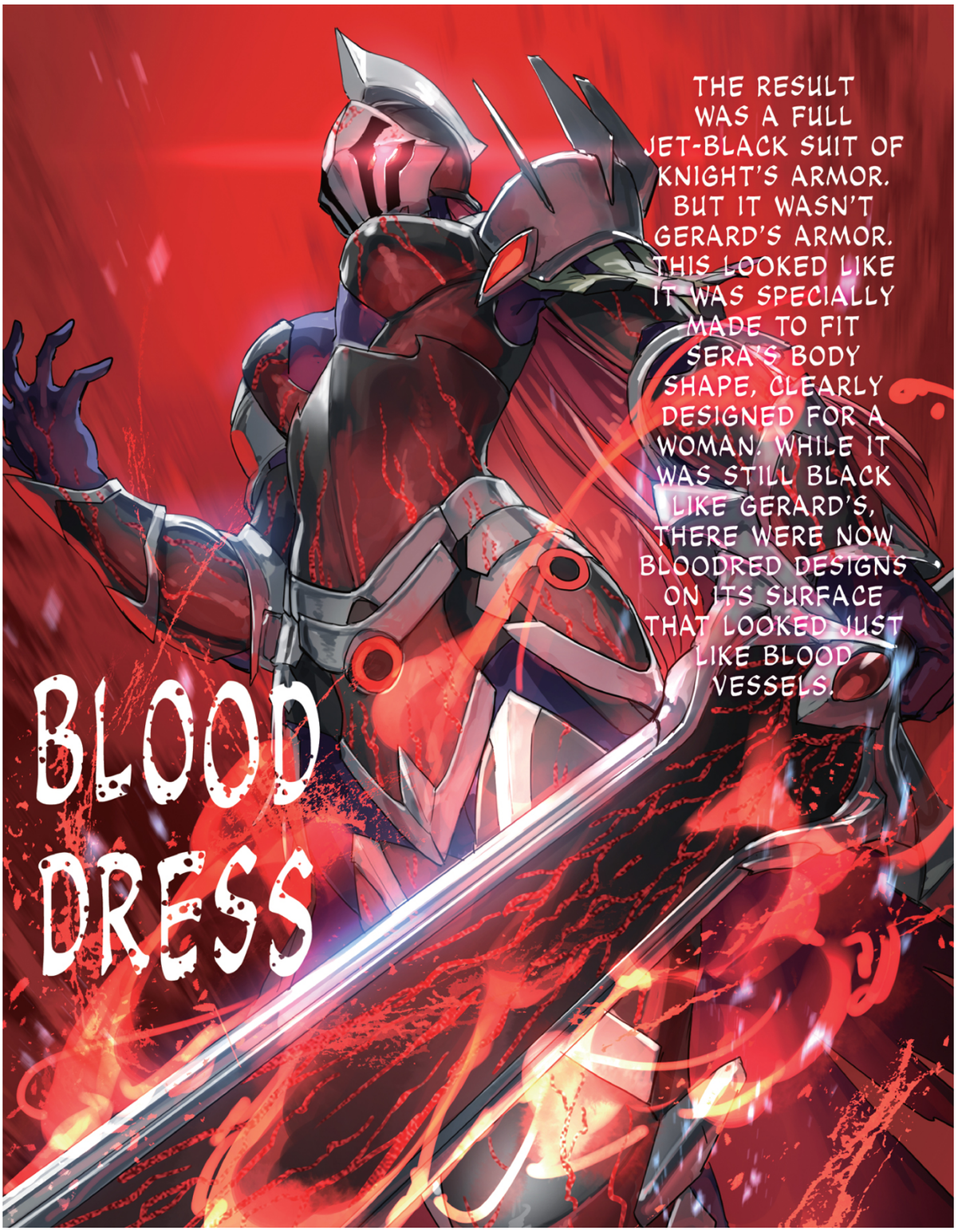

20
AUTHOR:
DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DAIXT
KUROGIN (DIGS)
BLACK SUMMONER
MINGLING TWIN OGRES


20
AUTHOR:
DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DAIXT
KUROGIN (DIGS)
BLACK SUMMONER
MINGLING TWIN OGRES


BLACK SUMMONER
20
DOUFU MAYOI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)


MELFINA
SERA
SHUTOLA
KELVIN
"WELL, THAT WOULD BE GERARD'S OWN FAULT THIS TIME. HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN TOO EXCITED TO SHOW HIS 'GRAND-DAUGHTER' HIS GOOD SIDE."
"WOW, WHAT A PERK, KELVIN! GERARD WILL BE SO JEALOUS AND REGRETFUL THAT HE GOT A HEAD START."
"OKAY, IT'S ABOUT TIME FOR US TO GO TOO."


THE RESULT WAS A FULL JET-BLACK SUIT OF KNIGHT'S ARMOR. BUT IT WASN'T GERARD'S ARMOR. THIS LOOKED LIKE IT WAS SPECIALLY MADE TO FIT SERA'S BODY SHAPE, CLEARLY DESIGNED FOR A WOMAN. WHILE IT WAS STILL BLACK LIKE GERARD'S, THERE WERE NOW BLOODRED DESIGNS ON ITS SURFACE THAT LOOKED JUST LIKE BLOOD VESSELS.
BLOOD DRESS



Black Summoner

Characters

Kelvin Celsius
Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes. Alias: Grim Reaper



Efil
Kelvin's slave and a high-elf girl.
A perfect maid, her love for her master included.



Sera
A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service.
Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



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



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



DarkMel
The form DarkMel took when she made a contract with Kelvin while on the verge of death. She's cute, and that's pretty much it.



Melfina
The former Goddess of Reincarnation and perennially hungry angel. Currently enjoying the heck out of her angelic life as Kelvin's wife.



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



Shutola Trycen
Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!



Ange
Former apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.

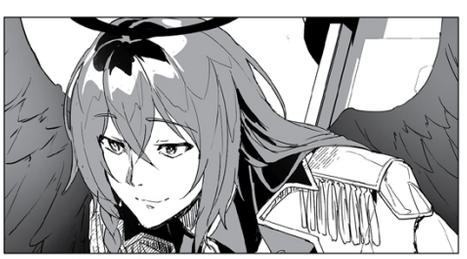


Bell Baal
A former apostle. Made up with her older sister, Sera, after a fierce fight. Seems like a typical prodigy, but is actually pretty awkward on the inside.

Ten Authorities



Cheruvim Ripita
One of the Ten Authorities, with the Authority of "Lethality," but is currently allied with Kelvin.



Eld Astel
Leader of the Ten Authorities. Bares his fangs at Kelvin and friends to achieve his greatest wish: reviving the wicked god.



Hao Marr
One of the Ten Authorities with the Authority of "Brawn." A great martial artist.



Gloria Rozess
A member of the Ten Authorities who lost to Sera. Her Authority, "Gap," caused Sera a lot of trouble.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:
THE THREE GREAT AUTHORITIES

CHAPTER 2:
CONTROL

CHAPTER 3:
BORDER

CHAPTER 4:
THE TWO OGRES

SPECIAL CHAPTER:
ADDITIONAL PRINTINGS CELEBRATION PARTY

ILLUSTRATIONS: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

CHERUVIM RIPITA (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

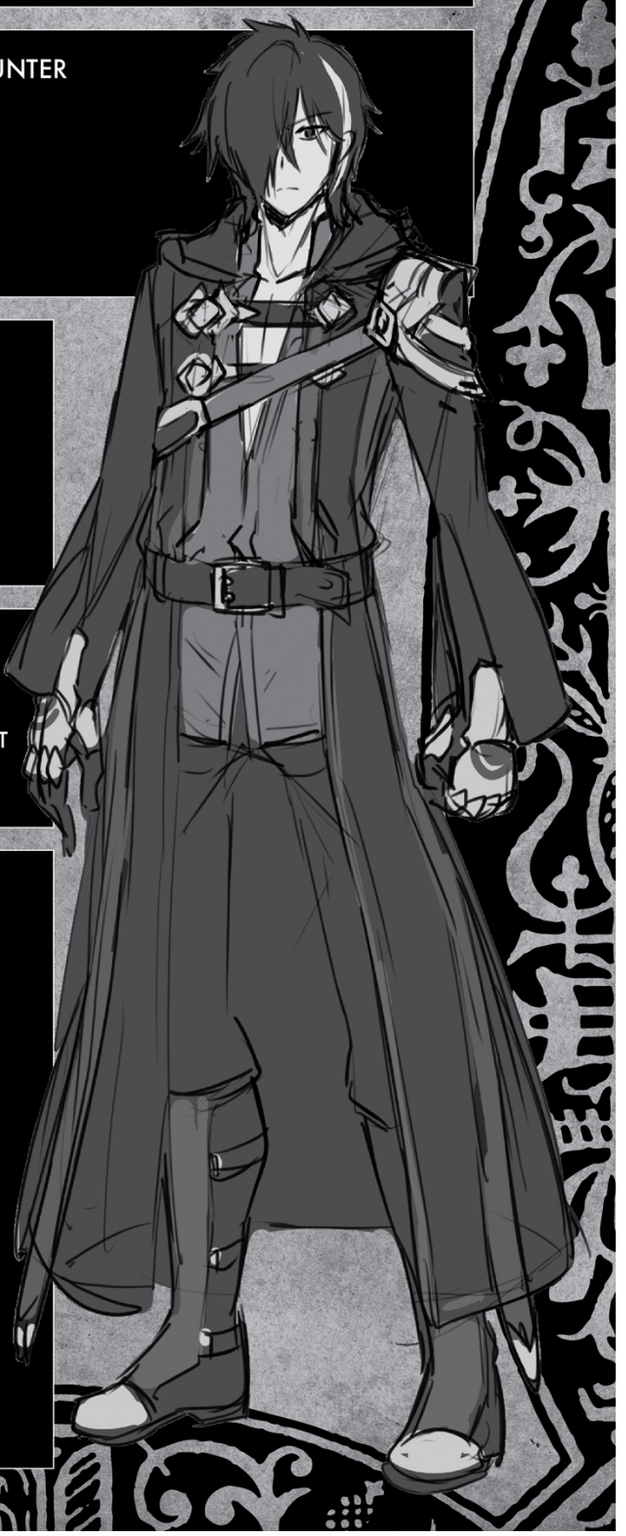
- 14,772 Y/O / MALE / SARIEL / HUNTER
- LEVEL: 244
- TITLE: FALLEN GRIM REAPER
- HP: 4,286/4,286
- MP: 14,181/14,181

- STRENGTH: 1,760
- ENDURANCE: 1,294
- AGILITY: 3,383
- MAGIC: 5,492
- LUCK: 4,144

- EQUIPMENT:
  ASTAROTH'S EMBRACE (RANK S)
  ABILITY EATER (RANK S)
  BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF THE EVIL BEAST (RANK S)

- SKILLS:
  DIVINE BINDING
  (HIDDEN SKILL: NOT SEEN BY ANALYZE EYE)
  LETHALITY (UNIQUE SKILL)
  PUGILISM (RANK S)
  SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)
  BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)
  ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)
  FLIGHT (RANK S)
  PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)
  DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)
  MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)
  CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)
  FOCUS (RANK S)
  MIND'S EYE (RANK S)
  CONCEALMENT (RANK S)
  DISGUISE (RANK S)
  NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)
  ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)
  AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

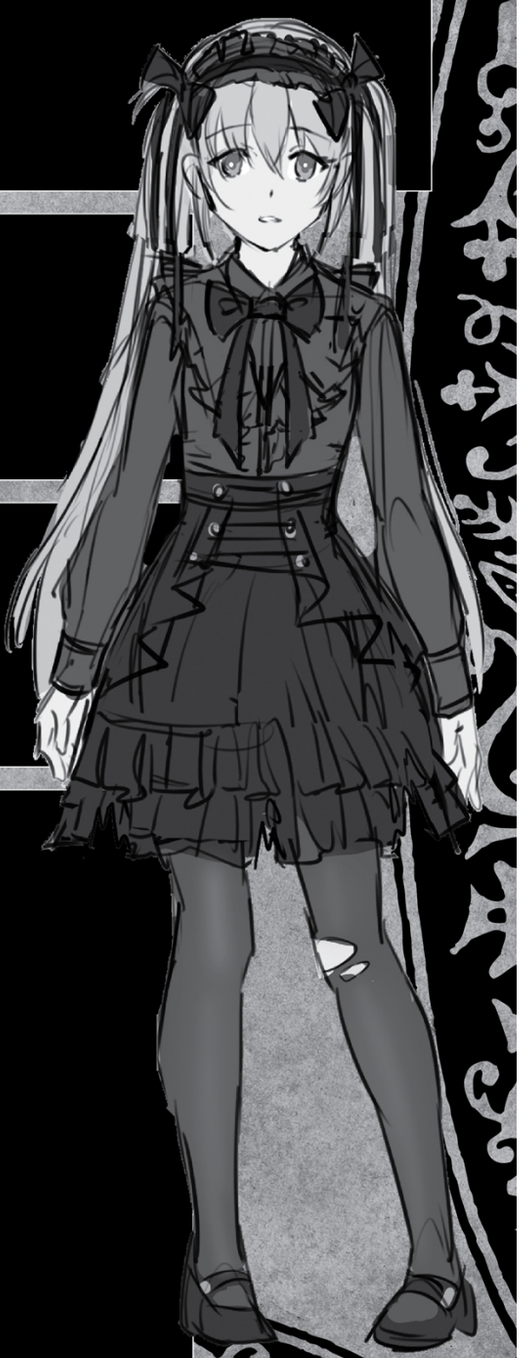
- PASSIVE EFFECTS:
  CONCEALMENT (RANK S)
  DISGUISE (RANK S)



■ REM TEARGATE (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

- 4,705 Y/O / FEMALE / DIVINE GIANT / SOVEREIGN
- LEVEL: 235
- TITLE: FALLEN GODDESS OF CONTROL
- HP: 1,477/1,477
- MP: 20,070/20,070 (+13,380)

- STRENGTH: 671
- ENDURANCE: 693
- AGILITY: 742
- MAGIC: 15,421 (+640)
- LUCK: 469



- EQUIPMENT:
  NETHERLAND (RANK S)
  SPITE (RANK S)
  ANGST (RANK S)
  HATE (RANK S)

- SKILLS:
  DIVINE BINDING
  (HIDDEN SKILL: NOT SEEN BY ANALYZE EYE)
  CONTROL (UNIQUE SKILL)
  FLIGHT (RANK S)
  DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)
  MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)
  FOCUS (RANK S)
  COVERT ACTION (RANK S)
  ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)
  MILITARY TACTIC (RANK S)
  MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK S)
  MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)
  MOISTURE ATTACHMENT (RANK S)
  MOISTURE CONSERVATION (RANK S)
  SPIRIT (RANK S)
  MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

- PASSIVE EFFECTS:
  CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ ISABEL ROZESS (ARTIFICIAL BODY)



- 13,639 Y/O / FEMALE / RAPHAEL / SWORDSMAN
- LEVEL: 268
- TITLE: FALLEN GUARDIAN DEITY
- HP: 38,331/38,331 (+25,554)
- MP: 39,639/39,639 (+26,426)

- STRENGTH: 7,799 (+640)
- ENDURANCE: 8,320 (+640)
- AGILITY: 5,163 (+640)
- MAGIC: 11,695 (+640)
- LUCK: 5,975 (+640)

- EQUIPMENT:
  PENALTY (RANK S)
  SENTENCE (RANK S)
  CONVICT (RANK S)
  GALLOWS (RANK S)

- SKILLS:
  DIVINE BINDING
  (HIDDEN SKILL: NOT SEEN BY ANALYZE EYE)
  BORDER (UNIQUE SKILL)
  SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
  PUGILISM (RANK S)
  STAVE MASTERY (RANK S)
  WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
  FLIGHT (RANK S)
  PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)
  DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)
  MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)
  CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK S)
  MIND READING (RANK S)
  FOCUS (RANK S)
  MIND'S EYE (RANK S)
  ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)
  FORTITUDE (RANK S)
  SPIRIT (RANK S)
  HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)
  IRON WALL (RANK S)
  ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)
  MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)
  SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

- PASSIVE EFFECTS:
  CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

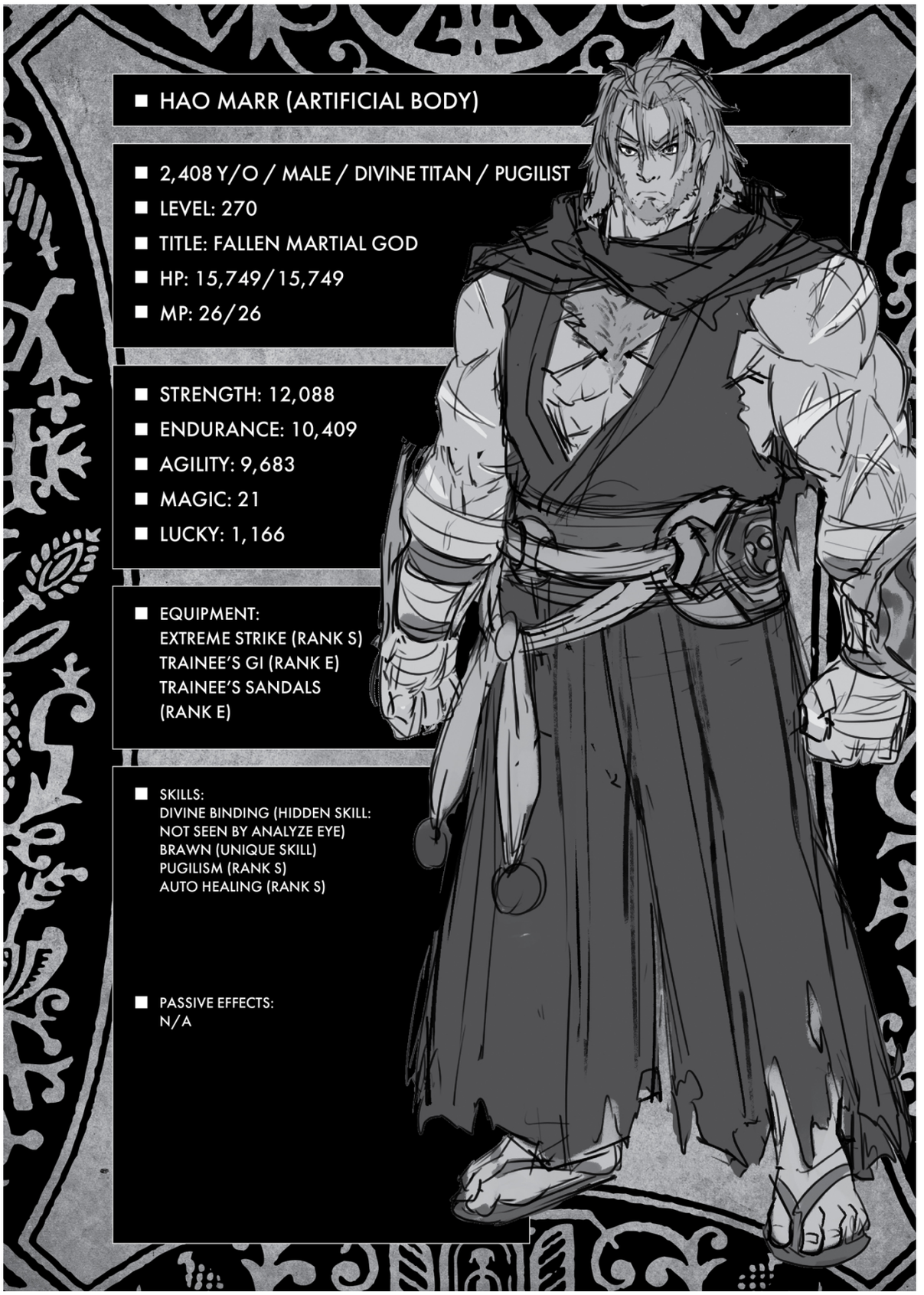

HAO MARR (ARTIFICIAL BODY)
2,408 Y/O / MALE / DIVINE TITAN / PUGILIST
LEVEL: 270
TITLE: FALLEN MARTIAL GOD
HP: 15,749/15,749
MP: 26/26
STRENGTH: 12,088
ENDURANCE: 10,409
AGILITY: 9,683
MAGIC: 21
LUCKY: 1,166
EQUIPMENT:
EXTREME STRIKE (RANK S)
TRAINEE'S GI (RANK E)
TRAINEE'S SANDALS
(RANK E)
SKILLS:
DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL:
NOT SEEN BY ANALYZE EYE)
BRAWN (UNIQUE SKILL)
PUGILISM (RANK S)
AUTO HEALING (RANK S)
PASSIVE EFFECTS:
N/A

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Characters
4. Character Stats
5. Chapter 1: The Three Great Authorities
6. Chapter 2: Control
7. Chapter 3: Border
8. Chapter 4: The Two Ogres
9. Special Chapter: Additional Printings Celebration Party
10. Afterword
11. Bonus Short Stories
12. About J-Novel Club
13. Copyright

Chapter 1: The Three Great Authorities

We left the central ocean and met up with the rest of my friends first. Even though it was only provisional, having a deadline meant we didn't have the leeway to waste time. So we started running here and there to complete our preparations.

The first place we visited was the Goldian Sanctuary on the Western Continent, where Prettia had fought that Hao person and been dealt a surprising loss before being captured. Here, Dahak was being trained by Bakke with Grostina's permission. From what I'd heard, Grostina was also undergoing some training.

Using Gerard's Reflective Dreadnought, I Summoned myself near the holy ground through Magic Stake and managed to find Bakke immediately.

Still, this place has such a unique atmosphere. There's not really any reason behind it, but I feel like it would fit Suzu perfectly.

"Heeey, Bakke, listen uuuup!"

"Hm? Ohhh, if it isn't Kelvin. What's up? Have you come to sleep with me?" she asked.

"What a greeting, right from the get-go... Well, I guess it's best for adventurers to obey their own desires. Anyway, that's not what I'm here for. How's Dahak's training?"

"Heh! See for yourself."

I looked over to where she was pointing to find Dahak in training gear, sitting in a cross-legged meditation position. Both his eyes were closed, and he had his palms brought together and wasn't moving at all—as a complete layman, he looked like a real monk, his form was that good.

"So you have him meditating. Is this some sort of spiritual training?" I asked.

"Something like that. Dahak needs to take a good long look at himself in order to reach the next stage. Meditating is surprisingly useful, you know?"

"Huh..."

Nothing against Bakke, but I was genuinely surprised by this training method. I'd totally expected her to be giving him the runaround playing a game of tag from hell.

“I shouldn’t be saying this, since I was the one who asked this of you, but…I didn’t expect you to be teaching him so earnestly, Bakke. To be honest, I thought you’d snap him up like a snack.”

“Huh? What’re you saying? I tried that a long time ago, obviously. He’s still dodging me for the moment, though,” she replied.

“Thought so.” *I knew it.* I needed to say that.

“More importantly, what’ve you got with you there? Seems like a Dragon King,” Bakke commented.

“Oh, right, I haven’t made the introductions yet. I’d like you to take care of some more students, since you’re taking your teaching role so seriously.”

With that, I Summoned two people to my side, whom I’d had waiting in my pool. They had been staying in Pub as Efil’s guards until now, which meant they’d shut themselves in at home. I was talking about Mdo and Boga. The two of them hated the idea right up until the end, but I couldn’t stand letting them continue the slothful life they’d been leading these days, so I forced them to come. To be honest, having Ange and Gerard nearby would be more than enough protection, and I could even get there in an instant through the Magic Stake I’d set up near the inn. There was no need to let these two lead a Mel-like life of only eating and sleeping and eating and sleeping.

Huh? Why is Mel fine, then, you ask? I mean…it’s Mel.

“Ah, Master, you’re so cruel… I was just worried about sister Efil’s safety…” Mdo muttered.

For the whole day, the blue Mdo had been out and about, as if to visually represent her mood.

Are you trying to tell me you’re feeling blue? I don’t mind comforting you, but I won’t let you go back.

“Urgh…but…we really hab been acting lazy ladely, maybe?” Boga was hesitant to agree.

“Anyway, it’s how things are. The day of the fight’s coming ever closer, and if all you Dragon Kings were to get fat, it wouldn’t even be laughable. So you two will be training with Dahak under Bakke from today on.”

“Aha, so that’s what you’re getting at. Mm-hmm…” Bakke hummed.

“Eep?!” Mdo and Boga let out simultaneously.

The two Dragon Kings seemed scared as Bakke started orbiting them like a satellite.

She's not even trying to hide that she's appraising them. But...something's weird, isn't it? Why am I getting a sense of déjà vu? Like I saw something just like this not too long ago...

"This big man here's got promise, Kelvin. Yeah, a lot of promise. But what's with that tiny girl? She's no good. Not to mention, it's a she," said Bakke.

"Um, you know I'm not *offering* these two to you or anything, right? I'm just asking you to make them stronger."

"Ha ha ha! Right, right, I remember now! Well, whatever. It's fine, isn't it? They're both Dragon Kings, so I should be able to teach them something, just like Dahak."

"Wh-What're you going to teach us?!" Mdo shouted in a panic.

"I... I'b not tasty at all!" Boga exclaimed.

They were more shaken than I'd ever seen them. They were visibly shivering.

"How are you this hated by dragons, Bakke? Their reaction is crazy."

"Really? But don't they say that no means yes? I'm sure that's all it is," said Bakke.

Is that right? No...I'm pretty sure it isn't. I think they're really not good at dealing with her.

"Ah, well...they say that conquering fears is the first step to becoming an adult."

"That's wrong, Master!" Mdo pleaded. "Methods are important, even for becoming an adult! I want to treasure the process!"

"Yeah! She's right!" Boga agreed.

They were begging very desperately. I could see tears in their eyes.

"Sorry, Bakke, but could we observe your training for a bit? Given how they're acting, I'd like to see for future reference. I'll decide if I'll leave Mdo and Boga to you after that."

"Master!" Mdo shouted.

Boga did likewise. "I always believed in you!"

The Dragon King duo clung to my waist tightly.

I mean, there was no way I could do nothing after seeing how desperate you two were. At least this observation time won't be a waste.

"I see, so these Dragon Kings are doubting my ability to teach. Mmm, good, I definitely don't hate the bratty ones. They'll definitely be worth teaching!" Bakke exclaimed.

“That’s not what we’re doubting!” they cried simultaneously.

Bakke had been looking at the two of them—or more specifically, Boga—as she spoke, licking her lips for good measure.

Hm, she’s totally locked on to him, just like she has Dahak, huh? That’s good for Mdo, but it’ll be hell for him.

“Well, whatever. I’ll give you a special lesson,” Bakke agreed. She turned right around and walked to Dahak, who was still meditating. “I’ll be teaching you to evolve further as a dragon. Actually, I suppose I should call it ‘optimizing’? Dragon Kings have been around since ancient times, and I feel like the previous Earth Dragon King, Ice Dragon King, and probably the Water and Lightning Dragon Kings were able to do this? Anyway, once you’re able to, you’ll definitely become stronger.”

“Huh, is that really a thing? What’re you going to do, specifically?”

“As I just said, you start by taking another thorough look at yourself, since pursuing your ideal self is absolutely necessary. That’s what Dahak is doing right now. Look,” said Bakke.

She approached the meditating Dahak, putting her face right up to his ear…and blowing into it. It was an extremely lewd move, and it went on for a weirdly long time.

Huh? What am I watching?

Dahak, however, did not react.

“Whaaat…” Mdo and Boga gasped simultaneously.

Even after having his ear blown on, Dahak didn’t seem to mind at all. He continued meditating without even the slightest squirm, concentrating on his inner self. In fact, we who were watching from a fair distance away were far more affected.



“Ha ha! You’re really concentrating!” Bakke yelled, impressed. “He would get very shaken at first, but he got used to it quickly. I suppose he has a goal he really wants to accomplish? Now, even if I touch him lightly in sensitive areas, he doesn’t react at all. Once you’re able to do that, you’ll be able to transition to practicing the technique.”

“Practice?!” Mdo and Boga exclaimed simultaneously.

“I have no idea what you two are thinking about, but I’m pretty sure you’re mistaken,” said Bakke.

The worst part was, they probably weren’t totally wrong.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Sorry I didn’t greet you right away, big bro Kelvin! I was in the middle of training!” Dahak exclaimed.

A while after we’d gone to observe Dahak’s training, he’d finished his meditation and dashed over to give his greetings.

“Oh no, you don’t need to worry about stuff like that. In fact, I was impressed by how you looked while training. Your focus really got through to me.”

“Heh heh, of course! After all, I plan to devote my life to Prettia-chan. Oh, but I don’t plan on dying, got it?! I know Prettia-chan wouldn’t like it if I did. Those who are resolved to save someone else must also save themselves! That’s an ironclad rule!” Dahak declared.

Whoops. I was impressed by Dahak’s growth, and totally unprepared for it. It was looking like there would be nothing for me to say at this point. That was how reliable Dahak had become.

“By the way, why’re Mdo and Boga here?” he asked. “Shouldn’t they be with big sis Efil?”

“Well, you see, they’ve been really slothful lately. I was worried about the state of you Dragon Kings if it was to drag on, so I forced them here. Basically, they’re going to be training under Bakke with you.”

“Ah, I see. I get it.”

“I… I’m still deciding,” Mdo objected. “To be honest, I’m not totally convinced by her description of the training.”

“I’b habing a hard dime deciding whether to train here too…” Boga agreed.

Right now, Bakke—their prospective instructor—was gone,

having said she'd go get Grostina earlier. Because of that, Mdo and Boga had regained some of their calm, but…

Hrm, they're still putting out an unwilling aura. What to do?

"Hey, I can hear the tremor in your voices," Dahak commented. "Do you guys seriously hate the idea that much?"

"I mean…I really feel like I'm in danger…" Mdo muttered.

"Yeah…the way she looks at me is scary," Boga added.

"Jeez, Dragon Kings shouldn't be whining so much," Dahak grumbled. "Listen here, Bakke is definitely scary in a lot of ways, and she'll definitely look at you like a piece of meat. All day, every day. Thanks to that, I can't even sleep peacefully. I have to be vigilant all the time."

"That's—" Mdo started.

"Terrible," Boga finished.

Yeah, it certainly is. I've also nearly been killed in bed by Mel more than once thanks to her terrible sleeping habits. I'm tearing up.

"But," Dahak continued, "the wall we're trying to climb is even worse. There's an enemy not even Prettia-chan could overcome: the strongest enemy alive. I saw it personally, felt his presence on my skin, and knew the difference between us. There's no way I could win against him as I am. That's why I want to become stronger. Now's the time to surpass big bro Kelvin, Gerard, and even Prettia-chan. In order to do that, I'll even wade through this hellish place. I could even live here."

The other two Dragon Kings gulped as Dahak clenched his fist and declared his resolve. Pressured by this, Mdo and Boga reflexively held their breaths.

"Just saying, you guys, but I'm pretty sure we don't have the time to sit on our laurels just because we're Dragon Kings. Even ignoring the incident with Prettia-chan, big bro and the others are constantly forging ahead. As his underling, I don't want to slap mud all over his face. If I'm not even powerful enough to hide in his shadow, let alone stand next to him, I don't think there's any point in fighting with him. Don't you guys agree?"

"I…" Mdo started.

"I…" Boga followed suit.

Wait! Just wait a second. Dahak's verbal surprise attack shot right through my heart.

Oh no, he's so manly… How much did you grow in such a short time? I'm not just a little moved, I'm super moved! I'm seriously starting to tear up.

After a short moment, Mdo continued. “Master, I want to train here with Dahak. I don’t want to drag you down and cause trouble for sister Efil. I’ll go through hell to make sure that doesn’t happen!”

“Uh, ummmmmm…” Boga was a lot more hesitant. “I don’t wanna cause drouble for anyone eidder. Okay, I’ll do it! I’ll do this…optimization…thing!”

“Heh, finally,” Dahak chuckled. “Well, try your best not to have your spirit break before it’s over. You can’t go into this thing half-assed, got it?”

“You’re just Dahak; don’t be so cocky,” said Mdo. “If you can do it, so can I. I’ll prove it.”

“I’b not confident, but I’ll do my best!” said Boga.

Dahak’s growth seemed to have had a good effect on Mdo and Boga. Now I wasn’t looking at two Dragon Kings scared of Bakke. It wasn’t just their levels and stats, Mdo and Boga were trying to change on a spiritual level too. Put mildly, it was a moving scene. Everyone was trying to become stronger for my sake.

I’m so happy. I wonder how strong they’ll get. I’m looking forward to it so much.

“Looks like it’s settled, then,” said Bakke. “Wanna train too since you’re here, Kelvin? I’ll welcome you with open arms.”

“Oh my, no! What wonderful youth! It’s enough to make me want to jump! Right! In!” Grostina gushed. You could practically hear the heart mark at the end.

It took me a moment to gather myself from the surprise. “Please don’t appear behind me all of a sudden, you two,” I told them. “The cowardly side of my heart was about to burst.”

“Now, that doesn’t sound like the battle-crazed fool who’s been wearing a creepy smile this whole time,” Bakke teased.

“I don’t think you should judge people by their looks.”

It seemed Bakke had returned with Grostina. I was truly happy about their invitation to train, but I couldn’t stay here for that long, so I had to gently refuse.

Oh man, it’s too bad, though. For real.

“Hey, you’re here too, Gros! These guys’ll be joining us, so please take care of them!” Dahak exclaimed.

“Mm-hmm, okay! I’ll teach them in great detail from right up close. In all sorts of ways!” Grostina giggled, making a heart mark once again.

“Hey, idiot, that’s my rewa—job!” Bakke insisted. “Kelvin asked *me* to do it! So I’ll make them grow wonderfully! That’s my mission!”

“You were just about to say ‘reward,’ weren’t you?” Grostina pointed out. “Jeez, now’s not the time to be so stingy! We should work together to ensure we save my sister! I’m prepared to lay myself totally bare to do it!”

“Let Dahak do it instead! I’d actually welcome that!” Bakke exclaimed.

“Close combat is the basis of all battles! There’s nothing to lose!” yelled Grostina.

“Dragons have their own way of fighting!” Bakke protested. “Now is the time to narrow down the scope of learning and so we can dive deeper!”

“Goldian Inheritance!” Grostina declared.

“Pursuit of Ideals Dragonization!” Bakke shouted back.

Then, they both let out wordless cries as they engaged in this terribly unsightly verbal battle.

Hmm, which statement should I retort to first? Well, they’re both Rank S adventurers, just like me, so I’m sure they’ll reach some sort of compromise that will result in the perfect style of guidance. I’m sure that’s what’ll happen. Probably.

A moment later, I could hear Mdo say, “Boga, what should we do? The difficulty of this trial has already increased twofold.”

“Uh, get through it with lots of determination?” Boga suggested.

“Exactly! Do that!” Dahak agreed. “And if you get stronger, that just makes it better! That’s what my mom tells me all the time! If you find yourself in hell, it’s the perfect time to show your guts!”

“What kind of person is your mom?” Mdo and Boga asked simultaneously.

Heh heh, Dahak’s totally acting like an elder disciple now. He’s still got some worrisome aspects, but he’s become a lot more manly, so I think it’s okay to leave him to it. Now then, it’s about time for me to leave. Uh, next up is…

“What do you think, Kelvin?!” Both Bakke and Grostina suddenly turned to me.

I had no quick response, so I reacted by silently Summoning Gerard, reflexively using my Summoning teleportation method to escape to my next destination.

◇◇◇

I was in Director Shin's filthy office: the office of the guild director in the Adventurer's Guild headquarters. The room was just as messy and cluttered as always, and it was a wonder that I managed to find space to walk and reach the sofa.

I stirred the tea Director Shin served me; it was some unusual kind called…gobucha? As I did so, I recounted what had just happened to her.

Hrm, wow, this tea has a really curious taste.

I was with Gerard as well. I'd had him come with me on our way out of the Goldian Sanctuary.

"Mhm?" Shin hummed. "So you chose this place as your evacuation area. Or I guess I should say you ran here? Wow, to think the infamous Grim Reaper Kelvin would do something like that. So unlike you."

"I'm not *infamous*. And all I did was pass off dealing with them to my cute Dragonz—"

"Isn't that a bit of a stretch?" Shin commented.

"Exactly, *and* you Summoned me without any prior notice!" Gerard complained. "With the look Bakke-dono and Brujowana-dono were giving me, I almost collapsed in fear!"

"Hrm…"

Both Director Shin and Gerard were ganging up on me, so I was feeling pretty disadvantaged. They were both making good points too, so I was unable to argue back. I mean, the looks on their faces were scary! It was enough to almost make Gerard collapse! It wasn't a problem in combat, but I didn't think that kind of pressure was okay to put out during a normal conversation. Honestly, I was scared too. That kind of pressure in a noncombat situation was totally unfair.

"Now that we've had some fun, I guess it's about time to get to the main subject," said Shin. "Tell me what you've learned, Kelvin-kun."

With that, she plopped herself down on the opposite sofa.

Hey, you, what're you doing talking like you're my boss? Oh, wait, you kind of are, huh? Well, it's still a pretty loose interpretation since we're adventurers.

Director Shin wasn't included in my Follower Network, and I hadn't handed her a mini Clotho clone, so I decided to comply without a fuss. I reported that we'd joined hands with Luquille

and Cheruvim, and on all the other events regarding the Ten Authorities.

"Mm-hmm mm-hmm, I see," she let out after I was finished. "Mweh heh heh, so things have gotten quite interesting without me."

"If we can believe what the Ten Authorities say, there won't be any attacks for another month. We already know where they are, though, so we'll be keeping a constant watch on them anyway."

"It *is* always better to be prepared," she agreed. "Just in case, I'll have the Adventurer's Guild prepare some countermeasures as well."

"As expected, you're quick on the uptake. That helps a lot."

