, then please!"

I blocked DarkMel's flying kick and merciless punch with my staff as we talked. I had a strong impression that a beautiful Goddess would fight mainly with spears and magic, but she could handle herself in hand-to-hand combat as well. I could personally attest to that, given the amount of kneebars and other grappling and locking techniques I'd taken from Melfina back when I was training to be able to handle Rank S magic. She was the type to come break me right away with no mercy or consideration, so the black version of Mel would obviously be the same! Still, I couldn't take back an offer I'd already made, so I couldn't stop talking!

"You know the ability of Skill Eater, which I've got equipped, don't you?"

"Of course! How closely do you think I've been observing you all this time?! It's a pair of gauntlets that allows you to copy the skill of anyone you touch, giving you the chance to make it your own! And your left and right arms get one slot each!"

DarkMel kicked a tentacle I dodged upward, forcing its vector to change forcibly back towards me. While getting a sinking feeling that anything went

with her, I realized that the tentacle would hit me if I didn't do anything. So, I quickly turned it aside with a cast of Impact.

"Indeed, those are the abilities of Skill Eater! So what's important is what skill I copied. I'll tell you: after some trial and error, I settled on Hearty Eating! Now we match!"

"We maaaaatch!" DarkMel shouted ecstatically before she managed to rein herself in, stammering, "No, more importantly...that skill..."

"Yes, I stocked up on a bunch of Melfina's special MP potions!"

Just saying, but I was being completely serious. In fact, I had been so serious when thinking about my fight with DarkMel that this was what all my pondering had led to. By drinking the Mel-stamped highest grade recovery potions that had been stocked up in Clotho's storage, I could recover up to my max MP. The one drawback of my maximum MP was taken care of by the skill I copied. Hearty Eating didn't just apply to solid food, but drinks as well. That had been proven by Mel's eating habits already. In essence, I could recover my MP infinitely!

"I absolutely wanted to bring a piece of Mel's power into my fight with you, DarkMel. I'm glad things went as planned."

"I'm a little miffed that you refer to Hearty Eating as if it's synonymous with me, but for the moment I accept your explanation. I see, so that's how you did it...but all the skills I had as Melfina should have been taken by me. Where did you copy that Hearty Eating skill from?"

"Didn't you say it already? If you have Mel's skills, then I just had to copy it from you, right?"

DarkMel paused for a moment before replying. "When did you even touch me? You're as lewd as ever, touching me without anyone knowing."

"I didn't do it to be lewd! I object to that characterization of events!"

In truth, I didn't actually have to touch the target's physical body as long as I could go through their magic power. I'd had a lot of chances to copy a skill off her, such as when I'd sat next to her in that dream eatery, or when I'd trapped her in my prison. The Hearty Eating skill I had in my Skill Eater was from

DarkMel, but I had also prepared a substitute copy from Clotho just in case that hadn't worked out. I had prepared thoroughly, but I still wanted to do battle with Melfina's skill, so I'd ended up pumping my fist in secret after managing to copy it off DarkMel.

"Well, fine. In short, I'm using your Hearty Eating skill to great effect. Now that my false charges have been cleared up, let's continue!"

"They haven't been cleared up, though?"

I didn't let that stop me. "Let's continue!"

"The way you look just makes you seem more guilty. Did you know that?"

Why're you being so insistent when you're planning to kill me and reincarnate the world anyway? No, well, it's clear just from looking at her face that she's enjoying the conversation.

"Now then, it seems that you, honey, who have played around with this pure maiden's heart, need some scolding."

Scolding? You're still attacking with those tentacles. That's much more than a scolding. Going further, you didn't stop even as I was telling you about my MP.

"Dead End."

Some of the newly formed tentacles gathered around DarkMel. Once they massed around her small hands and feet, even more tentacles came in from behind until they were packed in tight. Because of how densely they were packed, the tentacles were further compressed or possibly fused.

Yeah...just waiting for DarkMel like this while dodging the tentacle attacks is pretty rude, isn't it? I mercilessly used my scythe to send a slash flying at her.

"Barging in while I'm changing... You really are guilty aren't you, honey?" DarkMel turned to me with a nonchalant look, turning aside my slash on the way.

It was turned aside...so easily? Hey now, that was from Boreas Death Scythe, at least technically. Up until now, it had been able to cut down any monster without question and could even do the same to deities. *And yet, you just turned it aside?*

“I don’t mind if you do this to me as much as you want, but never do this to other women. I’ll be displeased if you do that, and it’ll also invite unneeded misunderstandings and jealousy, as well as become a reason for further crimes down the line. Oh my, you aren’t even trying to keep up appearances now, are you?”

“It’s because you so easily go way above my expectations!”

Her hands and feet were now dyed pitch-black. It resembled Sera and Bell’s magic, but it didn’t extend to her arms and legs. The skin of her hands and feet, which had been so white, were now the exact opposite color.

Did she grant the abilities of the tentacles to her hands and feet by pressing them into her skin? I don’t think it’d be something that...soft. I’m sure the compression made it stronger, or had the property take effect more immediately. The slash from my scythe had lost speed, power, and its special trait in an instant after she touched it before flinging it away. Given that, I’m sure I’m right.

Hmmm...the more I think about it, the less options I have. I’m going to be forced into close combat by DarkMel’s speed...with those hands and feet? That feels so impossible—how awesome!

“Is this really the time to act lost like that?”

“I’m not, I’m just excited!”

DarkMel rained down blows with unpredictable trajectories upon me. It was impossible to dodge, and blocking would have been dangerous if it hadn’t been so hard to do so anyway. If I made a mistake in my reaction, I would probably die.

::It’s a little fast, but I guess now isn’t the time to hold back. Clotho!::

Clotho, my companion with whom I’d spent the most time in this world, poked out from my black robes in its new form.

Clotho was the one I had made into my first companion when I had awoken in this world with no memories. Back then, it was a simple blue slime, which might be hard to imagine from its stats now. I believe it was no different from any of the other common monsters around Parth. In my unreliable memory, I had

somehow made it a Follower using the Summoning skill, and from there I'd spent some time with it until, at some point, Clotho had Evolved.

Slimes had a lot of Evolutionary paths, and Melfina had said that not even she knew what it would become. It had gone from being a blue slime to its current race: a Slime Gluttonia. And, having gained a unique skill, Clotho had grown into an even more reliable friend. Even now, though, I still didn't know why the slime had become the race it had.

Clotho was the first to become a friend, and the first to Evolve. However, it hadn't Evolved any further after that, even when Gerard and Alex had done so multiple times. Leveling and gaining stats through Gluttony had become its main methods of strengthening itself. At one point, I had even wondered to myself if that would be as far as Clotho Evolved. It had become a Slime Gluttonia so early, but now no matter how many levels it gained or how powerful an enemy it ate, it showed no signs of Evolving any further.

Still, I ended up quickly abandoning such lines of thought. After all, what good would it do for someone like me to worry when not even Melfina, a goddess, knew for sure? People wouldn't Evolve until they exceeded level 100, and the conditions for Dahak and the other Dragonz were similarly special. They needed to defeat a Dragon King. I had no idea what would be the trigger for its Evolution, and given there was no precedent, I couldn't even begin to guess. But that didn't mean that there was no road left for it to tread. We just needed to continue what we were doing. If it led to Evolution, that was great. That was what I decided.

However, the possibility of Evolution came from the most unexpected of places. We had chanced upon it without even meaning to. It had happened while we were inspecting the items, equipment, and other items we were planning on storing inside Clotho. We were in the underground training area, which was spacious and couldn't be seen from outside. I had been taking items out of Clotho, confirming each item, and then putting it back in order when—

"Hm? This... I got it back in Gaun..."

I was talking about a larger-than-fist-sized magic gem, shining golden, which had fallen out and rolled on the floor. It was the gem we'd ripped off the Divine

Beast Diamante's mask in Gaun's Cavern of Divine Beasts. At the time, I had planned to use it for something, but it ended up languishing in Storage.

"It's been a while since I last saw it, but it really is impressive. You haven't seen a higher-quality magic gem than this either, right, Clotho?"

Clotho made a movement equivalent to a nod. At the same time, the slime reached out a hand from its body to try and get a closer look.