"Of course I'd help. It'd be a problem if the leader of the guild *didn't* make a move," said Shin. "There's no need for you to thank me, Kelvin. Still...if the Ten Authorities won't make any more appearances, then there's a limit to what we can do here. Unlike the time the ark spread those angel-type monsters around, there's no clear threat for us to fight. At best, we could try to find fallen angels on the surface like Horace."

"Hm, if the fallen angels hide their wings and halos, then they're no different from normal people," Gerard commented. "It would be quite difficult to find them, though that may not apply to someone who holds a high-level Analyze Eye like my liege here."

"And I don't want to spend my time trying to find people that might not even exist. As for what you said, Director Shin, I'll leave it to you, since you have connections with guilds all over the world. I'm sure there are some adventurers out there who are good at searching or accomplishing special missions. More importantly, though, there's something else we should focus on."

"Something else?" she echoed. She lit up a cigar and started smoking it, moving completely at her own pace and not even giving us a chance to stop her.

It's okay to smoke in this room? Ah, right...

"I want to decide who will be participating in the assault on Isla Heaven, our enemies' base."

Even if everyone in my family was a given, I had no idea how the adventurers from other nations would proceed. Director Shin had touched on the subject earlier, but pretty much the only ones to be dealt real harm during this incident had been Lumiest and Leigant. And the Ten Authorities weren't showing

themselves to the masses like DarkMel's ark, so the majority of people didn't know about them. If I were to announce, "We'll be attacking the Ten Authorities on this date, so all powerful adventurers come help!" I'd just be met with looks of doubt.

The nations I was deeply involved with on the Eastern Continent as well as Grelbarelka on the Northern Continent should listen, but reinforcements would only give me less of a share of the battles, which would be a net loss, so I didn't really want to do it—

Ahem! Not long had passed since the last big incident, so I didn't want to trouble people. Yeah, that was it!

With that in mind, I was thinking about having Director Shin act as a coordinator so that the situation could be solved with the Adventurer's Guild while saving face with those from various countries who already knew about this incident. Shutola would be perfect for the role, but naturally it would be difficult for one person alone to cover everything the job would entail, and even if it were possible, it would mean she would spend the entire month fulfilling only that role. So I wanted to have our dear director work hard instead.

Now is the time for you to make use of your station! I was planning to try flattering her to make her accept.

"Jeez, you brought that up so lightheartedly," Shin complained. "I believe in on-the-spot judgment, so I don't like these kinds of backroom deals. Still, though...I don't mind accepting."

"What? Really?"

Ohhh, that was lucky. I'd figured it wouldn't cost anything to bring it up, but I hadn't expected her to actually accept. Now that she had, it shortened my travel plans by a great deal.

"In exchange," Shin continued, "I want you to bring me with you when you take down the Ten Authorities."

I had no words.

"I see, so that's the face you make when I'm saying something you greatly welcome? Yep, I totally get it," said Shin. "Having someone as strong as me take part must make you so happy, Kelvin-kun!"

No, no, no, my face clearly says I absolutely hate the idea. If you come along, there'll be less combat for me! You know my plan was to keep you busy behind the scenes and indirectly prevent you from participating, right?

“My liege, it would be best for you to calm down first,” Gerard commented.

“Y-Yeah, I know. I just got a little dizzy, that’s all. There’s no problem at all. Yeah, not at all. Everything’s totally fine…”

“You don’t look fine…” Gerard said, trailing off.

He was right. Once I calmed down and thought it through, having a stronger force *was* a good thing. Efil couldn’t participate since she was pregnant, and assuming I’d be leaving some people behind in Pub to guard her, we would definitely be lacking manpower. If I thought about Shin as someone I was selecting to fill in the numbers, she was within the allowable limits.

Okay! I’ve managed to convince myself!

“Mweh heh heh, come on, don’t be like that. I’m not really spoiling to fight the Ten Authorities, unlike you, Kelvin-kun,” said Shin.

“Hm? Then why do you want to do it?”

“My duty as guild director compels me to. Just kidding. I don’t feel a shred of duty toward my job, I’m just interested in the place. I’m sure you can tell, looking at this room, but I’m a bit of a hoarder. I love magic items with weird abilities and rare weapons and armor. And I figure if I go, there’ll be rare items that were made way back during the age of gods, right? I want those. In other words, my main goal is exploration! Oh, and I’m assuming I get to keep what I find? The early bird gets the worm, after all!”

Director, I can see the glint in your eyes…but I get it. You’re after the Ten Authorities’ stuff. True, having seen the Holy Stakes, I understand why those might be attractive. But that means you won’t be there to get in my way? Hmmmmmm…

After some extended thought, I answered. “I understand. They say nothing’s more expensive than something free, after all. But you better do your job as coordinator well, got it?”

“Ohhh! As expected from the Grim Reaper!” she exclaimed. “You catch on quick! Praise the War Poet!”

“Heh! If you’re picking a fight, I’ll gladly take you up on it, you know?”

“Agh, jeez. I don’t care what happens anymore,” Gerard said, sipping at his tea.

Smiling, we produced our weapons and took combat stances. Gerard seemed to have given up on something, and he chose to just sit back and skillfully sip his tea through his helmet.

Everyone here was truly doing their own thing.

"Lord Celsius, may I get in on this deal as well?"

Just as we were about to fight, a familiar voice came from a corner of the room, from inside a pile of items.

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I looked over in the direction the voice was coming from. All I saw was a mountain of stuff, but it was obviously…

"I'm sure this isn't the case, but you couldn't possibly have put the communication crystal in a pile of junk, right?" the voice asked. "Yeah, there's no way. Even you, Shin, and your complete lack of tidiness, can't have done something so stupid…right?"

Ah, I knew it. The voice belonged to Art, the principal of Lumiest. He was most likely speaking through a magic item that was inside that mountainous pile.

"You're as rude as always, Art!" Shin yelled. "Don't call the things I personally collected 'junk'! They're all national treasures! This is a pile of treasure!"

"Honestly, Director Shin, I also question leaving all these 'treasures' in a messy, disorganized pile," I interjected.

"What?!" Shin exclaimed. "A sudden betrayal from Kelvin-kun?!"

It's not like I was ever on your side. And that's just common sense.

"I knew it," said Art. "Stop being stupid and find the communication crystal already. It's unthinkable for someone in a position of authority to leave such a fragile magic item in any old place."

Shin clicked her tongue. "Fine, I get it. I'm just a messy, sloppy woman in the end."

"Are you seriously sulking now?"

"I am not!"

The director started digging through the pile of magic items while puffing on her cigar.

Man, she's way too uninhibited already, but when it comes to Art, she becomes even more of a child. Oh, she's found the crystal.

"Here, I found it and put it on the table. Happy?" Shin said sulkily.

"Again with the inscrutable… Don't pout just because you can't see my beautiful form through the crystal," said Art. "Just be satisfied with falling for my wonderful voice! Get drunk on the

sound!"

Shin scoffed. "Yeah, yeah, you're making my ears fall off already."

"Mmm? How rude. It's not like you could hear to begin with."

Both sides fell silent.

"Uh, er, Principal Art? You didn't speak up just to get into a fight, did you?"

There was no way they'd get anywhere if I left them to their own devices, so I had to step in. I was dealing with so many selfish people these days, like Luquille and Cheruvim.

You think so too, right, Gerard? Huh? Hey, what's with that doubtful look?

"Whoops, I shouldn't be troubling Lord Celsius," said Art. "Shin, let's get back to business."

"Well, I guess we have to if Kelvin-kun says so. I don't like how respectful you're being toward Art, but I'll let that go for you, Kelvin-kun."

"Oh, uh...thanks?"

Wait, why am I the one saying thanks? Well, whatever. What were we talking about?

"As I said at the beginning, I would like to participate in the final battle too," Art repeated.

Ah, right. That's what he said. Hm...

"I guess I should ask: is that just because Director Shin wants to go?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "Unlike Shin, I do not have such a childish competitive side. This has to do with my position. The fallen angels who worship the Ten Authorities sent a spy to my school and endangered the students. As the principal of Lumiest, I cannot leave that unanswered. There's also the fact that they attempted to use Dorothy-kun, and that we would have had a great disaster on our hands if even one thing had gone wrong. So I'd like to rake their leader over the coals. Would you please consider it, Lord Celsius?"

While he'd been displaying full-on narcissism just a moment ago, Art's tone was now low, and he sounded quite calm. In fact, I'd go so far as to say he was quietly furious. This was what people meant when they referred to invoking someone's wrath. Just like Director Shin, it was enough of a reason to consider letting him participate.

But still...both Director Shin and *Principal Art want to join in?*

That's reassuring, but also not. Specifically, there'll be fewer fights for me. What should I do, Gerard? Would it be okay for us to forge on ahead like we did back when we attacked Trycen? Oh, come on, stop with that pitying look! I'm thinking about this seriously!

"Ah, I understand your vices, Lord Celsius," Art added. "You don't need to worry; I don't plan to steal your fun. I specialize in backline support. Specifically, I raise morale with my performance while putting the enemy at a disadvantage. Just like Shin, who intends to spend her time looking for treasure, I don't plan on fighting the Ten Authorities directly, I can promise you that, though I hope you'll at least allow me to defend myself."

Ah, right. That reminds me, Principal Art used an instrument in the exhibition match too. He fought by catching the enemy's attention while dodging all their attacks and applying buffing or debuffing effects to those around him. Now that I think about it, he's basically a complete set of all backline support roles in one. He's a pretty rare type for a Rank S adventurer. Most of us like to be on the front line. If Art participates, he'll definitely give us an advantage.

After some thought, I replied, "If that's the case, I suppose I don't have any reason to refuse."

"Well, I guess it's fine since Art's got *such* a good reason. You'd better support me, at least, got it?" Shin said.

"Sorry, but my support won't work with those who can't hear properly," Art replied. "Even then, I'd only do it *grudgingly*."

"Whoa, was that a pun I heard? It was pretty good!" said Shin. "But if it's a fight you want, you got it."

"Okay, okay, calm down."

These two should absolutely not be allowed to be together during the assault, even if they are allowed to participate, I decided.

"Hm, this seems to be quite the gathering of Rank S adventurers. My liege's inclinations aside, it will be an honor to fight alongside you," said Gerard. "By the way, my liege, what about the other Rank S adventurers?"

"Hm? Ah, I guess it depends on the person. Right now, Bakke's with Dahak and the others and is more interested in them than the Ten Authorities, so I don't think she'll be taking part. Meanwhile, Grostina is keen to help since Prettia-chan's involved, so she'll definitely be a part of this. As for the rest of the Eastern Continent's Rank S adventurers... Well, I don't know about Leonhart and Sylvia. Leonhart prioritizes his country, and Sylvia is a guest general of Toraj. Given her title, she's relatively free to

do what she wants, but even so, she probably can't ignore Tsubaki-sama's wishes."

"Hm, it certainly sounds complicated," said Gerard.

"In that case, what should I do as the coordinator?" asked Shin. "Rank S adventurers are still guild members. Should I make them participate to solve this crisis?"

It took me a moment to collect myself and reply. "You're saying that on purpose, aren't you?"

"Mweh! Heh! Heh!"

Even though she was puffing on a cigar, the director's smile was terribly childish. It might have been a good idea to give the assault on the enemy's base some serious thought before the day came.

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After a while, the talks reached a good stopping point, and Art ended the call. After that, Gerard and I said some hurried goodbyes before leaving her office to return to the Golden Sparrow. However, right after we left, we happened upon some people in the hallway.

"What're you guys doing here?"

I was looking at Suzu, Paul, Sinjeel, and Oddradd—my disciples. They all had their ears to the wall, as though eavesdropping on the director's office. In fact, that seemed to be exactly what they were doing. And we hadn't just happened upon them—they were there on purpose.

"Uh, aha ha ha ha... We, er, were worried about you, Master Kelvin, so we came to see how you were doing," Suzu offered.

*If you're going to try that, Suzu, you should say "*hear."

"I didn't want to eavesdrop, okay?! But none of these guys would listen to me!" Paul said, trying to save himself.

I see, so you really were doing that. You're incapable of lying, aren't you, Paul?

"We were just worried, Master Kelvin," said Sinjeel. "This is just a form of love. Did you buy that? No?"

He was trying to put on his best smile, but that didn't stop me from feeling that it wasn't good to eavesdrop.

"Hah Haaa! Master Kelvin! Take us with you! To that final battle or whatever!" Oddradd shouted.

As for Oddradd, he was actually being refreshingly upfront

about it.

Just to sum up, it sounded like they had a variety of different reasons, but in the end, they wanted to participate in the fight against the Ten Authorities too.

I sighed. “You guys… I’ll scold you later; just explain the situation to me first.”

“Ah, we really are going to be scolded?” Suzu wilted.

“Of course you are. And depending on the situation, you’ll get worse too. By the way, why are you all together today? Didn’t you split up to do your own things?”

If I remembered correctly, Suzu had returned to the Eastern Continent to resume her job as Toraj’s guildmaster, Paul had remained in Leigant, Sinjeel had been doing things with his party, and Oddradd had gone to the Goldian Sanctuary.

Ah, wait… He wasn’t there, though. I finally had a realization.

“I finished my work in Toraj instantly and made a U-turn back!” Suzu exclaimed. “I put in a lot of effort to train my staff, so even without me, they’ll be fine for a while! My substitute guildmaster will make it all work out!”

“I know if I stayed in Leigant, that stubborn old king would start something again,” said Paul. “After I escorted Edgar and his friends back to Lumiest, I returned to Pub. Then, I met up with these guys, and this happened…”

“When Lady Respect left for her homeland, I felt incredible pressure from multiple sources,” said Sinjeel. “When I looked into it, it turned out to be you, Master Kelvin. I wondered if you were fighting something powerful, so I hurried to Pub based on that incredible deduction! And in truth, I was righ—”

“Hah HAAAH!” Oddradd laughed loudly. “My sister disciple, Grostina, seemed busy! I decided to return so that I wouldn’t be a bother to her! Then, I detected your presence in town, Master Kelvin! Thus, I came here!”

Sorry, but please don’t start talking all at once. I can make sense of everything somehow thanks to Parallel Processing, but honestly, it’s tiring. Still, at least I know what happened.

“I see. But I’m not taking you guys with me. To be blunt, you’ll be in the way.”

“Please, reconsider!” Suzu shouted.

“I agree with Lady Suzu, Master Kelvin,” said Sinjeel. “Weren’t you the one who taught us to crave fights against more powerful opponents?”

“Sure, but there’s a limit. Do you even know how powerful the enemies we’ll be facing are?”

“You’re wrong, Master!” shouted Oddradd. “The stronger the enemy, the more our hearts sing and the more we smile! We shouldn’t be thinking about losing, but of how to win, right?!”

“I mean, I don’t think eavesdropping is a good thing either, but I’m with them when it comes to fighting strong opponents,” Paul admitted. “It’s been really hard to raise our levels lately, so I’ve been wanting a tougher enemy to fight. I’m totally willing, Master. No matter how powerful they are, I’m not choosy.”

“So please, Master!”

All my disciples pleaded with me at once.

Oh no. It doesn’t seem like they’ll listen, no matter what I say. Hey, who was it who turned them all into battle-crazed idiots? Oh, right…it was me. Damn. Why?! Why did this happen?!

“It’s fine that you guys are battle junkies, but you’ve got to be more rational. Ugh, I guess it’s too late. Jeez, why do you want to come so badly? It’s going to be more dangerous than anything you’ve faced before.”

“So you’re saying it’ll be the wonderland of our dreams!” Sinjeel exclaimed.

“Hee hee! It sounds like a good date spot,” Suzu agreed.

“Dangerous, you say? That makes my heart sing,” Paul added.

“Hah HAAAh! Heh ha ha hah HAAAAH!” Oddradd laughed loudly.

Ah, I messed up. Saying it that way only makes them more excited. Even I, as rational as I am, would be happy to hear that. What a mistake!

As I was racking my brain, trying to figure out a way to stop them, Gerard messaged me through the Network.

::My liege, why not have Shutola convince them instead? She’ll likely do a better job.::

Hm, now that’s an idea, I replied. *But it doesn’t feel great having Shutola clean up my mess…*

Although their levels were still too low to fight the Ten Authorities, they had certainly raised their levels significantly. Paul had touched on it just now, but they were at a high enough level that only Rank S monsters would be able to get them even higher. Flipping that on its head, that would make them starved for places to train. At least, that’s what I figured. That was how I would be in their shoes, so it was very possible they felt the

same, being my disciples.

But if they get out of that thought process of charging forward and reach the minimum level needed before the deadline…it's possible they could come, I mused through the Network.

::If memory serves, you were just talking about your share of the battles,:: Gerard pointed out.

I mean, even if they grow that much, I'm not going to let them fight the Ten Authorities, I replied. *But it's not as if they won't have monsters there, right? There's a possibility Rem might have some guards or other people under her control wandering about. They'll probably be small fry compared to the Ten Authorities, but they'd be perfect for letting these guys gain experience.*

::Hm…so you're saying that you'll use them to thin out the small fry, and it will also serve as prime hunting ground for them to gain levels?::

Exactly, I confirmed. *Of course, I don't expect this to actually happen. The world isn't that convenient. If there aren't good enemies for them to fight, they can just watch from afar. At their level, that'll still help them.*

And so I decided to have Suzu and the others train and pass a test to allow them to participate. Leaving ample room until the deadline, I decided to set the training period at three weeks, and their trainer and exam proctor would be…

Let's see, how about Cheruvim? He doesn't have anything to do other than convince Gloria, and he'll serve as a good target in his current state. Yeah, he's perfect!

"You guys are seriously okay with this, right? You know that you might die?" I decided to check one final time just in case. I knew what their answers would be, though, and I wasn't proven wrong. They all said yes. "Right. If you're that motivated, then I guess I have no choice. Okay, come with me. I'm taking you to an incredibly fun training camp hell. But try your best not to die before the real thing. Naturally, I don't have the ability to bring the dead back to life."

The four of them had been full of motivation, but after hearing that, their faces clouded for a moment. At least, I thought they did…

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Deep in the jungle west of Pub, there was a dungeon that

Kelvin had discovered called the Grim Reaper's Dinner Table. The level of the monsters that spawned there were very high, and even on the higher floors, Rank A adventurers would find themselves fighting for their lives. The guild had designated it a Rank S dungeon, and without permission, Rank A adventurers and below couldn't even go near it, let alone try to conquer it.

For those who based themselves in Pub, the only ones allowed to set foot on that land were the guild director, Shin, and Kelvin, who was a Rank S adventurer. The only exceptions were Kelvin's disciples: Suzu, Paul, Sinjeel, and Oddradd, who had been given permission on condition that Kelvin accompanied them.

However, all that was only the information that was publicly available. There were other exceptions who weren't listed. Currently, there were two mysterious figures, a man and a woman, who could be seen near the deepest floors of the superdangerous dungeon. They were in what was originally an empty room, now transformed into a special prison thanks to Kelvin. The woman was inside the cell, while the man was on the other side of the bars. They seemed to be having a conversation.

"How long will you insist on being stubborn, Gloria? I'm telling you this, and I'm the subleader. Just come to our side already."

"And I'm wondering how long you'll make me repeat myself. Stop joking around, Cheruvim! Betraying us just because you've lost?! And you're still calling yourself the subleader?!"

The man on the outside was Cheruvim, and the woman in the cell was Gloria, who had lost to Sera. They were talking—or rather, fighting. Cheruvim had been tasked with convincing her to join them, but it wasn't going well.

"In the first place, I'm following the orders of Eld, who ranks even higher than you. I have no reason to obey you over him!" Gloria shouted.

"And Eld has gone off the deep end," Cheruvim argued. "His pointless orders have reduced our numbers for no reason, and even now he has yet to change his plans. He offers plausible excuses, but they're all worthless falsehoods. If the right hand of Addams has gone mad, then it is naturally my duty as his left hand to take action. This shouldn't be a bad deal for you either, as one who was once hailed as the God of Order. Isn't correcting mistakes part of maintaining order?"

"You fool! That's just you interpreting the word in a way that

suits your purposes!”

“Facts have always been interpreted by the strong,” Cheruvim argued. “You lost, so now you have a duty to obey the victor. If you agree with the teachings of Addams, you should understand that. I hope you do.”

“As if I ever would!” Gloria replied, shooting him down. Never mind not going well, it was looking like convincing her would be impossible.

“I’m coming in, Cheruvim. Wait, you’re still arguing? It looks like changing her mind isn’t in the cards,” a voice interjected.

It was soon followed by more voices.

“Wow, I didn’t know a place like this existed.”

“Because we’ve never been this deep. This is a surprise.”

“More importantly, everyone…”

“Hah HAAAH! Yeah, I get it.”

Kelvin and his disciples entered the room. Kelvin sighed, half astounded, while his disciples looked around with interest. The pair of fallen angels in front of him were wary.

“I was wondering who it was, Kelvin,” said Cheruvim. “Well, I suppose no one else could come here.”

“This place is basically a resort where no one can interrupt you since it’s filled with vicious monsters if you step outside. It’s pretty nice, right?” Kelvin replied.

“It’s not boring, at least,” Cheruvim answered after a moment’s thought.

“Oh, he agreed with Master’s opinion! He must also be a battle junkie!” Oddradd shouted.

“Indeed, he must be! His hair is even black as well!” Suzu agreed.

“And unlike Oddradd, he’s good-looking, though not as good-looking as me,” said Sinjeel.

“You guys need to stop talking. You’re interrupting Master,” Paul warned them.

After all that, Cheruvim finally had a chance to say, “So, who are these humans?” The prison had suddenly become lively, and he looked at Kelvin doubtfully.

Meanwhile, Gloria seemed shocked. She had yet to wrap her mind around the situation.

“They’re my disciples, Cheruvim. I want you to train them,” Kelvin explained.

It took a moment for Cheruvim to answer. “At least explain

things in more detail. This is coming from nowhere."

His confusion was well-founded, so Kelvin summed things up for him.

"I see, so you want to strengthen them for the fight to come?" Cheruvim concluded.

"Yeah. I refused at first, but they were so insistent. I have other things I need to do, though. You'll do great as a practice enemy, so I thought you'd be able to help."

"I refuse," said Cheruvim flatly. "I don't have time to participate in such worthless pastimes. As you can see, I'm busy persuading Gloria."

"Oh, come on. If you keep going the way you are, that'll never happen anyway. If you want, Gloria can train them with you," Kelvin suggested. "I've cast Heart Calm on her too. Just keep persuading her while you train them. Don't you think that talking to her in an environment where you can stretch your wings would be much more fruitful than trying to convince her here in this cramped dungeon?"

"You have a point..."

"No, he doesn't!" Gloria shouted. "I knew it, Cheruvim! You've gone insane!" She'd regained her wits while listening to their conversation and couldn't help but jump in.

"Ha ha! I'm glad she's doing better than expected. I heard her battle with Sera was very flashy and intense. I want to try fighting you too someday, Gloria," said Kelvin.

"So, you're Kelvin," Gloria replied after a moment. "I've heard a little about you from Cheruvim. No matter what you do, I will not yield to your whims."

"Sure, that's fine with me. In fact, I never expected Cheruvim to convince you. If he succeeded, we'd have more strength on our side and that'd be awful."

That seemed to confuse Gloria. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You can choose to take it however you like."

"Hmph. Empty bluster," she scoffed. "And you want those weaklings there to take part in the battle? You must be sorely lacking capable hands on the surface. How are you even planning to fight us Ten Authorities with those frail pieces of deadweight clinging to you? Just give it up. I won't blame you. You have no chance of winning."

"It's amazing how she can talk so big right after losing, huh? I

should learn from how shameless she is," Paul whispered to his companions.

"I agree, but you shouldn't be so rude to a lady," Sinjeel whispered back.

They were cut off by a brutal glare from Gloria. Paul and Sinjeel immediately fell silent and averted their gazes. It seemed she could hear their conversation clearly. Just like an Evolved human, fallen angels had good hearing.

"Ha ha! They've got spirit, don't you think?" said Kelvin. "And to answer your question, of course I plan to win. These guys will basically be there on an educational field trip. I don't plan to rely on them for fighting strength. Think of them as apprentices. The only ones on the front line will be people like Sera, who already beat you. So there's no need to worry."

"I have no idea what you mean by worry... It seems you're laboring under the illusion that you can fight the Ten Authorities on equal footing just because you beat Cheruvim and me. How pitiful," said Gloria.

"Illusion? Cheruvim is the subleader of the Ten Authorities, right?" Kelvin asked. "He's basically your number two."

"And I am calling that impression pitiful," Gloria answered. "If those ears aren't just for show, then use them to listen well. The three greatest members of the Ten Authorities, our *actual* top three, are still going strong. They are our best assets, and in terms of pure power, they are head and shoulders above the rest of us."

"Yeah, I know! I'm looking forward to meeting them!"

That threw Gloria for a loop. It was a moment before she let out a confused "Wha?" She had meant for her explanation to be a threat, but it had the opposite effect on this Grim Reaper. Unfortunately, she'd had no way of imagining such an outcome. How pitiful.

While Kelvin happily showed his wicked smile to everyone present, Gloria doubted what she'd just heard. But then she realized that her ears weren't defective and she hadn't heard wrong—the person in front of her had actually said those words.

"Are you...insane?" she asked.

"No, I'm totally sane. But, wow, I didn't expect you to be so kind, Gloria, worrying about an enemy like that. Or do you actually want to join us?"

"You idiot! I don't! That wasn't what I meant!" she sputtered,

emphatically shaking her head to drive the point home.

“Ha ha! My bad, my bad. Anyway, jokes aside, you mentioned the Three Great Authorities? I heard about them from Cheruvim already,” said Kelvin. “It sounds like he’s not quite satisfied with the term.”

“Of course not,” Cheruvim answered. “The Three Great Authorities is not a position decided by Addams, our god, but one that Eld created on his own. I suspect he did it to annoy me, which is why he left me out. In terms of overall strength, there is no way I would fall so far behind as to not be in that group.”

“It’s amazing how he can say that with no shame after losing to Master Kelvin,” Sinjeel whispered.

“I agree, but what happened to not being rude?” Paul replied in the same hushed tone, but they were quickly interrupted as Cheruvim fixed them with a glare. The trainees instantly clammed up and averted their gazes. It seemed their whispers were still clearly audible.

“According to Cheruvim, the Three Great Authorities are the God of Martial Arts Hao Marr, the Foreign God Hazama Shemhazar, and Isabel Rozess, the Guardian God and your older sister, Gloria. Hey, why aren’t Eld and Cheruvim included?” Kelvin asked. “They’re the top two members, aren’t they? I know Hao’s the guy who defeated Prettia-chan, Dahak, and Grostina, so I get him being in there, but…there’s no way he’s actually doing it to annoy you, right?”

“No, this is that contemptible Eld we’re talking about. There’s no doubt he made it somewhat believable just to annoy me more,” stated Cheruvim.

“Man, how much do you hate Eld?” Kelvin muttered in response. To him, knowing the strength of each of the Ten Authorities was of the utmost importance. After all, that would decide who he fought. Normally, he would go for the enemy’s head right away, but if Eld wasn’t actually the strongest, he would need to be a bit more picky about his opponents. Analyzing the strength of these so-called Three Great Authorities was part of that.

“Hmph, it wouldn’t do for you to hold a distorted image of us,” said Gloria. “Not to worry. This is information I have and am willing to share.”

“Ohhh, you sure are reliable. I expected nothing less from a God of Order,” Kelvin replied.

“Hey, death gods are reliable too, aren’t they?” Cheruvim chimed in.

That was met with silence from both Gloria and Kelvin. He’d said it with such a straight face that neither of them had any response.

“The title was given to those who managed great contributions in the previous war,” Gloria explained. “Hao, Hazama, and Isabel were on the front line and managed to defeat a great number of enemies. Meanwhile, Eld and Cheruvim were leaders and therefore did not have as many chances to fight. That is the true reason they weren’t included. In essence, it’s a difference in achievements.”

“Ah, I see… So that’s why,” said Kelvin. “By the way, did Cheruvim not know about that?”

“Of course not,” said Cheruvim.

“Wow, this guy just came out and admitted it…”

“Eld and Cheruvim are like cats and dogs, you see,” said Gloria. “Well, honestly, it’s more like Cheruvim one-sidedly hates Eld. I bet he didn’t really listen when Eld was explaining this after first creating the title.”

“Did he actually explain it at the time?” Cheruvim asked.

“Cheruvim, you…” Kelvin muttered in exasperation.

In the end, it seemed Cheruvim’s misunderstanding had been cleared up.

“Well, whatever,” said Kelvin. “What matters most is who’s the strongest in the end. Is it Eld? Or the Three Great Authorities? Please make it clear!”

“Unfortunately, I would not know,” Gloria replied. “Though I would definitely say it is either Eld or one of the three.”

“Aw, so you don’t know…” Kelvin deflated.

“It doesn’t matter either way. No matter who you fight, you have no chance of winning. Feel free to die with your overconfidence.”

“Wait, I’m not a candidate fo—” Cheruvim started, but was interrupted by Gloria.

“You stopped qualifying the moment you lost to this one.”

Cheruvim had no argument for that, so he said nothing.

“Uh, well, I’ll just keep that information in mind,” said Kelvin. “I already promised to leave Hao to Dahak, so I guess I’ll leave who I fight up to chance.”

“Hey, Master Kelvin, the training…” Paul prompted him

hesitantly.

Kelvin had been getting lost in thought, imagining who would be the most delicious fight from among the Ten Authorities. That would have been a fulfilling use of time, but Paul, who had been waiting with the rest behind him, put a stop to it.

“Oh, right, sorry. That’s what we came here for,” said Kelvin. “With that settled, I’m counting on you too, Gloria.”

With that, he put his hand on her head. That confused Gloria, and she made a noise to indicate that she was wondering what kind of trick he was trying to pull. But Kelvin did nothing more, though it seemed he was concentrating on something.

“Hey, what’re—”

Kerchunk!

Before Gloria got the full question out, she was interrupted by a sound that made her once again doubt her own hearing. Kelvin had just opened the door to the cell she was imprisoned in. He didn’t hesitate to undo the shackles on her arms and legs as well. The effects of the Heart Calm spell he had placed on her did not prevent her from harming him, nor did it prevent her from escaping. In other words, as long as she didn’t attack anyone other than Kelvin, she could leave right now if she chose to.

“You fool!” Gloria shouted. She was quick to act, manifesting her Authority and casting a Rank B White Magic spell, Flashbang, without chanting.

The instantaneous light was powerful enough to sear the eyes. But since she couldn’t harm anyone other than Kelvin, she activated her Gap Authority at the same time, creating an infinite distance behind him so that Suzu and the others wouldn’t be caught in the light.

I’ll leave everyone else, but there’s no need to have mercy on this one! Gloria thought.

Right after casting Flashbang, she swung at Kelvin. He was not protected, and now that he’d come into super close quarters to undo her shackles, there was no way she could miss his heart. She was sure of it, but...

Shock hit her as a sharp pain ran up her right arm. At the same time, she felt the sensation of flesh and bone squishing and snapping. The feeling of intense danger at this unusual occurrence made her immediately switch plans from erasing Kelvin to fleeing. She quickly eliminated the distance between

the cell and the door to the room as she ran with all her might.

"Master Kelvin! Are you okay?!" Suzu cried out.

The ball of light created by Flashbang disappeared, revealing Kelvin. He'd been kneeling to undo the shackles, and that hadn't changed now that the light was gone. Of course, Gloria was no longer in the cell.

"That was close," he said. "If I hadn't donned Hard in Astaroth form in response, I would've had a hole put in my heart. I finally got used to deploying him reflexively, though I'm pretty sure her fist is in a terrible state now since she slammed it full force into my armor, which will never break."

"Hey, you know she escaped, right?" Paul pointed out.

"No, no, she didn't. I let her go. Just like my disciples, my friends and I on the front line have to get into peak condition again. That's why I'm going to have her take part in the training. Oh, and leave the persuasion to me. I'll get it done."

"What?" Cheruvim was shocked. "You're going to convince her *during* training?"

"I'm saying I'll talk to her in a much more comfortable environment while you train my disciples. Right, then. You can take it from here!"

"Wait, hey!" Cheruvim shouted after him.

But Kelvin was already gone, leaving the four disciples who wanted to train and get stronger fixing the fallen angel with their passionate gazes. Kelvin hadn't lied about his plans, but Cheruvim still found it hard to accept it all.

◇ ◇ ◇

Gloria Rozess, hailed as a god of law and order, was originally on the side of the Chief God. The reason for this was extremely simple: The chief god's ideals upheld the order and stability of the world, which generally matched her love of a neat society. The wicked god's ideas, which were trying to destroy the current system, which wanted for nothing, and change the way everything worked, was something she hated.

So why had Gloria betrayed the chief god to side with the wicked one? Because of her older sister, the guardian god Isabel Rozess.

A few months before the great war of myths, Isabel had secretly left the area she'd been given by the chief god to

protect, heading for the wicked god Addams and his camp.

“Sister! Are you really going to side with Addams?!”

“Gloria! You’re shouting too loudly! I-If someone hears us, it’ll be a lot of work to shut them up!”

Gloria had discovered her in the act, which heavily shook her. Isabel had never been the composed sort, but she was especially upset today.

Seeing her sister like that, Gloria knew that the rumors were true, and she immediately voiced the question that came to mind.

“Then answer this: Why is a god of your standing trying to join a revolution, Isabel? They’re trying to throw this calm, stable world into the darkness of chaos. As a guardian, you should be everyone’s shield, so why do something so foolish?”

If Gloria was a god who defended law and order, Isabel was one who physically defended others from threats. She was worthy of being called a shield to the gods. Her elder sister, whose duty should have been to protect, was inexplicably trying to destroy everything, and Gloria couldn’t understand what she was thinking.

“Uh…er…um, I just started to doubt if the way things are now is actually acceptable. Or, I should say…er…” Isabel hesitantly answered.

“What? What do you mean?”

“You just said that this world is stable, Gloria, but that’s only because we’re severely limiting life in the worlds under our control, right? Is that really necessary?”

“Why are you asking about something so obvious? Of course it’s necessary to maintain the current state of each world. It’s because we’ve restricted them that they proceed according to our expectations. If even one individual were to deviate, the world it lives in would immediately approach destruction, just as beings called Demon Lords appeared in the lower realms in the past. Unlike us gods, not all the lives down there have a noble mindset,” Gloria answered.

After some thought, Isabel gave her reply. “Then what if the gods who manage these worlds were to lose *their* noble mindsets?”

“What?” Isabel was no longer panicked and flustered. In fact, her eyes were set directly on her younger sister.

“You’re right. Stability and peace are wonderful things. Under

this order, I’m sure those in the lower realms would enjoy unchanging lives. Wonderful, truly wonderful. But unlike we who live eternally, peace can be a poison for them,” Isabel told her.

Gloria had no reply, so Isabel continued.

“Those in the lower realm are still fine. Even if they’re rotten, they’ll eventually drop dead and be cleansed through reincarnation so that they can repent as a newborn. New lives give rise to new ambitions and progress. But that’s not true for gods. We have no concept of a lifespan, so we can live forever unless we meet with misfortune. If we’re rotten, we always, always—”



“Uh…Isabel?”

“Right now, most of us are poisoned by our unchanging world and have become slothful. All that many gods have on their minds is maintaining the status quo. They don’t even try to reach greater heights. We’re *gods*, you know? We garner worship from those below and are exemplary beings of absolute power! Did you know that, Gloria? Even conceding all my points, things aren’t even stagnant among the gods today. There are those who have completely abandoned their worlds or even treat their worlds like a game to be played. The chief god leaves such trash alone, not even bothering to censure them. Can that really be allowed? How can we as gods pretend we don’t see it?”

As Isabel spoke, she rapped the staff in her hands on the ground. The action was small, as was the sound it made, but it rivaled the footsteps of a raging giant. Gloria felt an indescribable impact with every beat. Each time the staff struck the ground, she almost felt like her entire body would spring up in response.

To Gloria, Isabel was someone to be feared. As a goddess, she was clumsy, pure, cute, lovely, and overflowing with kindness and love. Isabel’s believers held this vision of her as their ideal, and it truly was one of her many facets. However, it was only one.

“Isabel…” Gloria had ventured.

Isabel’s standards were extremely high, and she particularly despised slothfulness. The reason Gloria had grown to prize discipline and morality was at least partially because she was so close to her sister.

“But there are exemplary gods too, aren’t there?” Gloria pointed out. “And there’s no need to go as far as changing the lives of those below—”

“You’re right. Some exemplary gods exist,” Isabel agreed. “For instance, Gloria, you are a perfect example. Though your abilities have not yet matured, you’re much better than most. You have fantastic spirit and ambition, so your future is bright. It’s enough that even if the revolution comes to fruition, I want you to stay as you are. But there’s no guarantee that the rotten gods will not have a bad influence on you, much like one rotten apple can spoil the barrel. Before that happens, measures must be taken.”

A louder rap of her staff made Gloria flinch. “Measures?”

“In essence, the current gods lack a sense of danger,” Isabel had explained. “No matter what they or those below do, the

current system protects them. So the best thing to do is destroy the system and free those in the lower realms from these restrictions. They will reach greater heights according to their efforts and talents, and will likely one day reach the realm of the gods. In such an ideal world, the gods will not be able to take a lukewarm stance like keeping the status quo, because a knife that can bring them low will be born. Gods will have to pursue power that will make them worthy of being gods, and those from the lower realms will chase us to make us sweat. Look, there's a wonderful world that is constantly evolving. You see it?"

Isabel's excitement came through in her speech as she talked about her ideals, but her gaze remained as steady as it had been since the beginning of the conversation. She was not joking, but seriously aiming for such a world. And once she started running, that would be it. Once Isabel decided to protect something, she would even protect the world itself from what she considered corruption.

Gloria imagined the disaster her sister would create, and the realization made her dizzy. The morals and discipline Gloria was supposed to protect would be destroyed by her own sibling. That was something that could not be allowed. But at this point, it would be impossible to stop Isabel, so Gloria decided that she needed to become a brake for her sister—that even if such ideals were to be realized, she could at least lead it in a better direction. Gloria accepted this as fate, and decided to go with her and attempt to create a better universe.

"I'll side with Addams too, sister."

"R-Really? Thank goodness... You understand my thoughts? Hee hee! With my beloved Gloria by my side, there's nothing to be afraid of. Let's cleanse this world together and return it to its rightful form."

With her sister returned to her previous mannerisms, Gloria was truly glad she made that decision. Even though her sister had an air of danger about her at times, she was still Gloria's precious family. The option to dash her sister's desires as part of the chief god's faction never existed at all to her.

◇ ◇ ◇

Gloria had dodged past Kelvin and escaped the prison. Now, she was making her way through the Grim Reaper's Dinner

Table. She planned to head for the exit, retake her Holy Stake, and return to Isla Heaven, but her reverse conquering of the dungeon was not going well.

Wha?! Gah! Another dead end! she thought.

This was the umpteenth time she'd found herself with no way to proceed, and she couldn't help but curse in her heart. Impatience showed itself in the form of sweat, and mentally and emotionally, she felt like she was being hounded.

Still…dammit! Why does it have to happen now of all times?! My memories from back then…

In this predicament, one particular memory bubbled up to the surface. It was a memory of the beginning, and it came with a headache—the memory of how she had come with her big sister to the rebels' side. It had been carved deep into her heart with vivid colors.

Eld and the Three Great Authorities… Someone of my caliber isn't qualified to guess who is stronger. Indeed, I didn't lie. But…the scariest one to me is undoubtedly my sister. The sight of her going on a rampage on the front line was truly terrifying. Hao managed to capture that muscly false goddess, so she's calm right now, but there's no guarantee she'll stay that way forever. If Eld's plan gets knocked further off track, I have no idea what she'll do. That's why I can't afford to be caught he— Grk, again?!

After turning back and starting once more, it didn't take long for Gloria to hit another dead end. This floor was close to the bottom of the dungeon, and the passageways were narrow and convoluted, like a complex maze. What was worse was that this one had some sort of effect that stymied detection skills, meaning one needed to proceed while manually making a map or relying on natural instinct to get through. If Gloria had known some sort of specialized spell to help with it, she would have had options, but unfortunately, she didn't.

Simply destroying parts of the dungeon to make her way through could have worked under certain circumstances, but Gloria had been brought here while unconscious. She had no idea where she was. If she truly was underground, there was a chance the dungeon could collapse on her head. Naturally, she wanted to avoid such an event.

This mazelike structure on top of the enclosed space… That man understands my Authority to a hateful degree!

These kinds of mazes worked very badly against her

Authority, Gap, which required a target to be in sight before she could manipulate her relative distance to it. In short, the walls severely limited her field of vision, which in turn did the same to her ability. Her power to take shortcuts by shrinking distance was basically nonfunctional.

What was more, her already limited shortcut ability was too dangerous to use continuously and recklessly. The reason for that was all the high-level monsters that spawned in this dungeon. Many of them lurked in the narrow passageways with the Covert Action skill and would suddenly appear before one with no warning whatsoever. Often, she would turn a corner and use Gap only to end up right in front of a monster. If she were to use it in the wrong place or at the wrong time, she could definitely find herself in a monster's clutches.

Of course, as one of the Ten Authorities, Gloria would not lose to any old foe. Even if she was greatly limited in this body, she could end the creatures she encountered without a scratch. Yet, she wanted to avoid exhausting herself as much as possible. She was being chased by the man who had undone her shackles—Grim Reaper—and the God of Death who had betrayed the Ten Authorities. That knowledge made her more cautious than she needed to be.

In a one-on-one fight, especially if she was just trying to escape, she could deal with Cheruvim somehow, even though he was stronger. However, with the unknown quantity that was Grim Reaper Kelvin, things were different. Her Authority was limited, and the terrain advantage lay with her enemies, so she would surely be captured if she were to try. Right now, the best choice was to use all her strength to run and hope to find the right path out—though she did have an idea.

In truth, Gloria was right. Even in such a dangerous situation, she retained the ability to make good decisions. However...there was one point where she was wrong. It wasn't just Grim Reaper trying to capture her.

"Hm, seems you've finally come. Let us have a good fight!"

Gloria let out a noise of alarm. "Grim Reaper's underling!"

While trying to cross a T-junction, she found Gerard standing in the middle of the perpendicular path. It seemed he'd been summoned there just as Gloria had made a break for it. She could instantly tell that he was not to be underestimated.

Even without detection skills, his level is obvious at a glance. He's

most likely comparable to that demon named Sera! Dammit, when did the lower realm become such a den of monsters?!

Gloria searched for a way through while complaining internally. But with the condition that she couldn't harm him, she couldn't find an option. She just couldn't imagine getting past someone as powerful as Sera under the current conditions.

If only I could at least use Flashbang or something, running would be so much easier!

Seeming to read what was in Gloria's heart, Gerard shouted, "No need to fret! When my liege undid your shackles, he also overwrote his spell! You may attack me, just like you may attack him!"

"Wha?!" Gloria exclaimed in shock. "Do you really expect me to believe that?!"

"Indeed, believe it!" Gerard replied. "I swear on my knight's pride that I am not lying!"

Was he lying? Was he telling the truth? If Gloria assumed wrong, she could die. *Wait, when he put his hand on my head, was that…*

In the end, she only wavered for a moment. "Then I'll skip the introductions, as this is an emergency! If you don't want to die, step aside!"

"Naturally, I refuse! If you want to get past me, you'll have to show your strength!"

"Pray you don't choke on those words!" Gloria shouted. "Cross-Magazine Belt!"

With ammo belts of brightly shining crosses equipped on her arms, it didn't take long for cross bullets to start flying and immediately hit Gerard.

"Waaarghh?!"

"It was your mistake waiting in a place with no obstacles!" Gloria shouted. She'd adapted her Authority to her bullets, making it so that they were effectively firing point-blank at the knight. As a result, they were all on the mark. Not only that, but they were all aiming for gaps in his armor and his helmet. These unerringly accurate attacks basically nullified any defense the armor offered.

With loud cracking sounds, hundreds—*thousands*—of bullets poured toward Gerard, and the impact of them threw up a cloud of dust, disrupting Gloria's vision. Now she was unable to use Gap for point-blank hits, but as long as she didn't stop attacking,

she wouldn’t stop hitting. So she continued. But…

“Gnnrrrrrgghhh!” Gerard yelled with effort as he withstood the attacks inside the smoke. No matter how much Gloria threw at him, he didn’t stop shouting.

The first bullets definitely went through the armor… But from the fact that he’s still shouting, it wasn’t enough to put him down, that monster. And if I take too long, that Grim Reaper and the rest will catch up. I don’t have the leeway to waste more time here. With that heavy equipment, he’s surely not very fast, so…

Gloria made a decision. She would use her projectiles to physically pin him to the wall and use the opening to get past. Against such an obviously tough opponent, she knew that the fight would otherwise drag on.

“Hrngh!” Gerard grunted.

“Wha?!” Gloria exclaimed.

Just when she’d tried to run down the right side of the T-junction, a jet-black arm had appeared from the storm of bullets, approaching her at great speed. It was a close-range attack that was very surprising, but she just managed to dodge it. She then used Gap to create a shortcut to the other side of the passage, succeeding in leaving the junction. She managed to pass through unscathed, but if she’d made one wrong move, she would’ve been captured.

“Hrm, so I failed to grab her,” said Gerard. “It is difficult to deal with her without my reflection. But I’m finally used to those sure-hit attacks.”

Now that Gloria had escaped, the bullet hell had stopped, and the cloud of dust that had been kicked up was split apart, having been cut away by Gerard, the owner of the large arm. He’d made a fairly splashy entrance, and even though he’d taken so many attacks, he was barely damaged. The surface of his armor was scratched and dinged, but those would disappear in a few seconds thanks to Auto Healing.

“Is he really a living thing?” Gloria wondered aloud.

She truly believed the endeavor was as fruitless as fighting Ridwan.

Gloria immediately ran off, attempting to withdraw from the area. Now that she’d gotten past Gerard, there was no merit to continuing the fight.

“Hey! Wait!” Gerard shouted.

“Sorry, but I’ll have to take a rain check on this duel,” she shot

back.

Gerard had shouted to stop her, but she did not heed him. Even if she were to be mocked and derided for running, her number one priority right now was escape. Being mocked was a small price to pay for it; she was *that* resolved.

“Wait! I said wait, please! I feel like I’ll learn something after just a little more!” Gerard shouted. “Do that storm of attacks again! Beat me up! I beg of you!”

Gloria let out a confused exclamation. “Ghh— Agh, stop spouting those disgusting words, you fool! Don’t beg for that!”

“Ahhh! Don’t run! Please, waaaiiit!” Gerard shouted back.

“I absolutely refuse!” She’d been prepared for mockery, but she hadn’t expected to be the one mocking.

After that, she ran with all her might from the self-proclaimed knight that reeked of danger and succeeded in getting away. His toughness was monstrous, but as expected, he wasn’t that fast.

I wasn’t actually scared, but for some reason, I’m feeling relieved right now. If this is the wrong path, will I have to go back there? Urgh…

With such complicated feelings swirling in her heart, Gloria walked on. However, whether luckily or unluckily, her bitter feelings ended there.

“You’re here! Then please, let’s fight! Ah, I’m exempt from Kelvin’s thing, so you can feel free to attack me!”

A familiar voice came from a T-junction very similar to the one before. In fact, the words and situation were the exact same, and it elicited a sense of déjà vu. She looked down the path only to find Sera standing right in the middle of the junction.

Gloria said nothing, but her doubts turned to certainty. She stopped, glared at Sera, and said, “Are you people using me for training?!”

“Oh, have we been found out already?”

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Our vision was synced through the Follower Network, and I was watching through Sera’s eyes as she was about to fight Gloria.

Now then, I wonder how it’s going over there…

“You’re playing around with me?! I’ll destroy you!” Gloria shouted.

“I don’t really get what’s going on with you, but it’s nice that you’re motivated!”

Good. The connection is working. I can hear and see perfectly.

“Is it all good on Gerard’s end too?” I asked.

“It is,” he responded. “I can see vividly. Hmm, so this is what is called a ‘vee-arr’ experience.”

“Has Serge been teaching you weird things?”

Regardless, it sounded like Gerard’s vision was synced as well.

“The progression of humanity’s craft is amazing,” Gerard said in wonder. “It’s as if I’m there. What a strange experience.”

“I suppose you’re correct in the sense that this is an improvement in the craft of Summoning.”

Sharing Sera’s vision in real time through the Network was a much more difficult task than it might have seemed. If a previous version of me, even a more recent one, had tried to pull it off, it would have been so laggy as to be useless.

“Still…it looks like you’ve already manifested your Authority, and you can’t bring out those big crosses in such a narrow place. Isn’t this a bit much for you to take on?” Sera asked.

“What cheap taunts. This isn’t even a real handicap!” Gloria shouted.

The two glared at each other as they talked, and they seemed ready to jump into action.

“It looks like she’s going to fall for Sera’s taunts. I couldn’t see anything because of all the dust during her fight with you, Gerard. All I could hear was your awful shouting. Let me concentrate and watch.”

“I mean, that was my first time being attacked from essentially no distance at all…”

“Don’t try to make excuses.”

Well, I guess I can say I learned that if you make a mistake in dealing with her power, you can easily end up in a position where it’s hard to counterattack. Really, even if you know about it, it’s probably hard to take that head-on.

Facing attacks that couldn’t be avoided due to distance manipulation was a precious thing that couldn’t be found anywhere else. However, Gloria wasn’t going to cooperate willingly, and there was a limit to how much she could use her Authority. That was why I’d gotten her motivated by giving her a chance to escape, encouraging her to use her Authority wisely while sharing everyone’s vision.

I was also next in line to fight after Sera. If Gloria still had some Authority time remaining after me, we'd loop back to the start of the round: Gerard, Sera, then me. I wanted to at least get in two rotations.

"If you want to get hit so bad, feel free to taste my storm of bullets to your heart's content! Cross-Magazine Belt!" Gloria shouted.

"Crimson Astraea!" Sera countered.

While Gloria started shooting out her cross bullets, Sera used her secret technique that she'd learned directly from Goldiana: Crimson Astraea. A crimson aura exploded out from all over her body, and the swarm of bullets was instantly scattered.

"What?!" Gloria gasped.

"Whew, that was pretty thrilling!" Sera exclaimed. "I'm glad it went well!"

The rest of the bullets got close, but they were all thrown off target before reaching Sera. No matter how much Gloria fired, nothing changed.

"I see, it's the effect of her crimson aura," I remarked.

"It raises her stats and has the effect of Blood Dominion, doesn't it?" Gerard asked.

"Yeah. I think she's giving the crosses the order to immediately destroy themselves or something. Even if Gloria is negating the distance between them, it doesn't change the fact that they're passing through her aura. As long as Sera has Crimson Astraea deployed, Gloria's attacks will never touch her."

"So that's why the bullets are disappearing before they touch her?"

"It is. I do think the Blood Dominion effect of Crimson Astraea has gotten stronger. I remember she was only able to give it a weak effect before, but look how quickly it acted this time. Doesn't it seem to be on the level of Sera's blood actually being on it?"

"Hrm, I thought that too," Gerard agreed. "It's become quite fearsome, hasn't it?"

Sera always seemed like she was playing around, but she put in effort when people weren't watching.

I can't just sit on my ass either, now can I?

Gloria seemed to realize that there was no point in continuing to shoot, so she finally stopped her bombardment.

"Oh, done already? Then let's end the warm-up now and—"

“Hm?” I murmured, cutting her off.

Uh…huh? That’s weird. Her crimson aura had disappeared. Had she actually undone it?

“Next attack, please! This time I’ll do something about it au naturale!” Sera announced.

“Huh?!” Gloria cried incredulously.

“Huh?!” both Gerard and I did as well.

After Sera’s reckless request, our emotions matched Gloria’s.

Oh, come on. No, you’re not Gerard. That’s way too dangerous! Actually, just kidding. I did think so at first, but…how should I phrase it? Hm…

Sera had put her words into practice. How the heck could she catch every single cross with her bare hands? There was no way she’d be able to do it purely with intuition and reflexes…

Also, her training had used up all of Gloria’s Authority. Indeed, we never even got to my turn. *Seriously?*

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After that disappointing training session, we moved Gloria to a Holy Stake. Once her Authority recovered, we once again put her in the Grim Reaper’s Dinner Table’s cell and enthusiastically invited her to a training session in an attempt to win her over to our side. The result was… Well, naturally, we were refused. Even so, it didn’t seem like she’d given up on escaping and killing me to undo the restrictions I’d placed upon her, so in the end, we were still able to do what basically amounted to training. I was worried about what would happen for a moment, but all’s well that ends well! Anyway, the day of the final showdown was creeping ever closer.

“What?! It seems like the baby’s going to come the day of the final battle?!”

One day, when I’d returned to our inn in Pub, Ange gave me some devastating news. According to her, Efil’s due date was the day of the big fight.

“To be fair, it’s not set in stone. Vegalzeld-san came to see her a little while ago, and he said that she might be a little early, that’s all,” Ange explained.

Vegalzeld was a giant and one of the Four Demonic Generals of Grelbarelka, as well as a doctor. As far as we—or rather, Shutola and Sera—knew, his skill in medicine was one of the best

in the world. His diagnosis was likely correct.

"Sorry, Master..." Efil said guiltily. She was lying in bed, looking truly forlorn about troubling me. Her belly was huge by now. Even under the covers, it was obvious.

"Why're you apologizing, Efil?! I should be the one saying sorry for not being able to stay by your side even though this is such an important time for you. I would have loved to do so..."

"Please think nothing of it. You're fighting for the sake of the entire world," she replied. "I'm proud of that and overjoyed. It's not something to be sad about. Um...and you come to see me every day too..." Her cheeks flushed a faint pink as she tried to hide her face under the covers.

Stop that, Efil. You're going to blow up my heart and turn this entire room red, not just your face.

"Hm...it's hard for your big sister Ange over here to have all this lovey-doveyness shoved in her face. Should I leave?" Ange asked.

"Ah, no, that's not what I was—" Efil started, but she trailed off rather than finishing the sentence.

"Please, stay, Ange! I'm begging you!"

"Harumph! Such a forced response won't move me!" Ange said. "If you don't apologize, I might even come for your head again!"

Uh, hm...what should I say other than the way she's overemphasizing her sulking while making demands is so her. It's only been happening rarely these days, but when she actually comes for my head...uh, yeah, I don't hate it. In fact, I wish she'd do so more often.

"But then things will get even more complicated..." I mumbled.

"Hm? Did you say something, Kelvin-kun?" Ange asked.

"Oh, no, just talking to myself. I'm grateful to you, Ange, and I love you just as much as I do Efil. No lies."



After a long pause, Ange asked, “Really?”

“Really!”

Another long pause. “You’re not lying?”

“I’m not!”

And another pause. “And once this is over, you’ll marry us?”

“I will! Uh…hm?”

Was it me or had I just promised something insane in the heat of the moment?

“We did it, Efil-chan!” Ange cheered. “Once this is over, we’ll finally marry Kelvin!”

“Hee hee, we did, Ange-san,” agreed Efil. “In our case, the order is a little reversed, but that’s just an insignificant detail in the face of our happiness.”

“W-Wait, I agreed in the heat of the moment, but please wait a second. Of course I plan to marry you. I guarantee it, but doing it right after this upcoming battle is obviously too early! Look, I promised to marry everyone together, and Rion’s still in school, right? At least wait until Rion graduates from Lumiest—”

“Jeez, you’re such a party pooper, Kelvin-kun. At least let us experience the atmosphere of a wedding. Do you really think I don’t know about your practice wedding with Mel-san?”

“Urgk!”

Did she mean that time when Colette played the role of a priest in the Great Cathedral? That was a trap I fell into, and my life was thrown into chaos! Did she know about that too?

Um, Ange-san…your expression is scary. I get it, I get it already, so stop with the smile!

“Then we can have a practice run of the ceremony…” I reluctantly agreed.

“Woo-hoo! And the preceremony is secured! This is so exciting, Efil!” Ange exclaimed.

“A ceremony…with Master…” Efil was on cloud nine.

“Uh…huh? Efil-chan? Heeeyyy?” said Ange.

Only Efil knew what she was imagining, but she was definitely no longer paying attention. Well, I won’t say anything about it. It’d be rude.

“Oh dear,” said Ange. “It looks like it’ll be a while until she’s back to reality. Ah, right, I heard from Vegalzeld. The kid inside Efil-chan is a girl, right? You should think of a name already, Kelvin-kun.”

“Ha ha! That was a quick change of subject. Actually, I talked

with Efil, and we already have some ideas. We even met up with Elder Nellas from the elven village, and he gave us some traditional names. But he was weirdly enthusiastic about the whole thing—he gave us nearly a hundred names all in one go…"

"Ah, the 'too much of a good thing' pattern. Maybe he resembles Gerard-san," Ange suggested.

"Exactly. Gerard is crazy too. He was all, 'It's the birth of my grandchild!' and tried to massively increase the number of potential names. He was thinking up about ten every day, saying stuff like he'd received a divine revelation."

"Wow, he was so filled with motivation, it actually made you nervous, Kelvin-kun. By the way…will Gerard-san be like that every time one of us gets pregnant?"

"Let me ask you, can you imagine him *not* being like that? In the worst case, Gustav might even join in…"

Having a child should be a happy thing. But only in my life did it come with factors that made me extremely nervous. Honestly, my word would have almost no effect on them, so I was planning on borrowing the power of my wives to keep them in check. That was the smartest solution.

Efil gasped. "What was I doing?!"

"Whoa, looks like Efil-chan's back," Ange commented.

"I-I… Did I say anything weird?!" she asked, panicked.

"You're fine. You barely said anything. Right, Kelvin-kun?" Ange said, turning to me.

"Hm? Ah, yeah. She's right."

"I… I see. Thank goodness."

To be fair, it was obvious if you looked at her that she was basically muttering stuff about me and the ceremony. It was very cute.

"That's right, I should tell you now while I have the chance," said Ange. "Efil-chan's almost in her final month, so I'm going to stay here instead of taking part in the big battle. With the director and the principal on your side, you almost have too much strength anyway, so you'll be fine. Your big sis Ange here will continue heading up her guard squad!"

"What? There's no need to force yourself to stay here, Ange-san—" Efil protested.

"Yeah, okay, stop right there. I'm not forcing myself to do anything. Your safety is way more important than this fight, Efil-chan! So I'll leave that side to you, Kelvin-kun!"

“Oh, sure.”
And so she did.

Chapter 2: Control

Feeling increasingly nervous and excited, I boarded the Holy Stake with my comrades. This was the fateful day we would be heading for Isla Heaven to rescue Goldiana and fight the rest of the Ten Authorities. It was natural to be filled with motivation, and I could feel the corners of my mouth turning upward.

Ah, I can feel it. Today's a good day for battle.

"Hm, so Efil will of course be absent, but so will Ange, I see," Gerard noted. "Rion and Alex can't come either since they're in school, and the combat-specialized Clotho clone is with DarkMel to guard her. It looks like we'll be the only ones fighting this time."

"You say 'only,' but everyone else other than those you named is participating. It's actually a pretty big group."

There were me (plus Hard), Gerard, Sera, Mel, the Dragonz, and Shutola, for a total of eight. Given that there were six of the Ten Authorities left, we alone outnumbered them. And we would add Grostina, Director Shin, Principal Art, Dorothy the Divine Pillar, Cheruvim, and Luquille to our group, so our combat strength was quite high. As an aside, though she'd been training Dahak and the other dragons, Bakke wouldn't be taking part this time. She'd gone straight back home instead. Apparently, Dahak's incredible perseverance had left her...well, backed up. We'll leave the rest unsaid.

"Ohhh, so this is what it's like inside a Holy Stake. It's stupidly huge..." Paul muttered.

"You need to follow Master properly so you don't get lost! Ah, Master! I'll carry your staff!" Suzu said enthusiastically.

"Hah HAAAH! It's *huge*!" Oddradd yelled.

"You really feel the difference in civilization levels... But when it comes to pure beauty, I'm sure I have a winning chance..." Sinjeel muttered.

Naturally, my disciples were being treated like students on a field trip and didn't actually count toward our fighting force. I wanted them to directly witness a fight of a different dimension and absorb all the lessons they could.

Get stronger, by leaps and bounds! Oh...whoops, I got excited

again.

"You know, I'm more surprised that Shutola was so eager to take part," I remarked.

"That's rude, dearest brother," Shutola objected. "I'm part of the Celsius House too. I'll do my part in this battle perfectly! I won't be the only one left out of these events!"

"Oh! Wow, you're really raring to go. You were constantly out and about during our preparation time too. What was up with that?"

"Well...it's a secret!"

"Aw, a secret?"

"Yeah." Shutola nodded. "It's not something I can tell even you, dearest brother, but you can look forward to the results. I'll do enough for Rion-chan and the others too!" Shutola, unusually motivated, clenched her fist cutely to show it.

I see. Enough for Rion-chan and the others who will be sitting this out, huh? That's a good mindset.

I was curious about what she was doing in secret, but I honestly didn't think I had to worry about Shutola. She was several hundred times smarter than I was, so I didn't doubt she knew when to pull back.

"So, how are Dahak and the others doing after their training? Did they get stronger?" Sera asked. She was looking at the Dragonz, who were looking somewhat gaunt. She'd become much stronger herself, so she must have been wondering if their training had paid off as well. In fact, she seemed intensely interested.

Dahak chuckled proudly. "Well, I can at least say that I'm satisfied with how strong I got? Right, you guys?"

"Urgh...those days were hell..." Mdo muttered.

"I'm not delicious. Don't eat me..." Boga said quietly.

While Dahak seemed confident, the other two had lost the light in their eyes. What had happened after I left the Goldian Sanctuary? I hadn't been told anything, but I could see that they'd been wrung dry by Bakke.

Hey, guys, she wrung you dry with proper and respectable training...right?

"Uh...Mdo, Boga, are you two ill?" I asked.

"We're fine," said Dahak. "As you can see, our bodies have gotten thinner. You can expect great things from our training!"

Ah, he's saying that only their bodies were drained. That's

reassuring. Wait, is *it? It really looks like they're spiritually worn out too!*

"From what I can see, you should be worrying more about big sis Mel," Dahak continued. "I hear she hasn't been training at all these days; she's just been spending her time eating. Actually, scratch that. She's *still* stuffing her face."

"Fwha?" Mel replied with her mouth full. "Did you fwhay fwhumphing?"

Dahak was looking straight at the pile of yakisoba that Mel was scarfing down. The former goddess had her mouth full of noodles, complete with dots of sauce on her face here and there.

Okay, let's get you cleaned up with this handkerchief…

"Now, now, I understand that you're worried, Dahak, but this is actually good for Mel. Um, how should I put it? It's like her Unique Skill."

"Unique Skill?" Dahak repeated. "Ah, that reminds me, big sis Mel's stats have changed since she quit being the Goddess of Reincarnation, huh? I don't know *how* they changed yet, though."

"Then you should see for yourself up close during your next mock battle. Seeing is believing, after all."

"Aw, don't tease me like that!"

Anyway, Mel was fine. It wasn't like I was biased toward her because she was Mel or anything.

As we made small talk, we approached the central section of the Holy Stake. Everyone else was already present; it seemed we were the last to arrive.

"You're quite late, Kelvin," said Luquille. "Are you trying to show off how composed you are? Or did you just get lazy?" She immediately taunted me in place of a greeting. Her mouth was as foul as ever. But I noticed that she was repeatedly shooting glances over at Mel, who was busy eating yakisoba.

She's definitely not consciously doing that… Let's not point it out to her; it'll definitely make things more troublesome if I do.

"Our preparations for victory took a lot of time. Come on, just let it go. I mean, we're technically here on time anyway."

"What're you saying, Kelvin? When it comes to a date like this, it's common sense to come extra early! Being right on time is too late!" This time it was Serge who jumped in. She was currently sitting on a large machine.

"Tell me, what kind of date are you planning to have, and with who? This is way more like a hike than a date," I asked.

“Oho! Didn’t expect that response!” Serge exclaimed. “I didn’t even think that was possible!”

“Yeah, and I didn’t expect you to be here, Serge, so that makes two of us. So, what? Are you joining in?”

“I wonder why you look like you hate that idea *so* much. You should be dancing for joy with tears in your eyes that a superstrong, superbeautiful girl like me is joining in, you know? Jeez, shape up, Kelviiiin!” she answered mockingly.

“My bad, my bad. I’ll start crying and dancing for joy right now. AS IF!”

Why was talking with Serge always so exhausting? It was like playing catch only to find yourself completely out of energy.

“Remember this, Shutola. That’s what people mean when they refer to ‘going with the bit.’ As one of the Celsius House’s precious straight-man roles, you need to take note,” Mel advised.

“Okay, got it! I’ll do my best to learn!” Shutola exclaimed.

Hey, you there, gluttonous one! Stop teaching Shutola weird things.

To be fair…I’d kind of expected Serge to join in when she’d stolen my spot as Dorothy’s sparring partner. It was a bad premonition, one that I wanted to be wrong about if at all possible.

“Hey, wait!” Grostina joined in with a lilt in her voice. “You guys, dates and hikes are wonderful activities, but this battle is to save my dear sister’s life, not to mention the fate of this world hangs in the balance. Be a bit more serious!”

“Oh, come on. I can’t speak for Serge, but I’m being totally serious,” I replied.

“That’s rude,” said Serge. “Unlike Kelvin, who only has fighting on the brain, I’m taking this seriously.”

“Actually, neither of you are…” Grostina muttered.

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Before setting out in the Holy Stake, a briefing was held to finalize and confirm our plan. I wanted to make sure that this went off without a hitch to reassure Grostina, who was worried about the solidarity of our group.

“Okay, I’ll be leading this meeting. Are there any objections?”

“Yes, a big one. I should be the one leading this as the one most familiar with the Ten Authorities,” said Cheruvim.

“Oh? Why should you be given such a responsibility when no one trusts you?” Luquille shot back.

“I’ll turn those words right back at you. Right now, I’m under Kelvin’s restrictive spell. Meanwhile, you’re completely free and could be described as a hyena trying to swipe everything out from under everyone else. You’re the one here no one trusts.”

“Jeez, stop fighting already,” said Grostina.

Luquille and Cheruvim had immediately begun bickering over control of the meeting.

These guys are as bad as Director Shin and Principal Art. Oh, wait, right, that pair is here too. Please, everyone, play nice with each other.

“Let’s split the difference and I’ll take the lead!” Shutola announced. “I did my best to study the plan!”

“Ah, yes, I’m fine with that. Shutola is definitely capable,” I agreed.

“*Mgmg…gulp!* I’ll back Shutola too,” Mel agreed. “You’re fine with her, right, Luquille?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, if Melfina-sama says so…” Luquille answered.

Finally, Cheruvim agreed. “Well, if Kelvin says so, I withdraw my objection.”

With that, Shutola was appointed mediator of the meeting, and the briefing finally began.

“Our common goal is to defeat the Ten Authorities. Everyone agrees on that. The problem is what happens afterward,” Shutola summarized. “Sister Luquille wants all Ten Authorities to be converted to believers and to reinstate Mel as the Goddess of Reincarnation. Cheruvim wants to take over for Eld and revive the wicked god Addams, freeing the world from its shackles. And our representative, dearest brother Kelvin, just wants to have a good fight with the Ten Authorities. He doesn’t much care what happens after that as long as Prettia-chan is rescued. Everyone else has their own opinions, but they generally agree with Kelvin. Do I have everything correct so far?”

“The guild has no problem with this,” said Shin, “though I suppose it’d be perfect if you made a note about recovering any precious items.”

“I agree with Lord Celsius,” said Art. “The best outcome would truly be to neutralize the threat and have them reform their ways using my beauty! However…I can’t be selfish about this, so I won’t insist on it.”

“I’m fine as long as we can regain the pride of the Divine Pillars,” Dorothy stated.

Director Shin, Principal Art, and then Dorothy all nodded their assent, along with Luquille and Cheruvim. Paul and the other disciples were speaking among themselves, saying things like, “What’s a Goddess of Reincarnation?”

Let’s make up some random lie for them later.

“Mhm, mhm, I see. Then what about after we defeat them?” Serge asked. “Basically all our objectives branch out from there, right? Can I defeat Luquille and Cheruvim then?”

“What?” said Luquille.

“Oh?” Cheruvim reacted as well.

Serge was grinning as she dropped that bomb. Of course, Luquille and Cheruvim were immediately incensed.

“Uh, er, I’m not sure it should be phrased so belligerently, but sister Serge isn’t totally wrong. Essentially, that is one way this could go,” said Shutola. “Once we complete our common objective, our alliance ends, so there is definitely a possibility of a new battle breaking out. It would depend on the circumstances when it happens, and honestly, there’s no way to know how that will go right now.”

She took a breath and looked at Cheruvim and Luquille.

“Of course, it would be best if we could settle things by talking,” she added. “Cheruvim seems different from Eld, and Luquille wants peace under a new Goddess of Reincarnation. I understand both sides. I’m sure the two of them can talk it out…right?”

She employed the tactic of looking down with her eyes upturned. If the move had been used against Gerard or Azgrad, they would have instantly caved, given how cute she was. Gerard was, in fact, coughing up blood.

After some thought, Cheruvim replied, “Hmph, I don’t think talking it out would make Kelvin undo the restrictions on me. But as the little girl says, I possess a wide field of view, unlike Eld. If that is what you want, I won’t reject you out of hand.”

After some thought, Luquille said, “Indeed. I don’t wish for pointless conflict either. As long as my goals are achieved in the end, I don’t mind how. If negotiations are the best way to resolve things, I will accept that.”

“Really?” Shutola replied. “Yay! Then it’s a promise, okay?” She was happily jumping up and down for joy, her arms

outstretched. It was enough to finish Gerard off.

"Grkh..."

"Hey, Kelvin, Gerard looks like he's in critical condition."

"Yeah, just let him be..."

Leaving the near-dead Gerard aside, the way Shutola was acting was almost unfair. It wasn't just how cute she was being—with all our other helpers around, if they'd refused to talk out of hand, they would've been marked as a threat by everyone else. I think anyone would have agreed to talk, even if they were just paying lip service in the moment and didn't mean it. This minor answer, which didn't even involve a contract, didn't mean much, and it was easy for them to say anything.

However, Shutola had her Unique Skill: Retributive Persuasion. This ability applied to anyone who was hostile to her. If that person agreed to something she said, they would be forced to follow their words. In essence, since Luquille and Cheruvim had agreed, they would have to be true to their promise once the alliance was dissolved and speak candidly to one another. This eliminated all possibility of taking advantage of people's exhaustion after the final fight, allowing us to relax and concentrate on the Ten Authorities.

Of course, I wasn't personally opposed to another fight breaking out...but in this case, it was hard to predict what the situation would look like once the battle was over. It would be best to prepare a safe ending.

Nice work, Shutola, I complimented her through the Network.

::Heh heh, it wasn't much!:: she replied.

Not much?! I thought. Honestly, to a battle fanatic like me, she was the kind of person I least wanted to make an enemy of. It was terrifying how she managed to put people in a bind outside of combat like this. *Scary... So scary.*

"Next, I'm going to talk about Isla Heaven, our destination. It's smaller than the other continents, but it's still a continent, so it's huge! Make sure to memorize the map so you don't get lost! Even as small as I am, I've memorized it, so I'm sure you all can too!"

After that, the briefing continued under her management. She gave a perfect explanation while casually laying down some verbal traps.

Um, Shutola-san? Maybe you should, like, show more discretion?

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In the Chamber of Wisdom, the sacred place in which the angel leaders once slept, the machines in which they used to slumber were now empty and being used as seats, such as by the leader of the Ten Authorities, Eld Astel.

He was sitting quietly, saying nothing, with his eyes closed, so still that he didn't feel like a living thing. The Chamber of Wisdom was ruled by stillness, as if sound itself had been killed off in this area. But before long, someone came and broke that silence.

"Have you noticed, Eld?" asked the newcomer.

After a moment, Eld answered. "Hazama, I see."

The newcomer was indeed one of the Three Great Authorities, Hazama Shemhazar. The figure, covered in robes and speaking like an elderly man, was obviously not shaped like a human under his clothing. His unsettling mutations were not hidden at all, though they were out of sight. It looked like tentacles or something wriggling underneath.

"The false goddess, traitors, and more besides are coming to Isla Heaven," said Eld. "Judging from their incredibly faint presence, they're using a Holy Stake to get through the barrier and assault our position. Hazama...you seem to be in an awfully good mood today."

"Khah hah! You can tell?" The wriggling going on under his robe was more intense than usual.

Eld noticed this and pointed it out, but he must not have been very interested in the subject in the first place, as he didn't even bother to meet Hazama's gaze. He simply maintained his expressionless manner as he talked.

"Even though we're using artificial bodies, this world has the talent to defeat our members," said Hazama. "And we'll be able to offer such noble souls to Addams. What's not to be excited about? I will source the rest of the necessary souls with my own hands! Khah hah hah!"

"Yeah...you're right," Eld replied.

Hazama laughed with glee, but Eld knew that he didn't mean a word of what he said. Of course, such a thing was a minor detail to Eld, so he didn't bother mentioning it.

"Is everyone else at their stations?" he asked.

"Khah ha— Hm? Oh, yes," Hazama answered. "They've scattered across Isla Heaven so that their Authorities won't

interfere with each other. I'm going to head to the spot I've planned for myself after this too. What will you do, Eld?"

"I'm going to stay. I'm sure Cheruvim will bring some people straight here. His Authority doesn't mesh well with either Rem's or yours, so I will take on the role of his foe."

"Oh? You sure can talk big. I don't mind fighting him in your place, you know. There's no need to be so considerate; I'm not *that* senile."

"Heh, is that right? Well, either way, it's all up to them. All we have to do is defeat those we face and offer them to Addams."

"Exactly," Hazama agreed. "For the sake of the world we wish for, a true paradise for all life, we can't afford to slip at this opening stage. We will wrest those who oppose us under our thumb. That is the natural order. Well then, it's about time for me to go. Khah hah hah!" The wriggling under the robe got more intense as he laughed and turned around.

"We lost the war long ago. Even though we were overwhelming the other gods from beginning to end and were just a step away from claiming the chief god's seat, we lost. Do you know why, Hazama?" Eld asked.

He'd muttered the question in a low tone, but Hazama stopped laughing instantly. He was wriggling under his robe as always, but for some reason it seemed slower than before.

After a moment, he said, "Khah hah! You're asking that now? The answer's simple. Everything is the fault of that damned chief god. He was hiding some sort of technique that allowed him to strip us of our divinity in an instant. If you trace our power back far enough, it all connects to the chief god. And he is fully capable of reclaiming that power at any time. Essentially, we cannot win against him because we are also gods; that's how the system works. While we were managing the lower realm, we in turn were being managed by a tyrant. That's the idiotic punch line of the whole thing! Khah hah hah! Hilarious!"

"Hilarious indeed," Eld agreed. "We lost *because* we are gods. That's why we must gain a power that does not rely on our divinity."

"Mm-hmm. I don't know what kind of fate it is, but this world already has those who can defeat gods without being gods themselves. It's a miracle that couldn't happen anywhere else," said Hazama. "In other words, we can raise ourselves up to a level to kill gods in this world. To think that the loss of our bodies

would work to our advantage like this! Khah hah! These artificial bodies sure are the bee's knees, as they say! If only we could use our Authorities in full, there would be nothing to complain about! Khah hah hah!"