"Here you go; look as much as you want. But still, I wonder if I can add this to some sort of equipment? I feel like it would be too brittle to use in Gerard's shield, and Efil's already using the gem that's her memento. Hmmm...huh? Clotho?"

I had casually looked over at Clotho, who had accepted the gem. For some reason, I felt a sense of unease. Its slime body was jiggling and quivering, and it wasn't responding to my voice. I could feel its swirl of emotions through the Network.

Ah, I thought. I knew what this was; I'd seen it before.

"No way...it's Evolving?"

It reminded me of the scene when Clotho had first Evolved. It had been in my pool back then, but Melfina had been right beside it, calming it down. *Calm, calm...not calm.*

I moved restlessly around Clotho, watching over it. By the time I was about to enter my eighth lap, I finally saw a change. Clotho's entire body suddenly started to shine. It was so bright, I couldn't help but shade my eyes with my arm. Still, I somehow managed to hold on. I wanted to burn its form into my eyes. Its form as a Slime Gluttonia, in whose care I'd been in for so long.

After a while, I ventured, "Clotho?"

The light gradually faded, and Clotho, who had most likely finished its Evolution, showed me a new silhouette.

"Clotho, you..."

Clotho's reborn body was not pitch-black, but blue. It was as if it had returned to its starting race, a blue slime. What was different from a blue slime was its

core. As if the magic gem I had given it had become its core—Clotho's heart was now faintly shining.

Just looking at it, my companion's new form might not have made much of an impact, but what had changed the most was inside. Its abilities couldn't even be compared to before, and in fact DarkMel's face was colored with surprise as she looked at it.

"What...is that?"

"Well, that's mean. You should know, shouldn't you? It's Clotho."

All of DarkMel's attacks had been defended against by Clotho, who had jumped out. Its slime body had stuck out and made contact with DarkMel's fist, preventing it from hitting me. Once again, I was impressed with how powerful Blunt Damage Invulnerability was. I would have liked to have learned it if I could, but it wasn't on the list of skills I could acquire. None of my party members could obtain it either, so it must have been special to slimes. Too bad.

"I see, Blunt Damage Invulnerability. But you were a little careless. My Dead End will degrade your stats regardless of any resistances, just so you know. No matter how much your stats have grown from Evolution, I will return it all to nothing."

"Really, now? But Clotho seems to be raring to go."

Clotho was still intercepting her fists, and there was no sign of its stats declining. In fact, I could feel its motivation through the Network as it upped the voltage. It also activated Absorption.

"Hmmm?"

Finally, DarkMel seemed to think something was up, as when one of her fists was caught, she shook herself free and backed up. Then, she looked down at her own limbs. It looked like she didn't understand why her degradation ability wasn't working.

Don't worry yourself over it.

DarkMel's ability was working just fine, and it hadn't been undone. It simply didn't work on Clotho.

After a moment, she asked, “Is it Clotho’s power?”

“Well, who knows? I just gave you an answer to a question, so I don’t plan on giving you any more hints.”

“I see. I suppose it was a foolish question. My apologies.”

The two holy lances that had been trapped came down from above to rejoin her.

So they escaped.

DarkMel would most likely be showing her true stuff from here on out. Still, my job was Summoner. Going forward, I would be fighting with a reliable partner.

Clotho, 0 y/o, Gender N/A, Dille Marè

Level: 198

Title: Everlasting Darkness

HP: 8496/8496 (+100)

MP: 9044/9044 (+100)

STR: 7304 (+100)

Endurance: 6702 (+100)

Agility: 6318 (+100)

Magic: 5839 (+100)

Luck: 5330 (+100)

Skills: Gluttony (Unique Skill), Unchanging (Unique Skill), Armored Skin (Rank S), Auto Healing (Rank S), Metallicize (Rank S), Absorption (Rank S), Flexibility (Rank S), Division (Rank S), Dismantle (Rank S), Storage (Rank S), Hearty Eating (Rank S), Digest (Rank S), Blunt Damage Invulnerability, All Elemental Resistance

Passive Effects: Summoning/Magic Supply (Rank S), Concealment (Rank S)

When Evolving into a Dille Marè, Clotho had gained the unique skill Unchanging, which invalidated all abnormal statuses or status debuffs that would harm it. The skill was the ultimate natural enemy of all obstruction and debuff abilities. Take, for example, Sera’s Black Magic, which had a lot of spells

like Sword Break or Armor Corrosion that lowered a specific stat for a period of time—none of that would work on Clotho. The same also went for loss of HP due to deadly poison, paralysis due to electric shock, or anything of the like. DarkMel's degrading attacks were no exception, so no matter how much they touched it, nothing would happen.

"Haah!"

"Grk!"

With a holy lance in either hand, DarkMel applied her Dead End effect to them. Now, the holy lances favored by divinity were dyed black, losing all traces of their previous sacredness. However, they were much more wickedly powerful than their appearances suggested, and the pressure she exuded was much greater than when she had been attacking with her bare hands. She had yet to touch me, but I could tell that those black spears were stupid sharp. And of course, Clotho wasn't immune to slashing attacks.

"Hee hee! You can still fight me even when I have Luminary and Eclipse in my hands! That's more than I expected... No, I should say...that's just like you, honey!"

"Could you not refer to me like I'm your property?! If that's what you're going for, then by law, you'd be mine instead!"

"I'd actually love that!"

I was only able to hold on in spite of her strength thanks to the level of coordination between Clotho and me. By connecting my telepathic function with Parallel Processing, I could effectively split the roles of attack and defense between us. Doing so greatly lessened my burden so that I could deal with the tentacles closing in on me from outside my field of vision even as I dealt with DarkMel. Rather than doing all this consciously, I was sensing her thought patterns and trusting the flow of things to naturally move my body. Or at least, something close to that.

One of the greatest features of Clotho's new unique skill was that it could still receive the effects of unharmful stat changes, such as buffs, as normal. More specifically, this applied to spells cast on it by members of its party, but that meant I could give it Sonic Acceleration. The overclocked buffs that had placed

such a strain on my body could be handled by Clotho in its current state with no problems. With the tag team between me and my once-slime, we could fight evenly with DarkMel even when she was serious.

On top of that, the part of Clotho still in my robes had spread itself into a thin layer covering my body, so it was also doing double duty as a final line of defense for me. This wasn't making use of its invulnerability to blunt damage as had been revealed earlier, but Clotho's ability let it repel most melee attacks using Armored Skin or resist all elemental attacks with its All Elemental Resistance. Depending on the situation, it could also harden itself by turning into metal using Metallicize. Moreover, Clotho had the Flexibility skill and could regenerate lost chunks of its body at tremendous speed using Auto Heal. Essentially, it was like I was wearing the world's best armor. Clotho was truly a partner I could rely on.

"Bubbling Disorder."

I made an alarmed noise. There was no way I would miss the intonation DarkMel had muttered after the latest swipe of one of her black holy lances was repelled. I allowed the impact of the clash to send me flying as I immediately deployed an Adamantite Rampart. Of course, I made sure to overclock it as I had been doing with all the spells I'd been casting. Meanwhile, I used my momentum to fly backwards.

The moment I made that move, the wall I'd created crumbled. I could see countless small bubbles and foam spreading before my eyes. The foam multiplied and multiplied, steadily swelling forward. Or so I thought, but the bubbles that made contact with the wall were repelled, and a small piece of what it made contact with disappeared. It was as if, right before disappearing, the piece of wall had been enveloped and eaten by a bubble. The effect range of each one was small, but their numbers were enormous. Because the bubbles were multiplying faster than they disappeared, the area they covered naturally grew more and more.

"Jeez, you trying to outdo Clotho or something?!"

The reason I said that was that the bubbles closely resembled Clotho's Gluttony. However, they had no sense of manners or anything of the like, and

seemed to only have eating on their agenda. Clotho eats elegantly enough in peacetime, okay?!

"Oh, I take that back. Those bubbles resemble you more than Clotho!"

"What does that mean?!"

I'll leave that to your imagination. Still, the fact that my wall was so easily consumed meant that not even Clotho would be able to easily survive getting hit by it. *So she's, like, trying to finish me with high firepower that ignores defenses since her degrading water isn't working?*

I could feel even more sinister magic power swirling around from beyond the foam. I got the feeling that if I spent too much time dealing with the bubbles, I'd be too late for a lot of other things.

::I'll leave the details to you, Clotho. Let me concentrate for a bit on cleaning that stuff up.::

I threw the bottle of the recovery potion I had chugged forward as I instantly used the MP I had just regained. The magic concentrated on the tip of my black staff, on the point where it connected to my scythe. The moment the encroaching foam touched the empty bottle, I unleashed the magic I had been gathering.

"Boreas Death Scythe Hexa!"

It was the most MP I'd ever spent on a single spell. My scythe enlarged to a point where it could just barely keep its form to unleash an extra large slash. It was large enough to hit all the bubbles that were still attempting to multiply, and no matter what the bubbles tried to do, the slash uncaringly cut through everything in its path.

Maybe I'd have been able to slice the ark in half with this, a small corner of my mind under the effects of Parallel Processing thought as Clotho and I followed after the slash. We had one goal: DarkMel's throat.

Soon enough, the slash reached DarkMel herself. She crossed her black holy lances and attempted to defend against the attack. Her expression hadn't changed, and neither had mine.

“Look well! I am the only one who can take an all-out attack from you, honey!”

DarkMel blew away the attack I’d put so much effort into while she laughed. No matter how instantaneous her degradation effect was, it was a shock to see my attack so easily neutralized. Still...it was within the realm of my expectations.

“That was a pretty big swing!” I shouted. “That was actually really painful for you, wasn’t it?”

In dealing with the slash, DarkMel had made a grand swing with her holy lances and was now stuck recovering her stance. *Her degradation wouldn’t have made it in time if she hadn’t done that*, I told myself, taking a convenient interpretation. Either way, she had shown a large opening. Having chased after the slash, I had arrived right in front of her.

“Yes, exactly as I’d planned. Shift to Holy Extermination Form. Charge MP.”

“Grk?!” I reflexively let out a noise. DarkMel’s holy lances, which should have been indisposed due to her overblown swing, had already come back around and were available for use. The black balls of light at the tip of each lance were the exact same signs that warned of Mel’s giant beam attack.

She used that to disintegrate Demon Lord Zel along with my proposal... No way, is she planning to make a sweep with it as it’s firing?!

“Burst Lancer!”

DarkMel’s expression was practically screaming that she wanted to be praised so badly she couldn’t stand it. Looking my opponent in the face, I was sure that she’d actually do it. In fact, she already was firing that beam of divine light. DarkMel’s black wings spread as wide as they could, and she was flanked on either side by those superweapons from the age of the gods. Heedless of the tentacles around her that she herself had created, everything was being swallowed up in the black light she was unleashing. Both giant beams were closing in on me like a pair of scissors, and all I could see was the end of the world.

::Thanks for staying with me all this time, Clotho. But I’d like you to stay just a

little bit more. I want to give her a little surprise.::

I sent that message at high speed through the network, and Clotho immediately approved. This would be the first time I ever used this in a real battle. But strangely, I knew it would work. Clotho got on my black staff, and I concentrated everything I had, all of my senses on my plan. *Yes. Do it. Make it happen. Show that beloved idiot who's on top.*

"Mortality Beam Hexaaaaaaaa!"

In that instant, DarkMel's sanctuary was filled with light.

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I met DarkMel's greatest attack head-on with ours. The moment our attacks clashed, the entire space was filled with a magnificent explosion, or at least I thought it was. The reason I only "thought" so was because not even I, someone who was there, could tell for sure. Magic was swirling all over the place, inundating the area with so much raw information that my detection skills couldn't keep up. The sensations of brightness, pain, and heat poured in through every pore of my body.

Oh well, it's not a problem.

What Clotho and I had to do was exceedingly simple and clear. We just needed to pour all our power into our attack—that was it. Luckily, I knew that we were still alive. So the only thing left was to put everything into the spell, right?



Skeeeeeeeee—

I had struggled as much as I could, and used all my stamina and MP. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears, and my vision was completely hazy. It felt like I was still holding on to my black staff, but it seemed I was putting too much strength into it, because I couldn't really let go. The fact that my own senses were getting to be untrustworthy was pretty dangerous.

What happened? Who won that clash? Can I keep going? This is so fun, dammit. Even after ending up like this, all I can think about is fighting. Well, that's fine. I'll only stop when I've beaten DarkMel. The fight isn't over yet.

"Hagh...agh!"

I let out a huge breath. It was hard, like I was choking. It felt like I hadn't breathed for hours, and I could finally feel the blood in me slowly starting to flow.

"Heh... Hee hee..."

I thought I heard DarkMel's voice from some distance away. *Oh come on, both of us are still alive after all that? There's a limit to how strong our dumb luck is.* I wanted to say all that out loud, but it seemed it would take a little more for my voicebox to recover. I choked when I tried to push myself to speak.

"More...than anticipated... Completely...unexpected! Ahhh, honey....I will always...you, honey!"

Gradually, my sight recovered. It was blurry, but I could definitely see the black goddess in front of me. At the same time, I felt a coolness under my robes. It was the thin membrane of Clotho, who had protected me. Its response was weak, but it meant Clotho was still alive. Still, it seemed it had exhausted all its power along with the MP it had stored at the same time, so its consciousness was hazy. For the moment, I undid Clotho's Summoning, returning it to my pool to recover.

"*Hack, hack!* Aghh... Hngh!"

My eyes... Good, don't seem to be any problems there.

I could see DarkMel's two holy lances scattered around, half-destroyed. I

would sound terribly hoarse, but by now I felt like I'd be able to speak.

"Well, don't you look just awful, DarkMel."

"You're not much different, honey."

With all my senses dulled so much, I sat my tattered ass down on the transparent floor. Meanwhile, DarkMel's voice was comparatively clear. After all that had happened, it would have been nice if she'd at least had to sit down, even if she wasn't completely beaten. But DarkMel had planted herself firmly and stayed standing.

"Yeah, I really aren't, am I?"

Still, though she was standing, after taking our all-out attack, DarkMel had received what seemed like a fatal wound. Blood blossomed freely over her youthful body, creating a strong sense of mismatch. She had a section of tentacle covering her wound, probably as some sort of makeshift bandage. Either she couldn't use White Magic or had run out of magic, but regardless, she had to make do with emergency measures. Why was she still standing even after taking so much damage, though?

After that thought crossed my mind, I started to feel how pathetic I was, but somehow I also felt happy, and I couldn't stop myself from standing up as well.

"So, did that settle our little match?"

"What would make you think that?" DarkMel quipped. After a moment, though, she continued, "No, it's about time I started being honest. Seriously, I'm pretty much at my limit."

She was saying such lovely things to me, even as she was coughing up blood. Basically, she could still fight.

"I have a calling. It is to kill you with my own hands, reincarnate you, and spend eternity with you, honey."

"I have a calling, too. It is to accept your love and crush your calling into tiny little pieces."

Darkmel was silent for a moment, but soon enough: "Right, I understand. After all, out of everyone in the world, I know you best. But that calling will

never be fulfilled.”

Suddenly, my heart started beating faster. Instead of getting weaker, DarkMel’s power was only rising, along with a black light. That wasn’t all; her young-looking body grew to the same age as Melfina’s artificial body. Even her armor, which had been destroyed, had changed size.

“Ha ha! Well, crap. So is this something like a second phase?”

“Weren’t you the one who always said that a last boss should be able to transform? I only lived up to your expectations. Of course, this form only exists to forcefully make use of a goddess’s powers. It places a tremendous burden on me too, and it’s not like I’ve healed the wounds dealt to me before transforming.”

In other words, she’s pushing herself real hard.

“But now that I’ve become like this, my strength is—”

“Yeah. It can’t even be compared to your previous childlike one, right? What the hell, so are you trying to say this is the power of a real goddess?”

Even mortally wounded, the aura of strength that DarkMel was putting out was crazy. I couldn’t get a sense of the upper limits of her power, and I had no idea how I could beat her. The fact that her form implied that she would now be using her powers as a goddess most likely meant that I would now be facing her true power.

What ridiculous strength. It’s like all the plans I made and options I prepared aren’t worth anything.