Hazama started to walk off once again, disappearing from the Chamber of Wisdom. Eld didn't bother seeing him off. He simply stared off into empty space.

"Addams was the only one the chief god couldn't completely suck the divinity out of. I'm sure that's why he was put under a different seal than what we were imprisoned by. Our Authorities are basically dregs of that divinity, given to us by Addams. He was able to give us these Authorities because he was powerful enough to rival the chief god. Ah...that's why you must stop being a god too, Addams."

No one was around to hear Eld's words, and they disappeared into the nothingness he was staring at.

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Having left the Chamber of Wisdom, Hazama looked up at the sky and sighed. It wasn't like he had any complaints about his conversation with Eld, but the person who appeared in front of him now was much more than he'd bargained for.

"Hm, I suppose our conversation went on too long. I didn't think you would get here so quickly," Hazama said. "Still, even my old eyes can tell you aren't Cheruvim. So who are you?" Even Hazama's large body was being obscured by the shadow of a pair of widely outstretched wings.

After a beat, the one opposite him spoke. "Dorothy." The owner of said wings looked down at him from the sky as she gave the shortest answer possible. One of her legs was in the form of a taloned claw, and it was gripping a staff as a thick tome floated around her. She was clearly ready for battle and seemed like she'd go on the attack at any moment.

"Dorothy?" Hazama repeated. "Ah, one of the Divine Pillars—"

"Maul," said Dorothy.

An invisible string and arrow were created on her staff, unleashing an attack at a speed the eye couldn't follow. The arrow of erosion, which would age the spot it hit by decades in an instant, struck Hazama right in what should have been his chest. The meat in the arrow's path rotted and fell away, leaving

a large hole. However...

“Hm, it’s a shame youngsters these days are so hasty. They immediately resort to fists and won’t even have a little conversation first,” Hazama lamented. “But your power is interesting. Since it rots flesh, I believe it’s Black Magic? Still, what is the story behind your form? I know you’re not a simple half human, half bird! It sure is interesting!”

“I have no interest in you whatsoever. It would help if you just died already,” Dorothy answered.

“Khah hah! That is an impossible request for me—Hazama Shemhazar! Just give it up!”

The hole in his body, which had been opened up by Dorothy’s arrow, swelled explosively and filled up with new meat. There was already no sign that he’d been hit, and the flesh underneath the robe continued to dance unsettlingly.

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We’d located Isla Heaven using the Holy Stake’s return feature and managed to get through the barrier, so we were now above the wandering continent. We were just about to disembark from the Holy Stake and land. Suzu and the others were basically on a field trip, so they were staying inside the Holy Stake.

“To think that you brought a brainwashed Gloria inside that suit of armor. I didn’t expect that. Is she still inside?” Cheruvim asked. He spoke up just as we were about to leave. He was looking at Gerard with incredible interest.

“Mm? I feel a rose-colored gaze!” Gerard exclaimed. “I’m bewildered! Super bewildered!”

“Mm? It suddenly started making some strange moves,” Cheruvim noted. “Is Gloria struggling inside?”

“No, that’s not it... Er, please don’t stare so much. For certain reasons, he’s not good at dealing with passionate stares.”

I felt a sort of pity seeing Gerard panic like that. But leaving that aside, Cheruvim was right. Gloria (under Sera’s Blood Dominion) was actually inside Gerard right now. When we set off in the Holy Stake, Sera had ordered her to use her Authority to shorten the trip...and it had gone shockingly well. It was basically, “Set sail!” and then immediately, “We’re here!” We pretty much warped, as the Holy Stake had reached Isla Heaven with unbelievable speed. Even I, as the person who’d suggested

it, was surprised. Given that, I suspected the enemy would be even more so.

"By the way, I already put Gloria back using Summoning, so she's no longer in Gerard. By now, she should be relaxing on the Northern Continent."

"The Northern Continent?" Cheruvim asked. "Not the dungeon on the Western Continent?"

"We're all here, so there'd be no one to watch her in the cell. Anyway, don't worry. I've left her to the demons, so there's no way she'll escape."

"The demons of the Northern Continent?" Cheruvim asked. "Ah…I see." He seemed to get who I was referring to.

"Huh, so this is the angels' continent! The aesthetic sense of these buildings is a little iffy, but everything is overflowing with magic! I bet if I were to cast a spell here, it'd be more powerful than usual!"

I suddenly overheard a truly devilish voice that wouldn't be out of place on the Northern Continent. Indeed, it was Sera and the devilish aesthetic sense she was so proud of.

"Don't get too excited and bite your tongue on the way down, Sera," I warned her, since she seemed raring to just jump out and go. Her demon wings and tail were flicking and twitching, showing how excited she was.

"How rude! I wouldn't do that! You should be more worried about Mel than me—she's still eating even now," said Sera indignantly. "Now she's even started on a turkey!"

"Fwhah?" Mel said. She continued to chew, large pieces of turkey in her hands.

Oh wow, what a big turkey…

"You're the one being rude, Sera," said Mel. "Nothing can match me when it comes to eating. Eating means chewing well, which means I am a pro at it. Do you really think I would make such a mistake as biting my own tongue? I could eat perfectly even if I were skydiving!" Mel made the kind of smug face that would usually be on Sera as she deftly continued to eat her turkey.

True, with how much skill she's displaying, she may have a point…

She was strangely convincing.

"Hey, Kelvin, sorry to interrupt you while you're flirting, but—" Shin cut in.

"We aren't flirting!" we responded in unison.

Mel, meanwhile, ate her turkey.

"Okay, well, honestly, I don't really care if you are or not," said Shin. "But I wanted to point out that that Dorothy girl went ahead."

"Huh?"

I looked over to where the director was pointing and saw a pair of large wings heading off at an extreme speed. It was Dorothy descending to Isla Heaven.

Wait, she took a head start?!

"Whoa there, I can't let myself lose to Dorothiara-chan. Serge Flore, heading out!" Serge announced.

"I'm going ahead too. I will be the one to defeat Eld," said Cheruvim.

"Wait, wait, the treasure is mine!" Shin shouted. "As the guild's representative, I must secure all the precious world heritage here!"

"All righty then; I should get going too," said Gerard. "I'm empty inside now, so it's much easier to move about!"

"AWWWWRIIIIGGHHT!" Dahak yelled. "Mdo, Boga, we're heading out too! Our destination is where Prettia-chan iiiisss!"

"I am going to let out all the anger and resentment that's piled up during those hellish days!" Mdo announced.

"Waaaaaiiit!" Boga yelled after them.

"We're going to save you now, sister!" Grostina shouted.

Everyone followed Dorothy, jumping out one after the other. In the end, only Sera and I, who'd been flirting, as well as Mel, who cared first and foremost about food, and Shutola, who seemed to be cringing, were left.

We reacted with utter silence before Mel said, "We've totally been beaten to the punch. It's all because you had to flirt with us regardless of the time and place, honey."

"No, it's more because you had to eat."

"Jeez, you guys..." Shutola muttered. She was utterly exasperated, but we hadn't even started fighting yet. It would be easy to make up for our late start. Still, the fact that they'd all rushed out to battle showed how interested they were.

Right, that's how much you all love to fight. Heh! That makes me proud as a fellow battle junkie!

"So, you're still here, Lord Celsius," said Art. "Did you want to keep my beauty to yourself? Ah, if that's the case, I, Art, will happily accede to your wishes! Come, look!"

Oh...whoops, Luquille and Principal Art are still around. Did you two get a late start as well? Are you our comrades?

"Please stop looking at me as if I'm one of you. My role is to protect this Holy Stake, so it's not like I missed the earlier rush," said Luquille.

"And as I've said before, I am a backline supporter," said Art. "I will use this holy relic as a live venue, spreading my sound across the entire continent. My delicate yet bold performance will raise my friends' abilities and give other buffs, while sounding like a deafening explosion of sound to our enemies, the Ten Authorities. Ah, don't worry, no matter how beautiful I am or how much I stand out, my superhuman evasion abilities have been adapted to even this live venue, rendering our enemies' attacks against me useless."

"Okay, it's about time for us to go too. Shutola, come with me, okay?" I said.

"Okay! I'll ride on your back," Shutola agreed.

"Wow, what a perk, Kelvin! Gerard will be so jealous and regretful that he got a head start," said Sera.

"Well, that would be Gerard's own fault this time. He might have been too excited to show his 'granddaughter' his good side."

With that, we jumped out of the Holy Stake toward our own battles with the Ten Authorities.

"You should stay here, entranced by my beauty, Luquille-kun! Wait, huh?! She's already gone?!" Art exclaimed.

◇ ◇ ◇

While falling from the sky, I gave Isla Heaven another once-over. As expected from a floating continent, it was huge. The first thing that stood out to me was how few towns and settlements there were. Rather, the only one was at the very center. The settlement's name was San Zelles, the angel capital. Even though this was the only settlement, one would question whether or not it really was the capital, but this was old and common information, so there was no point in retorting to that. Anyway, San Zelles had everything an angel would need.

Pretty much all the buildings were silver in color, with a holy design the exact opposite of Sera's preference. Basically, the entire place looked like the Great Cathedral of Deramis. It had

the same coloring and might even have been made of the same materials. It reflected the sunlight and could be considered very bright if you weren't used to it. That might have been why the capital felt so divine, like the place itself was doubling that divinity. If Colette were to visit here, she'd probably be unable to keep her faith inside her and would start going on a *pilgrimage*...in more than one way.

I mean, look, this is Mel's hometown, and that fact would make it even worse, wouldn't it? Yeah, it definitely would...

Also, the Chamber of Wisdom, where the angel leaders used to be, was in the center of San Zelles.

"Just supplying all the needs of its population doesn't make it a good place. The order here was very strict because everyone was a potential future god, and nobody cared what the food tasted like as long as it gave the necessary nutrition; it was barely worth eating. There was also basically nothing to do for fun other than meditate, go to the great library to learn something, or cheer on your s— *Ahem!* Performing...acts of faith to the current deity," Mel complained.

"It was an awful place for you, wasn't it, Mel?"

"It *was*!" Mel agreed. "But to be fair, because of that, I met you, honey, so... *nom nom.*"

Please don't eat and blush at the same time.

Actually, Rafaelo, who was a manager of the angels, was the same way. I was sure that normal angels placed the most importance on supporting their stans (which they disguised by calling it acts of faith). Mel, who had left, had a fundamentally different value system.

"Dorothy and Cheruvim... Oh, looks like they made a beeline for San Zelles. I can definitely feel two big entities there...but anyway..."

Out of the remaining Ten Authorities, if there were two in the capital, the others would be...

Ah, there they are.

A third was at the peak of a large mountain. Judging from the map built within the Follower Network, that was Divine Mountain Enberg, the highest point in all Isla Heaven. Given that it was the highest point of a floating mountain that was already up in the sky, it was probably treated as the spot closest to their deity. For all that, the air there would be even thinner—or actually, basically nonexistent—so even angels couldn't climb to the peak.

“Huh, that one picked an interesting place for a battlefield.”

“Dahak, Mdofarak, Boga, and Grostina are headed to Enberg. Which means…” Sera said.

“Ah, I get it. I’m deathly interested, but not even I would want to get in their way, so let’s give that a pass. Okay, next.”

Okay, found another. But this one’s all the way on the edge of the continent.

It looked like Gerard, who’d dropped before us, was making an all-out sprint for this one, but he was still far away.

“In terms of the location, erm…”

“One of the hearts making Isla Heaven float. If I remember right, this one should be the main generator. There should be other backups, but I believe if this one is destroyed, it would cause a lot of problems,” said Mel.

“Grk, really?! That little girl said something stupid about ramming Isla Heaven into the ground, but if that really happened it would be no joke.”

“Gerard is slow, so it looks like he’ll take quite a while to get there,” said Sera. “I’m going to go that way too, Kelvin. I have a bad feeling.”

“When you’re the one saying that, Sera, it generally comes true, so try not to say anything too ominous, please… Still, though, I’ll feel safe leaving that to you, so I’m counting on you!”

“Heh heh, I’ll take care of it for you!” Sera said happily.

I applied Sonic Acceleration to Sera to double her speed. Right after, she donned her crimson aura and dashed off through the sky.

Whoa, she’s gotten much faster. I can tell even though I put Sonic Acceleration on her.

“Are you okay with letting Sera have that fight? The presence I feel is as powerful as the one on Enberg,” Mel noted.

“That’s true, but…given how far it is, it’s doubtful I’ll be able to keep my desires in check until I get there.”

“Ah, that’s why. With such a feast in front of you. Well, how about the fifth one there?”

She was looking at a clear, emerald lake and the large tree that towered over the center of it. It wasn’t just the water that was the color of emeralds, but the tree as well, so it was a truly fantastic sight.

“That tree is referred to as the World Tree, and it’s a miracle in and of itself,” Mel explained. “Just like Enberg, it’s considered

holy by the angels. Boiling the leaves works as a cure-all, and if you affix twigs from the tree to parts of your body, it will heal any break or fracture in minutes. There've even been anecdotes about it bringing the dead back to life. I owed a lot to that tree as a child."

"Huh? What happened during your childhood? Was there some sort of epidemic or something?"

"No, I'd just chew on a leaf whenever I fell over while running," said Mel as she mimed tearing off a piece of something. That something was obviously a leaf of the World Tree—

Wait, no way, what're you doing after introducing it as a miracle yourself?! Is that what you meant when you said that angels regarded it as holy?!

"I may be pure and proper now, but back then I was as mischievous as any child," said Mel.

"You..."

Having gotten to know a new side of my wife's past, I felt both happiness and sadness. But it seemed Shutola, who was clinging onto my back, had a completely different take.

"Hey, Mel, I know about the World Tree from fairy tales too. Is it the same one?"

"Yes, it should be. Isla Heaven is a floating continent, so it's possible for loose leaves to be blown by the wind to any part of the world. From that, people discovered the existence of a World Tree somewhere! Well...that's how your legends were formed, though from what I've heard, there are variances depending on the culture as well. Some exaggerate, saying that its size is the greatest in the world in addition to its healing powers, among other things."

"Wow, so I was right! Amazing!" Shutola exclaimed.

"You're acting unusually excited, Shutola. Is it really that amazing?" I asked.

"Yeah, it is! To tell you the truth, I've been thinking about it ever since I looked at the map," she confessed. "If there's an enemy near the World Tree, I want to go there!"

Whoa, so Shutola's decided on her destination too, huh? There doesn't seem to be anyone already heading there...but I'd be a little worried about sending her alone.

"Mel."

"I know," said Mel. "I'll head to the World Tree too. Get on my back, Shutola."

“Okay!” Shutola replied before clambering over to Mel’s back.

“So, where will you be going, honey?” Mel asked. “The sixth one?”

“No, I can’t seem to find the sixth member, no matter how much I search for their presence. They’re probably hiding somewhere, but… Wait, where did Serge and Director Shin go? I don’t sense them either.”

“I suppose they’re in stealth mode trying to find the last one. Or maybe to search for treasure?” Mel answered.

“Ah…”

Both seemed possible, and I couldn’t tell which it might be because both were such free spirits. Still, I figured they’d do the bare minimum to help, at least, so I decided to believe in them. But that still left the question of which path I should choose.

“Okay…I’ve decided.”

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The one waiting at the World Tree that towered over the lake was the former Goddess of Control, Rem Teargate. She was sitting by the shore with her feet in the water, kicking to make splashes every once in a while. The tranquil background and her young appearance combined to make the scene seem very peaceful.

“They’re here?” she said to herself. She seemed to have sensed something. She stopped kicking the water and turned around to find…

“Hello, cute little girl. Are you alone? Are you free? Wanna have some tea with me?”

It was Serge Flore, the cute-girl lover and history’s strongest Hero. As soon as she caught sight of Rem, she reflexively hit on her. Rem said nothing in response at first, and the peaceful scenery transformed, steeped in an awkward atmosphere. Naturally, Rem’s brows furrowed, and she was clearly wary.

“Why you? Of all people…” she muttered.



“Huh? You’re really *that* shocked? I hid my presence since I was definitely trying to surprise you,” Serge admitted. “Oh man, that was worth all the effort! Then wait a second, please. I woke up early and prepared lunch for just such an occasion!”

“I’m…not going to…eat, though…” Rem struggled to get out.

“Whaaat?!” Serge exclaimed. She was truly shocked by Rem’s reasonable response. It seemed she was genuinely interested in her. “Oh, come on! There’s no need to refuse out of hand!” Serge tried to rally. “I’m a perfect girl, right down to my cooking, so while the food may not be too glamorous, you can see the fruits of my efforts. I made this food to max out affection values, you know? It’s a meal par excellence filled with lots of love, which I made while thinking of you, Rem-chan! There’s no doubt it will give a critical hit to your heart if you just eat it!”

“And now…I care even less…about it,” Rem said with stops and starts. “I don’t get what you’re after… But my goal is clear as day…”

With Rem’s words as a signal, the lake around the World Tree came up all at once. Something had been hiding within the lake. Or rather, things—numerous and gigantic.

“Oh?” Serge let out. Not even she could bring out her little boxed lunch in this situation, and she backed away from the lake, trying to create some distance. “What’s this? Who are you guys? I’m about to have a date with her, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t get in the way!”

“Who’d go on a date with you?” Rem muttered. “In fact, I’d rather date these children…”

The things that popped up from the lake were essentially shadows with mass. They barely maintained human shape, and each one seemed shrouded in black mist and seemed terribly hazy. They came in all sorts of sizes, with some as tall as two meters, and others tall enough to be ten meters. They crawled out of the lake one after the other, encroaching onto the shore and then even farther. The open space was buried in shadow, leaving no trace of the mystical scenery that used to be there.

Eurgh…I’d heard about it, but isn’t this, like, way too many? Serge thought. *There’ve got to be at least hundreds of these, right? Maybe thousands… Even tens of thousands?*

She had been having trouble deciding when to bring out her boxed lunch, but figuring there was no way she’d be able to do so now, she switched to assessing the situation. Finally, she was

intending to fight.

“Mm-hmm…with so many companions, shouldn’t you be deploying them for security? Or can you not send them out too far?” Serge asked.

“That’s not it… But I’m not going to tell you the right answer…” Rem muttered.

“I see, so you chose to concentrate them in one place rather than thoughtlessly scatter them to make sure to bring down your opponent. In the end, you’re evaluating me highly. I love you, Rem-chan!” Serge exclaimed.

“What…is this person saying?” said Rem.

While Serge had succeeded in bewildering Rem even more, the situation wasn’t great for her. The wondrous emerald lake had changed into a pitch-black den. In short, she was surrounded by enemies.

The increasing enemies are a problem, but what’s worse is…this superspecial date spot is ruined! Serge thought. *Only a demon would be happy coming to a place like this…*

Actually, at this point, such concerns were comparatively minor. But as Serge was thinking, her first concern aside, her second worry about the date spot was basically nothing. A certain Grim Reaper might have lodged an objection, but unfortunately, Serge had no such interests.

“You were the Goddess of Control, right, Rem-chan?” she asked. “I wonder what these are that you’re controlling. I don’t remember seeing anything like them, even in Abyssland, or is that just me? Will the surroundings go back to being pretty if I defeat them?”

“You… You’re so full of questions! I have no obligation to tell you—” Rem started.

“Of course you don’t! Yeah, I knew that!” She gave a wry chuckle as she drew her Holy Sword Will before calmly splitting her blade apart. Two became four, then eight, then sixteen. The weapons doubled each time.

“That’s…an interesting sword,” said Rem. “But…that amount won’t—”

“Be enough, right?” Serge interrupted her. “Don’t worry, I’m the type to have quality over quantity. Also, I’m pretty good at facing a lot of enemies at once.”

“Uh, um…if possible, please don’t cut me off like that…” Rem replied, sniffling. She seemed about to cry but managed to stop

just short. Just. Her eyes were a little teary, that was all. “Th-That’s enough talk!” she declared. “No matter who you are, you’ll never defeat my dolls—”

“Wait just a second theeere!”

That made Rem respond with a surprised noise. The shout had come from straight above the girls. They looked up at the sky, where Mel was approaching at a fierce speed with Shutola clinging to her back.

“Hwup! Whew…looks like we made it,” said Mel. “I ended up burning extra calories in my hurry.”

“Thanks,” said Shutola. “Sorry you had to rush all because of my selfishness.”

“No, it’s fine. More importantly…it seems that we’re the center of attention.” She looked around her with annoyance. The lake was still burgeoning with ever more enemies. They were already surrounded by shadows.

“Heh! It looks like I’m luckier than usual today,” said Serge, so happy that her sentences were all but ending in musical notes. “I never expected Shutola-chan would come right after Rem-chan! This is the first time I might actually be grateful to Absolute Gospel!”

“Hey, wait! That’s not why we’re here!” Shutola exclaimed.

“Uh…huh? Um…what about me?” Mel asked. She’d realized that, sadly, she wasn’t included in the statement. So, she pointed at her own face in an attempt to appeal to Serge.

“Huh? Ah, well, yeah, uh…to be honest, the Goddess of Reincarnation Melfina doesn’t really strike me in that way…” Serge replied.

“What do you mean by that?!” Mel shouted. “I know this isn’t something you should say about yourself, but I think I’m pretty attractive! Look, I’m even seventeen!”

“That seventeen thing is a joke in my world. Did you know that?” Serge said. “And even if you ask why, I’m not really sure of the answer! That’s…really all I can say about it.”

Mel growled in frustration.

“C-Calm down!” Shutola pleaded. “No matter what anyone else says, dearest brother loves you!”

The area around the World Tree instantly became much noisier. The shadows surrounding everyone seemed somehow bewildered, unsure of what to do. Meanwhile, Rem, who’d been left out of the exchange, started to tremble…



“Uggh…” She started to cry. “I asked nicely…to please…not interrupt…me…*sniff!* And now you’re i…i-i…ignoring me too! Urgh…ugghhhh…WAAAHHH!”

Her wailing carried all through the surroundings of the World Tree. It was so loud as to be unimaginable from her normal quiet voice.

“Uh, hey, Rem-chan? Come on, you’re laying it on way too thick,” said Serge. “You even managed to surprise me.”

“No,” countered Mel. “I think that crying is the Goddess of Control’s true character. Look around us.”

“Huh?”

Rem’s crying caused a change in the shadows surrounding them. While they’d seemed a little bewildered before, there was none of that hesitance to be seen now. Rather, they were showing clear hostility and murderous intent, complete with a bloodthirsty aura.

“Those under her control have their strength heavily affected by the Goddess of Control’s emotions,” said Mel. “As though reflecting the state of her heart, those under her control are indecisive in peacetime, with each individual’s strength varying greatly. However…once she starts crying, they become ruthless war machines. This unique trait made her feared among the other gods with the title of Crybaby Control Goddess.”

“What kind of joke setting is that?!” Serge exclaimed.

“Uh…didn’t I explain this during the briefing?” Shutola asked.

“Oh, really?” Serge answered. “Oopsie!” She stuck out her tongue in a cute gesture, attempting to excuse her mistake. Apparently, she hadn’t listened to the briefing. Shutola pouted, a vein popping on her forehead, cheeks swelling.

Rem continued to sniffle. “They’re ignoring me again…and only talking among themselves… WAAAHHHH!”

That got the trio to pay attention. They turned around and sucked in a breath in shock. Their actions seemed to further upset Rem, as she cried even louder now. And with her crying voice as a signal, the shadows finally went into action. Some ran like humans, others moved on all fours like animals, while yet others made large leaps with their huge forms to approach Mel and the others. Because they had no mouths, there were no battle cries. But Rem’s wails filled the surroundings along with the footsteps of the shadows.

“Well, we need to intercept them! Melfina, Shutola-chan, can

you protect yourselves?" Serge asked.

"What a foolish question," Mel answered.

"I'm counting on you, Georgios!" Shutola exclaimed.

Serge manipulated the twin holy blades in her hands along with a multitude of Wills that floated in the air. Mel wielded her shining silver weapon, Seraph, which had been made by Kelvin. Meanwhile, Shutola rode on the back of her battle teddy, Georgios, while also controlling several knight golems with her magic threads.

The trio had instantly made themselves battle ready, putting their backs together as they faced the coming shadow horde.

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"Hm? Is it me or did the ground just shake?" Gerard asked.

"Do you really think I'd know when I'm flying?" Sera shot back. She had already met up with Gerard, and they were currently heading for their destination.

Gerard was sprinting at full speed, his armor clanking as he went, while Sera was using her wings to fly. Since she was matching his speed, she wasn't going as fast as she could.

"It's a floating continent, so there shouldn't be any earthquakes," Sera reasoned. "If you think about it, the cause would have to be a battle somewhere."

"You're right," Gerard agreed. "But, hm...aren't we too slow? I'm running as fast as I can, but we're still not there."

"Well, to be fair, the enemy was so far away that Kelvin let me have this fight."

"Mm? Really?"

"Yeah, I could hear him say that after I left," said Sera. "But the presence of the Ten Authorities member there... It's stupid strong. Incomparable to Gloria."

"So it will undoubtedly be a tough fight. Huh...?"

Something like a building appeared in front of Gerard as he crested a small hill. The reason "like" came into play was that it was man-made, but something seemed off about it.

"What's that?" Gerard asked. "It looks like a silver box left out in the middle of a plain."

"Hmm..."

It was indeed a square silver box in the middle of a plain. What looked like double doors could be seen, though the box

was a little too small to be called a house. At best, it was a shack. Why was something like that in the middle nowhere with nothing but nature around it? That question consumed the pair.

“This is where we were aiming for, more or less,” Sera said. “Mel said that the heart making this continent float is here, but…”

No matter how much they searched, the only likely target seemed to be the silver box. Still, they felt that it wasn’t actually the heart of Isla Heaven. The Ten Authorities’ presence wasn’t coming from inside it.

“The enemy presence is coming from underground. Oh, could this be an elevator?!” Sera exclaimed.

“Elevator?” Gerard parroted. “You mean that weird device in the guild headquarters?”

“Yes, exactly, just like that. After hearing about it from Kelvin, I actually went to play with it several times. It was pretty fun!”

“Play with it?” Gerard asked incredulously. “I’m amazed that the guild receptionist let you through.”

“Yeah, they stopped me at first,” Sera admitted. “But that Shin person passed by and gave me the okay! She was like, ‘Heh, finally someone who knows the worth of things shows up…’”

“I…I see…” Gerard muttered. Sera’s impression was oddly accurate.

“I’m sure that box has a similar device! We can do a quick fall to the bottom!” she said excitedly.

“Whether or not a quick fall will actually happen, if that is a way underground, it makes sense that the enemy presence would be coming from below us,” said Gerard. “Okay, let’s try opening those doors!”

The pair approached the box cautiously. During that time, they detected no hostile moves being made, and they were neither attacked nor otherwise obstructed.

“Having this much nothing happen is actually kind of ominous…” Sera murmured. “Are we being led into a trap?”

“There are no traps ahead of us, but we’ll need to be even more careful from now on,” said Gerard.

The pair reached the box and checked the doors. It seemed to be the type that would open on its own after receiving some sort of command, as there was nothing like a doorknob attached. However, they didn’t spot anything that seemed like a trigger either.

“Hrngh!”

They forced it open with a heavy thud. The doors were thick and solid, but Gerard’s massive strength was enough to solve that problem.

“The inside is…oh, pitch-black,” Sera noted. “There’s no elevator, just a hole so deep I can’t see the bottom.”

“Hrm… Was it because we didn’t open the door properly?” Gerard wondered. “So what do we do? We can’t produce light like Efil can.”

Sera pondered the question. “There’s no other choice but to jump in, right? Even without light, I can see. And, well, my instincts can take care of the rest.”

“Only you would be able to figure things out on instinct alone…”

“What’re you saying? You have the Mind’s Eye skill, Gerard! You should be able to do it too; just see with your heart’s eye!”

“No, no, the skill doesn’t have that kind of effect. Anyway, you’re right that we should be able to make do. Luckily, steep drops don’t pose much of a problem for me.”

“Then it’s decided! Okay, let’s go! Hwup!” Sera jumped.

“Already?! Wait, I’m coming too! Hup!” Gerard yelled as well.

As the two jumped into the hole, they disappeared, swallowed quickly by the darkness.

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The dark that Sera and Gerard had plunged into was, in fact, a type of elevator shaft, but the darkness at the bottom seemed to spread out forever. Although they thought they were going straight, that wasn’t necessarily true, as they could have been changing directions slowly or moving diagonally at times. The construction was quite convoluted.

“Urgrakh?!” Gerard yelped.

“Jeez, Gerard, walk quietly,” Sera chided him. “The enemy will hear us!”

“Y-You’re right, but…”

He had bumped into walls several times as they walked. Since he was the party’s toughest member, he didn’t take any damage, but it made a huge noise every time. Sera had night vision, but it was reckless for Gerard to walk without any light whatsoever.

“Well, I guess it’s too late anyway,” Sera muttered. “If this

enemy ranks high among the Ten Authorities, then whoever it is probably detected us the moment we came here."

"Indubitably. But it's strange they aren't doing anything. There are so many options, from using the darkness for an ambush to setting traps."

"Surprisingly, they might like to fight upfront like Kelvin?" Sera wondered. "I mean, the one that defeated Goldiana was apparently like that too. Gah, and now I'm mad again just thinking about it. I let Dahak have that fight, but I'm going to be avenging Goldiana next time!"

"No, no. Goldiana is still alive! Come now," said Gerard. "She's just been captured."

"I know. There's no way she would die without saying goodbye first. Also...well, I'd still let you have dibs on avenging her. I may be her best friend, but you're, um...*involved* with her..."

"I AM NOT!" Gerard shouted emphatically. "Please stop fabricating such lies!"

His shout reverberated throughout the shaft. At this point, there was no longer any trace of their supposed stealth plan. If a pro at sneaking—like Ange—had seen them, she'd have fainted, foaming at the mouth.

Regardless, the pair continued on while making lively conversation. Before long, they came upon a large space that was dimly lit. At the center was a gigantic machine with several thick cables connected to it. Atop it floated a large reddish-purple gem.

"Well, this obviously looks important," the knight noted.

"I'd bet on it being the power core for this floating continent. So, who're you?" Sera asked.

Neither of them were looking at Isla Heaven's heart. Someone was sitting in front of the device in a prayer-like pose. It was Isabel Rozess. In response to Sera's question, she picked up the staff that was on the ground next to her and silently stood.

"I... I'm one of the Ten Authorities, Isabel Rozess... Yes. Um, you don't plan to...surrender, right?" she asked. "Neither are you willing to hand over your souls—"

"Nope!" Sera declared.

"Of course not!" shouted Gerard.

"Um, thought so... Sorry for asking such a weird question," Isabel said timidly. "But...this is wonderful." She finally looked up to face them, her expression extremely bright. It looked nothing

like the face of someone about to fight. In fact, she even seemed affectionate toward her would-be adversaries. “Your attitude of prioritizing your own will even in the face of a god… It’s so moving. Ah, this really is how the world should be.”

Sera made a confused noise. “What kind of nonsense are you spouting? Do you even want to fight?”

“Yes, of course I do. By all means, I would love to better understand you people who have been born in this world. I want to feel you directly.” She put her hand on her chest as she talked, speaking like a pastor. Her tone was soft and pleasant to the ear, yet that was exactly why it seemed so out of place on this battlefield.

::What is she, Gerard?:: Sera asked through the Network.

::That’s what I want to know. Still, don’t let your guard down.::

::Of course not.::

They were already prepared to fight. At the moment, they were waiting to see how their enemy would act, but they were ready to start anytime, concentrating on Isabel’s every move.

“That’s why I’m going to show you my sincerity,” said Isabel. “Dreieck!”

The pair made noises of alarm as she made her move in an instant without any preparatory motions or shift in magic power. By the time they noticed, they were surrounded by what seemed like a barrier. It was cube-shaped, generally faint blue in color, and had what seemed like a warped crest on it. At first glance, they appeared to be shut in, but Sera’s sense of danger was triggering over something else.

::Whoa! I didn’t even notice the barrier being built! What about you, Gerard?::

::If *you* didn’t notice, then naturally I didn’t either. Is it her Authority?:: Gerard replied.

The real problem was that the barrier had been constructed so fast, it had slipped past Sera’s detection abilities. Even Kelvin in his current state would need about the blink of an eye to cast Glory Sanctuary. If he tried to hide the flow of his magic power, Sera would still be able to detect it. Yet she couldn’t do the same for Isabel’s barrier spell. There had been no sign of it right up until it manifested, making it only the second time in Sera’s entire demonic life that she had failed to notice something.

I see, Sera thought. *A power very similar to that of her sister, Gloria, who’d drop attacks right in front of your face out of nowhere!*

It was Isabel Rozess, hailed as a guardian deity and one of the Three Great Authorities. According to Cheruvim's information, she was more powerful than Gloria. A truly troublesome enemy. But while Sera was thinking that, she also found herself wishing that Kelvin had come along.

"You seem to have a lot of questions," said Isabel. "So allow me to answer them. My Authority is Boundary. The barrier I just put up is, of course, part of that Authority."

"Heh, that's awfully nice of you," said Sera. "Well, it's not like I'll look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Hee hee!" Isabel giggled. "You have such an honest personality. I'm starting to find you even more wonderful."

"I don't need your flattery," Sera replied. "So, what's the catch?"

"As the name of my Authority implies, there needs to be some sort of border or boundary there. If I had to use something nearby as an example, it would be like a fence marking off a plot of land. In larger terms, it would be like the borders between two countries. No matter how insignificant or rigid the boundary, as long as I can recognize it, my Authority allows me to use it—instantly, freely, exactly to my desire, and without limits."

"Hm? Even if what you're saying is true, I don't see anything around us that would serve as a boundary," Gerard pointed out.

"Gerard…the floor," said Sera shortly.

"Hm?"

The floor beneath them was made up of a large number of tiles. They were simple floor tiles that could be found anywhere, but from a different perspective, each one was a tiny boundary. The barrier around them indeed followed those tiles.

"So this is what you call a boundary," said Gerard. "It's like a kid playing with words."

"Oh no, you can't make fun of the games children play, you know?" said Isabel. "They have rich imaginations like no one else, after all. Also, look, the two of you are straddling a whole multitude of boundaries."

Zwm!

A moment later, Sera and Gerard were assaulted by a lattice of barriers that tried to separate every boundary—or rather, barriers in name only; blades in practice.

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Zwm!

“Oh!”

“Hm?!”

“Oh my,” said Grostina.

“Uh…huh?” Boga mumbled.

At the peak of the divine mountain Enberg, their party had reached their destination and found themselves assailed by a sudden onslaught of murderous intent from somewhere far off. It seemed Boga didn’t understand what was going on, but Dahak, Mdofarak, and Grostina all knew that a new fight had kicked off somewhere in the distance.

“Heh, apparently a new festival’s started,” said Dahak. “How about it? Think it’s about time we start our own? Right, Hao-san?”

Nothing was said in response, but they were currently facing off with Hao of the Ten Authorities. He had his eyes closed to go along with his silence, and behind him Goldiana could be seen in her bonds. She was hanging from a cross in a pose overflowing with love, arms spread as though ready to accept anything. Her pose seemed…different from before, but there was no way for Dahak and the others to know that, so there was no one to point it out.

“Tch! Not talking, eh?” Dahak spat. “You’re as unfriendly a bastard as ever. But we need to pay you back for what you did. I need to save Prettia-chan from that terrible state as soon as possible!”

“He’s right!” Grostina shouted in support. “We trained like we were possessed to get stronger and save my sister!”

“So, you say you got…stronger,” Hao finally said. “I see, it does seem like you’ve become somewhat more capable. I can certainly feel strength radiating from you now. Not only that, but you seem to have gained a new power.”

He slowly opened his eyes, his face as expressionless as before. However, the tone of his voice seemed somehow happy, like he was laughing.

Dahak faltered. “O-Oh, really? It kind of…feels like you’re reading my mind, doesn’t it?”

“Sister Mel does that a lot to Master too,” Mdofarak pointed out. “It’s not that rare.”

“Indeed, such a feat is not especially notable,” said Hao. “Anyone skilled at reading their opponent’s ki can reach this level.”

“Responding seriously just puts me on the spot…” Mdo muttered. Hao, unable to pick up on her snide remark, seemed a tough verbal opponent for her.

“I figured you people would come as long as I was guarding this false goddess, but…indeed, you’ve grown more than expected,” he said to Dahak. “It seems you are no longer the immature, reckless one I let go. Would you like me to correct my earlier statement?”

“Huh?” Dahak grunted. “I don’t care one bit about anything you say. Not to mention, talking with fists suits you way more than words, doesn’t it?”

“You would talk with fists even though you’re dragons?” Hao asked. “Interesting. I would love for you to teach me what it’s like to fight a dragon that has learned martial arts. After all, that’s not something you encounter every day.”

“Hah! Keep talking! Let’s go, you dogs!” Dahak yelled.

While Dahak burned with fighting spirit within, a visible aura also sprang up around him. It was a Goldian Aura, exactly like the one seen during Hao’s fight with Goldiana. The color was red, and it was still in development, but the fact that he’d learned the basics of the style in such a short time was incredible.

“Oh?” Hao murmured. The sight was enough to elicit a verbal response. However…

“What a nasty tongue you have, Dahak,” said Mdofarak. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk to us like that.”

“Who…were you referring to as ‘dogs’?” Boga asked. “I’m Boga.”

“Hmm…saving my sister is important, but I wish you’d be more elegant about it,” Grostina added. “Hey, why don’t you retry that line?”

“Whaaat?! You idiots! FOOLS! Hey, hey, hey, come on, now’s not the time to be joking around! Are you kidding me?! We’re right in front of Prettia-chan! You totally ruined everything!” Dahak screamed.

No response was forthcoming. Those quips scattered the aura that Dahak had been emitting. Whether this was a show of their disunity or the general laxness of the group, all tension immediately left the scene. Even Hao, who was supposed to be facing them, seemed to notice the shift in mood.

Enacting such a farce right in front of me, he thought. *Heh, interesting. So they’re saying they don’t just have strength and*

martial skill, but also nerves of steel. Well done.

Actually, he didn't notice anything. In fact, he was impressed. It seemed the man couldn't recognize a joke if it slapped him in the face.

"Jeez, get it together!" Dahak shouted. "Fine, I'll do it over! Mdo, Boga, Gros…let's save Prettia-chan!"

"If you're going to go that far, then I suppose there's no other choice," Mdo relented. "Now is the time to show the results of that hellish training."

"Mm-hmm!" Boga agreed.

"Now, let's do this! Make-UUUUPPP!" Grostina exclaimed, ending her cry with a visible heart mark.

Each shout was unique as the four wrapped themselves in auras. Furthermore, Dahak hid himself among plants sprouting from the ground, while Mdofarak did so in a swirl of colored light, and Boga did so behind a boulder that suddenly appeared. Meanwhile, Grostina started to glow purple and suddenly shed her clothes, just like transformation scenes that might or might not be familiar. For…*reasons*, no more will be said of Grostina's actions.

"Oh? Is this a transformation into your true draconic bodies?" Hao asked.

"Heh! You can totally attack us right now, you know?" Dahak taunted him. "We're enemies, after all!"

"No, I'll refrain," said Hao. "This will make you stronger, won't it? So there's no reason to stop you." Even though the group was showing an opening to attack, Hao didn't make a single move. It seemed he would remain still during this time to witness how they changed.

"Tch! Still acting all calm and composed," Dahak muttered. "Then grab an eyeful! This is my new form as Prettia-chan's knight!"

Uh…knight? Hao wondered. Part of Dahak's words confused him, but he still paid attention to their transformations as a whole without bias or discrimination, even Grostina's shift.

"Groooooaaaarrr!"

A loud explosion was heard—or was it a dragon's roar? Something seemed to fly off Dahak, Mdofarak, and Boga, kicking up clouds of dust around them only to be blown away mere moments later.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Dahak.

The Dragonz appeared in their new dragon forms in front of Hao, keeping their human shape while heavily taking on traits from their dragon selves.

“Yo, still recognize us? This is our new power.” The dragon in front spoke in Dahak’s voice. While he was still humanoid, it was like he now had dragon elements mixed in like moss on a tree, and his face was covered by what looked like a wooden mask shaped like an animal skull. Every footprint he left behind immediately sprouted thick vegetation, as though he were trying to turn the mountain peak green.

“Let’s get this over with quickly and make time for some sugar intake.” Next to appear before Hao was a dragon emitting dazzling light all over. Unlike the wooden styling of the previous dragon, this one looked very sharp and fashionable, and because she was exposing her face, it was clear that it was Mdo. Three rings made of red, blue, and yellow light were orbiting her like satellites, scattering more brightness around her.

“I’m super strong in this form!” Naturally, the last dragon was also humanoid. However, this one was a size larger than the others. He was wearing heavy and rough-looking armor that seemed to be hewn from pitch-black stone, and he looked overwhelmingly menacing. It seemed that the armor was giving off heat, since aside from the blackness of it, there were also parts that were red. It looked like magma flowing over it, and bubbling sounds could be heard as well. Most likely, the red parts were exceedingly hot.

“Aaannnd…I’m the final act!” Standing above the newly reformed dragons was Grostina, looking like an uncanny purple sprite. After this transformation, she looked even more like a butterfly, complete with antennae on her head and an insect abdomen attached to her butt.

For *reasons*, the rest will be omitted.

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I felt a strong pressure coming from the mountain. It seemed that Dahak’s group had started their fight in earnest. That made the third fight I’d felt. What was more, I’d just caught a glimpse of Dorothy and someone in a full robe burrowing underground. The robed guy was probably one of the Ten Authorities, and Dorothy was most likely chasing him.

But why did he go underground? Dorothy morphed into something like a mermaid and started burrowing like it was normal…but mermaids belong in water, don't they? Why did it allow her to go underground in her case? Is she all-powerful? Wait, now's not the time for that.

If the mysterious robed guy was one of the Ten Authorities, that meant there were only two left. One had yet to be found, as any attempts to detect them came up short. And the last one was the leader, Eld. Cheruvim had gone on ahead, so I figured he'd run into the man soon, but the leader was one of the enemy's strongest fighters, which I put great importance on.

"It's not fair for you to keep him all to yourself, Cheruvim! I don't hate team-ups! In fact, I love them!"

Using my speed boosted by Sonic Acceleration, I hurried to the Chamber of Wisdom or whatever it was called, where he was waiting. There lay the greatest feast, so of course I rushed.

I ran headlong at the comparatively grandly adorned temple at the center of all these buildings, which sparkled in the sunlight, jumping inside. *I made it! I made it, right?!*

"Great, the fight hasn't started…yet?"

Then, I saw it. Cheruvim in his *natural* state—and by that, I meant with literally no clothes on.

Eurgh, please no…

"H-Hey, why're you naked *again*?! Don't indulge in your hobbies *now*, Cheruvim! Are you an idiot?!"

"What?" he responded. "Kelvin, do not jump to rash conclusions!"

It seemed he wanted to make excuses, but all the tension for an upcoming fight left me. *Seriously, what're you going to do about this? I feel depressed.*

"I'm not like this willingly!" he exclaimed. "I was hit by Eld's Authority!"

"Authority? Wait…Authority?!" I couldn't help but shout.

"Don't make stupid jokes at a time like this! Efil made that equipment I lent you, you know?! As if Rank S equipment could disappear so easily!"

"Well, it happened, so just accept it!" Cheruvim shouted back. "The moment he approached, all of it just flew away!"

"That's impossible! What really flew away were your inhibitions!" I yelled in response.

"I wouldn't be in this state if not for his Authority!" Cheruvim

insisted. “Also, I don’t want to be lectured about inhibitions by a battle junkie like you!”

“Heh…an argument right after meeting back up? So, this is how my lieutenant has fallen,” came a voice. The sudden comment interrupted our argument.

Cheruvim’s naked form was so impactful that I hadn’t even noticed the other person in the room.

Oh, there he is.

Someone who I assumed was Eld waited there in the back of the room. He had red hair, and while the Ten Authorities should have been fallen angels, for some reason, he had white wings like a normal angel.

Wait, is that energy shaped like wings? Hm…even after seeing this, I have to say that Cheruvim’s current state is harder to overlook… No, I’ll say nothing more.

The Authority Eld possessed had not been seen even back during the mythical war between the gods, so not even Cheruvim knew about it. At the very least, that was how Cheruvim himself described it. That was why I’d hurried here, figuring that something would happen, but…it seemed this hidden Authority was to strip the opponent naked.

Hey, wait, if that’s a joke, it’s not funny! Do you really accept this as an Authority, oh leader?! I mean, certainly, with that as a power, you can’t really show it to others. I get it, but still!

“No need to glare at me like that, Kelvin Celsius,” said Eld. “Why don’t we at least exchange the barest minimum of greetings first?”

“Greetings? Come on. Honestly, this situation is so concerning that I don’t even know if I have the concentration for that.”

The fight that I chose after all that pain and anguish ended up with my ally being stripped naked by what was supposedly the enemy’s ability. *Damn, even someone like me would cry, you know? There’s no way I’d want to fight an enemy like that…*

“Heh! I see that you’re extremely curious about my Authority,” said Eld.

“Yeah, in a lot of ways. Seriously…”

“Be careful, Kelvin,” warned Cheruvim. “If you carelessly get close, you’ll meet the same fate.”

“Yeah, I’ll be on the lookout. I don’t want things to devolve further into chaos…”

This seemed to confuse Cheruvim. “Hey, is it just me or have

you lost your will to fight? What're you doing, now of all times! You are the man that I chose! Get it together!"

Yeah, I'd like to flip your words right back at you.

Just in case, I loosened the restrictions on Cheruvim so that he could attack the Ten Authorities. I did have the option of just leaving it all to him, but...

No, I can't do that this late in the game. I'm going to have this fight, even if I have to cry tears of blood!

"Sorry, I was just taken aback. I never expected the leader's Authority to be stripping others. Who would?"

"I didn't expect it either!" Cheruvim yelled. "I knew it, Eld! You're not fit to be the leader! Graciously accept your defeat and hand your seat over to me!"

"It seems you're laboring under a misunderstanding," Eld said with a chuckle. "Or rather, it seems like you have yet to realize the truth."

"What truth?!" shouted Cheruvim.

"The real nature of my power." With that, he drew energy from his white wings, creating numerous swords.

Hm? Wait, that power...

"Is that Baldogg's?" I asked.

"Indeed. This is Baldogg's Authority, Tempering. It surprises me that you'd need an explanation. I wouldn't even have dreamed of that happening, Cheruvim. You're even more dimwitted than I thought."

"You..." growled Cheruvim. "No, first—"

"Yeah, the bigger question is why Eld is using Baldogg's power," I interjected.

According to Serge, who actually fought Baldogg, uh...Tempering transforms the objects around the user into energy and uses that to create new objects. If that was true, I understood how Cheruvim's equipment was broken apart when Eld got close. *Right, I get it now. Cheruvim didn't get naked of his own accord, and Eld's Authority isn't some joke. Whew, that's a relief!*

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Cheruvim. My fighting spirit is now at max," I informed him.

"That was sudden."

"It's not like I can do anything about that; it just suddenly filled up. Also... Hey, Eld. Is your Authority to copy your comrades' Authorities or something like that?"

"What if it is?" Eld asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? That would be the best-case scenario! HA HA HA HA!”

Being able to copy the Ten Authorities’ powers meant that, in a way, I’d be able to fight all the ones I’d missed the chance to face! How could that not be the best development?! Tempering, Lethality, Control, Unbreakable, Brawn, Gap, Boundary, and even unseen powers as well! I hadn’t made the wrong choice!

“Good fighting spirit and a face unthinkable for a human,” said Eld. “If Hao were here, he would have welcomed you from the bottom of his heart.”

“Don’t talk about people who aren’t even here. If my worldly desires pile up any more, it’ll be no joke. Also, if you really think that, you should welcome me in his stead. Don’t worry, I’m not expecting you to have mastered other people’s powers. Instead, you’ll be using a fighting style that takes advantage of having copied multiple powers, right?”

“Well, I wonder? You’ve made it awfully hard to say this with all your expectations! My Authority, Unity, isn’t all that convenient, just so you know,” Eld announced.

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“The sparks of conflict have been lit. Now, let’s play. A heavenly melody worthy of this stage!” Art declared. He was, naturally, standing in the service entrance of the Holy Stake, playing his music in a fairly dangerous position. He was glittering, so it seemed he was doing well today.

Luquille, who was watching him—or rather, had other business in the service entrance—said nothing as he shouted that incomprehensible line to himself, but she did direct an awkward and troubled look at him, objecting silently.

“Oho, so you want to participate in my special concert too, Luquille-kun?” he asked. “Of course, I welcome it! Let’s produce a wonderful duet and decorate this battlefield with flowers!”

It took a moment for Luquille to work up a response. “No. I’ll refrain.”

“Too bad!”

Art pulled out another instrument from nowhere and tried to hand it to her, but she immediately refused. With that, the instrument retreated back into Art’s pocket, to wherever it was normally located.

“Well then, why are you here?” he asked. “You don’t need to steer the Holy Stake anymore?”

“No. We are far from any fights in a place that will probably not take damage. I was going to take action to make the Ten Authorities understand how wonderful Melfina-sama is.”

“I see, so essentially missionary work?” Art asked. “Okay, then please also spread word of my world treasure-level beauty!”

“Uh…what?”

“I carry the important duty of delivering my musical arts to everyone from here. That is why I unfortunately cannot show myself to the Ten Authorities,” he explained. “That is terribly unfortunate for them, since they will not have the opportunity to carve the sight of the world’s top beauty into their brains. No wonder they’re causing such trouble! There is a danger that their hearts will deteriorate and negotiations will break down! That’s why you must do this at the very least! Describe my beauty to them! Once you do, they will surely open their hearts. Ah, my beauty is such sin…”

“I… What?”

Having been saddled with the “honorable” duty of public relations manager, Luquille could do nothing but nod silently. Art was being forceful enough to prevent any rebuttal, and the request was so stupid that she couldn’t work up the will to argue with him.

“Um…anyway, I will be leaving the Holy Stake,” she finally announced. “I’ve set it to stealth mode, so I don’t believe it’ll be discovered, but just in case, I’ll leave its defense to you.”

“Yes, do,” said Art. “My Hair’s Breadth can be applied to it—or I should say, this entire stage. No matter what attack comes, I will evade them all.”

“There are no spotlights or anything, so please don’t mess with the controls,” Luquille warned him.

“Of course not. I *am* an educator. I promise not to engage in any impropriety.”

After a beat, Luquille replied, “I see. Well, then.”

“Now, it’s time for the deployment of a hero! Let’s send her off with panache!”

Art started playing from the heart, as if to cheer her on as she left the Holy Stake. The piece was bright and energetic, sparking visions of a hero setting off on a journey. Just listening to it imparted courage and made the world seem like a wonderful

place. But the song didn't seem to match Luquille's tastes, as she left at a fierce speed, disappearing as though running away from the noise.

"Heh, it seems my music is already having an effect," said Art. "My word, it's scary how talented I am. By the way, Shin, are you still there?"

Shin let out a long yawn. "Yeah, I was so bored I almost took a nap. I just managed to keep myself awake thanks to all the discord."

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" Art laughed. "I think you need to clean out your ears."

Shin, who should have already left, appeared behind him. She didn't even try to hide the fact that she was yawning, which meant that she'd hidden herself quite a while ago on the Holy Stake, waiting for this moment.

"Still, that was an astounding feat, hiding without being noticed by any of them," said Art. "Honestly, excluding Catria, anyone would have a hard time finding you without prior knowledge. Were you always that good at stealth?"

"Hm? Ah, no, I just borrowed the magic item that governs this Holy Stake's stealth function. I made it so that the stealth affects me too. Oh man, relics from the age of myths are amazing things. The pieces I pulled out sparked a lot, but it doesn't matter as long as the Holy Stake stays in the air. I gotta say, I nicked a lot of stuff from Jildora's lab, and this reminds me of those nostalgic days! Hee hee hee!"

After a moment, Art commented, "Didn't Luquille-kun just say not to tamper with the controls?"

"Don't know, don't care. Maybe she said it to you but definitely not to me. Even if she did, I borrowed it beforehand, so I'm safe."

"No, no, you definitely aren't," Art muttered. Then he sighed, "To think this is the director of the Adventurer's Guild." The sigh was a heavy one. He'd already been forced to break his promise to Luquille, which was a small shock to him.

"It's because I am who I am that I'm the director," Shin retorted. "More importantly, don't stop your performance. Someone might suspect something."

"I don't need you to tell me that. I will put my soul into it so that I may shine as I do!" Art exclaimed.

"Is that so? And how did you find the prisoner? You must have had a fair amount of time to talk to it. Did you manage to find

some stuff out?" Shin asked.

"Hm...well, I suppose I can say she was quite a stubborn girl," Art ventured. "It's such a waste, but she did not open up her heart even in the face of my beauty. I must say, it was quite a shock. It hurt me a little..."

"I don't care if you were hurt or not, seriously. Yeah, go eat shit," said Shin.

"Heh! You didn't need to reinforce it that much!" He was hurt once again.

"Well, I think we should leave our usual argument aside for now. In the end, I don't think we can trust that fallen angel," said Shin. "Kelvin's letting it run free, but *that thing* is clearly a being too dangerous to leave alone. There's something it's hiding from us. Something that could be fatal to us. Yeah, okay, right! I've decided! It'd be safest for me to finish it off in a way so no one notices!"

"Whoa there, that's quite violent. Is your instinct telling you that? Or your experience?" Art asked.

"Hah! You already know the answer, don't you? It's both, of course," Shin answered. "It's natural to become more of a worrier as you age."

"Personally, I think it'd be best to watch and wait for a little longer," said Art. "Look, educators shouldn't be engaging in such immoral acts. That's basically what Luquille said."

"That's just your convenient interpretation. Depending on how you look at it, eliminating threats to the world without anyone's knowledge could be seen as true righteousness. Even if that's not the case...well, it's always the older ones that take on the roles of villains, and that's fine."

Shin walked toward the exit as she shook her head in exasperation.

"Just to confirm, you don't need any backup from me, right?" Art asked.

"That question is so stupid, I don't even feel like answering it, but I'll still say this just in case: no, I don't. In fact, you being around will just throw me off my game."

"Thought so. Well then, do as you please. I will maintain my dignity."

"Yeah, you do that. Bye!"

The next instant, she completely disappeared. Even Art, who had just been engaging in conversation with her, couldn't track

her.

“There may be a way when she’s close, but it’d be impossible at a distance, huh?” he said to himself. “So, that stealth technology even works on someone like me, with Rank S detection skills. Wait… Could it be that this Holy Stake…isn’t actually in stealth mode right now?”

If Shin had yanked out the stealth device, that would certainly be the case.

“Heh, I see. Well, fine. That just means I can stand out more! Now, be enamored by all that is me! Fall for my performance! The audience has gathered, and the stage is set!”

Art played his partner, the Stringed Instrument of the Spirit King, even more fiercely, shining ever brighter.

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The battle taking place near the World Tree got more intense as time went on. While Rem’s shadows spawned limitlessly from the lake, Shutola and the others stood against them as one. Mel used ice created by her Blue Magic to hinder their movements, allowing Serge to slam them with the multiple holy swords she was controlling for maximum firepower. Any enemies that were still standing would then be mopped up by Shutola’s golems. Even though it was a sort of impromptu team up, the fact that they were all experienced fighters showed. Their synchronized teamwork managed to optimize all their actions.

However, that was only enough for the battle to reach an equilibrium. That was how massive the numbers of spawning enemies were—the more they defeated, the more room there was for reinforcements to appear. They had no way of reaching Rem, who was their leader. They could tell where she was thanks to her crying, but she was hiding behind the army of shadows, so they couldn’t see her.

“It’s all boring shadows no matter where I look!” Serge complained. “It doesn’t feel like we’re making a dent!”

“What’re you acting all nonchalant for?! No matter how much magic we save and ration, we’ll run out eventually!” yelled Mel.

“Jeez, you’re harping again,” Serge replied. “Your real age is gonna get found out if you keep getting angry so quickly.”

“Graaaah!” Mel shouted.

“I’m glad to see that you two still have energy,” said Shutola.

“But it’s true that it won’t be good for us if this situation continues.”

She racked her brain from atop Georgios as she manipulated her magic threads. At the moment, the enemy shadows were weak enough that one hit was enough to destroy them regardless of their size. However, the creatures were comparable to the average Rank S monster, so they couldn’t afford to get complacent. It was clear that the more time went on, the worse the situation would get.

“Sergey…can you concentrate your attacks in the direction that Rem girl is in?” Shutola asked.

“Hm? Well, I can, but then my attacks will change from covering all directions to concentrating on literally one point,” Serge warned her. “It may open a path, but our enemies will come like an avalanche from everywhere else.”

“Mel!” Shutola called.

“Indeed, we just need to buy more time!” Mel agreed. “I’ll do it!”

“Okay, I’ll help! So please go ahead!” Shutola shouted, turning to Serge.

“I’ll do it if you say, ‘I love you, sister!’” Serge replied.

“Huh?! What’re you saying?! Do you know what situation we’re in?!” Shutola shouted.

“Nope don’t care! If you don’t say it, I won’t put in any more work!” Serge replied, sulking.

The other two combatants responded with silence. Despite the sudden tantrum she was throwing, Serge was still sweeping up the enemies around them, so it didn’t feel like she was keeping true to her threat. In short, she was just being selfish. It was easy to tell she was lying, but it was also true that it was they who’d be inconvenienced if she continued to pout.

Shutola heaved a large sigh, and then… “I love you, sister Serge, so please work hard for my sake. Is that good?” She gave it her best shot, complete with teary eyes. Aiming to stir up the desire to protect, she was quite cunning in that moment.

“OKAAAYYY! Your big sister Serge will give it her aaalll!”

The effort returned tangible results, as Serge’s emotions exploded. Accompanying her rising excitement, her holy swords grew noticeably larger. In the end, they grew to a ridiculous size, as though they were made for giants.

“Let my feelings reach Rem-chan too!” Serge exclaimed. “Giant

Holy Sword Will Asgard!”

She swung the giant blades forcefully, using superhuman poise, and the oversized weapons produced not just incredible killing power through slashing and crushing, but also a flying slash that seemed like it would extend out forever. The shadows that were unfortunate enough to be in the way of this slash were swallowed up by it, leaving nothing behind. Furthermore, it left behind delayed slashes in its wake, cutting up any enemies that tried to fill in the gap.

“My pawns!” Rem wailed.

“Okay, I made a path,” Serge declared. “But I got hit with some pretty gnarly recoil in exchange!”

“Thanks, sister!” Shutola said. “Leave the rest to Mel and me!”

“Urgh…I won’t let you. Pawns!” Rem called.

“That’s our line! We won’t let you do as you please!” Mel exclaimed. “Iceberg Wall!”

A great wall like a mountain of ice was generated in front of the golems that were solidifying their defenses around Mel and the others. This Rank S Blue Magic spell froze the shadows, making them a part of the wall. However, the shadows transformed into a black wave that tried to overcome the barrier. They paid no heed to their freezing limbs. Any shadows that froze completely became hand- and footholds for their comrades; it seemed their general plan was to force their way over. The ones that were frozen were still struggling within their icy prisons.

“Gah, they’re so persistent! It’ll only hold for a few more seconds, so we need to use this chance to advance!” Mel shouted.

“Yeah!” Shutola agreed.

“Onward to where Rem-chan is!” Serge cheered.

They needed to do something about the controller of this army, Rem, before the path they’d made was swallowed up by the black wave. They ran through the path of the slash like the wind toward Rem.

“Ee…eeep!” Rem squeaked.

“Yaay! I found Rem-chan!” Serge said excitedly.

When she saw Rem, it looked like their target was on some sort of portable shrine being carried by shadows. The shrine was also black, like it was another shadow.

Rem gave a little hiccup before yelling, “Don’t… Don’t come

any closer!”

“Heh heh heh,” Serge laughed deliberately. “It’ll be fine; I’m not a scary person. Look, I’m not scary at all, see? So I’m going to come over, okay, Rem-chan?”

“Eeeeeep!” Rem cried out.

“Stop that, Serge,” chided Mel. “That’s not something you should say to anyone, even an ally.”

“Yeah,” Shutola agreed. “That definitely made me feel sorry for her…”

“Oh come on, that was way milder than the stuff Kelvin does,” Serge protested. “I was talking to her nicely; I didn’t even say anything threatening!”

“You’re plenty threatening already…” muttered Shutola.

“At a level that I can’t just turn a blind eye to,” confirmed Mel.

“Whaaat?” Serge deflated. She brought Kelvin up as a comparison, but unfortunately, she’d failed to gain their approval. The danger she represented was different from Kelvin’s, but that was a matter of course.

“Save me, knight!” cried Rem, sniffling.

“Huh?”

Whether it was Serge’s fault or just that her sadness had reached a critical point, Rem cried out for help to someone, or something, unknown.

A moment later, the sound of an enormous explosion came from near Rem’s portable shrine, heralding another mass of shadows appearing from the air. This drew the trio’s attention. Wondering what was going on, they saw that these new shadows seemed to be knights on horseback. Just like the others, their forms were hazy and indistinct, but they were all holding weapons that looked like lances. Both the warhorses and knights boasted impressive sizes, the largest group of all the shadows thus far. On horseback, one pair reached nearly twenty meters in height. Not only that, but there were three pairs in total.

“Whoa, huge!” Serge exclaimed.

“Gah, I suspected this since she called the others pawns, but there really was another piece!” Mel groaned.

“They’re way too numerous for pawns, though! It’s amazing, isn’t it?! This is so far from actual chess!” Serge said excitedly.

“Now’s not the time to be chatting!” Shutola interjected. “They’re attacking!”

The newly appeared foes were already on the attack. They lifted their lances, pointing them forward, and charged. Just looking at them would have allowed anyone to guess that this kind of assault was coming. Unfortunately, their speed and mass were a problem. The three mounted knights' charge had already carried them right in front of Shutola and the others.

The shadow knights shouted in an unintelligible language as they charged at Shutola's group head-on. They aimed their lances accurately at the three, trying to use their momentum to pierce and kill their targets. Of course, the trio moved to intercept.

"Holy Axe Masakari!" Serge yelled. She had evaded the attack with ease before transforming her holy sword into a giant axe, which she used to chop off the legs of an enemy horse as it passed. The horse lost its mobility, and the knight fell off its mount, slamming into the ground. Then, both rider and horse disappeared.

"Hup!"

Mel had flown in close, unleashing pinpoint double thrusts with her spear at another knight and horse, piercing both in an amazing display. After that, just like the one Serge had demounted by force, the stricken knight and its mount disappeared.

This made two defeated knights, and only the one that had charged at Shutola was left.

"Georgio— Kyah!" Shutola cried out.

"Shutola!"

The pair heard her shriek right after dispatching their own foes and immediately turned. They came back, making a sharp U-turn, to see what they assumed was Shutola with her belly split open—except it wasn't her. It was Georgios, who had taken her place.

"Are you okay, Shutola?! I'll heal you right away!" Mel exclaimed.

"I-I'm fine!" Shutola replied in a panic. "But Georgios covered for me, and…"

The silver lining of this terrible situation was that Shutola was unhurt. However, a large amount of cotton was spilling out of Georgios's wound from the knight's attack. Its upper and lower halves were just barely attached, and it didn't seem like it would be able to stand back up even if Shutola were to command it

with her magic thread.

"Oh dear, it's totally broken," Serge commented. "But I commend you for your bravery in protecting Shutola-chan to the end, Bear-kun."

"I'm sorry! It's because I'm not strong enough!" Shutola cried out.

"Whoa there, those words don't belong on the battlefield, Shutola-chan," said Serge. "You can grieve after it's all over."

"She's right," Mel agreed. "If you weren't here, we wouldn't have been able to break out of our initial stalemate. Right now, I'm just happy you're unhurt. Can you stand?"

Shutola sniffled and moved slightly. "Yeah, I'm okay. You're…right. Now's not the time to apologize. I'm going to do my best!"

"Good, good. Your big sis Serge here always knew you were a strong girl, Shutola-chan! Though I got some goose bumps when Melfina actually said something goddess-like for once!"

Melfina screeched at her in response.

"Calm down, sister Mel," Shutola said placatingly.

"Whoops! We don't have time to be talking!" Serge exclaimed.

It was good that Shutola was back on her feet, both physically and emotionally, but since the trio had ceased fighting for some time, the shadows had completely blocked the path they'd made to Rem. The knight that had attacked Shutola charged into the Iceberg Wall with great speed, pulverizing it into dust. Then, it turned while trampling several shadows underfoot, once again pointing its lance at the trio.

"*Hic, sniff…* You people are awful, breaking my dolls…" cried Rem. "Urgh…Knight!"

Bobooom!

The sound of the explosion was familiar. Annoyingly, the two knights that had been defeated once again appeared by Rem's side.

"Eurgh, they're back," muttered Serge.

"We killed two, and she summoned two…" Mel muttered, trailing off in thought. "It seems there can only be three of those 'knights' at any one time. Good, then they won't be spawning infinitely."

"Not that there isn't the possibility of them infinitely resurrecting!" Serge commented. "Also, this might be a stupid question, but aren't there only two knights in chess? She has one

too many, right?”

“Given the number of pawns, I believe we should give up on trying to relate this to chess,” Mel replied.

“Ah, right. So this is more like the ultimate version I thought up…”

Mel and Serge worked hard to clean up the foot soldiers around them as they had their conversation. It might have seemed like they were back to square one, but the powerful knights had not yet joined the battle, so the situation was clearly worse than before. Though Shutola was fighting as hard as she could with her golems, without Georgios, her own mobility had dropped tremendously.

“Get on my back, Shutola!” Mel shouted.

“No! That’ll weigh you down!” Shutola replied. “Don’t worry about me!”

“But…”

“I know that I’m not reliable in a fight! But still…I won’t drag you down!” Her determination translated into magic, which exploded out of her fingers through her magic threads to the golems, spreading out from them. “Frigid Lethal Threads!”

It was the only Rank S Blue Magic spell that she had completed. Just as Efil could wreath her arrows in flame, Shutola transmitted Blue Magic through her threads, essentially using her golems as barrels through which to fire her magic.

“That’s…” Mel hesitated.

“Ohhh! I haven’t seen that spell before,” noted Serge. “Is it an original of yours?”

“Yes. Please be careful not to get in front of the golems,” Shutola warned them.

A large amount of silver threads shot out from gaps in the golems’ armor. The constructs had surrounded the trio in a protective circle as the threads went toward the shadows that were attacking them, tangling them up at high speed.

These silver threads had two abilities. One was to rapidly freeze anything they touched. Those that wrapped around arms would only freeze arms, while those that wrapped around legs would do the same to those limbs; it was a very concentrated effect. And the second effect…was to sever things.

The shadows raised something like a scream in their unintelligible language. Frighteningly, the threads rapidly froze the parts they touched before slicing those sections apart. This

attack seemed to completely ignore the target's toughness, as the threads didn't seem to be stopped or slowed at all, regardless of who they targeted.

"Whoa... This is surprisingly gruesome, Shutola-chan," said Serge. "Still, its power is amazing."

"It's just a spell that takes advantage of the brittleness brought on by cold," Shutola explained. "Anything with a lot of moisture becomes very brittle when frozen. I just concentrated the power of a Rank S spell into one point and applied a freezing effect to specific areas—"

"Which forcefully renders the target's toughness void," Mel finished. "Or it might be better to say that it's an attack that confers a weakness."

"Erm, so it's like dunking something in liquid nitrogen?" Serge asked. "Ahhh, yeah, that really does make things brittle. I think I remember seeing that in some sort of experiment."

Mel and Serge were impressed by this new spell but also slightly taken aback. Meanwhile, the threads continued to stretch out in every direction. The knight that was trying to charge at them was included in this...and it ended up touching the thread as it moved, resulting in the loss of a leg. That didn't mean it lost its momentum, though, so it fell showily and was destroyed.

A beat later, Serge said, "Can't we just let this do the rest?"

"No!" Shutola shot back.

Frigid Lethal Threads was certainly a powerful spell, but it had a weak point in that during its use, neither Shutola as the caster nor the golems she was using to fire the spell could move. In short, it couldn't be used while the caster was running like they had been when the knights first appeared. Also, since Shutola had to concentrate on the spell, even if Georgios had still been active as her legs, she wouldn't have had the leeway to control him. That was why its use was severely limited.

"I can break us out of our current predicament, but no more than that!" Shutola shouted. "I'll be the one to open the way this time, so you have to—"

"Yee— Eeeeeep!" Rem shrieked. "So scary! Scaryscaryscaryscary! I don't want to die like that! Bishop! Rook! Fill this battlefield with your protection and firepower!"

The trio made alarmed sounds as they heard more explosions and instantly had a bad feeling. Bishops and Rooks were both

important pieces in chess. The shadows they'd been facing up until now all had appearances and strength befitting their names. So what would these newcomers that Rem had just named be like?

"Yeah, this *would* happen, wouldn't it?" Serge said flatly.

"A tower of shadow that reaches up to the heavens, and there are four of them surrounding us. Then there're the shadows that look like mages. I can confirm five of them have spawned in the backline." Mel sighed, "Given how things are going, she definitely has queens too."

"I wonder if she has kings too... Also, I'm sorry. We might need to change the plan," said Shutola.

The booms lasted only a moment before the new shadows were ready to spring into action. Not being able to adapt to the ever-changing battlefield would lead to a quick death, and unfortunately it didn't seem like the girls would have the time to complain.

The four bishops let out a questioning cry in their strange language. The towers that surrounded Shutola and the others from a slight distance were so tall that it was impossible to see their peaks, and they were full of arched windows. Those windows unleashed a multitude of projectiles made of energy, which also hit friendly shadows, exploding. The trio was exposed to attacks from all directions, even above.

The five bishops again spoke loudly in unison. Meanwhile, the five mage-like shadows stood in the rear, ceaselessly muttering incantations in their unintelligible language. The spell they cast affected all friendly shadows on the battlefield, giving them resistance to explosive damage as well as a buff to their stats—supportive effects well suited to the current situation. The shadow soldiers had been taking significant damage from the towers' attacks at first, but now they were able to withstand the explosions, which would only hurt the three women: enemies who would harm their master.

The pawns and knights could spawn infinitely and knew no fear. The towers rose high enough to cover the sky and exhibited their overwhelming firepower without hesitation. The mages could accurately appraise the situation and flexibly apply supportive effects. All these shadows could take action independently without orders from their king, using any method available to them to have the greatest impact. This was likely

their strongest possible formation. In short, the battle was going badly for the trio.

“Celsius Briar!” Melfina yelled.

At the center of the bombardment, a large blue rose and countless thorns made of ice appeared. This spell acted as an umbrella against the bombardment, allowing the trio to somehow endure their dilemma.

Mel’s Rank S Blue Magic spell Celsius Briar specialized in protecting positions. Even if an attack was able to damage the durable ice flower, it was constantly growing and would instantly repair itself. During the war against Trycen, this spell had successfully blocked an attack from Demon Lord Zel, and it was doing great work today as well.

“Huh, this is some pretty stylish magic,” said Serge. “I totally thought your spells would be shaped more like food.”

“How could you even think that?! Even I can properly separate magic from food!” Mel shouted indignantly. “Not that I couldn’t eat this if I wanted to!”

And that was how she discovered that she could eat magic… Anyway, this wasn’t the time to be joking around, but given Serge’s personality, it was extremely hard for her to stay serious for so long. In fact, it was pretty much impossible. She had quite the troublesome spirit.

“Then while Melfina is stopping the attacks from the sky, Shutola-chan and I will take care of the pawns and knights!” Serge suggested. “Wait, but then we’ll just be back to losing the battle of attrition…”

“I can refill my magic with potions as much as I need, but Shutola can’t, given how light of an eater she is,” said Mel. “What about you, Serge? Want another?”

“No, no. Normal girls can’t drink so much in battle, okay? I’m the strongest in the world, but I’m still a normal girl in that regard. Whoops, I went off on another tangent! Man, I can’t help it, though; talking is just so much fun! I love talking!”

While mowing down the surrounding enemies with a giant laser, she continued speaking like nothing was happening. There was clearly no need to worry about her magic reserves—she’d be able to go on for a while more. That, at least, was good news.

However, it was common knowledge that good news came with bad, and a part of the battlefield had changed for the worse. The silver threads that Shutola had been continuously

using were now unable to destroy enemies in a single hit.

Shutola mentally clicked her tongue. *It's happening gradually, but Frigid Lethal Threads is becoming less and less effective. If I had to think of a cause…yeah, it'd have to be those mage shadows. It looked like they granted resistance to the bombardment with support magic, so maybe they can give resistance to ice too. Either way, we can't leave them alone. Still…*

She once again looked over the enemy formation. It seemed the mages had put up some sort of barrier in front of their headquarters, as they hadn't taken any damage despite being hit directly by Serge's spell. Between her and the mages stood hundreds or even thousands of shadows. Even though its power had been weakened quite a bit, the mages were no doubt strong enough to withstand Serge's assault. That meant it would be extremely difficult to defeat them using long-range attacks.

It'll be tough to destroy that barrier if we don't find some way to close the distance, Shutola thought. *But in order to do that, we'll need to advance while defeating the shadows around us and being exposed to the bombardment. On top of that, there's a possibility she's still hiding the king and queen pieces… This is bad. We're just going around in circles. But still…it's not like we're out of options!*

She never ceased paying attention to the situation as she looked for the perfect timing. They would have one chance and no more.

"Should I get serious and charge into the enemy?" Serge suggested. "I mean, the world itself loves me, so I'll probably be fine. I don't even think their attacks will touch me."

"No, wait!" Shutola shouted. "There are still chess pieces that haven't made an appearance, so it's dangerous to go off on your own!"

"Oh?" Serge responded. "Oho? That's the look you make when you've thought up a plan, isn't it, Shutola-chan? I know it is; I can tell!"

"Jeez, you really do just say whatever comes to mind," Mel complained. "But I agree this time. You have a plan, don't you, Shutola?"

"Yeah, actually…" Shutola started. She had prepared multiple trump cards just in case. She now shared one of those with the other two. While she was doing so, Mel cast Spy's Fog to hide them.

"*Hic, hic…urgh*, uugh?" Rem noticed the fog that had suddenly

appeared around the large rose even through her tears. She tilted her head in confusion, though she continued to cry. “A smoke screen? I don’t feel them anymore…*sniff*…are they preparing to run away?”

Even if they were planning to run, they were completely surrounded by her shadow army. The sky was also exposed to fire from the towers, so there was nowhere to escape to. So what were they doing? Rem continued to ponder that question, but at the moment, most of her emotional bandwidth was taken up by sadness, so she wasn’t able to think things through calmly. In the end, she kept going back to the train of thought: *They’re planning to run… Leaving me behind… I’ll be left all alone.* It was fairly nonsensical, and it only made her shrink further.

“Rehe|teb?man?/iclououwo%”

“Lopo]^?Neksawodetsopede/pl^nekteop@teotepl$”

Instead of Rem, the shadow mages started to speak. As always, their conversation was unintelligible, but it seemed like they were communicating, trying to come up with some sort of counter. It was a little troubling that they weren’t including Rem, who was their master, but they must have either thought that there would be no point or they were thinking of her when they did so. Either way, these shadows were the best choice to optimize the army. There was no doubt that they could analyze the battlefield calmly and make appropriate decisions. At the very least, they were better than Rem, who was still in the throes of her own emotions.