“I have been continuously impressed by you, honey. But that all ends now. I have confirmed that you have unsummoned Clotho, who was your partner and your last hope. What can you even do now? There’s no time, so I will be ending this quickly.”

DarkMel’s holy lances had been destroyed, but even without her weapons, her two hands were already more lethal than those things. In my current state, and even at full strength, it probably would have been easy for her to bury me.

“Well, shit, I don’t think there’s any way to win...”

“Heh... Hee hee hee! I will make sure you die painlessly.”

“Mm.”

I raised my right arm towards DarkMel, who was coming to wrest the life from me. She made a puzzled noise.

“What kind of move is that?”

“Before I busted into this ark, I punched Tristan in the face, you see. I owed him that from before, so even if I had to let someone else finish him, I wanted to at least do that much to make myself feel better.”

“I see...and? I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bring up that clown during this time that’s meant for the two of us.”

“I wouldn’t bring him up for no reason—why would I want to? Don’t you understand? I punched your Apostle with this hand, you know?”

“So what? Urrghh!”

DarkMel’s eyes opened wide. It seemed she finally caught on to what I was saying. But I’d already recovered enough to instantly down some recovery potions. Melfina’s special fast-acting medicine filled my stomach faster than a goddess could, returning my MP to me.

My arms were equipped with Skill Eater. And one of those arms now had Divine Manipulator on it. I had “welcomed” the unique skill into my arm when I punched Tristan.

“DarkMel, my fight with you was filled with improvised moves, and it was so fun I couldn’t help myself. So to thank you, I’ll show you my last trick as a Summoner—make sure you watch from your special seat, okay?”

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Divine Manipulator: a unique skill that allowed for the owner of the skill to summon the divine without expending max MP. Tristan had used this to get his hands on a large number of Divine Pillars, and he had used them freely as his Followers. However, this skill wasn’t omnipotent, and it only applied to divinity of the lower ranks. When trying to Summon anything more than that, no matter the method or contract, max MP would be taken.

However, what I expected from this skill wasn't its ability to remove the max MP penalty. That was only an extra, something incidental to what I really wanted it for. According to the info given to me by Melfina, while the skill didn't fully apply to higher-ranked divinity, it would at least somewhat reduce the cost of Summoning.

Yes, it had reduced the Summoning cost of my Followers.

"Honey, you're planning to summon a goddess's—Melfina's true body? Something like that—"

"You went as far as to become a goddess for me, so don't say something like that's impossible. Even if there's no precedent, or it's incredibly reckless, you're the one who demonstrated that it was possible, DarkMel!"

DarkMel had only absorbed Melfina's artificial body. Or more specifically, Elearis's body. It wasn't Melfina's—the current Goddess of Reincarnation's—real body. Melfina had been unable to return to her real body and had instead been stuck within my pool as an emergency measure. Given that, I thought DarkMel had probably engineered it so that Melfina couldn't do such a thing. That made things simple. If she couldn't go to her body, then I would just have her body come to her. If I could just Summon Melfina as a true goddess, Melfina, who was slowly fading in her current state, would be returned to her original form. It was a very brute-force method, but...I had no choice but to try.

DarkMel silently grit her teeth, but she didn't try to move. Did she not want to interrupt my Summoning, or was she wondering if I could really Summon Melfina? Or did she just want to confirm my intentions? Either way, my only choices were to succeed in this or lose. I hadn't tested whether or not I could do it beforehand, so this would truly be my first time as well as a test. I needed to make it happen, no matter what.

After a while, I said, "Hmm...that's not quite right. You're the type to welcome me with restaurant seating. It should be more like...going through a door or something."

I gave up on trying to think too deeply and decided to try the Summoning with a fresh new feeling. *This will be a reunion with the one I love! Wooooooooo! It's been a long time, and I can feel the magic draining from my entire*

boooddyyyyyy!

Just like that, as I was harming my own health at an incredible rate, before I'd noticed, my surroundings had brightened. It had become something unfitting of the space-like place I was in before. It was warm, with kind and gentle light coming down from above.

Ah, I know this warmth. It was the kind of warmth that would have Colette crying in joy and hyperventilating with snot running down her nose as she attempted to suck in and taste all the air around her. I could feel my eyes growing hot. This might be the only time I could understand that pervert's feelings.

"So the last enemy is me, huh? This is our first time meeting face to face, isn't it, Goddess of Reincarnation Melfina? How do you feel, seeing your dark side in the flesh?"

After a moment came a familiar voice. "Right, well, let's see. Even after everything you've done, I strangely am not mad at all. But your attempt to hurt the one I love most is something I cannot forgive."



Melfina was standing in front of me, facing off against DarkMel. The bluish, gentle light that shone down on the area was undoubtedly coming from her. She looked familiar to me, but was that excessive godliness something she did to give me a sense of happiness after not seeing her for so long?

Anyway, let's stop the roundabout descriptions now. Melfina, the girl I yearned for, was back.

"You finally did it, honey. Summoning me was the one goal you had from the start—and it was worth waiting sooooo so long. I give you my stamp of approval!"

Mel turned around to face me for a moment, and she had a fuller smile than I had ever seen. No treat or feast Efil had ever made had elicited such a smile from her.

Oh crap...I'm so happy.

"Your age is already over, Melfina, Goddess of Reincarnation. Withdraw graciously."

"DarkMel, was it? I would say no, you are the one who should know your place...but now that we've come this far, I'll stop beating around the bush. Come, hit me with everything that's in your heart. I will answer in kind. Or are you too embarrassed to have your innermost feelings heard by the one you love most?"

After a moment, DarkMel replied, "I see. It looks like you're plenty prepared for this, then."

"Yes, of course. I will take over from here, honey. It'll be pretty dangerous, so take care."

Both sides flapped their pure white and jet black wings respectively, as if trying to intimidate the other. At the same time, they locked eyes and their angel's halos shone brightly. With just that, the area was taken over by a stupendous sense of pressure. Pathetically, I couldn't even bring myself to stand in it. Even Clotho, who was immaterial in my pool, was afraid.

As if they had matched their timings on purpose, Melfina and DarkMel each

sucked in a breath at the same time. As one might expect from two beings who used to be one person, their actions were basically mirrors of each other.

But...why the breath?

"Go away, Melfina! I should be in that spot; it's what I've dreamed of for so many years! I refuse to wait any longer! I will *not* give up on this! Some woman who just sat in her position as Goddess and did nothing isn't worthy of him!"

"Would *you* actually withdraw after hearing that?! Unfortunately for you, I am a very persistent girl! I am an endlessly stubborn woman! Even if you love him the most in the world, I will love him even more than that! Even if I'm not worthy of him, I would be greedy and stay!"

There was no saying things in a roundabout way, no subtlety as the two exchanged their true feelings, clashing them against each other as they slugged it out. As they shouted, their voices twisted the atmosphere, emitting pressure so immense that I couldn't face them directly. There were actual, tremendous physical forces at work here, but in my case, the hot and heavy feelings I was being hit with were even stronger.

It was too late now, but suddenly I realized, *Huh? Is this that legendary scene of carnage between women?* So thought a small part of my Parallel Processing partitioned consciousness. *Still, though, things are this deadly from the very start? Makes me wonder what would happen if the two goddesses were to fight for real. That's strange, my body's trembling. I haven't felt fear at the prospect of a fight since I was approached by Goldiana's faction.*

"Good, well done. I will erase you myself. I alone am sufficient as his legal wife...no, his *wife*!"

"Oh? You seem up against a wall. Do you not have the confidence and pride to insist you're the legal wife no matter how many more lovers he takes? Sure, I'll take you on—in order to stay myself!"

Every time they exchanged arguments, I had the delusion that I was stuck right in the middle of them. *How strange...truly strange!*

Leaving aside those delusions, now that the holy lances had been destroyed, the two of them were fighting with their bare hands. It was inappropriate, but I

couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of how their fight would unfold from here on out. Yeah...I know it's inappropriate, so forgive me for that.

"I will be the one who stands next to my honey!" both of them shouted in unison. And with that, the grand slugfest between goddesses began.

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A scuffle between women, huh? In general, that meant lots of slaps or hair pulling...basically, someone would imagine a catfight. However, what was happening in front of me was clearly far above that level.