“Ho?Teyoedkunk|Cohisl?ycsh?yungue?:potea?crobyutotujie”

“Yu?a|Tenc0ieyuslazoonkamata. La*clba?”

Silver threads that came out of the mist were still preventing them from entering the “smoke screen,” so the mages judged that the enemy was inside. They stuck with their current strategy while staying alert, waiting for the enemy’s strength or stamina to run out, or for the bombardment to destroy the ice rose. It was a safe and orthodox strategy.

Not long after, the situation changed as they had predicted. The ice rose, having been continuously exposed to bombardment, started to collapse with a loud sound like shattering glass. It seemed that even such a large rose that could grow and regenerate couldn’t withstand this much concentrated, large-scale fire. The crumbling lump of ice smashed into the ground, and the impact added a dust cloud on

top of the mist. Visibility got even worse, blocking the sight of not only the surrounding shadows, but even Rem and the mages, who were watching from far away.

"Aaagh! My eyes! There's dust in my eyes!" Rem wailed.

"Linuaw/ie:clteyoriltyusank]cohipe*nba?te?ea"

"NderguiJule?tepply^te?hte???fanch]undets?^ti"

"Mlepotaseteomle?tetut^?"

Rem began crying all over again for a different reason. Meanwhile, the mages hurried out of their fortified position to confirm the deaths of Mel and the others. Rem took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes, so she was...well, also busy. And in this case, "busy" meant she was open to attack.

Bwoom! A loud explosion could be heard as the portable shrine Rem was in was buried in another cloud of dust. She and the shadows that served as her bodyguards were a beat late to respond since they were in the middle of doing something else. That instant was worth a mountain of gold, though.

"Huh?" Rem gasped.

"Keh heh heh... Hey, little lady, we're in the middle of battle, you know? You shouldn't be looking away," came a voice.

"GO! Viktor!" Shutola shouted.

Leaping out of the heavy dust and mist was Viktor, a member of the Four Demonic Generals who was in charge of cooking. And Shutola was riding on his back.

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The great blue flower was still alive, at least until Shutola finished telling the others her plan. Rewinding time somewhat to when the plan was first revealed: what actually happened? Well…

"Yeah, actually, there's a way to trick the enemy and get near that child. Sister Mel, can you cast Spy's Fog? I've got my hands full controlling Frigid Lethal Threads," Shutola said.

"I don't mind, but…"

Following Shutola's instructions, Mel cast Spy's Fog on the spot. With that, a thick fog manifested, preventing anyone from seeing what was under the blue rose.

"Okay, thank you. Clotho, please put Georgios into Storage. Also, could you bring *that* thing out instead?" Shutola asked.

Shutola's Clotho clone responded, showing what passed for its face. Then it jumped above Georgios and put the honorably wounded bear into its Storage. As if in exchange, it retrieved something as well.

"That's…a portable teleportation gate?" Mel asked incredulously.

"Indeed, it's our key item!" Shutola declared happily.

"Gee whillikers, so teleportation gates are finally portable! This is the first time I've seen such a convenient thing. But still, each gate has to be connected to a different one, right? There's no way there just happens to be a gate near Rem-chan or on Isla Heaven as a whole," Serge said.

"You're right," Mel answered. "In order to minimize contact with the outside world as much as possible, Isla Heaven does not have any teleportation gates. At least, it shouldn't. If we're using it to escape, I'd understand, but…"

The gate would at least let them escape this little pinch they'd found themselves in, just as Goldiana had once escaped from the Ten Authorities. However, it wouldn't do to forget that the miniature gate was a one-way trip and they wouldn't be able to come back.

"No, that's not how we're going to use it. There's no time, so instead of explaining, I'll just show you," said Shutola. "Clotho, please set the gate as we discussed before!"

Clotho formed a thumbs up, as if to say, "Thought you'd say that, so I already did it!" And it indeed had already finished setting up the gate. The slime had truly perfected the role of the unsung hero. Thanks to hard worker Clotho—or rather, the hardworking slime, Clotho—the gate was already running,

connected to another within seconds.

“Looks like it’s connected. So what do we do now?” Serge asked. “I still want to go wild, so I’m not really into running away just yet. Ah, but if you ask me really nicely, I might go on a little date with yo—”

“I told you already, this isn’t to run away,” Shutola said, cutting her off. “This gate is not for going somewhere, but for someone to come to *us*.”

“Huh? Who’re we waiting for?” Serge asked.

“Still, that’s…” Mel hesitated.

As is already known, the miniature teleportation gate could be used as an entrance but not as an exit. At least, that’s how it should have been. In short, it was impossible for someone to come and provide support that way. Mel understood this and naturally seemed confused by Shutola’s statement. However, while all that was happening, someone appeared from the gate.

“All of you have been putting in effort to prepare for this day, right? I was the same. I thought as hard as I could about what I could do and then prepared as much as I could,” Shutola said.

“I-Impossible…you improved the miniature teleportation gate?!” Mel exclaimed. “Now it has the full functionality of a normal gate?!”

“Exactly! It was a lot of work, but I did my best!” Shutola said proudly.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean you can call in anyone from anywhere? Whoa, that’s crazy!” Serge gushed.

“It’s not just crazy!” Mel shouted. “Out of all the relics from the age of the gods, the teleportation gate was the hardest to work with! And not only has it been copied, it’s been improved!”

“Kheh heh heh. Well, thanks to that, the fuel efficiency of it has gotten much worse. At best it would support just me.” Demon Lord Gustav’s aide, Viktor of the Four Demonic Generals, appeared from the gate with his unique laugh. Both Mel and Serge were surprised by this, and their eyes widened, pupils dilating.

“Oh? This is awful,” Viktor said. “I was assessing the situation through the Clotho clone, but I hadn’t imagined it would be *this* bad. It seems we don’t have time to take it easy. Oh, my apologies, I’ve forgotten to introduce myself. I am a demon in the service of Gustav-sama. My name is Viktor.” He gave a polite bow as he offered his name. Meanwhile, Serge’s emotional state

was quite jumbled as she looked him over.

"Our support is…this demon? And he said 'Gustav…' Does that mean—"

"Stop right there," Viktor cut her off. "As I said just now, we don't have time for idle chatter. Hero Serge Flore, your relationship with us demons is certainly a complicated one, but let us set that aside for now. That is the contract I've formed with this young lady over here."

"If that's the case, I guess I will too," Serge said. "I don't want to bother Shutola-chan, after all."

"Good. Are you okay with that as well, Goddess of Reincarnation Melfina—no, Celsius family wife?" Viktor asked.

"Wife?!" Mel yelped. "*Ahem!* If you're going to go that far, I have no objections. You follow Sera, after all, so I'm actually reassured. Hee hee…wife…" Mel must have really liked how that word sounded, as her mood took a steep upturn.

"Ergh, that was way too easy. I'm actually a little creeped out. Anyway, leaving the *wife* alone for now, what's our plan? He came because you have one, right?" Serge asked.

"I do!" Shutola confirmed. "Uncle Viktor is perfect for this situation!"

"Uncle Viktor…" Serge muttered.

Even though she should've just been convinced, she was now looking at Viktor with envy. She was jealous that he'd been given a term of endearment without even having to ask. As for Viktor, it seemed he quite liked his new nickname.

"The ground is swarming with the enemy, and the sky is just as dangerous. Kheh heh heh heh heh! Certainly, I am perfect for this situation," Viktor admitted. "So you're saying we just have to go underground."

"Underground? You're planning to use the Burrowing skill?" Serge asked.

"Hm…now that you mention it, Viktor *is* good at such tactics. But doesn't that skill only apply to the user? You'd be fine, but we would suffocate, wouldn't we?" Mel asked.

"Kheh heh heh! I trained daily to make the impossible possible," replied Viktor. "I can do it, and you'll just have to trust me when I say that."

"Saying it like that just makes people doubt you, Uncle Viktor!" Shutola complained. "I-It'll be okay! We can go together! It has my seal of approval!" She emphasized this by miming using an

imaginary stamp. The motion was familiar to her given her usual tasks, so she was able to do it even while manipulating her threads.

“S-So cute! Gah, no, that’s not it! H-Hmm? Well, if Shutola-chan says so, then I don’t mind,” said Serge. “At worst, I’ll just escape even if I’m stuck in the middle of the ground.”

“Naturally, I’m okay with this as well,” said Mel. “Now that it’s decided, I’d like to say ‘let’s get going,’ but actually let’s decide on our roles when we pop up in the enemy’s camp. Also, should I destroy Celsius Briar at the same time? It should draw the enemy’s attention and might delay their ability to realize what’s going on.”

“Ah, if you’re going to do that then I’ll leave my guards behind,” said Shutola. “It’ll be suspicious if all the attacks suddenly stop. I’ll make it feel like we’re gradually being forced into a corner!”

“Then allow me to be your legs,” Viktor offered. “Now, get on my back.”

“Okay, I’ll get on!” Shutola agreed.

“A… A piggyback ride?! That’s so nice! I’m so jealous!” Serge growled.

“Serge, your desires are leaking out of you,” said Mel.

And so, the four of them went underground to attempt an ambush.

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The ambush worked wonderfully, catching the enemy by surprise. Mel and Serge ran at the shadow mages and the soldiers assigned to their protection. At close range, they would fare much better against the mages. And as if to prove that, they nearly instantly routed their targets without giving them even a moment to resist, winning with overwhelming speed. Also, Rem and her other pieces were late to react as well.

“Prepare yourself!”

“Prepare!”

“Huh?! Wh-Who?!” Rem shouted.

In the face of Viktor and Shutola’s approach, she wasn’t quite fast enough to prepare for battle. In fact, she was frozen in fear upon seeing Viktor for the first time. Also, Viktor had already activated his Jin Scrimmage, so he was looking even more

sinister than usual. It was understandable that Rem could be scared…possibly. Of course, some (like Kelvin) would point out that one of the stronger Ten Authorities shouldn't be acting that way.

"Cobllrdrkwinookoish"

"Tansw?Skotanoparada:knwoteacl^>sh"

Instead of Rem, they were intercepted by the shadow pawns that were carrying her portable shrine. They'd recovered from their surprise first and left only the minimum number needed to keep carrying the shrine, while the rest struck out to intercept. They were model soldiers, sacrificing themselves to protect their master. While they might have only been pawns, they seemed more skilled than the average one. In other words, they were *elite* pawns.

"Excuse me!" Viktor shouted.

Still, that didn't mean they were able to stop Viktor and Shutola. They were mowed down by an arm surrounded by armor shining with black light before being finished off by Shutola's Frigid Lethal Threads. In the end, the guards weren't even able to buy a full second of time.

"Q-Queen!" Rem cried out.

But that fraction of a second was not in vain. In such a short time, Rem was able to wring out what little courage she had to cry out a name. It was most likely her trump card, her hidden ace, her ultimate weapon—the strongest piece in chess, the queen. The piece by that name crawled out of a subspace in strange full plate to stand in front of Rem as a shield. Then…

"And booom!"

It was blown away by Serge, who'd come charging in from a blind angle to the side.

"Uh? Huh?" Rem gasped.

"Sister Serge!" Shutola exclaimed.

"Leave this annoying-looking thing to your big sister Serge!" the former Hero replied. "I'm pretty sure Melfina will take care of the ones trying to return from the front lines too!"

With that, she ran off, Will in her hand, now transformed into a spear. She'd stabbed it into the queen and was probably going to carry it far away where their battle wouldn't affect those around them. She moved at super speed, and it looked like the queen was trying to resist, but Serge's lance charge wouldn't let its prey escape. In the end, the queen was carried away out of

Rem's sight.

Rem was silent now. The unexpected forceful removal of her trump card from the battlefield was shocking in the extreme to her, and her mind was completely blank. Only, the shadows had realized that their master was in danger and had turned around to converge upon those threatening her.

"My word, as an ally, Serge is extremely reliable, isn't she?! So I should do my job as well! Kanaloa Freezer!" Mel shouted. She spread her wings and took to the sky, raising her new partner, Seraph, to the heavens.

The spear glowed a bright blue-white that could be seen across the battlefield. The next instant, the entire shadow army in Mel's line of sight was instantly frozen. Neither pawns nor knights nor rooks were given time to resist. Since it was so sudden, the shadows likely didn't even realize that they'd been frozen. Also, the lake that was infinitely spawning the pawns froze over as well. It was as if a frozen ocean had suddenly appeared.

This is the ultimate form of fused magic, a white and blue spell equivalent to Rank S! Mel thought. *But while it's powerful, the price is also high. My MP is draining fast, and I'm getting so hungry!*

Her stomach growled a hungry melody as she tried to maintain the spell. Having others hear her stomach growl *was* something she was embarrassed by. However, the extreme drain on her MP was more pressing at the moment. Though not as much as Kelvin, Mel still had quite a lot of MP, but even so, this drain wasn't something she could ignore.

This is tougher than I expected! Mel thought. *Maybe it's because I made the scale too big, but the more I try to maintain it, the more the drain increases at an exponential rate! Won't it eventually become too much, even if I try to restore my magic using recovery potions? Oh, fine, I guess I'll have to use Autophagy.*

Autophagy was a Unique Skill that she had gained when she'd quit being the Goddess and returned to being an angel. It was a somewhat strange skill that got stronger the more food she stored in her stomach. The most important effect was to automatically regenerate the HP and MP she was losing. In essence, it was in the same vein as Auto Healing and Magic Attachment, only taken to the extreme. It went above and beyond Hearty Eating, and Mel, who had been eating a truly stupendous amount up until now, was able to recover a

corresponding amount after activating the skill. It was enough that as long as she had at least one HP and MP left, she would instantly recover in full. Basically, she could recover and use as much magic as she wanted now.

But on the other hand, once this skill was activated, it would keep going until the entire stock was gone. Also, once it ended, she'd be assaulted with an intense feeling of hunger. But given how powerful the skill was, such a demerit was a minor thing. It *was*...but because this was the first time she was using it, Mel didn't actually know how bad the hunger afterward would be.

"I'm more than a girl who just eats!" she shouted. "I'm going to work enough to earn all that food!"

As if to distract herself from that unknown, she made her shout as loud as possible. It projected overwhelming strength, and the shadows trapped in her icy version of hell couldn't move a muscle.

"I'll hold them back with my full power! In the meantime, you two need to do it!" Mel shouted back at them.

"Of course! No need to say that twice!"

"We're already right in front of her!"

"Ah! Aaah!" Rem shouted.

The final guards were defeated by Shutola and Viktor. The portable shrine dropped to the ground, and Rem came tumbling off of it. Then, a big black arm and some silver threads approached her.

"So...sorry!" Rem cried. "It's because I...I'm such an unworthy king!"

It was unclear who she was apologizing to in such a trembling voice. Maybe she just apologized out of reflex. It was definitely not her calling on some more friends. In fact, it might have truly just been an apology that had no impact on the battle at hand.

At this point, there were only enemies around her, and the shadows that were her allies could not hear her. In chess terms, this was checkmate, and the apology without a hearing recipient was only for her own sake, with no meaning in this battle.

Only, someone actually did listen to her. It was the stuffed doll she always carried around with her. It only had one eye, and stuffing was poking out of its belly, so even as pure flattery it couldn't be called well-made. But even so, the poor little stuffed doll heard her apology.

"Teeclmo?~ainsagocoyote!wi!teblsiknoteeclmo^te?>teyuti"

Was it Rem or the doll who issued that undecipherable utterance? Before Shutola and Viktor could react, it transformed into a shadow, swallowing Rem up whole.

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This is a story of the past, before Rem Teargate became a goddess. She was born as royalty in a certain world. The birth of the great Teargate family's firstborn was something to be celebrated by the entire kingdom, and the day was supposed to be a very special day. However...

"Wh-What's this?! Hey, what is the meaning of this?!"

"D-Don't ask me..."

When Rem was born, her father, the king, was shocked, and couldn't hide how shaken he was. It was enough that he questioned the queen, despite her being exhausted from childbirth. The queen also seemed to have no idea what was happening and was on the verge of tears. To someone without full knowledge of the situation, the king's actions would have been deplorable. However, he wasn't the only one unable to hide his confusion. The guards surrounding them, the midwife and maids who attended to the birth, and even the minister who heard the king's raised voice and came running all doubted their own eyes when they first laid eyes on Rem.

So, why were they like this? Was there a problem with Rem's health? No, that wasn't it. She was crying energetically like any baby would and didn't seem to be hurt in any way. Of course, neither was she ill. Then was it because they were expecting a boy? No, that also wasn't it. This kingdom didn't discriminate between genders for the purpose of succession, and it had indeed had ruling queens in the past. Even if their firstborn was a girl, the king would not have been so shaken. So why?

"Why? Why is the child so small?! It's as if she's of a different species altogether!" the king cried out.

He likened Rem to one of the smaller species, but she wasn't that strange for a human baby. Although she was smaller than the average, it wasn't enough to be a problem for a human family. Except...the kingdom she was born in was one of giants. A human baby had been born to giant parents.

This was unprecedented to the giant race. If this occurrence were to be made public, in the worst case, the queen could have

been accused of having had secret relations with a human.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" the queen shouted.

"No...don't apologize. I should be the one to do so for raising my voice," the king replied. "I trust you, and I'm sure everyone here does as well. Unfortunately, there are those in this country who don't. I wonder what happened..."

The king had managed to regain his calm with time, and he sat down in a chair, clutching his head. It was public knowledge that the queen had been pregnant, so they couldn't pretend that she wasn't after all this time. Also, even if the girl was too small, she was still the child that his beloved wife had gone through so much pain to give birth to. The king didn't want to deny his feelings as a father.

"My liege...may I?" the minister asked.

"What is it, minister?"

"I've calmed down as well now, and there comes to mind a question," he said. "That is, er, well...this is actually quite hard to say, but..."

"It's too late to spare my feelings, minister. Just spit it out."

"R-Right! Then...well, when the queen became pregnant, her belly was recorded as having swollen to the normal size for one of *our* pregnancies. I just thought that the size of the princess and the size of the queen's belly didn't quite match up," the minister pointed out.

"Hm? Yes, I believe you have a point?" the king said. He tilted his head, trying to figure out the mystery. Naturally, he was the husband and had seen his wife more than anyone else during the pregnancy. There was no way he'd misremember such a detail. When his wife was pregnant, she'd certainly been the normal size for one of their kind.

"Now that you mention it, the pain from the birth felt like it should have come from someone much bigger..." the queen added.

"Are you sure? Hmm...what could have caused this?" the king wondered aloud.

"My liege...may I?"

It was one of the five court mages in service to the kingdom. He'd probably come along with the minister and the others. Only, he still looked terribly shaken. He was sweating profusely from his forehead—no, most likely his entire body.

Because he looked so sickly, the king couldn't help but

wonder if the mage was well. “You’re sweating a lot. Are you ill?” he asked.

“Honestly…no, I’m not,” the mage answered. “But right now it’s more important I give my views on this. It’s not completely unrelated to our current state. Please, allow me to speak.”

“Uh, hm…you seem to be implying something,” noted the king. “I understand. Let us hear what you have to say as someone qualified to be a sage of this kingdom.”

“Thank you. We weren’t present when the queen was giving birth, but…well, we certainly felt when the princess was born. All five of us,” said the mage.

“Oh? What does that mean? What are you even talking about?” He was unable to understand what the court mages were trying to imply and tilted his head once again, puzzled.

“To tell you the truth, we did not run here because of your shout,” the mage confessed. “You may think it strange, but…the princess called us.”

“The…baby?”

“Indeed. When the princess was born, we felt an abnormal rise in magic from this very spot. Anyone well-versed in magic would have been able to feel it; I daresay even those in town would—no, all those throughout the kingdom would have felt this huge surge,” the mage said.

“It was intense, like a star exploding,” another commented. “I believe the princess is a chosen child of god. Even as a newborn, she has more magic than any of us.”

“What?!”

While giants were possessed of a strong physical build, as a race they tended to have less magic than humans. Still, the court mages assembled here were skilled even when compared to human mages. And now, they were all praising the newly born Rem while also trembling with fear. The king could instinctively tell from their desperation that their words weren’t mere flattery.

“Now, what I’m about to say is mere speculation, but…could it be that the princess traded her physical size as a giant for enormous amounts of magic?” the mage proposed.

“In exchange for her body?” the king repeated.

“I cannot begin to understand how it would work, but there is no other way to explain this.”

“Was this a prank by a god or was she chosen as a messiah? Either way, the princess will lead a life of great accomplishment.

We are certain of that," said one of the other mages.

Being given the seal of approval by the court mages was a great honor and indicated that the child's future would be bright. But even so, the king was worried. Rem's body was peculiar for a giant, and he wondered if his people would accept her, or if they would even believe she was their child.

"I see, a god's prank, huh? Still, would the citizenry accept this?" the king asked. "Even if this child has commensurate power, I think they will prioritize what they can see. If we make the wrong move, they could lose trust in the Teargates."

After a moment's thought, one of the mages spoke up. "I have an idea, my liege. There aren't many in our kingdom who can use magic. That is why those who can are respected and trusted. Why not summon those who are skilled with magic to look upon the princess directly?"

"A lot of them are proud of their status as mages, and very stubborn. That is exactly why they will not lie," agreed another mage. "If they were to see the princess, they would come to realize that the earlier explosion of magic came from her, even without us having to tell them. Also, they will surely realize how precious she is."

"Then they will bring their great adoration of her back to their homes and tell others of what they experienced," another jumped in. "Though it may take some time, trust in her will surely increase."

"She may be looked upon with doubt at first," admitted yet another mage. "However, the mages—no, *we* will all wipe that doubt away!"

"I-It won't just be the mages! We will do our utmost as well!" cried someone else in the room.

"Exactly! I attended the birth! I know the truth, that the princess is indeed the child of the king and queen!" said another.

"I..." The king trailed off, overcome by emotion.

One by one, more voices pledging aid were raised. The king, moved by the affection of his subjects, shed tears in huge drops. But...by that time, the fate of the giants' kingdom might have already been set in stone.

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A few days after Rem was born, the king gathered the people

in front of the palace to officially announce the birth of his child. Over the past few days, the servants had worked hard for Rem's sake. They did not treat her with prejudice, despite the baby being too small for anyone to think she was a giant, and the royal couple were endlessly grateful for that. However, they were also worried about whether the people would accept Rem like the servants did.

"We've done everything we can. In fact, the reactions of the mages in every region have been better than expected. Some have even raised their hands and called her the child of a god. But nothing is ever certain. It'll be nice if nothing happens, but..."

While the king was busy fretting, the time for the citizens to congregate got ever closer until finally, it came.

"This is all thanks to you people," the king said.

"No, everything is because you trusted us, my liege," the minister replied.

In the end, the king's worries ended up being only that. It was almost disappointing how easy the reveal was.

"Oh, what a divine and adorable baby!"

"You can tell she's different just from her mere presence! I can see an overflowing amount of magic even though I don't have any myself!"

"I heard about it, mama! A really wise mage said it! This kingdom will prosper forever because Rem-sama was born!"

"Hee hee, and that mage was right. We need to give proper thanks for the miracle of Rem-sama's birth."

"Thank you... Thank you!"

"All hail Rem-samaaa!"

What a happy miscalculation. Every voice was cheering for her birth. This time, the king had appeared with Rem in his arms, and the moment the crowd laid eyes on her, their excitement boiled over. Not a single one seemed suspicious of Rem's size, and the revealing of the new member of the royal family was a huge success. The help of their servants had worked wonders. Or at least, that's what the king would have liked to assume, but things were going *too* well. The distrustful ruler naturally had doubts about this all-too-easy series of events.

"Is this a dream, minister?" he asked. "Or some sort of phantasm concocted by my weak heart?"

Well...they were *those* kinds of doubts.

"Just how little confidence do you have, Your Majesty?" the

minister muttered. “This is no dream, nor is it a phantasm or an auditory hallucination. This is undoubtedly the truth and the collective will of the people.”

“But…”

Even then, the king wasn’t convinced and had to order the minister to slap him as hard as possible on the cheek after they returned to the palace. Although the minister was dumbfounded at the ridiculous order, he was willing to do it if it would get the king to accept reality.

Pwaclap!

“It’s not a dream…” the king muttered.

“I told you.”

Just then, Rem’s crying voice reverberated through the room. The sound of that slap had surprised her.

“Oh no! Sorry, Rem! It’s all because the minister doesn’t know his own strength! Hey, minister! This is your fault!”

“You’re blaming this on *me*?!” the minister shouted. “My apologies, Rem-sama! It’s just because the king feels the need to jump at every little shadow!”

“You! How dare you betray me!”

Their fight only made Rem cry louder. In the face of this bawling baby, the top leaders of the giant kingdom could only panic. At least the worrywart king’s fears had been somewhat assuaged.

Several months and years passed after that. During that time, the giants’ kingdom was peaceful. Rem was healthy and growing steadily. She didn’t get to the size of a normal giant, but no one in the kingdom cared about that anymore.

“Ohhh, Rem is crying. Your smiling face is too terrifying, minister. Get out of her sight!” the king demanded.

“Your face is the terrifying one, with all those scars,” the minister shot back. “If you want to stand in front of Rem-sama, I suggest you put on a full-body costume first!”

“Those two are at it again. They never get tired of it, do they?” an onlooker murmured.

“Hee hee hee! They can’t help it, Rem-sama is too cute. Not that we can either,” another replied.

Rem cried often, but strangely, even her crying voice was absolutely lovely. Her parents, the minister, and the citizens—even utter villains—all had a deep love for her.

More time passed. Once Rem was able to speak, the love for

her grew even deeper and more striking.

"Oh, um...good...morning..." she said hesitantly.

"Wooaarrgghhh!" three voices cried out at once.

Every word out of her mouth, no matter how trifling, was utter bliss to the giants, such that they couldn't resist shouting out in joy. At this point, every single person thought only to make the kingdom better for her sake, to grind themselves into dust for her, to give everything they had for their country. In fact, they didn't just think it, they *did* it. Each day saw the giants' kingdom grow more plentiful than the last, with crime taking a steep dive. With Rem set to rule the country, everyone believed this trend would continue indefinitely, which led to it coming true—a self-fulfilling prophecy. The future looked bright to absolutely everyone.

However, another ten or so years later, there was a stroke of bad luck. The giant king was taken ill, and his life was like a candle in the wind. But he held no regrets in his heart.

"Rem," he said, "I leave the rest to you. I'm sure you can lead this kingdom down the right path."

"Father..."

Even more than a decade after her birth, Rem still burst into tears at the drop of a hat. She was also still small for her race. But no one in this kingdom cared. In fact, the king keenly felt that his daughter had grown wonderfully. He adored her, even.

"Heh! Don't make that face. Have confidence in yourself," he told her. "Rem, you've used that impressive magic within you to do great things...sometimes making it rain on withered land, sometimes saving lives by turning away disasters...and even more miracles besides. The number of miracles you've worked... Ah, no... Even if that number was zero, my subjects would love you. Rem...no matter what, I am proud of you."

With that, he gently closed his eyes.

"My servants...and the people...are even now working hard to...support you, Rem," he said, having to start and stop. "The entire kingdom has come together as one...for my beloved daughter's sake. I can imagine it... Ah, what a wonderful sight. What is there to regret?"

As long as she existed, this kingdom was guaranteed peace and prosperity; the king was sure of it. That was why he could comfortably pass away.

"I'm counting on...you..." With that thought filling his heart,

the giant king went to the afterlife quietly and happily.

Rem let out an anguished, wordless cry. After that day, she spent three days and three nights shut in her room, sobbing nonstop. She was loud enough for the entire kingdom to hear constantly, regardless of the time of day. Hearing her wails, the people were more certain than ever that they needed to support their ruler, Rem.

After going through the coronation ceremony and officially becoming queen, Rem took her father's words to heart and learned how to rule wisely on top of bringing about miracles when needed. She was desperate to answer the hopes and expectations of those around her. So there was no way those around her could have known. Slothfulness wasn't allowed; living in a healthy, moral manner was the most wonderful thing. Indeed it was, for they were supporting Rem. The giant kingdom, having welcomed their new ruler, was going to prosper even more.

Some time after being crowned, Rem was crying as usual while making mistakes. But that was just another thing everyone loved about her. Everything she did was adorable, naturally. The adorable Rem's miracles spread to the neighboring territories as well, and they were absorbed into her kingdom, expanding the land under her control. In the end, the giant kingdom managed to become the world's single biggest entity. This peaceful world, where even villains reformed themselves to live healthy lives and shed their sweat among others, continued until Rem's life was complete.

But the moment it was, the giant kingdom was destroyed...along with most of the world.

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"Hic, hic...weeehhh..."

A girl cried alone in a space filled with light. What could she be feeling sad about, even though she was in such a bright space filled with hope? She seemed to be crying while looking down at the lower realm through a transparent floor. Her name was Rem Teargate. Up until the end, she'd been loved by the world. And in turn, she had done her best for everyone. However, she looked like a young girl despite being old enough to have died of old age.

“You are Rem Teargate, I assume? What are you crying for? I hear that despite being a mortal, you gathered enough faith to rival a god and brought the world peace and prosperity for a time. And now, you have climbed to the greatest heights, ascending to the domain of godhood. Your achievements have even been acknowledged by us gods. I would understand feeling pride, but surely there is no reason for this endless crying?” A man whose face she could not see called out to Rem as she continued to cry.

It was as though only his face had been covered in black permanent marker, or possibly the universe itself was hiding his face. Either way, she couldn’t make out his features clearly despite looking right at him. What she could see was his powerful body as well as the strange mix of power he was giving off: part divine, part evil. He also had an overwhelming presence, and if he’d been an average god she would have instantly prostrated herself before him.

“Hic…ic…”

Despite the fact that the god was talking to her, Rem continued to cry instead of responding.

“Heh! So you insist on acting upon your own emotions, despite being in my presence. What arrogance, what blasphemy! Your attitude would invite such derision, even if you are a child.”

The tone of the voice was frosty and indifferent, which made Rem twitch and tremble. The man extended a hand toward her and gently laid it on her head.

“But I like that,” he said. “As the rumors say, you seem to be a strong youngster deep inside, despite how you appear on the outside. Rem Teargate, is the disastrous state of the world below after your death what is causing you such anguish?”

The eyes on the face she could not see seemed to be watching the same scene as she. At least, what was how she felt. The tone of his voice was as cold as ever, but the warmth of his hand was strangely pleasant.

“Hic…I…I—”



“I see. So this is the effect of being loved the world over and serving as its light.”

Rem and the man were looking at a dead world, with bodies scattered all over. Where did the peace that had once reigned gone? Everything in view looked like a hellscape. It wasn’t like there had been any strife, a war between nations, or even acts of terrorism. The people had simply taken their own lives. Many words for it existed, such as suicide, but they all meant the same thing: haunted by despair, the people of that world had chosen to leave it.

“I-It’z my bault… All begauze I used dat power!” Rem blubbered.

“The power of control?” the man responded after a moment.

Ever since she’d been born, Rem had unconsciously been using a certain power she possessed: the power of control, as the man had said. Like its name suggested, it placed others under her control—a most powerful ability.

Though she was still crying, Rem slowly started to talk. She’d only noticed this power of hers once her sense of self had come into being. Ever since birth, Rem had only ever experienced kindness from people, never having any memory of being scolded or yelled at. At worst, she witnessed arguments between her father and the minister.

“You made the same mistake again*?! Gah, how many times do I have to tell you?!”*

“My apologies…”

That was why it had been such a shock to her when she’d come upon a scene of someone in the castle scolding their subordinate.

But although shocked, she had also thought, *How could that person say such awful things? The world should be a kind place where everybody is happy.*

Immediately after that thought had crossed her mind, the scolding had stopped and the two were all smiles.

“I’m so sorry! I went too far!” the superior had said. “You’re doing a good job; it’s my fault for giving you too much work!”

“No, the soldiers are working harder than I am! I’m just immature!” his subordinate had replied.

They’d reconciled by shaking hands, apologized from the bottom of their hearts, and resolved the issue at breakneck speed.

“The moment I laid eyes on Rem-sama, I realized how foolish I was being!” the superior had claimed.

“Of course! It’s Rem-sama! I’m going to try harder than ever before!” the subordinate had replied.

After that, Rem was very satisfied. She was of course happy to be complimented, but more than that, she liked that they were happy. After that, whenever she came upon a similar scene, she dealt with it in the same way. She’d learned about her power very early on, and she’d thought that she could use it to solve problems, to make more people happy.

As her body grew, so did her feelings toward peace as Rem evolved into something even more powerful. The range of her ability, which had initially only covered the palace and its surroundings, grew to extend beyond the castle town all the way to the neighboring towns, and then to remote villages until finally the entire kingdom was under her control. After Rem’s father passed away, the strength of her powers became even more striking, allowing her to absorb other nations into hers until, in the end, she developed the kingdom into a superpower.

“Becoming the light to illuminate the way for your people, allowing them to live righteous lives. They would have no enemies or villains, and experience no strife or conflict. I see… That *is* a perfect world,” the man said. “As long as you’re alive, that is.”

“I… I told everyone to keep working hard even after I died…” Rem muttered.

“Oh? So you sensed the danger of your passing and tried to take preventative measures? But it seems mere words could not save them from the despair of losing you.”

The man then went on to say that Rem was like the sun for the people of that world. It was because they’d had the light of the sun that the people could feel hope and joy. They’d faced the sun’s light and walked along with it. However, if the sun, despite bearing such an important role, suddenly disappeared one day, what would the people do? Well, there was no need to even think about it. They would despair. Their worlds would fill to the brim with agony.

“Your death released them all from the control they were under,” the man explained. “They’d tasted days filled with hope under the aegis of your power, and they could no longer live without it. They couldn’t allow a world without you, the one they

loved more than anyone else, even their families or spouses. That is why they chose to leave for the next world, dreaming of meeting you again."

Rem had no response other than to continue sobbing, tears overflowing from her eyes. In fact, she couldn't say anything. The sadness was too much. Having the harsh truth pointed out to her by the man, she had surpassed the limits of what she was able to withstand.

"I…uh…I…"

It was too late for regret. It was too late for everything. She shouldn't have desired anything; she shouldn't have drowned in her power. She should have abandoned them all the moment she was born. Regret poured into her, crushing her heart.

But then, a light shone down upon her.

"That world is currently on the verge of total destruction," the man said. "But it's not your fault. In fact, you did well. Well done leading those mortals while being one yourself. Allow me to repeat that: well done."

Rem was speechless for a moment. "Huh?"

Surprisingly, the man had reached out with a helping hand. He was haughty, arrogant, and brazen. But he was also incredibly strong, and he'd approved of Rem.

"You…who?" she asked nonsensically.

"There should be a limit to ignorance, to not know of me. But I will still tell you," he said. "My name is Addams. The great Addams. Remember the name."

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Addams had said that the fault lay with neither Rem for using her powers nor the people who'd clung to hope, but rather the system that the world was built on.

"System?" Rem asked. "So if that had been fixed, this wouldn't have happened?"

"At the very least, fewer people would have chosen death," Addams replied.

He had her question why the people were so affected by her ability, and the answer he gave was that it was because the people were weak, immature in both body and spirit.

"The world you lived in was an oppressed one where everyone was only allowed to have an average amount of strength. Even

among the giants, there was no one who could achieve the equivalent of thousands or tens of thousands on their own. Even with the miracle of magic, an individual could only harness enough of it to be child's play. No one else had a mysterious power like yours. You were special."

"Th-Then, I... Why..."

"You were an irregular being in that world. A mistake. A fluke that occurred despite astronomical odds. That was why no one could resist you. You should have been born on one of the worlds I managed, where everyone is allowed to desire power and the strong can stand shoulder to shoulder. You were worthy of being in a true paradise."

"True...paradise..." Rem repeated quietly. She couldn't help but think that if only one more person had shone as much as she did, things would have been different. Also, if everyone's hearts had been stronger, they might not have chosen death. Maybe such a world was the only one where someone like her would have been allowed to exist.

"Opinions are currently split among the gods. One side wants to continue oppressing those who reside in the lower worlds to make them easier to manage. The other side wants to make those mortals truly strong, to lead worlds filled with promise and potential. I am the leader of this latter group, and in the near future, we will go to war," Addams said.

"War?!" Rem replied in shock. "War is...bad. Why would gods do such a bad thing?"

"A correct and righteous question," said Addams. "But it seems you have some incorrect preconceived notions about gods."

"Preconceived...notions?"

"While gods are higher beings, they are in no way noble or lofty. They are selfish and haughty, much like me," Addams explained. "Rem, you have an ideal world that you wish for, don't you? Then you need to make that come true with your own two hands. Even gods get tired of only preaching hope and love."

Addams removed the hand he'd laid on her head and offered it to her. She finally looked up at him, but in the end she still couldn't see his face.

"Are you...recruiting me?" she asked.

"How you interpret it is up to you," Addams replied. "As is your choice to take this hand or slap it away. Decide for yourself."

Rem didn't say anything as she hesitated. But it was only for a moment, and she quickly took his hand.

"I don't...like war. But even so...I want to build my own ideal world," she said quietly.

"Heh! So there *can* be life in those eyes. But are you sure? Even if we beat our enemies, the world you wish for could be filled with conflict and danger."

"If that happens, I'll just control you and stop it...so...don't worry."

Addams froze for a moment but then burst out laughing. "Khah! Heh heh! Heh hah hah hah hah! Right, so you'll stop me! That's good! A perfect answer! That selfishness... You're becoming more and more godlike! Hah! Ha ha ha ha!"

"He's...laughing at me. Urghhh..."

Rem's expression instantly changed from determined to sad, as she seemed to think that he was making fun of her. But as she began to cry, she could have sworn she caught the slightest glimpse of his face.

"Heh heh heh, so your crying habit hasn't fixed itself even after death. What a strong girl," said Addams. "Ah, that's right. I will give you your first job as a goddess."

"Hic, hic... First...hic...job?" Rem forced out through sobs.

"Don't be like that. This has nothing to do with fighting. To tell you the truth, all the people who followed you into death refused reincarnation," he informed her.

That got Rem to suck in a breath in surprise, her eyes widening even as she continued to cry. "They followed me... Does that mean...?"

"Normally, all those who disobey the will of the gods meet severe punishment...but I used my authority to delay that for the moment. I was interested in seeing what kind of punishment a new goddess like you would inflict on them," Addams explained. "How about it? Want to take on this momentous task as your first job? If you do, take this hand again. If you don't, refuse it. Decide for yourself."

"There's no need to even think!" Rem said. She took his hand with as much strength as she could muster to show her will. It didn't hurt Addams at all, since she was so weak, but he still laughed heartily.

"Heh hah hah, it looks like you're not lost anymore. I have certainly received your will. Take this." He handed her a ragged

stuffed doll that was very familiar to Rem.

"This is…the birthday present my mom gave me," she muttered.

"Indeed. A small, filthy, creepy little handmade thing," Addams agreed.

"Hey, that phrasing is—"

"I do not know how to hold back; just let it go," said Addams. "Anyway, as I said, the souls of those who followed you are currently imprisoned inside that ratty little doll. You're a goddess, so you should naturally know what to do with them. The first step would be to talk with them. Or if you find that you can't decide, you can talk to me. Depending on my mood, I may answer."

Rem hesitated a moment before replying, "Thank you."

"I don't need thanks from someone like you," said Addams. "But this is a reward for entertaining me. Take this Authority."

A divine light flew from the hand Addams held out to her.

"Huh? What's this…?"

"I did maintenance on your power to make it worthy of being used by a god. If I had to name it, I would say it's the Authority of Control. Your power up until now was a crude and troublesome thing that affected anything around you and fluctuated with your feelings. You could call it a public nuisance. It's especially strong when you cry, like you were doing before."

"Public nuisance…" Rem muttered.

"What, you didn't notice?" asked Addams. "All the other gods have been avoiding this place because they didn't want to be affected. You haven't met anyone other than me since you became a goddess, have you?"

Instead of replying, Rem tried to think back. Upon dying of old age, she'd suddenly found herself here with a mysterious banner floating in space that said, "Welcome to the divine realm!" Along with that was a long written explanation of her many achievements in life that had led her to being chosen to become a goddess. But Addams was right; she'd met no gods other than him. She hadn't moved from her initial spot since she'd been spending all her time crying. What he said made sense—at least, to her.

"It seems you know what I'm talking about," said Addams. "Well, what's done is done; no need to dwell on it. Now you can will your Authority on and off. Also, the area of effect has

become more defined, which will make it stronger the more you shrink it down. Finally, when you manifest your Authority— Oh? What's wrong?"

While Addams was explaining the changes to her power, Rem had been staring pointedly at his hidden face. It was very unlike her, with her shy personality, to be staring so fixedly.

"I've...been given so much. Why are you going so far for me?" she asked.

"Isn't it obvious? You have promise and can be useful to me. Also, I'm eventually going to come back to collect what I lent with interest. Don't forget that."

"I see... You're a weird god," Rem muttered.

"You're one to talk."

And that was how Rem had come to know Addams. She'd eventually become his confidant and gone on to make great contributions to the war that was to come.

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The Control Authority Rem possessed could broadly be used in two ways.

The first was to spread the effect of her power to her surroundings like she'd been doing, putting multiple targets under her control. Anything under a certain level of strength would be affected, and she could apply it to a seemingly infinite number of targets. She could also affect not just living things, but inanimate objects like suits of armor and golems as well. Thanks to Addams, she'd also become capable of making fine adjustments to the range of her power.

The other was an unrivaled technique that she'd taken a long time to create along with her friends: Giga Stratos. It was a type of golem summoning, where Rem would have the souls of the people who followed her possess dolls made of shadows that she created with Green Magic. The stronger these souls' bond with her, the stronger they were in the dolls. If she added her Control on top of that to make it so they weren't afraid of anything or anyone, they became fearless soldiers clad in the best armor. The basis of this was the same as having the golems created by Kelvin put under Sera's Spirit Control.

But a big difference was that when Rem's dolls were destroyed, she could immediately reconstruct them by her side

as long as she had MP left. In this situation, where the World Tree's lake was linked to Rem's MP reserves, she could restore them infinitely. The only weakness would be her ragged doll. This divine tool given by Addams was the receptacle for her underlings' souls. Basically, it served as their Storage, and without it, Rem couldn't talk to them. In other words, if it were to somehow be stolen or destroyed, Giga Stratos would cease to function. However, that would be incredibly difficult to pull off. No one had ever managed to do it, even the gods fighting in the mythical war.

Also, she could make a total of six types of puppets: pawns, which could spawn in such numbers as to hopelessly swarm people; knights, which excelled at strength and mobility; bishops, which could contribute in a lot of areas, from putting together strategies and giving rearline support; rooks, which were specialized for eliminating enemies, since they had the souls of several archers mixed together inside; the queen; and finally the king, which was all the souls fused together. Unlike all the other puppets, the king could only be manifested under certain circumstances.

I hereby manifest my Authority! Rem mentally incanted. With that, the final lock barring her from fulfilling these special conditions had been released.

"Whoa there, this is... We're pulling back, young miss," said Viktor.

"Please! Sister Mel, sister Serge, be careful!" Shutola cried out.

Shutola and Viktor, who'd been about to go on the attack, reacted by making hurried retreats. Mel, who should have been holding back the rest of the enemy forces, and Serge, who should have been dealing with the queen, both switched their attention to this new target.

"Vacotecour?Tecaoteete??y%temo?Gengislageiteyoflse?Engite?ie" Multiple voices spoke in unison.

The four of them let out shocked noises in concert as they heard the unintelligible but creepy noise. It sounded like a multitude of voices overlapping in a chorus as it spread throughout the area. The sheer volume of it almost made them faint.

"Gaaahhh! Ow, that voice is basically a weapon in itself!" Serge complained. "So, what is that?!"

"The Goddess of Control's trump card, I'd say."

The shadows that surrounded them—Rem's puppets—had dissipated, their pitch-black remains gathering to form the threat that was currently facing them. Given that it was composed of thousands or even tens of thousands of puppets, its size was too huge to describe in mere words. It was so big that it made Blue Rage, the gigantic enemy Kelvin and his friends had once fought in Trycen, look like a baby. Was it as big as a skyscraper? Or an entire mountain? The farther up the group looked, the more mass they found waiting for them and the less they could tell about its size.

"There's nothing left but to laugh! Aha ha ha ha! I mean, come on, wait just a second! That thing's ridiculous, and it came out of nowhere!" Serge exclaimed. "Even for me, this is the first time I've seen something so big! And wow, it's even more sinister-looking than that queen earlier, I think? Ha ha! It's so big, I can't really tell!"

"Now's not the time to be laughing. When that thing appeared, the lake dried up. How much magic do you have to use to create something like that? Gods really have no concept of limits. My word!" Mel complained.

"Really? You're saying that, miss former goddess?" Serge pointed out. "By the way, I know this is beginner-level stuff, but Isla Heaven is a floating continent, right? It won't...sink from this weight, will it?"

"I suppose we'll just have to hope the continent holds," Mel replied. "I've thought of something for the worst-case scenario, so...let's just concentrate on beating it for now."

The king, a gestalt fusion of all the puppets, was something that could be created in exchange for a preposterous amount of magic when their leader, Rem, was in danger. It was the most powerful thing available to her, forcing her to scrap all her puppets for their souls. This giant puppet was the source of her great contributions during the war and was also the physical representation of her manifested Authority.

"With how big it is, you'd think it'd lose sight of us, but it hasn't," said Serge. "I'm happy to have such a cute girl looking at me, but to do it through that bigass thing... Hm, it's a complicated feeling!"

"So, what do we do?" Viktor asked. "Our target is most likely inside it. Everyone but me is fairly exhausted, right? If I may be blunt, I must say that wasting time searching for her in that

thing on intuition alone is foolish in the extreme."

"I still have some Autophagy stock, but you're right, I'd like to avoid drawing this fight out any longer," Mel answered. "So, seriously, what do we do? Our opponent there's about to attack."

The king was looking down at them from way up in the sky. Since its upper reaches were hidden in a black misty cloud, they couldn't make out its expression, but they could feel magic being concentrated around where its mouth should have been. All four of them instinctively understood that it was going to unleash a breath attack. And with its sheer size, such an attack would likely put all of Isla Heaven in danger.

::There's no time, so I'll just use telepathy to transmit the plan to you!:: said Shutola.

::Oho, so this is that telepathic communication I heard so much about. Excuse me, Clotho-sama.:: Viktor replied.

::Man, this kind of thing is so handy for times like this! So, you've come up with a plan, Shutola-chan? I'll follow it. You don't get this kind of treatment every day, princess!:: Serge chimed in.

Viktor was communicating through Shutola's Clotho clone, while Serge had one of her own.

::Okay, thanks! So, about the plan... I don't think we have the leeway to engage in a long fight against something that's damaging Isla Heaven so badly just by standing around. So our goal is a super short, decisive battle! We need to defeat it in one hit!:: Shutola declared.

::Well, that makes sense, but the question is how,:: Mel replied.

::There is also the question of where to aim. As I said before, we have no idea where the girl is, nor do we know what its weak points are.:: Viktor pointed out.

::Oh, come on. Don't you two think you're being *too* pessimistic? You've got me, the strongest Hero, with you, as well as Shutola-chan, the cutest in the world! With the glutton and demon as extras, things'll totally work out no matter what! Probably!:: Serge asserted.

::Glutton?! Wouldn't you normally call me an angel?! It even pairs nicely with demon!:: Mel argued.

::Kheh heh heh, how optimistic. But it does seem like the young lady has not given up. Do you have a plan for that problem too?:: Viktor asked.

::Yeah. Um...:: Shutola began.

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Having nearly instantaneously finished their strategy meeting through telepathy, Shutola and the others quickly took action. Viktor stood at the front of the group with her on his back. Behind them was Serge, holding her weapon transformed into Holy Bow Artemis, with Mel standing behind her as if to support her. She looked like a goddess pulling the Hero into an embrace from behind—a truly picturesque scene. But, well, as expected…

::I can't help but wonder why Efil-chan, our best archer, isn't here. Why am I so happy with someone like Melfina, finding myself about to shoot an arrow? If it wasn't for Shutola, I would never have done this, I tell myself,:: Serge said through the Network.

::Hey, what do you have against me?! I don't care what you think of me, but even I can't stay silent after that! Oh, but I'd still prioritize Efil's cooking! Gah, quiet down, my empty stomach!:: Mel replied.

In the background of this beautiful scene, the two were arguing as always.

::Now's not the time to be arguing over telepathy! I just need you for a couple seconds, so concentrate on the enemy!:: Shutola yelled through the Network.

::Right! Your big sister Serge will do her best for you!::

::And you can eat after this is over, so just use all the Autophagy stock you have!:: Shutola continued.

::Hm, I suppose if you're willing to go that far, Shutola, I'll have to roll up my sleeves since I'm such a reliable big sister. Get ready, Goddess of Control. All the food in my stomach greatly outweighs your so-called king!::

Ignoring the responses that weren't befitting of a Hero and an angel, it seemed that at least their morale had peaked.

::I'm going to be sending you more magic power than what's in the lake there, Serge. Don't waste a drop of it!:: Mel told her.

The magic power Mel was creating thanks to Autophagy flowed into the arrow Serge had nocked. Mel wasn't lying, as the amount of magic she was pouring forth was insane, enough for Will to scream and creak in protest. One wrong move and the weapon would self-destruct before any attack was made.

::Who do you think you're talking to? I can control this much mana without even thinking about it. In fact, give me more!::

Serge shot back.

Despite that response, it definitely looked like she was pushing herself. Handling so much magic was dangerous, and it seemed this spontaneous cooperative effort was a bit tough for Serge to pull off, despite her otherwise superb skills. What was more, she was using a special arrow this time in order to kick the attack up a notch. The magic swirled noisily, but if one listened carefully, it was possible to make out the mechanical sounds coming from the arrowhead. In fact, they were pretty loud in their own right. The two sounds were layered on top of each other in an earsplitting duet.

::It looks like they'll manage working together somehow. Let's work hard too, uncle Viktor!:: Shutola messaged through the Network.

::Yes, of course. But are we really going forward with that plan? I'm happy you believe in me, but there's no guarantee this will work.::

::I'm sure it'll be fine. You're very strong and reliable, Sera says so all the time!:: Shutola replied.

::She does? Hm...that's somewhat embarrassing. But I'm also happy!:: He smiled happily. It seemed his morale had risen as well.

::Dearest brother also complimented you. He was muttering about wanting to fight you again. Also, he said he was workshopping excuses to drag you into a battle!:: Shutola revealed.

::Fighting so much is just too much trouble, though,:: Viktor replied. His smile turned into a frown, showing how little he liked the idea.

::And more than anything, my calculations say that you'll be able to do it, uncle Viktor! So don't worry!::

With that third bit of encouragement, Shutola put on a brave face. But Viktor could tell that she was trembling slightly as she clung to him. The clear death she could see above was likely the source. Even so, she did not let that fear show on her face and was putting her all into drawing out the best performances from her friends.

My word, she should know it's not the time to be encouraging others, Viktor thought with warm exasperation. *Such a bright and kind girl, just like Sera-sama.*

Viktor saw a young Sera in Shutola, and his smile widened to

its limits. It seemed his morale had now peaked as well.

::Then I will need to answer your expectations. Indeed, Miss Shutola, I'm sure it will all work out. I guarantee it will,:: he responded.

::Yeah!::

Viktor's back seemed bigger all of a sudden. At some point, Shutola had stopped trembling. Was it because she was feeling a deep sense of relief?

"EmneteyatelateafHte," came a multitude of voices.

After a few seconds of waiting, the king was unleashed, finally taking action. It shot a huge beam of energy from its mouth, so powerful that it might destroy Isla Heaven. It came down directly toward Shutola and the others like it was divine punishment.

"Miss Shutola!" Viktor shouted.

"Yeah, let's go!" Shutola called back. "Bagworm's Thread!"

The magic threads that Shutola had deployed instantly turned aquatic blue. They then wrapped around Viktor's large arm, which had been formed with his Jin Scrimmage, while also stabbing into the ground. At first glance it might have looked like the threads were blocking his movements, but naturally, that wasn't the case. This wasn't a supportive action, but a defensive one. Looking closer, it was possible to see that the blue magic threads were also wrapped around Shutola, acting like seat belts.

The Rank A Blue Magic spell Bagworm's Thread healed anyone who touched it while making the thread itself incredibly tough. Viktor took his arms, which had been wrapped in these threads, and braced himself, glaring down the king's attack that was on the verge of hitting.

"*Devour, activate.*" He ate the massive energy beam. Now, there wasn't even a speck remaining of the violent mass of magic that had filled their field of view. The king also seemed unable to keep up with the situation, as it had put its all into that attack; it was standing there frozen, its mouth still open.

Grk! I knew this would happen! My stomach isn't big enough for this! Viktor thought.

He'd taken an impact he couldn't completely absorb, and he was struggling not to be thrown backward. Thankfully, he had the magic threads wrapped around both his arms as a lifeline. He gripped them as hard as he could, bracing himself. Shutola, who was hiding on his back, held on for dear life so she wouldn't

be flung away either.

::It looks like I was able to keep my promise,:: Viktor commented through the Network.

::Y-Yeah…as…I…expected!:: Shutola replied through exhausted fits and starts.

In the end, while Viktor's Jin Scrimmage had been destroyed, he'd somehow managed to withstand the king's attack. In fact, he hadn't just withstood it, he'd eaten the attack whole. And to highlight that point…

::Are you two ready?!:: Shutola asked.

::Of course!:: Serge replied.

::I want food!:: Mel complained.

::Got it! Then…do it!:: Shutola commanded.

When she gave her telepathic command, Serge, who had been waiting impatiently behind them, as well as Viktor, who'd risked his life to eat their enemy's attack, released what they had been holding back.

"Mistleteinn!" Serge shouted.

"I'll give this right back to you!" Viktor shouted.

Holy Bow Artemis unleashed a god-killing arrow filled to bursting with magic from a certain ever-hungry angel. And as if to push the arrow forward, the king's energy beam was also shot back.

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The god-killing arrow was being pushed by the manifestation of divine punishment, and this single attack that seemed like it could destroy the world itself defied gravity as it rose to the heavens like a shooting star at the king.

"Teove^ie~Selp'ixkiteow^teflsh?sh"

The king stayed frozen in shock for a few seconds but snapped out of it when it recognized it was being attacked. It seemed it couldn't think that fast, probably because it was a gestalt amalgamation of souls. Or rather, it couldn't make up its mind that fast.

"Gnwarecteete?sh"

The king opened its mouth again, likely in response to it finally recognizing the arrow as a threat, and was about to shoot another beam. But no matter how much magic it poured into its mouth, there was no sign of the beam coming out. This heavily

confused it.

“Kheh heh heh, unfortunately for you, *I* won’t let you do that,” said Viktor, smiling as he watched the confused king.

The beam attack was currently subject to Viktor’s Devour skill. Any spell absorbed by this skill was stolen by Viktor for some time. In short, the king couldn’t use its beam at the moment. It was natural for an enemy to be confused if they didn’t know about that skill beforehand, though. Although there was a certain battle junkie who could accurately analyze how his ability worked mid-battle, he was the exception, not the rule.

“Aha ha, first try never fails!” Serge exclaimed. “But Rem-chan, you don’t have the time to be so dazed!”

“Teyate?ste?”

As Serge had warned her, the arrow was already up to the king’s thighs. It still hadn’t figured out why it couldn’t shoot its beam. So the king decided on a more direct form of interception. It exhibited surprising agility for something so big, swinging its giant fist at the arrow to smack it down.

::That fist looks really tough. Can your luck make your attacks dodge things, Serge? At this rate it’s going to hit,:: Mel noted.

::Dodge? No, no. What’re you talking about, Melfina-san? That arrow is using a god-killing arrowhead. Why would it need to do something so roundabout? It’ll just eat and destroy anything divine!:: Serge replied.

Bwommbwommvwomm!

A loud mechanical noise suddenly came from above as if in response to Serge’s telepathic message. Yes, Mistleteinn was an attack that forcefully crammed the god-killing property into an arrowhead. It was something Serge had learned while training with Dorothy, and she had already found a use for this broken move in a real fight. What used to be a chainsaw was now just an arrowhead with rotating blades.

However, its lethality and god-killing property were the real deal. It bit into the king’s iron fist and ripped into it without losing any speed to the fist’s outer defenses. Then, Viktor’s energy beam came as a chaser, mercilessly hitting the wound.

“Teow?Ubstctiokoyoaciassiss?ssiss?acksh?sh”

The king let out a cry that could cut through the heavens and split the earth. As always, its voice was a weapon unto itself. However, it was clearly in pain this time. Furthermore, while this was happening, the arrow was continuing through its arm and

was already at the base. Its destructive power and speed were truly fearsome.

::Ah, so that's what a god-killer does. I'd heard about it, but this easily outstrips anything I'd imagined. Still, what's more terrifying is the amount of magic I poured into it. I didn't expect to put in that much. I'm starting to get scared of my own appetite!:: Mel commented.

::Yeah, I agree with that, at least. Considering how big your daily food expenses are…it's no joke. I feel sorry for Kelvin-kun,:: Serge replied.

::Actually, the one who's truly got it tough is the one who cooks all the food! She's taking a break right now, though!:: Shutola added.

::I can only imagine her hardships as a fellow cook. If only Sera-sama or Bell-sama had even a portion of her appetite. They've been light eaters since they were small, and it took a lot of trial and error to see what would get them to eat the most. Ah, I'm truly jealous of the size of your stomach,:: Viktor responded.

::Please, everyone! Stop talking about things that have nothing to do with this fight! We're still in the middle of it! Smack-dab in the middle!:: Mel reminded everyone. Her comments had started a cascade of retorts about her appetite, so she'd made an obvious attempt to change the subject. Clearly, she was feeling embarrassed.

::Aha ha, my bad. Telepathy is just so convenient, I couldn't help it! Still, while it's true we're in battle, we've already done everything we can. If this doesn't secure our win, then we'll just have to graciously admit defeat!:: Serge declared.

::No, we won't! Actually, are we going to make it here?! Right now, the arrow is on course to go through the arm and out the shoulder! Destroying an arm is great, but we need to hit the Goddess of Control!:: Mel replied, panicked.

::Jeez, you're so noisy when you aren't eating, Melfina. It's fine! My Absolute Gospel doesn't make me popular with the girls, and it's not an attack-oriented skill like the guild director's, but you know how much effort I put into that attack. I'm sure you'll be able to expect great things from it this time,:: Serge comforted her. With that, she put up her hands, showing them to Mel. They were absolutely shredded, even showing bone in some places. It was so awful that just looking at it caused sympathy pains.

::You… Those wounds… Are they—::

::It happened when I fired off Mistleteinn, obvs! Naturally, I'm totally dry on magic, and I think you probably are too, Melfina. I don't even have the leeway to heal these with White Magic. The pain I'm feeling is, like, no joke. But it was worth all this pain…::

Serge looked up to the sky, and Mel's gaze followed.

::Because, luckily, it looks like Rem-chan was in that huge thing's right shoulder.::

At the exact time the pair looked up, far in the distance, Mistleteinn finally ate through the entire arm and exited the king's right shoulder. When it did, an unconscious Rem was launched out of the king. It didn't look like she had been hit by the arrow, but in exchange, Mistleteinn had stabbed the stuffed doll she'd been carrying. Due to the chainsaw-like nature of the head, the doll was ripped to shreds.

"Viokoideeau'ie|a?tefte?>"

It sounded like a death wail. Rem's doll had been the vessel for the souls, and now it was destroyed, which also caused the king's body to start collapsing. Already, there wasn't even a single fingertip left of the all-too-huge body. The king had crumbled to pieces, as if to imitate the absolutely awful state the doll was in.

::Um…but it seems like we haven't won yet,:: Mel commented.

::Huh? What're you talking about? There's no way I'd ever kill a cute girl. It's enough that Rem-chan's out of magic and unconscious, isn't it? The huge thing's gone too,:: Serge argued.

::No, but, well…why is she totally unharmed and just unconscious after being hit with such a powerful attack? There's got to be a limit to how convenient something like this can be,:: Mel replied.

::I mean, I guess we could just chalk it up to the perks of being a protagonist? Hey, wait! Wait! Viktor's gone off to help Rem-chan! That's *my* job!:: Serge was in a panic.

After that, Viktor performed a gentlemanly catch of Rem in place of Serge, who was wounded. Serge complained vehemently, and she only calmed down once Shutola healed her hands.

Chapter 3: Border

Just as Shutola's group claimed victory over Rem, ending that fierce battle, far off on the outskirts of Isla Heaven, three powerful individuals, Gerard, Sera, and Isabel, were also having an intense fight. They were at the heart of the floating continent, which wasn't a place one should be fighting. The slightest mistake could cause a huge disaster, so this was the worst spot for a battle.

But even in such a dangerous, terrible area, the three showed no signs of holding back. Despite that, they were managing not to damage the continent's core even slightly, all while skillfully and boldly continuing to fight. Even though the rest of the area was in a catastrophic state, the core itself was fine.

"Hrmph!"

"Haah!"

"Hup!"

Gerard aimed a downward swing at Isabel, who was jumping through the air, while Sera threw a punch from directly below. However, despite how she looked, Isabel was also skilled in close combat. She used the bottom tip of her staff to easily defend herself.

"It's not over yet!" Sera shouted.

"Agito!" Gerard yelled.

Though she'd managed to stop their first blows, their offensive wasn't over. Sera activated Blood Dominion through the fist that was touching Isabel's staff. Meanwhile, Gerard launched a flying slash from his blade, which was locked in a clash with the same staff.

"Vertreibung," Isabel announced in response.

Both Gerard and Sera let out noises of alarm as her body lit up with a blue light just as they tried to launch their follow-up attacks. Right after they noticed this, for some reason, they were the ones sent flying despite being the attackers. The pair each slammed into a different bit of wall and were covered in dust.

"It's no use," said Isabel. "My Vertreibung activates using my own existence as a border and implies an absolute line of logic. No matter what form an attack takes—slashes, blunt blows,

piercing blows, magic, or special abilities—anything that I think will harm me is neutralized and turned into a physical impact to be returned to the offender. Interesting, right? But I have to say, how far you flew indicates how amazing your attacks were. I'm moved. I can feel it right on my skin. So as a thank you, I'll give you this: Dreieck."

The dust that had been thrown up formed a thin line that drew a checkered pattern in the air. Then it turned into another barrier blade.

Zwm!

The number of attacks couldn't even be compared to the first one that had used the floor tiles. A storm of borders rained down on the pair. All these slashing attacks wouldn't even leave behind the tiniest chunk of meat if they were to take it.

"Jeez, thanks for the long-winded speech from that high horse of yours! Just saying, but your attacks won't work either!" Sera shouted.

"They might not work, but they're so sudden, it *is* surprising," Gerard commented. "It's bad for the heart!"

Sera and Gerard still sounded hale and motivated inside the cloud of dust. The pair swung their weapons, instantly dispersing the concealing cloud. As they'd claimed, they were fine even after such a strong attack. Sera had only suffered light wounds, while Gerard was totally unhurt.

::Those attacks come out stupid fast and are dense as all hell, but they're not very powerful,:: Sera noted.

::No matter how many she layers on, those slashes won't affect me. I managed to withstand my liege's special attack, so there's no way I'd be cut by something like that,:: Gerard replied.

Sera and Gerard confirmed they were okay, but how did the two of them slip through that storm of blades? Well, the answer was actually quite simple. In Sera's case, she just had to command the barrier blades to disappear the moment they touched her blood, and they instantly winked out of existence. That let her get away with just some shallow cuts. And any damage she took would heal in seconds with Auto Healing. Basically, she wasn't wounded at all. As for Gerard, he had the Slashing Damage Invulnerability skill, and that was all that needed to be said. He'd once used it to withstand Kelvin's Borealagann. Slashing attacks of this strength wouldn't even deal a sliver of damage.

“You just get more and more wonderful,” Isabel said after a moment. “It seems it wasn’t a fluke that you defended against Dreieck the first time. I can see all the effort that you put in like the most moving of passages. I feel it deeply.”

“Yeah, yeah, be as moved as you want,” Sera said dismissively. “Actually, wait, why do the little motes of dust and sand in the air count as boundaries too?! You lied about your ability!”

“I lied? Of course not,” Isabel claimed. “To my eye, everything floating in the air weaves a beautiful pattern with clear demarcations. So I have decided to use them.”

“So, as long as it looks that way to you, it’s fine? Anything goes, then…” Gerard muttered.

“Hmph, fine! Whatever! What now? As we just said, such attacks mean nothing to us. Aren’t you stuck?” Sera asked.

“Hm? Are you not in the same boat?” Isabel asked. “I do not believe you’re able to harm me either.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” said Gerard. “Reflecting our attacks is certainly a troublesome ability, but this isn’t our first time encountering something of that nature. There are ways to deal with enemies that are good at counters.”

“Exactly! You tell her, Gerard!” Sera whooped.

“Hee hee! I see,” said Isabel. “You two really are just so precious. I suppose I should show my respect for you, since you’ve taken a step out of the realm of child’s play.”

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble!

Suddenly, an unbelievably loud noise cut Isabel off. They were deep underground, and such a loud noise traveling all the way here made it seem like the ground itself was shaking. Actually, it really *was* shaking. The noise was even louder than Rem’s king’s voice.

Isabel made a confused sound. “What is this noise? It doesn’t seem to be something from one of the other battles happening elsewhere.”

“Hm? This earthquake…” Gerard muttered.

“Yes. It’s *that* sound,” agreed Sera.

Isabel was tilting her head in confusion, while Gerard and Sera had figured out the source of the noise.

“This is undoubtedly…the sound of the princess and her stomach!” Gerard exclaimed.

That left Isabel dumbfounded, and it took her a moment to let out a “What?” Her entire face was frozen as she doubted her

opponent's sanity.

"What a coincidence," said Sera. "I was thinking the same thing. Mel's stomach has reached its limits!"

"Wait just a second," said Isabel. "Are you two making fun of me?"

Isabel wasn't even half in disbelief; she was fully rejecting the information she was receiving. She refused to believe a word they said, though that was understandable.

"Huh? We're in a serious battle. Why would we joke?" Sera replied. "I should be asking you the same thing."

"Indeed," Gerard agreed. "We would never spoil the mood of such an earnest battle. We can read the room, I say!"

"You… You're being serious?" Isabel had to ask. "You seriously think that was the sound of a stomach rumbling?!"

For the first time since the start of the battle, she seemed shaken. There was no doubt that she wanted to say that the pair were definitely spoiling the mood. It was common sense that no human or even god could have their stomach rumble so loudly. In this specific instance, Isabel had done nothing wrong.

"Jeez, you really need to learn some common sense!" Sera exclaimed.

"Indeed! You do!" Gerard backed her up.

Isabel had no words. She'd done nothing wrong, and yet she was still being abused like this. Her eyes up until now had been filled to the brim with excitement and joy, but now they contained something heavier, all because of this exchange.

"Also…heh heh! You don't have time to be making silly jokes," said Sera.

"What do you mean?" Isabel asked after a moment.

"Mel's stomach rumbled that loudly. That means she won against whoever she's fighting!" Sera explained. "Not that I know who it was since it's over now!"

What a line of logic that was.

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With the sound of Mel's empty stomach announcing her victory as a backdrop, Sera and Gerard faced off against Isabel. After receiving good news in such an unexpected fashion, the pair were filled with fighting spirit, thinking that they needed to follow suit. Meanwhile, from Isabel's perspective, the news of the

defeat of one of her fellow gods was unfortunate and definitely spoiled the moment she was having. Of course, that was assuming she decided to believe her opponents' assertion that the rumbling was Mel's stomach.

"I see," she said. "You're right. Out of all the fierce fights happening all over, I can no longer feel Rem's presence. It seems I shouldn't dismiss you out of hand."

She did believe them. Or at least, she set aside their comments about the noise and was able to sense the truth about the rest of their claim.

"Well done," she continued. "Rem may not be one of the Three Great Authorities, but I still thought of her as strong. I never expected anyone would be able to fight through all that overwhelming mass and even bury her king, the product of her manifested Authority. Honestly, I'm amazed."

"We told you!" Sera asserted. "I don't know what you meant by king or whatever, but we'll beat you, just like our friends did that Rem person!"

"Indeed. Our own king wishes for victory, after all. We must bring him more good news," said Gerard.

"Wonderful..." Isabel muttered.

"What?" Sera responded.

Isabel started to cry. These tears weren't out of sadness for the loss of a comrade. They were like the tears someone shed after finishing some super moving piece of entertainment—clearly tears of joy.

"Come on, you've got to know you're making no sense," Sera complained. "You're free to cry if you want, but why now? Are you really that happy that one of your friends lost?"

"Heh...hee hee... No, I wouldn't shed tears for such a shallow reason. I was just impressed by the sheer level of what's possible for life on this planet to achieve. You're all lower beings from the mortal realm, but you've managed to beat a high-ranking deity through training and artifice. Do you know how exciting, how sublime, that is? Creatures that were originally nothing more than things to be managed have grown to the level of those above! I don't know why, but for some reason this land in which Addams was sealed has made our hopes a reality! Ah, how wonderful...truly wonderful! So, a free world shines this much!"

Isabel's tears wouldn't stop, nor would her words of "praise" for Sera and Gerard. She wasn't acting; everything she said came

from the heart. Her mood had soured a little before, but now she was soaring so high, there was no sign of that left.

"Uh, sure. My word, she's started going off again..." Gerard muttered in amazement.

"Is she the same type of fallen angel as Luquille?" Sera asked. "Jeez, why are so many of them crawling out of the woodwork? I don't care to know about the gods' circumstances."

"You don't know? Which means you don't understand?" Isabel asked. "I understand completely, though. I know this world is the paradise I've dreamed of and that you two carry limitless potential within you. The more you're beaten, the harsher the trials you go through, the closer you get to the gods. Ah, my beloved children, that is why I will bestow further trials upon you!" She stared straight at Sera and Gerard as she shed her tears of joy. It was like she was telling them the real fight was just beginning.

"Everything you say and do is so roundabout!" Sera complained. "In the end, we're still fighting! Blood Scrimmage! Also, Crimson Astraea!"

"Well, at least she's finally gotten serious. I suppose we should be grateful for that," said Gerard. "Battle Standard's Skyfall!"

Sera deployed her crimson armaments and aura, spreading the effect of her blood to all her equipment while also emitting it to the area around her. Meanwhile, Gerard imbued his sword with the very conceptualization of a destructive slashing attack, a trump card he had once been unable to use without Mel's help. Both of them were showing enough strength to take down a deity.

"What lovely power," Isabel gushed. "Just looking at it moves me to tears."

"Uh, you're already crying," Sera pointed out.

"I...think I can see that the amount of tears has increased?" Gerard said. "Maybe."

"Yes, indeed, that's exactly it," said Isabel. "I'm surprised as well. I thought that tears were Rem's domain, and that all the tears in my heart had dried up. I can't believe I'm witnessing something this wonderful. As a sign of my gratitude, allow me to show you my true form. Almost no one has had the chance to witness it, even during the mythical war, but I'm sure you two will be fine. While there's no guarantee, I want to believe in you. So...please don't break too easily, okay?"

An unbelievably strong killing intent welled up from within her. It was heavy and made it hard to breathe, and it filled the entire area in an instant. In the midst of this nightmare, she slowly raised her staff. The movement was elegant, like a knight raising their sword during a ceremony, but also wild.

“I hereby manifest my Authority.”

The moment she voiced those words, Isabel’s staff began emitting a bright light. Normally, Ten Authorities members who manifested their Authority would change form, but that wasn’t the case here. She didn’t look any different afterward. Her staff had changed instead.

“A sword?” said Sera.

Indeed, Isabel’s staff had changed into a magic sword containing her wings and halo in the midst of the blinding light. The wings and halo weren’t the only things that were black. The grip and blade were also black, and it looked as sinister as DarkMel’s spear when she’d been the Black Goddess.

“Are you surprised?” Isabel asked. “To tell you the truth, I’m actually a swordsman.”

“Oho, like me?” Gerard said appreciatively.

“Hee hee! It seems you doubt me. But be at ease. I’m fairly skilled, if I do say so myself. If Hao is the strongest in hand-to-hand combat, then I’m the strongest in swordplay. That’s what you can expect from me.”

“Huh…” Sera murmured.

At first glance, it might have seemed like swordplay and Isabel’s Authority were unrelated, but they couldn’t imagine that Isabel would make such a meaningless boast while crying with such a bold smile.

::Well, I guess we’ll find out once we start fighting. Are you ready, Gerard? Actually, I should ask if you’ve mastered that sword,:: Sera asked him privately.

::Of course I have. I’ve made progress as well. I won’t lose to the youngsters just yet!:: Gerard boasted.

A short period of silence passed as Sera decided to pretend she hadn’t heard that, choosing instead to deploy Nightmare Balls around her. Thousands of blood spheres were formed, floating around their master and waiting impatiently for orders.

“You’ve made a move. That means I can attack now, right?” Isabel asked. “Well then, excuse me.”

They hadn’t noticed her approach. By the time they did, Isabel

had already gotten past the veritable ocean of blood to sever both of Sera's arms.

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"Grk?!" Sera shouted.

By the time she realized both her arms had been severed, she was already moving to counterattack. The plan was to use the massive amount of blood flowing from her stumps as weapons. With her Unique Skills Blood Dominion and Bloodbending, even a fatal wound could be a chance for a comeback. However...

I'm not bleeding from where I was slashed?! Sera thought in disbelief.

Not a single drop of blood was flowing from the severed stumps; all she could feel was the pain of being cut. The same went for the damage. Her arms were currently flying through the air, and yet for some reason there was no blood.

What's going on?!

Isabel was going to attempt another attack as Sera's arms flew through the air. Sera could see strange magic circles over the severed cross sections of her arms. She thought fast, coming to the conclusion that it was some sort of barrier, which was the reason she wasn't bleeding. This also led to the reason her arms weren't regrowing either. While most might think that not bleeding was a good thing, Sera manipulated blood to fight, and Gerard had no blood flowing within him, so it was nothing but a nuisance.

"SERAAA!" Gerard screamed.

There was no way he could just sit by and watch as one of the people he thought of as a grandchild was hurt. Cold rage filled him but kept him composed as he made an all-out attack from a blind angle. Dainsleif, imbued with Battle Standard's Skyfall, was Gerard's strongest move, and it had once brought Jildora to death's door. In terms of pure power, it was either the strongest or second-strongest move among everyone in Kelvin's group.



“Mm? Right… Pretty heavy. A good attack,” said Isabel.

Gerard grunted with effort, trying to push his attack through. But not even his trump card could get past Isabel’s pitch-black sword. It wasn’t exactly easy for her to block the attack, but from the way she spoke, it was clear that she still had plenty of leeway.

“For your blade not to chip and crumble after touching my blade, Penalty… You just get more and more magnificent in my eyes. Allow me to award you a gold star by way of an attack,” Isabel said.

“A gold star, huh? I’m a bit too old for that, unfortunately!” Gerard replied.

Isabel changed targets from Sera to Gerard, swinging her thin arm and displaying unbelievable skill with the sword as she unleashed attack after attack. Gerard desperately tried to hang on, but that was all he could do. His skill with the sword was lacking in all respects, from the weight of each hit to the number of moves made. The difference almost made the fight cruel.

Gerard possessed immunity to slashing damage, so he shouldn’t have needed to defend or dodge her sword strikes. If they truly were slashes, he could just nullify all of them. However, Gerard wouldn’t allow that.