"Hagghh!"

"Hwup!"

They matched fist with fist, kick with kick, and grappling move with grappling move. It was a bare-handed fistfight with both fighters clearly trying to kill. There was no mercy or constraint in what they aimed for with their fists, with them hitting at each other's face or stomachs with all their might. Not only that, but each blow was as strong or stronger than Clotho's and my strongest attack. If I had taken even one of those, I knew I would be turned into chunks of meat. I didn't want this knowledge, though; it killed me inside.

"Gaghh! Not...yet!"

"Grkkhh!"

Even after taking blows of such fearsome power, both of their movements were still as crisp as ever. In fact, they were getting faster, until finally I stopped being able to keep up with them with my eyes. That was how much energy they clashed with; even from where I was, the shock waves of their fight reached me such that I had to use what little magic I had left to construct a barrier. Honestly, it seemed like just the shock waves would break my bones. I barely had the leeway to spectate, as instead I was plunged into a time of just trying to withstand the intense pain that assaulted me.

Even without being able to see Melfina's and DarkMel's movements, there was something I could glean from all this pain I was receiving. And that was exactly how much DarkMel in her young form was holding back, as well as the fact that I hadn't reached her dimension with all my plans and little tricks, not

even a little. I had managed to even out the situation by summoning Melfina the Goddess of Reincarnation and borrowing her power. But I was completely reliant on her... As a man, it was kind of pathetic.

::But at the same time, it kind of makes me happy too. It really seems this habit of mine won't ever get fixed, will it, Clotho?::

There were no actual words, but Clotho replied with an exasperated feeling, as if it was saying, "What, you're only realizing it now?"

Yeah, you're right. It's not the time to be lost in pensive thought.

Seriously, though, the scale of this fight was getting out of hand. And I wasn't talking from a place of personal emotion; this was a physical problem. Specifically, this black domain that DarkMel had deployed was starting to give up the ghost.

This palace was made with esoteric techniques like Colette uses, right? My Boreas Death Scythe and Setsuna's Iron Cutting Authority could do it too, but to break an esoteric technique's barrier just with the aftershocks of your fight...what kind of joke is that?

"Uh, Hey...wait a second, you guys..."

"Honey! Please shut up for a second!" both of them shouted, once again in unison.

I had no words to reply with. Or rather, I couldn't get them out. With both the white and black versions of Mel saying the same thing, I understood on a cellular level that I couldn't go against that. *Just what was that moving reunion from before, then?* Their battle instincts had reached a fever pitch already, and they had moved into an aerial battle using their wings.

"Wait, hey! No, that's bad!"

They were already exerting tremendous force on the area when they were fighting on the ground. If they were to fly all around the place as they pleased in an aerial battle, spreading their ridiculous energies throughout, then DarkMel's domain would seriously be smashed to pieces. It was because of this domain that two goddesses could even fight without affecting the outside world. If that were to disappear, then—

“Shaaaaaagghhhh!!!” both of them shouted at once.

I heard an ominous shattering sound, like a piece of the world had been destroyed.

◇ ◇ ◇

Central Ocean:

While the white and black deities were having their unrestrained punch-out, things were mostly settled on the outside of the ark. All the powerful enemies outside had been eliminated, leaving only the angels that were continuously pouring out from the ark, which could be dealt with by the forces that were left. In order to support Kelvin and the others, who had gone on ahead inside the ark, Sera and her group were about to charge inside as well. But...

“Hmmm...as I thought, I’m getting a bad feeling. A really bad one!” Sera said with her eyes closed and arms crossed. She had tried to concentrate on her senses while in the air, and that was once again what she came up with.

“Again?! Sera, you said that before.” Gerard paused. “But were you being serious? You’ve already warned us, but nothing’s happened.”

“I’m super serious, the most serious! I don’t know where this feeling is coming from, but I can feel it clearly. What about you, father?”

“If Sera says so, then it must be so! Your Papa supports you all the way!”

“Wow... Well, leaving Sera aside, I don’t really want to put too much faith in this one... Still, it’ll take Shutola and the others a little longer to get here, so I’m on board with keeping an eye out, but—hm?!”

The other three gasped in surprise all at once as, with perfect timing, Efil, Gerard, Sera, and Gustav spotted something in the water under them. The thought of, *No way! But...* was written all over their faces as they immediately got ready for battle.

Seconds later, a black shadow appeared from the depths of the ocean. Gradually, it increased in size until it became definitive proof that something was about to surface. But the four of them already knew what it was. Efil nocked an arrow while Gerard took a stance with his sword to try to intercept.

Meanwhile, Sera and Gustav did the same.

“It’s coming!”

Soon after Gustav’s cry of warning, the shadow leaped out of the ocean’s surface, accompanied by a high spray of water. The four of them saw it inside that water...the machine-dragon that should have fallen already, Jildora-Sun. They saw its head that had been pierced with an arrow, its burned flesh that had fully healed, and the rest of it as it once again took to the sky.

“Agito!”

“Melting Blaze Arrow!”

Before their minds could catch up, Gerard and Efil reflexively attacked. Their moves were precise and well-practiced, and seemed certain to hit the ascending Jildragon.

“It’s no use. Attacks of that level will not pierce through this armor.”

As their attacks were repelled by the machine-dragon’s arms, a voice came reverberating out of its innards. It sounded male, and unfamiliar. But, Efil and Gerard knew the voice’s owner. From the manner of speech that hid the owner’s emotions to the coldness that did not consider humans human, they could tell.

“You... Jildora?!”

“Yes, that’s right. I am Jildora, a new god reborn as the ultimate lifeform. Hm, I see. I have changed my body many a time, but in the end, it seems I am most compatible with my own. I am wonderfully familiar with this power!”

As if putting himself on display, Jildora deployed a mandala of light on the back of his new body. It closely resembled the ring of light once used by the Dragon King of Light, Murmur.

“You’re already acting like a god so soon after reviving? You’ve fallen far, Jildora!”

“I am not acting. I am truly a deity now. This body is the ultimate thing, a culmination of the best of all my techniques and the result of my prayers to DarkMel. Tristan’s unique skill for deities applies to this body as well. That

man...he made some cunning little trick to make it so my ego would only return if he were to die, didn't he? A jester until the end."

"I'll say this now, but it doesn't matter whether you're a god or not. We have already beaten that body just recently. Now that we know you have the ability to regenerate, we just have to make sure it isn't possible this time."

"Heh. You don't get it, do you, my daughter? I am the one who made this body, and I am also the one who can use its abilities best. Not even an idiot would try to lump in my current power with how I acted when I was a Follower of the likes of Tristan. Well, whatever. I just woke up, so this will make for a good warm-up. For starters, I'll turn you all into test subjects."

With a wave of his tail, Jildora brought out a sense of oppressive spirit that was completely different from when his body was on auto mode. He faced off against Gerard, and the area filled with staggering amounts of killing intent.

But the situation suddenly turned in a direction no one would have predicted as, suddenly, control of the situation was utterly wrested from them.

::Everyone, get out of the ark! No time for questions, just hurry!::

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The telepathic message came suddenly. They had not heard from Kelvin for a while now, since he had infiltrated the ark, so hearing his voice was great. But the contents of the message made things seem dire. The fact that he wanted everyone to evacuate seemed like the message was aimed at Rion, Ange, and the others who had entered the boat with him. However, he had also sent the message to everyone instead of picking a recipient, which told them that Kelvin was panicking quite a bit. His order to evacuate was terribly lacking in concrete details. Most likely, even if they replied with questions, they wouldn't get an answer. In fact, they would probably have interrupted his thought processes.

Sera's group, which was facing off against Jildora, couldn't carelessly make any moves. In truth, everyone there wanted to hurry to Kelvin's aid. But with Jildora still present, such a choice was not possible. Many of their friendly ships were still in this airspace, and they were all still in combat with the angels. Even if they were to rush to Kelvin's side, it would have to be after they got rid of the danger that was Jildora. Otherwise, they would have to leave Kelvin's safety to

Ange and the others, who were ostensibly closer to him than they were. But...

::We’re gonna kill him quick!::

::You got it!::

::Understood!::

I get the feeling Sera and the others are communicating in some way Papa doesn’t know about! thought Gustav.

Having learned that the one they loved or their sworn liege was in danger, Sera and the others could no longer afford to take their time. They had decided to use all means available to them to destroy Jildora. In an instant, Efil, Sera, and Gerard agreed with each other, while Gustav used his Baal family instinct to sense what was going on. However, in the instant it took the four of them to do that, the situation worsened.

Suddenly, the sound of a huge explosion rolled throughout the area. But it didn’t stop at just one; the sound repeated in succession, and the source of all the explosions was the battleship *Elpis*. Naturally, there was no way Efil and the others wouldn’t turn to pay attention to it. Everyone on their side did the same, and so did Jildora on the enemy’s side. After all, that huge ark had been made with his own hands and was one of his greatest creations alongside the machine-dragon.

“No way... My battleship, the *Elpis Album*, was made to withstand the rampage of Apostles! Is that Selector—no...DarkMel’s doing?!”

Jildora most likely wasn’t lying, nor was he simply mistaken. It was true that the gigantic battleship had incredible durability, enough that it could withstand behind hit with many Rank S spells. However, the parties currently fighting within the *Elpis* had, in a sense, transcended this dimension. Right after a bluish-white light beamed out of the ship, it was chased by a pitch-black one though they were traveling at speeds that far outstripped light. Their brightness completely occupied everyone’s vision, but all their brains could recognize was the light, while everything else only seemed blurry. That was how most of the people saw it.

In the short moment in which those bright lights appeared in the air, the two

lights clashed many times over. It was like two needles threaded with different threads crossing over and over to stitch a cloth, and every time that happened, the *Elpis's* tough armor was destroyed. Furthermore, every time those lights clashed and passed through each other, the energies produced exploded afterwards like time was picking up what the lights had forgotten. Whatever was happening had long abandoned common sense; it was a fight between goddesses. The ark had been slightly too brittle to contain it.

Babaaaaaaang!

That was the largest explosion today. It occurred right in the center of the *Elpis*, threatening to snap the giant ark in half. But then, almost like a joke, the massive battleship did snap with an almost comical sound.

"Hey comeoncomeoncomeon, are you serious?!"

"Retreeeat! Hurry and get out of here! It's coming doooowwwnnn!"

The people who reacted the fastest to the falling wreckage coming down from above shouted as loud as they could. The crews of the Toraj ships heard them and desperately tried to urge the Aqua Swallows out of the danger zone with all haste. Now the giant wall that was the remains of the ark coming down on them from above was a much bigger threat than the leaderless angels.

Both ends of the ark fell through the air, hurtling towards the ocean with the severed ends facing down. There was no way for it to maintain flight capability in that state, so the *Elpis* simply made contact and sank into the ocean, severed ends first. Meanwhile, more explosions erupted here and there. Given its original scale, the sinking ark was like an entire island falling from the sky. Even if only a part of it had fallen, it would have resulted in a shock wave of unprecedented size running through the ocean.

The ark that had been prepared for a goddess had been unavoidably destroyed by those same deities. The one silver lining was that they were already somewhat fatigued thanks to starting the fight in DarkMel's territory. If they had been fighting out in the open at full strength, the entire area might have suffered even worse damage.

"Is that...our king?"

“No, it’s me. I, DarkMel, and I, Melfina, are having an all-out fight.”

The unexpected reply had all five people—everyone there—letting out noises of shock and surprise. Until the voice had come from beside Jildora’s shoulder, no one had realized the speaker had even moved there. But when they suddenly shifted their eyes to the speaker, colors of red and black jumped out at them.

The black figure was DarkMel, who had until just then been locked in fierce combat. In contrast to her relaxed speech, her breathing was ragged, and she was covered in fresh wounds. On the other side, Melfina was upside down, seemingly overlaid with the figure of her younger self. They were only able to exhibit their true powers as goddesses for a very short time. As her words had implied, right now DarkMel didn’t seem long for this world.

“DarkMel, you—”

The source of the red color was a vast amount of flowing blood. It wasn’t DarkMel’s; it was from the stump of the machine-dragon’s neck, as she had torn off the head with one hand. She tossed the dragon’s head, which she had so easily ripped off, into the ocean. Jildora, in the body of the Light Dragon King, could easily have recovered from that state. However, he had been unable to predict this turn of events, and since he had never expected to be attacked by DarkMel, who was supposed to be an ally, he was unable to hide how shaken he was. The same went for Sera and the others, who were also present.

“What’s wrong, Jildora? You’re not acting like your usual cold and calm self. With that, you’re lacking far too much in every field to call yourself a god. You’re so badly made, it’s an insult. The way you are, you’ll only disappoint my beloved. You can’t kill me with this. Ahhh, I can’t do this, it would be unforgivable. Never...never. I cannot be killed; disappointing but I cannot be killed but I cannot be killed but I cannot be killed I cannot kill disappointment can’t be killed that person I’m disappointed kill that person can’t be killed...”

Those words were muttered like a curse, and alongside that, DarkMel mercilessly stuck her arm into the machine-dragon’s wound. Though she was bathed in copious amounts of blood, she didn’t seem to care at all as she started to chant.

“Parasitic Nirvana.”

Countless tentacles, the same that had appeared during her fight with Kelvin, shot out of DarkMel’s arm, the one that was inside Jildora-Sun. They crept through the machine-dragon’s body, eating away at it.

“Gah...agh! Grgah... Yghh...you...ba—”

“No need to worry. I will not break my promise to you. I will make sure to use this flesh, giving it power befitting a god. Then, I will gladly take it. It will be an offering, Jildora!”

The machine-dragon was overtaken by black tentacles, and Jildora’s agonized cries disappeared along with him.

Special Episode: DarkMel's Reminiscence

In the place of worship made in the ark, a song rang through the space, dedicated to my honey. I have always been and will always be waiting for my honey to come to me. I am DarkMel, the evil side of Melfina—no, I am someone who threw herself entirely into love; an eccentric woman who even climbed up the steps to godhood for the sake of it. I suppose that would be more correct? Well, at this point, the reason hardly matters. What's most important is that, currently, I have almost grasped my dream. It is right there, within reach.

The days spent in that hellish state of simply keeping my smoldering hatred and resentment alive felt so long. I've crafted many a plan, prepared myself thoroughly, and even taken the occasional gamble. I deceived people, drove some mad, took some over, put some under my thumb...I had done everything I could do with my own two hands because I had to. And I had continuously won all my endeavors.

Was it painful? No, not at all. It was all for the one I loved. Thinking of that made any pain go away, turning it into pleasure as my heart danced. I did it all happily. I chose to do it myself. I... I... I...

And like that, I became a Goddess. Heh heh... Heh heh heh... Aha ha ha ha ha!

Anyway, let's leave all that formal and stuffy talk here. After all that pleasant and sinister process, I finally got my honey to come to me. I prepared this ark and the Apostles as presents for him. I wonder if he'll like them? Of course, the biggest present is me. I'm sure I'll have a solid grip on his heart after all this. Ah, I can't wait to meet him again. Won't he come just a little sooner? I wonder what kind of smile he'll show me? I wonder, are these clothes good for a killing-each-other date?

Oh...that's no good. I think I've gotten a little stupider, considering what has to happen after. Let's calm down a little by thinking of my honey. Yes, that would be best. It's the most logical measure.

My reunion with my honey was on some planet called Earth. I had been acting while Melfina was lazing about in her slothfulness, using my position and

authority to its fullest and leaving no stone or piece of evidence unturned to search for where my honey had been reincarnated.

Though I hated doing it, I couldn't reveal my identity to him at the time, so when I appeared before my honey, I surely only seemed like a suspicious individual. But on the inside, my heart was beating so fast I thought it would explode. It was very painful, you know? What was especially painful was how my honey had been reborn in a country and era completely devoid of conflict and battle. I had to save him as fast as possible; I needed to return him to his rightful place. While suppressing my rapidly beating heart as much as I could, I burned with a sense of purpose. Yes...because unlike the outward Mel, I was brilliant, skilled, and a hard worker, I made sure to finish him off with a single blow. It happened in an instant, before he could even feel any pain. It was very merciful, as was befitting of me.

::Whuh... Where is this place? I...remember being slashed by some suspicious person. And then—::

::Child of man.::

::Whooaargh?! Huh, and angel? No, a Goddess?!::

Then, we changed stages to the ritual of reincarnation. I really, really didn't like it, but just like before, I couldn't afford to make myself known. Or rather, I couldn't step out into the spotlight. As a replacement, I had to have that idiot Melfina finally carry out her role as a Goddess of Reincarnation. She didn't even remember the script I prepared!

::Calm yourself, child of man. Because of the ineptitude of your Earth god, you have met an unfated death. Oh, how unfortunate!::

My honey seemed unable to respond.

::My name is Melfina. I am the Goddess of Reincarnation, a deity that presides over the ability to reincarnate mortals.::

Still no reply...

::Um...are you listening to me?::

::Oh, ahhh...sorry. Or...excuse me?::

::I understand you are shaken, but please steady yourself. What I am about to discuss with you is very important.::

No, I did not miss noticing that my honey was completely lost for words, awestruck by my beauty. I wasn't like my dense other self, so I noticed immediately. Still...hee hee...as I thought, he was captivated. No matter how we met, my honey was fated to always be connected to me. Even though we were already married, it was still a little embarrassing.

After that, Melfina moved things along according to my script. She had explained that my honey would be reincarnated into the site of my planned little paradise of a miniature garden. He would also be given some skills in order to ensure he could live without problems in the world, and also to prevent any unforeseen accidents. However, one unexpected thing did happen.

::I fell in love with you at first sight. Come with me!::

I shorted out from my spot on the other side of Melfina's consciousness after hearing that sudden confession. My chest squeezed and my head was in a tizzy. It was a severe status abnormality. My confusion must have infected Melfina, because her cheeks also flushed, and it created an abnormal change in her heart. No, it was because my honey's charm was infinite. Even if she didn't become like that on the spot, she would surely have done so in the near future. After all, she was me, even if she was still white.

After almost an hour spent trying to court me, my honey formed a contract with Melfina—or in other words, me—using his obtained Summoning skill on the spot. His sweet words of love had rained down on me with the ferocity of a squall, and I was already head over heels. I'll need to have him take responsibility for that. After all, what he just said was nothing less than the most intense courting in the world! Also, I was already my honey's lover, wife, and most beloved. I totally have a duty to respond to his feelings, right? This is fate! All of this was only natural!

::Even if I lose my memories, I know I'll fall in love with you all over again!::

Haaaahhhhhhh! Oh no, I can't stand it! I just can't! How could you wield such destructive, forceful words, honey?! My heart was already holding out the white flag of surrender, and you're still going for the kill?! Even thinking back on

it now, the line was so powerful that if I let my guard down, I might faint! But that was only natural. After all, even after reincarnating and losing his memory...no matter how many times we go around this wheel...we will fall in love!

That's right...so that my honey will never despair in the world, I must become his ally, or even sometimes his enemy, countless times. This was both a proposal and the moment I once again realized how correct my plan was.

::I see. A truly interesting proposal. Very well, this is a good opportunity to use some of my paid leave. I will see with my own eyes whether or not you are good enough to have a Goddess as a Follower!::

Huuuuuhhh?! How dare the white me get up on a high horse like that?! Even though her heart's pounding like a schoolgirl and she'd actually love to go, she's putting on a strong front?! She even said the words "good enough!" Even though all she does when she's not fulfilling the absolute minimum of her duties is laze around and eat endlessly, and once she falls asleep, she won't wake up for anything?! Not to mention, her sleeping posture is just the worst!

Ahem. Whoops. I was just supposed to be reminiscing here. Getting so emotional over the likes of Melfina, who's on the verge of disappearing anyway, isn't like me. This is also part of the plan... Yes, part of the plan. I will take the seat of Goddess of Reincarnation for my own, and once I reincarnate the world, there will no longer be any need to borrow the power of my white self. Everything is for my honey; I would even drink boiling water for him.

Take, for example, Melfina's special artificial body. That fool had prepared it without even knowing or suspecting that she was dancing in the palm of my hand.

::You took quite a while, Melfina.::

::Did you know I'd come?::

::I wonder why I did...but I had a feeling you'd be back today. I never would have expected to be right, though.::

::You're getting further and further away from human, I see.::

::Shut it.::

But...how should I put it, when Melfina started using that body as an excuse to flirt with *my* honey, I honestly thought my negative emotions would explode out of me. I mean, that's something I built, you know? Well, I knew that my white self would probably go on the attack with it, but expecting it didn't make it any less infuriating.

::What do you think?::

::Good enough; I like it.::

::Mmheh heh, I see.::

Whew, too close. I almost broke the organ I was playing. I have been perfectly compatible with my honey from the very beginning in the first place, so I'd already predicted that with all those good impressions flying about, Melfina would pull out her smug face hundreds of years ago. So I'm fine, it hasn't gone to my head at all. This was only the natural result. Mmheh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh...

No, actually...the worthlessness of my white self for losing out to the likes of Efil and Sera even while having an absolute advantage was somewhat exasperating. Think back, when was it that the white version of me finally managed to make use of a fait accompli? That's right, she was totally too late. Come on, white version of me. This is even worse than being a late bloomer. I know you aren't. Are you messing around?

::So, what were we talking about?::

::Jeez, it's not like you to pretend you didn't hear. I said, honey, let's have a ceremony.::

::What kind of ceremony?::

::The marriage kind.::

If I had to find something to compliment her on, the only thing would be that she immediately had a ceremony, even if it was just a placeholder. I could feel her strong spirit in insisting that was the one line she crossed first. The only thing I didn't like about it was that Melfina was the one in the dress, but in the end, she was still me. I'm thinking of conceding the world and letting that one go. Melfina is me, so it's like I was the one there, after all.

::I got his word! Colette!::

::Yes, Mel-sama! I heard it as well!::

::Uh...what?::

Also, well, I don't mind giving her some credit for choosing the current generation's Deramisian Oracle, Colette Deramillius, as her witness. The Oracle held an impeachable standing in the world, and if someone with as much authority as her were to guarantee the validity of the ceremony, it would be set in stone that I was the first one to marry my honey. If only you had as much initiative as Colette instead of eating and sleeping and eating and sleeping over and over instead of going on the attack, I'd have given you a full score. Well, I'll at least give you passing marks. Until that point, that is.

The problem is from then on. Melfina, you remember what you did after the ceremony, don't you? It was so shocking that I, the black Goddess, couldn't believe my eyes.

::And now, in my bedroom, Kelvin-sama and Mel-sama will have their fi—::

::Waaaiiit! There's no way we can pass it off as a rehearsal if we go that far!::

::It'll be fine! My room comes complete with soundproofing! No matter what you do, it will not leave the room!::

::Where does that confidence even come from...and that's not the problem.::

::Honey, if you aren't satisfied with me, then Colette can come too...::

::Gladly!::

::You've! Got! It! All! Wrong!::

I've thought she was an idiot for a long time now, but I never would have expected her to be this foolish. My vision turned red, and I even ended up releasing some killing intent. Seriously, I was worried these impulses might end up destroying the *Elpis*. Yes, that was how much I'd lost control of myself.

But it was only natural. After the ceremony, Melfina had used her fanatic Colette to mmmblemmblemrmrrrmm... That's right, she had, along with the help of Deramis's Oracle, used drugs to...on the be be-be-beddddddddd—

Crackksnapcrack!

Whaaaaaat the hell was that useless goddess doing?! I know you're a late bloomer and others got a head start on you, but things would have been fine if you just honestly clashed your feelings against his. Instead, along with your own believer, you drugged him with a powerful aphrodisiac! You do realize you're supposed to be the pure Melfina, right?! This makes me look like some sort of weirdo! Or what, are you trying to imply that I, the black version, am somehow even worse?! Aggghh jeez! That memory almost made me destroy this organ with just my killing intent!

I need to thank Creator for making it this sturdy. He may be a bit...*yeah*...on the inside, but he's at least a useful person. Let's make his next life one as a goblin or something, so he can enjoy true freedom. I'm so kind and merciful!

Still, *sigh*...the more I think back...the more I remember, the more strained I feel my stomach is getting. Damn you, my white self. How dare you attack me mentally like this. You're pretty good. I suppose I should say...as expected from a side of myself.

But your turn ends here. Now, I will be the one to support my husband! As both his legal wife and as his greatest enemy! After all, we're already having a combat date today! I, DarkMel, will be the one to win in the end! You can burn his final image into your brain while you're trapped in your dreams, unable to do anything!

Whew, I definitely feel better now. From the outside, it might look like I'm putting myself down, and any onlookers might wonder what I was doing, but let's just ignore all of that. Anything more and it'll affect my condition, so let's stop the reminiscing here. After all, I could see myself dying of high blood pressure if I had to look back on every single one of Melfina's memories. As a new Goddess of Reincarnation, that would be seriously uncool.

Still, I wonder why my white self fell so far into depravity? Logically, she shouldn't be too much different from how I was before I fell as an angel. Was it because she spent too long as the Goddess of Reincarnation? The system of periodically replacing the deity is to prevent degradation of the deity's management over time, so it *does* seem possible. But to have fallen so far in

only a few hundred years, I am ashamed. She should learn from me; I spent all that time with an unchanging conviction, every day spent concocting and enacting plans.

First off, my white version's daily life is just unhealthy. I've said it already, but all she does is eat and sleep in a cycle. In comparison, before I fell as an angel, I led a life befitting a lady and befitting my honey. I made sure to eat three meals a day. There were times when I had one, two, three, four, or even five snacks in between, but I made sure to keep that to only five or six times a week. Ah, I did the same for extra helpings too, okay? Unlike my white self, who was able to avail herself of Efil's meals, we were adventurers who had to work to support ourselves. Given our funds, we had to emphasize quantity over quality. I wasn't like a certain someone who wouldn't hesitate to order one of everything off the menu. No, I didn't have that luxury! If I had a choice, I would concentrate on one dish that was friendly to the wallet!

Furthermore, to survive as an adventurer, good time management was absolutely necessary. Of course, as an adventurer, my past self splendidly managed her schedule. I was the same as my other self in that I slept early every day. However, unlike Melfina, I did not wake up after noon every day, immediately eat breakfast, and then have lunch an hour later, and generally lead an absurd and unreasonable life. Allow me to declare: I, DarkMel, wake up in the morning every day! I even eat breakfast in the morning, and I have my lunch in perfect harmony with my honey! Hah HAH!

Hm... Hmmm? Oh, that's strange. Looking back at it calmly from a third-person perspective, my old self's and my white self's habits don't seem to be all that different. Yeah...I can see that point of view, kinda... Uh, well, it's true that the Goddess of Reincarnation's work is a lot, and Melfina has to eat and sleep enough to support the energy cost of my activities as DarkMel too. Having it take a toll on her personal life is only natural, I suppose. Okay, as a show of my compassion and mercy, I will make a special exception and rethink my stance. Cry and be grateful! Hmph!

Sigh. Oh no, once again my heart is in disarray. I should play a hymn praising me to reset my feelings... No, not one praising me, I should play something for my honey. That would calm me down more, I'm sure.

That’s nice. Unlike Melfina, whose only talents are alchemy and eating, I can play something like this even without a skill. Of course, I can do alchemy, eat, and everything she can do as well. In order to grant so many wishes, I needed to increase the methods with which I could accomplish things. So I learned new things and continued to challenge myself to learn to do what I couldn’t do before. This ability was but one of the many things I learned. But, well...cooking alone remained stubbornly unattainable until the end...although in exchange, I became able to brew amazing tea. In that sense, I could at least grasp a part of my honey’s stomach. Yes indeed.

Grasp the stomach... There was a time where I, too, traveled along with my honey, much like Melfina. It was the start of everything, so to speak. We had met in a way that could be described as a whim of the goddess, and we ended up going with the flow of things and traveling together. And, before we knew it, we ended up in an inseparable relationship. We fell in love and even exchanged vows in matrimony to each other.

As the hymn tickled my ears, I imagined that night, with my honey and Mao talking. I believe they were happily enjoying tea I brewed, one of the few things I could actually make. The days the three of us spent together were short, but that adventure story remained vividly in my memories even now.

::Wow, this is great!::

::Hee hee hee, there’s seconds if you want it.::

::It’s basically the only good thing Mel can...make? Still, she’s not the only one who’s happy to be able to eat good food during a journey. I am too. In the end, humans need both battle and food to survive!::

::Honey, there was something strange mixed into that statement.::

What a warm conversation, something that I cannot have right now. It’s so nostalgic...truly nostalgic...but my honey is already a Demon Lord, ever since that time. What was behind his smile, what he must have been thinking, I couldn’t imagine. But my honey never figured that out, until the very end. Even after he had completely become a Demon Lord, he told me he wanted to be with me. He trusted me, and worried for me. He smiled at me...loved me.

I was the one who killed him. Because of that insolent little system, I was

made to dirty my own hands. No matter how much resentment I feel, I can no longer go back to my relationship back then, not in this world. So, I will make it anew. I am trying to rule as the destroyer of this world, and Mao went as far as to throw away his position as Hero to support me. At this point, no one in this world other than my honey can stop me.

I will swear to you, honey, once again, and may my voice be carried to you upon this hymn. I will never betray you, honey. I *will* answer all your expectations. I will continue to create this world, and...I—

“Oho. For someone trying to become a god to be playing a piece praising them. How interesting.”

Suddenly, I heard a voice coming from behind me. The voice belonged to Analyzer, to Riold. Oh no, I ended up too engrossed in my memories, it seems. Of course, I had already sensed his presence beforehand. So I stopped my hands, which had been playing the organ during my period of reminiscence, and tried to get control of my heavily beating heart. I hadn’t let any of my inner emotions show, but Riold is a pretty troublesome one. Just in case, I needed to be careful.

Okay, now I’m perfect. I am the Black Goddess, the one who will destroy the world and return it to its rightful form, DarkMel. I cannot allow myself to show weakness to anyone, not even my honey. My decisions up until now, which had been like I was playing house, were all to say farewell and completely separate myself from my past self. I am DarkMel and not Melfina.

“Aw, you stopped? Personally, I would have liked it if you’d kept playing a little longer.”

“Analyzer. No, all our remaining brethren...”

After my final conversation with Riold ended, the ark shook greatly, followed by a great noise that was even audible in this place. It’s finally time for my date with destiny, isn’t it? Welcome, honey. Glad to see you here. Did you enjoy this world? Did you meet powerful enemies that satisfied you? Good, then I will give you the strongest there is; I will bring you transcendent entertainment.

“So, you’re finally here, honey. I’ve been waiting. Mao, Riold, Tristan...the signal for battle has been raised. You’ll show them our hospitality, won’t you?”

Now then, let’s start this dreamlike series of events, honey. I am prepared, and I have both the resolve and power necessary. All for your ideal, honey.

Afterword:

Thank you all for purchasing *Black Summoner Volume 14: Summoning the Goddess of Reincarnation*, truly. This is Mayoi Doufu, and all I've been doing lately is playing a certain horse game. As always, to those who read the web novel and still picked up this book: thank you for supporting me.

The main series is finally at its climax. We are barrelling toward the biggest battle ever, as well as the final volume (?). It's been five years since we started with volume 1, which released in 2016, and oh man, I couldn't be more grateful. Having people who will continue to read your work is the greatest joy for a writer, after all. And between Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama, who easily blow my expectations for the cover illustration every volume, and Ammo Gin-sama, who is killing it with the comic version, this tofu is very blessed. Though I'm still pushing myself until I vomit blood to write all the way to the end of the afterword. Rather than writing the book itself, it's always the three-pronged problem; I'm not getting any new ideas, I never grow, and I feel like such a useless tofu. Please, get buried in the pages already...get buried...

Well, anyway, leaving that aside... Now that we're this far I'm going to get this over with quickly. That's how I truly feel. You may think you see me with one hand holding a smartphone with that horse game installed on it, but I'm being serious. Please believe me, I'm not lying! Come on, hurry up and finish your mainte— *Ahem, ahem!* Excuse me.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who helped in making this book: my illustrators, Kurogin-sama and Daixt-sama, who drew DarkMel in a way befitting the final boss; my proofreader; and not to be forgotten, all you readers. Well then, I will be praying we meet again in the next volume. Please continue to support *Black Summoner*.