I’m not trying to imitate Sera, but the intuition I’ve built up over many years is telling me that I mustn’t allow myself to get cut by that sword! he thought.

It was unclear at the moment whether this decision was correct. However, Sera’s arms, which had been severed by Isabel, had yet to grow back. Judging from that, it was clear that the pitch-black sword had some sort of special power.

Meanwhile, Sera, wounded, made a temporary retreat from the battle, taking the opportunity to concentrate. She used her Blood Dominion inside her own body, commanding said blood to erase the barrier preventing her regeneration. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be going well.

Gah! This barrier over my wounds is much more annoying than I expected! It’s so small but so stupidly strong! Is this as strong as that purple barrier that stopped me in Gaun? Hm…it could even be as powerful as Colette’s secret technique! she thought.

It wasn’t like she couldn’t get rid of it. However, it took several seconds between her giving the order and the barrier actually dissolving. This battle was seemingly going at the speed of light, so several seconds was a fatal delay. She didn’t have it that bad

since she'd only lost her arms, but if her head was lopped off, Sera would die without being able to regenerate. Unlike with Dreieck, in which she could immediately regenerate after being cut, this sword that rejected healing was far too dangerous to Sera.

While she was trying to undo the barrier, Sera was committing to supporting fire using her Nightmare Balls. These blood attacks came from every direction, including Isabel's blind angle, becoming a shield for Gerard, who was about to be overwhelmed. She wasn't just limited to shooting them; she could even set them as traps on the ground. The only limit to their application was her imagination.

However, nothing changed. Even with Sera's support fire, Gerard was being pushed back by Isabel. Between Isabel's swordsmanship, martial arts, and the occasional use of her reflecting ability, they weren't able to damage her even once.

The little sister, Gloria, was pretty strong, but she's on a whole other level! Sera thought. *Which means Dahak's group is in trouble too, since they're fighting another one of the Three Great Authorities. Same with Dorothy... Wait, now's not the time for this!*

Sera immediately regrew her arms once the seconds she needed to get rid of the barrier were up. The speed at which she was able to do so was incredible once she got rid of the obstruction.

::Okay, I'm free of the barrier! I'm coming, Gerard!:: Sera told her partner.

::Please be as quick as possible! She wasn't kidding when she called herself the strongest swordsman of the divine realm; I can't deal with her on my own!:: Gerard replied.

::Got it! Also, about that reflecting barrier that woman uses: From what I can see, she can't keep it up! The effect is only for an instant, and she needs about three seconds until she can use it again!:: Sera informed him.

::I see. That's good news. Then that is what we should be aiming for?:: Gerard asked.

::Of course, to string together our attacks!::

Sera had met with some misfortune, which was why she was merely observing, but thanks to that, her deduction was absolutely correct. Isabel's reflecting barrier was powerful—*too* powerful. Because of that, its effect lasted an extremely short time and needed three seconds before it could be used again. If

they struck during this vulnerable moment, it would probably be possible to damage Isabel.

“Haaah!” both Sera and Gerard shouted in unison.

Right after their telepathic exchange, they struck with a tag-team attack. Their movements linked together, covering for each other’s openings; it was pretty much a work of art. This teamwork was something only they could pull off as the two frontliners who’d been with the party since the beginning.

“Th-This is… Wow! What a wonderful combo! You’ve exceeded my expectations once again! I’m tearing up so much I can’t see!” Isabel exclaimed.

Unfortunately, not even their teamwork was able to get through her guard. She’d raised the speed of her swordplay further, managing not only to suppress their offensive, but also create a barrier in the space her sword passed through. It was still unclear what allowed her to do this, but as things stood, their combined offensive was far from working. In fact, they wouldn’t even be able to damage her once.

“Incredible! You’ve already undone Ray Septum? Wow!” Isabel exclaimed. “Also, you’re the demon who defeated my little sister, Gloria, right? Well, it makes sense that Gloria lost if you’re this strong. Was she formidable? No, with your strength, I’m sure she wasn’t that tough an opponent. Am I wrong? Or right? Ah, how wonderful!”

“Gah, you! Are so noisy! We’re *fighting*!” Sera shouted between moves.

“As for this suit of armor… Hm, I can feel my magic being sucked out every time we clash swords,” noted Isabel. “Is that a property of the sword? Also, your movements are getting better over time. I see you’re the type to rev up slowly. Either that, or you have some sort of ability that raises your abilities as the battle draws on? I don’t think that’s it, but it’s all the same in the end…you still haven’t shown me the depths of your strength. What wonderful latent ability!”

“Seriously, how strong is this lady?!” Gerard shouted.

Her talkativeness showed how composed she was. Isabel continued shedding emotional tears as it became clear she was adjusting her strength to Sera and Gerard.

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Isabel's sword, which she claimed was called Penalty, was able to create mysterious barriers in the path it traveled through. Just like Vertreibung, these manifested instantly, but unlike it, they were incredibly strong. These barriers, looking like transparent curtains, could absorb any attack before disappearing right after. Sera and Gerard were stymied by these barriers that could appear anywhere at any time to block their attacks, and they could see no solution.

"Gah! Dangit!" Sera yelled. "Just dealing with her alone is already so annoying!"

"My apologies, but I've ramped it up to the next stage," said Isabel. "I figured you two would be able to handle fighting at this level."

"This…level?" Gerard said incredulously. "Khah! Ha ha ha! You make it sound like you can still give more!"

"I'll keep that a secret for now," said Isabel. "By the way, what do you think is the strongest concept among all the world's borders?"

"What're you…talking about?!" Sera grunted.

"Is it national borders? Or the difference between space and the stars? Or the borders between strata buried deep in the earth?" Isabel asked rhetorically. "No, it's none of them. The strongest border is the trail of my sword."

She raised her sword so that it would be easy to see to help make her explanation as simple as possible before quickly backing away. Once again, the curtain-like barrier appeared, following it.

"Indeed," she continued. "I am able to create barriers following this sword's path. And these result in the most powerful barriers I can make as well. But you've already at least somewhat figured this out from Excess Curtain, the barrier that just protected me, right? And you must have realized instinctually that you can't break it. It might only last for a moment, but its strength is immense. It disappears immediately, but I can make barriers anywhere my sword passes through, so there's no need to worry about being caught without it. Ah, right, I should tell you that the Ray Septum that I put on your arms also came from this sword, and you should know that it's also quite strong. It was really hard to undo it, right? I'm sure it was. You see…"

Sera and Gerard were speechless.

Out of nowhere, Isabel launched into a lecture on her barriers. Or, it could be said she was revealing her hand. By being applied to a part of the body, Ray Septum could prevent healing or regeneration in exchange for also preventing any extra bleeding damage. There was also more—she really was telling them all about her abilities. Sera and Gerard were unable to make sense of the situation, their eyes shrinking to dots even as they remained calm.

::What in the world is she doing?:: Gerard asked.

::This is just what my intuition is telling me, but it doesn't feel like she's lying. Everything she's telling us is true, probably,:: Sera replied.

::She's telling the truth, you say? You're sure she's not trying to confuse us by giving us false details?:: Gerard asked.

::Yeah. It doesn't feel like that at all,:: Sera confirmed.

::Uh...huh?::

They just couldn't figure out what Isabel was trying to accomplish. All they knew at this point was that she was strong enough that they couldn't win, even two-on-one. But in some sort of cosmic irony, the time she was taking for her lecture served as time for the pair to rest and plan.

::Can you steal her sword with Blood Dominion?:: Gerard asked.

::I've tried it several times already, but it doesn't feel like I can give it orders at all. Since it seems the sword can create barriers wherever it travels, it might have a barrier over it at all times as well. You know, like the aura Goldiana and I have,:: Sera reasoned.

::Then what if I use my sword to absorb the magic from the barrier? No, that won't work either. Even if we could destroy the barrier, she'd just make a new one.:: Gerard gave up.

::I also considered making constant contact with her using Crimson Astraea, but she always gets in the way at the worst times with her curtain thing. It's possible for me to remember all the places her sword passed through, but pointing them out while fighting is surprisingly hard. The strength she has over us means we're always on the back foot,:: Sera explained.

::Huh? Why?::

No matter how much they talked over the Network, they couldn't find a solution. This was possibly the first time they'd fought someone so much stronger than they were. To anyone's

eyes, the situation must have looked unwinnable and hopeless.

::So what do we do? Give up?:: Sera asked.

::Hah! Hah! Hah! Never! It's been so long since I've felt so excited.:: Gerard rejected her proposal.

::What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing!::

And that was exactly why they were having so much fun. Kelvin's nature had rubbed off on them a little, and they were, as they said, excited. They wouldn't be able to win even after giving it their all. But that also meant they were fighting someone they couldn't beat even after all that effort: a true rarity. It was normal to go all out. What was important was trial and error. From here, they would surpass their own limits and finally become better.

But before that...there was something they wanted to make sure of.

"Hey, are you even trying to beat us? It looks to me like you've been holding back this entire time," said Sera.

"What? Now that you ask me...I wonder," Isabel replied. "Rather than defeat you, I'm too preoccupied trembling over your progress. Honestly, I didn't have the mental leeway to even think about it."

As they'd surmised, Isabel had never really seen the pair as real enemies. She might have been intending to finish them off at first, but after seeing how strong they were, her emotions had gradually shifted her goals. Now she was acting like Kelvin, raising his pupils to be strong and delicious and enjoying their growth. Of course, what Kelvin was truly looking forward to was what would come later, while Isabel found meaning in the raising itself.

"Oh well. That's just a minor detail, isn't it? In the first place, our goal is to revive Addams and return the world to its rightful state. It was never to destroy this world or end your lives," said Isabel.

"But don't you need the souls of the powerful to revive that Addams guy?" Sera asked. "Or, what, do our souls not qualify?"

"Oh no, your souls definitely qualify. You beat Gloria, didn't you? Only...well, what need is there to make a sacrifice of those with good ambitions and bright futures? For sacrifices, let's see...we can use the Foreign God Hazama, and the God of Destiny Patrick, along with others we can gather later. Anyone'll be fine as long as they meet the requirements."

"Uh...aren't they your fellow fallen angels?" Sera asked.

“Hee hee! Oh, no need to worry about that. I hate them anyway,” Isabel replied. “Gods that wallow in slothfulness and rely on the strength of others will be unneeded in the new world. Ah, but don’t worry. I like you two. As long as you maintain your noble spirits, you are my beloved children. I will lead you along the correct path and protect you. I am a guardian, after all. It is, naturally, my duty. So please, devote yourselves so I don’t abandon you, okay?”

Isabel wiped away her tears, putting on a lovely smile as she spoke. Once again, the pair was speechless.

Ah, she’s got her own weird and troublesome ideals. We need to bring her down and end this here and now or things’ll be bad. Their thoughts were aligned.

“Jeez, how high up on your horse can you get?” Sera sighed.

“Well, I am quite literally a higher being,” said Isabel.

“Hm, maybe. But what will you do—” Gerard started.

“If we reach those heights?” Sera finished.

“What?”

Isabel tilted her head in confusion, but the next instant, Sera’s and Gerard’s bodies started to shine with mysterious light.

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That’s… Isabel thought.

How long had it been since her eyes had gone this wide? Technically, the most recent time was when the sealing of Goldiana had gone wrong, with her ending up in some weird pose and confusing Isabel, but she didn’t want to count that, so she didn’t.

Did her eyes widen because what was happening before her was just that unbelievable, or was it because of the joy she felt at seeing her beloved children go above and beyond her expectations? Either way, this event was truly surprising.

“Just wonderful,” Isabel muttered spontaneously. She wasn’t shedding tears, nor was she smiling with joy. Her expression stayed the same as she spoke what she felt. However, that was exactly why it was so much truer to herself.

It had all started when Sera and Gerard had banged their weapons together. The action seemed so natural, like they were exchanging high fives, so Isabel had thought it was something they did to get themselves fired up. However, when they’d

mysteriously started to shine, both Isabel's eyes and heart were completely taken by this strange phenomenon and the rising *something* she could feel coming out of their bodies.

"Looks like it went well."

Strangely, their voices overlapped. Actually, Sera's voice came through more clearly, but her manner of speech and general attitude had hints of Gerard in it. Once again, it was strange.

"You two— No, just you? What a rare experience. I'm finding it difficult to process this situation. What did you do?" Isabel asked.

The twin lights shrank down to just one, and then grew dimmer. From the light emerged only a single figure; the other was nowhere to be found. Where had the other gone? Isabel was giving the figure her full attention. Actually, at this point, she had already figured it out, though that didn't mean that she understood it, which was why she needed to ask.

"This form came about after seeing Kelvin wear Hard to transform. Wearing Followers was truly a novel idea, and not something anyone had thought of before. It occurred to me that I'm really just a suit of armor, so couldn't I be worn as well?"

The light was completely gone now, revealing who was inside in full.

"But you don't look like you just donned a suit of armor," said Isabel.

"Naturally not, everything needs its own little piece of flair, after all. We call this form Blood Dress."

The result was a jet-black full suit of knight's armor. But it wasn't Gerard's armor. This looked like it was specially made to fit Sera's body shape, clearly designed for a woman. While it was still black like Gerard's armor was, there were now bloodred designs on its surface, looking just like blood vessels. The same also went for the large sword the knight held. Dainsleif was already huge, but this one was a size larger, with blood vessels running across every inch of it. If one were to listen closely, one could hear something like a heartbeat, and it was disconcerting.

"Would you like to know more?"

"I *am* interested," Isabel admitted after a beat. "But right now, I'd rather experience your strength rather than learn exactly how you accomplished this. If my thinking is correct, you're—"

"Indeed. We may be as strong as you."

Blood Dress, Sera and Gerard's new power. Naturally, it was more than just Sera wearing Gerard as a suit of armor; they truly

seemed fused as both of their Unique Skills seemed to be in action. Isabel could feel the result of this fusion clearly coming from the monster in front of her. It felt like she might actually be able to go all out with them in this current state.

"Let's cross blades already. We can talk after," said Isabel.

"That's if both of us end up still able to talk when this is over. Right, then..."

"Indeed."

"Here we come!"

"Prepare yourself," said Isabel.

Both sides readied their weapons and disappeared. This was the first time this entire battle that Isabel had gotten serious, and now things were moving at such a speed and level that everything before seemed like child's play. Each sword swing resulted in a whole swarm of slashes flying out, all of which were imbued with individual barrier effects, turning each into its own little finishing move. It was a godlike technique, truly befitting the one said to be the strongest with a sword among all the gods.

Gweeen!

Isabel let out a shocked noise. Unfortunately, this fierce attack was stopped head-on. Each of the fused pair's swings resulted in just as many slashes as Isabel's sword, only these were crimson in color. The moment these slashes clashed, all of the barriers Isabel imbued on hers burst. From a barrier that invalidated damage type immunity to a barrier that was absolutely resistant to slashing attacks itself, to a barrier that inflicted all sorts of debuffs on contact, and many others were all nullified without ever displaying their properties. Of course, because these originated from her sword's path, all of these were Isabel's best barriers. It was only possible to tell how incredible being able to nullify all of them in an instant was by looking back on their fight from before they'd fused. They'd done more than simply combine strength. After all, if their individual abilities had been enough, they'd have been an even match for Isabel from the start.

"So you can defend against Sever Crime when it's optimized to be proof against defenses!" Isabel exclaimed. "Wonderful! So wonderful I can't fully express it with just this overused word!"

Blades clashed and barriers and blood flew as both sides continued to deal with threats. Isabel was totally serious now;

there was no sign of all the restraint she'd been showing in this clash. Her very heart was trembling in ecstasy as she swung her blade with all her might.

"So you're still a blabbermouth even when you're going all out! Well, whatever! I'm having fun too, after all!"

Sera and Gerard were also going all out, both to break through their own limits and to meet Isabel's expectations. They were enjoying this battle from the bottom of their hearts, and it showed in their sword strokes.

"Death Penalty!" Isabel shouted.

In the midst of all the slashes, she deployed a single killer barrier that used all the sword strokes she'd left behind to manifest. At first glance, it looked like a long curtain, but both sides were sharp like a guillotine. This was clearly different from Excess Curtain, which she'd been using for defense.

"True Laevateinn!"

In response, Sera and Gerard created a long whip sword that extended out from their tail. Was this Sera's original tail with Gerard's armor over it? No matter the answer, the sword was as blood-soaked as everything else, so there was no doubt it looked vicious.

Still, this fight was only growing more and more intense, and now a single problem showed itself. When these two powerful weapons clashed, would this area, the heart of the floating continent, be able to survive intact?

"How long has it been since I've created such inhumane barriers?!" Isabel shouted. "I might be using an artificial body, but I can assure you, the edge of this barrier is no joke!"

"Hah! Neither is my sword! If you doubt it, why don't we compare directly?! This is great; I want to know my limits too! And also surpass them the moment I find them!"

Unfortunately, none of them had the mental space to think about that. The situation seemed hopeless.

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Blood Dress was a powerful secret technique that Sera and Gerard had to use to rival Isabel, resulting in them fusing together. Behind this god-rivaling power lay the pair's Unique Skills, which were meshing together miraculously well, allowing the fight to happen.

And this was how the technique worked: It started with Sera donning Gerard's armor. Of course, it didn't end there. With Bloodbending and while using as much blood as she could afford to release outside her body, she filled Gerard's armor with her blood. Once the inside was full of her blood, Sera activated Blood Dominion, ordering Gerard's armor to exhibit abilities past its original potential limits and changing it to be perfect for her body. This resulted in assimilating what she was wearing so that she could move it as if it were her own body, while she simultaneously imagined her strongest self so that she could use all of this at full potential—Sera's blood flowed from inside the armor to the outside, spreading her orders all throughout.

Meanwhile, Gerard activated a certain ability to try to fulfill Sera's wishes as much as possible: Self-Transcendence would raise the strength of both his weapon and his armor. Sera's Blood Dominion was making him even stronger than normal, so he was able to categorize both himself and Sera's blood as his equipment to make them stronger. But that wasn't all: Since Sera's blood was strengthened, the orders it transmitted through Blood Dominion got stronger as well, which fed into Gerard's Self-Transcendence—in short, it was an infinite loop of sorts. Now, in this fused state, they had long surpassed both their limits as they stood before Isabel.

"What fearsome swordsmanship! But I can see it! And if I can see it, I can learn from it! I'll consume everything you have to offer!"

"So much ambition, even now!" Isabel exclaimed. "And it's coupled with an incredible ability to learn! I understand! I can tell you're growing at an unbelievable rate with every clash of our blades!"

Both sides' blades were completely even. Actually, they were each polishing their own swordsmanship abilities using the other's skill, maintaining equilibrium as each grew to new heights. On one hand, Sera and Gerard tirelessly operated their infinite growth machine. On the other, Isabel was enjoying the height of her divine existence as she unleashed everything she'd built up over her long life for the sake of her children. Every time they clashed, both sides got even stronger.

Also, the two sides weren't clashing only with their swords. Other blades were deployed in an all-out battle as well.

Vwaboomboomboom! THUD!

A portion of Isla Heaven suddenly collapsed due to the influence of this fight. What happened? The best way to find out was to first get a grip on the situation.

First, there was Isabel with her slaughter barrier, Death Penalty. It was as thin as a sheet of paper and frighteningly flexible, swaying with the wind and dancing through the air. It looked somehow idyllic despite its violent name, and some might have been disappointed in its looks. However, in reality, it was nowhere near idyllic.

This absurdly long blade was swung all over the space, coming at its prey from unpredictable angles instantly whenever Isabel gave the order. While it could naturally attack from any direction, it could even split and recombine freely. Before long, there were so many guillotine blades flying all over, it was almost funny. However, what was even scarier was how brutally sharp the barriers were. These flying blades, now reduced to the size of a normal guillotine's blade from splitting (which was still large by any normal standard), were so sharp that they were able to cut Isla Heaven itself down to the lowest layers upon impact. In short, the blades were able to cut all the way through Isla Heaven without even really meaning to, and there were so many of them flying wildly around, it was impossible to count. What would happen to Isla Heaven in such a situation?

The answer was obvious. The aforementioned collapse was only a part of the damage caused; Isla Heaven was steadily being cut into little pieces. At this point, the situation was way past worrying about the heart of the island; absurdly, the floating continent itself was in danger of being cut up. The guillotine blades were running rampant in an ever-shifting formation, a testament to how excited Isabel was.

Then, there was the creepy, blood-soaked whip blade created by Sera and Gerard: True Laevateinn. In the first place, whip swords were a very rare category of weapon, and there were very few who could use one to any satisfactory degree. This weapon, with blade segments connected by a wire, could extend long distances while acting as both a sword and a whip. It could also travel trajectories unthinkable for normal swords, making it extremely hard to react to. Of course, that was exactly why it was so hard to wield. Also, maintenance on such weapons was terribly involved, and even in this world, almost no one bothered making any. While there was a cool factor to the weapon, it was

in general an obscure, hard-to-use thing.

But True Laevateinn was an exception to all of that. True, neither Sera nor Gerard had ever used a whip sword before now. And yet, it was still being used like it was a part of their collective body. It was natural to be able to use any part of the body you were born with, and because this piece was also a sword, both Sera's Pugilism and Gerard's Sword Mastery applied to it. All this boiled down to the pair being able to use the whip sword freely. Not only that, but the whip sword itself was as vicious as Isabel's Death Penalty.

In response to the guillotine blades that came from every angle, the blade coming from Sera's tail flexed freely through the air, intercepting the attacks while scattering fresh blood. The sword stretched as far as it wanted without limits, growing new blade sections as it did to match the guillotines. Also, it seemed to be just as sharp as the guillotines, as each clash resulted in both sides' blades being destroyed. However, the whip sword would never be destroyed completely. As said before, it was part of Sera's body, so it could regenerate; instantly growing back the destroyed parts. So while the guillotines were near infinite in number, the whip sword was essentially invincible, repeating a cycle of being broken and regenerating.

"What fearsome, wonderful regeneration speed!" Isabel said in praise. "But that won't last forever! The more you regenerate, the more you exhaust yourself! But don't worry, you're already absolutely precious!"

"That goes for you too! You may be able to use your Authority as much as you wish while inside Isla Heaven, but the magic you need to use to create your barriers is a different matter! You're the one that's going to exhaust yourself first!"

"No, you assume too much with that!" exclaimed Isabel. "In the first place, I don't believe you can keep up that wonderful form for too long! It must have some sort of corresponding weakness; that's the nature of such wonderful things! But I really do think it's *wonderful*!"

"Allow us to turn those words right back at you! You haven't been able to go all out in so long, do you really think you can keep up this level of strength for any amount of time?! While things may have been different when you had the body of a true goddess, you're using an artificial body right now!"

"Even so, I—"

“Even so, we—”

Will win. Was what they wanted to say, and that was all well and good, but a problem reared its head. Indeed, Isla Heaven had finally reached its limit. Though they were on the edges of the land, the scale of their battle was both huge and being held underground. The ground making up the continent changed considerably as the heart was absolutely disintegrated, resulting in the fall of Isla Heaven.

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The causes of all this destruction continued fighting even as the ground broke apart. Sera-Gerard sprouted wings from the back of their combined armored backs, while Isabel used barriers as footholds to continue their combat. At this point, they were wholly focused on each other, and it didn’t seem like it would end until one side was defeated.

But the conclusion to this fierce fight was near. Their earlier argument contained no bluffs or lies to shake the other; both sides had simply stated the results of their own analyses. Basically, both were near their limits.

“Wuh…wonder…haah…ful!” Isabel gasped between pants.

“We’re going to overcome our limi— Urp! Ts!”

They really were. Their breathing was elevated. Their swords felt heavy. But still, the quality of their swordplay did not drop. In fact, it only got faster and sharper. Given how far they’d gone, this fight was probably now more of a clashing of stubborn wills, and it was time for them to make their last moves.

Each of the numerous times they clashed blades, Sera-Gerard had been using Blood Dominion to eat away at the barrier around Isabel’s sword while simultaneously absorbing Isabel’s magic. This was effective, but their enemy’s store was massive, and she was also repairing the barrier after every clash, so no progress was really being made. However, all this had been one of Sera-Gerard’s traps.

Since the start of this battle, as well as since their usage of Blood Dress, Sera had been concentrating on using her Blood Dominion to erase barriers. Actually, she’d tried to stop Isabel and the creation of her barriers entirely at first, but that had failed. Still, taken the other way around, Isabel now misunderstood that Sera had the power to undo her barriers.

Sera-Gerard had planned to use this misunderstanding to make a move when the chips were down. The new order she gave instead of simply undoing the barriers was to switch around the definition of “harmful opponent” and “Isabel,” and with that timing, have everything disappear all at once.

“Grhak?!”

“Finally…you fell for it!”

Though Blood Dominion’s initial effect was minimal at first, now that Blood Dress was in effect, the skill could instantly undo barriers. Sever Crime—the ability that allowed Isabel to add extra slashing barriers to her attacks—left her sword, but was now pointed at Isabel herself. She was inundated by traitorous barriers and given all sorts of status effects as, at the same time, the multiple defensive barriers protecting her were undone.

“Now it’s over!”

Sera-Gerard swung their sword at the perfect moment to take advantage of this gigantic opening. The guillotine blades that had been flying around were also exposed to splattering blood from their whip sword and were being ordered to stop. Now, Isabel had no power, control, or Authority left.

“Penalty!” Isabel cried out.

However, though they thought Isabel had been driven to a corner, she still had her pitch-black sword. The barrier on it might have betrayed her, but because Sera-Gerard had made their move at the last possible second, the blood hadn’t reached the sword itself. The sword flapped its wings, which had only seemed like decoration up until then, and accelerated. This final struggle, a show of stubbornness, was still a powerful attack, and it sped toward them.

Then, the battle was decided.

“I can’t even lift a finger anymore,” said Gerard. “And the knight calmly falls…”

“Same here…” muttered Sera. “So, what about you? It looks like your sword is back to being a staff.”

“I’m doing exactly as well as I look,” said Isabel. “My, my, I didn’t expect this to end in a draw! Truly wonderful.”

“That’s all you’ve been saying since like halfway through the fight,” Sera commented.

She and Gerard had fallen along with the crumbling ground, with Isabel following after them. The team of two were now back to their original forms; the effect of Blood Dress had run its

course. Isabel's Authority had stopped manifesting because she'd fallen off Isla Heaven, which had reinstated the limitations on her body. As Sera had pointed out, Penalty was once again in the form of a staff. At this point, the three were completely exhausted. They barely had the energy to speak, let alone fight.

With a great splash, all three fell into the ocean. After a moment, Sera and Isabel floated back to the surface. Rubble continued to fall on top of them, but their luck was high enough that they weren't hit by any of it. Meanwhile, Gerard's armor was too heavy for him to float back up, but there was no need to worry about him. He was likely doing fine somewhere below the surface.

"I've been thinking..." Sera suddenly muttered as she looked up at Isla Heaven, which was crumbling and gradually losing altitude.

"Thinking what?" Isabel asked. She was looking up at the same sky next to Sera.

"We were so caught up in our fight that we lost sight of our surroundings."

"What a coincidence. I was just thinking the same thing. As I thought..."

"We went too far..." both she and Sera said in unison.

Now that it was all over and they'd calmed down, regret started to seep in. But there was nothing they could do. It was impossible to stop the collapse of the floating continent. They could only float along sadly in the ocean.

Isabel yawned. "I'm so satisfied, I'm starting to feel sleepy. The fight's ended in a draw for now, so I'll just take a nap..."

"Huh? Ah, wait, *now*?! Hey!"

Sera couldn't help but retort at Isabel's unexpected declaration. However, Isabel simply closed her eyes and dozed off...

"H-Huh? W-Wait, did I really fall asleep? Come... Come on, w-wake up, other me! Don't switch with me now of all times!"

Well, not actually. For some reason, she suddenly started acting confused. Her way of speaking and general aura changed completely. Her bold, godlike mannerisms from before disappeared without a trace, leaving behind only a weak, nervous girl. This complete personality flip made Sera's eyes go wide for a while, but her intuition was strong, and she quickly figured it out.

“Do you…have two personalities?” she asked.

“Huh? Ah, yes! Actually…wait, the enemyyy?! Eeep, sorry! Sorry! I’m so sorry that the other me ran her mouth offf!” Isabel screamed.

“Oh, uh, okay?”

Though neither of them could move, the image of Isabel pulling off a magnificent kowtow still came to mind. That was how desperate her apology was.

“The other me really is so selfish! She caused so much trouble for everyone else! Aghaghaghaghaghaghagh!” Isabel screamed some more.

“I don’t know about trouble. We’re enemies, after all…” Sera muttered in response. “Oh well, whatever. It was a good fight, so it all worked out in the end.”

“Really?” Isabel asked. “Um, but Isla Heaven…”

“Oh, well, about that… There’s no point crying over spilled milk,” said Sera. “So…instead, you said something about a nap. Does that mean the other Isabel’s sleeping right now?”

“Um, most likely…probably…yes?” Isabel answered timidly. “We can speak to each other internally when she’s awake, so…”

“Huh…”

“Y-Yes…”

The pair sank into an awkward silence.

Unfortunately, the ocean breeze couldn’t blow away the awkward mood, so they had to stew in it for a while as they floated on the surface. It might have been their punishment for going off the rails and destroying Isla Heaven.

::Heeey, Seraaa, you know I can’t float like you, right? I’m siiinkiiing,:: Gerard complained telepathically.

::Sorry, I can’t move. Also, it’s super awkward up here,:: Sera replied.

::Huh? What’re you talking about?::

Indeed, it might have been *her* punishment.

Chapter 4: The Two Ogres

Let us rewind time to before Sera and Gerard's fight ended. On the peak of the Divine Mountain of Enberg, Isla Heaven's highest point, endless lights of varying colors were shining in quick succession. The sight was powerful like fireworks, while also being colorful and pretty, but...

"Nwaaargh!"

"Hrrrmph!"

"Hwaaagh!"

"Heh! You're pretty good!"

These guys scream so loud... thought Mdo.

The truth behind the lights was a battle "to the death," unthinkable for anyone not involved.

Facing Hao, who was feared as a God of Martial Arts and fighting, were three Dragon Kings in humanoid form and a (also humanoid) purple butterfly named Grostina. In terms of positioning, Hao was standing on the high ground in the center, surrounded by Dahak and the other Dragon Kings circling him, with Grostina flying overhead.

"Beastly Tree!" Dahak shouted.

"Gwaaargh!"

Dahak's right arm was enveloped by a rapidly growing tree ending in what looked like a ferocious beast's head. The thing seemed hungry due to this rapid growth, and it locked on to Hao as its prey, starting a high-speed hunt. It approached Hao while staying low to the ground, its large maw opened wide.

"Lava Press!" Boga cried. He beat the hungry tree to the punch by spurting fire from his armor to accelerate himself like a jet fighter despite his large size. He got above Hao's head and swung a large, red-hot arm down at his enemy. Fiery jets added to his already impressive strength to make for an even more forceful attack, creating a giant crater in the ground, complete with spurting lava coming out of the cracks.

"A good attack," Hao commented.

"Hrngh!" Boga grunted.

Hao had dodged so well that it couldn't even be considered a close call. But if the attack had connected, not even he would

have been unscathed. Hao praised the power of that move from the bottom of his heart.

“Dodging leaves you open! Take thiiiis!” Dahak yelled. He’d predicted that Hao would dodge and aimed his Beastly Tree at where he would go. The hungry tree started by grabbing Hao’s legs to prevent him from escaping.

“Indeed it does, but you’re too slow,” Hao said.

The Beastly Tree inexplicably broke apart into little pieces. Dahak’s prediction should have been on point, and his aim should have been true, but he had yet to fully grasp the range of Hao’s movements.

“Dammit!” Dahak yelled. “But it’s not over yet!”

“What?”

Broken pieces of tree rained down on the ground. As they touched the earth, they started growing rapidly again, becoming bigger before everyone’s eyes and returning to their original beastly form. In fact, since each piece became its own beast, the attack grew more powerful than before.

“Groooaaarrr!” the creatures cried out in unison.

“Oh?” Hao murmured.

“Thanks for breaking them into so many pieces!” Dahak taunted him. “Let me return the favor right now! Right, Boga, Mdo!”

“R-Right!” Boga responded.

“I know,” said Mdo.

Boga responded to Dahak’s shout by twisting his arm farther into the crater he’d made, while Mdofarak took to the skies.

“Lava Crater Press!” Boga shouted. Redness seeped from his fist into the ground. Then, the mountain erupted. Although it should have been dormant, Boga had unleashed a breath attack from his fist, forcing it into activity. This man-made—or rather, dragon-made—activation, became a big enough disaster to not only involve the immediate area, but the entire continent.

The mountain peak was now a danger zone, and Mdofarak, who’d flown into the sky just a moment before, deployed three differently colored halos of light around her, which started to rotate at high speed. The rotating rings emitted a shrill sound like metal scraping together as they sped up, and at this point it just seemed like a mysterious object that made weird sounds. However, in truth it was a ridiculous weapon.

“Trinity Squall,” said Mdofarak. Her voice triggered the three

light halos to start continuously shooting bullets of red, blue, and yellow. They were scattered like shotgun pellets but at the rate of a gatling cannon.

Indeed, these halos were actually gun barrels. The red one was made of fire, the blue one of ice, and the yellow one of lightning, and the impact of the bullets coming out of these was accompanied by tiny disasters matching each one's element. Pillars of fire rose up in concert with Boga's magma, while clumps of ice froze time inside it, and lightning rampaged all around. Each bullet made a huge impact, and there were tens of thousands of them raining down, as if they were trying to completely destroy the mountain.

Now, the battlefield was a chaotic mix of multiple elements, with Beastly Trees continuing to spawn in huge numbers. They were still plants, though, so when they made contact with the fire that plants were so famously bad at dealing with, something that Dahak had not planned for happened...

Or at least, that's what one would expect, but Mdo and Boga had already considered that issue, and these attacks in fact only strengthened the Beastly Trees.

"Groooaaarrr!" went the many trees in unison.

The change was so dramatic, the Beastly Trees basically Evolved. The ones that were hit by red bullets were lit on fire, the ones hit by blue bullets turned blue, and those hit by yellow bullets manifested metallic armor for some reason. None of them seemed to have taken any damage. In fact, they were more active than before.

"Surprised?! This is the true strength of Beastly Tree!" Dahak yelled. "These creatures can adapt to any environment, no matter how harsh, instantly adopting a better element! Also..."

He emitted a red Goldian Aura, which transferred to the Beastly Trees so that every one of them was soon wrapped in it. The trees, now with auras, sprouted arms and took fighting stances.

"It was a lot of work implanting reason in these ferocious things, you know? I had to use my head a lot!" Dahak boasted.

"Hm, what an interesting way to use your powers," said Hao.

"Thanks! And I have to say something to you too. It's frustrating, but even now, we're far below you in terms of strength," Dahak admitted. "But the weak have their own ways of fighting! I, Dahak, admitted this, thought hard, squeezed out all

of my stubbornness, and am going to show you my guts!”

Even though he’d trained to death under Grostina and had been taught to adopt this form by Bakke, there was a limit to how much he could grow in such a short time. That was why he’d desperately thought about a way to win with what strength he had. He had even sacrificed sleep—or would have, but being exhausted would make him unable to exhibit all his strength, so he made sure to get his sleep but spent all his waking hours thinking.

The Beastly Trees, having been given Dahak’s aura, now had the same Pugilism level that he did. In other words, though their stats were lower, they could use tactics normally reserved for groups of people. Dahak had made all sorts of preparations for this day, planning to challenge Hao with both the advantage of numbers generated by the trees and the terrain advantage generated by Boga and Mdo.

“HOOOAAARGH! HAAAH! HOOOH! HOOOAAARGH!”

Also…Grostina was dancing fiercely high above everyone else.

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“Well then, let us exchange blows,” Hao said.

It needn’t be said that Hao was at an overwhelming disadvantage having to face everyone in this place. However, he still chose to eschew all tactics or trickery for an earnest, head-on fight and willingly charged into the crowd of Beastly Trees, each in a fighting stance and with varying elements.

“Shrinking Step,” said Hao.

The way he advanced was strange—he only used the minimum movement necessary. Actually, that wasn’t quite true; he was traveling so fast that he left behind afterimages, but it looked like his legs were barely moving at all. Basically, he seemed frozen in his fighting stance as he moved around. To those fighting him, it looked like he’d warped.

“All that distance…in an instant?!” Dahak complained. “Another weird move! But who cares?! You won’t budge my Beastly Trees with that!”

“Groooaaarrr!” the crowd of trees roared in concert.

As Dahak claimed, the trees weren’t cowed by Hao’s movement, and they wasted no time in attacking. Furthermore, Mdofarak started giving supporting fire from the back while

Dahak and Boga ran to the front lines of the fight.

"Then allow me to test how great your power is!" Hao exclaimed.

Right after, several of the Beastly Trees surrounding him suddenly had their faces cave in, and they broke into pieces. Hao's fist had passed through their fighting stance as well as the red auras surrounding them. Because his fists were so fast, nobody could react in time.

"Tch! Thought those fists would be quick too! But!" Dahak shouted.

"Hm?"

Though some trees' faces were caved in, they still weren't defeated. In fact, they just grew new faces with astonishing speed.

The Beastly Trees' adaptability comes from their regeneration speed! Dahak thought boastfully. *Doesn't matter if you burn them, freeze them, or crush them; they'll just grow back if you don't completely annihilate them!*

Indeed, the Beastly Trees were able to completely regrow lost body parts, much like starfish or axolotls. Even if what looked to be their heads were crushed, as long as their HP pools weren't reduced to 0, they were able to regenerate indefinitely. Unlike living things with blood, they didn't have critical weak points like heads and wouldn't die even if their "heads" were destroyed. Furthermore, they all averaged over 5,000 HP, with a fair amount of toughness in their stats even at this level. It would take a lot of damage to completely down them.

::Boga! The trees are putting their bodies on the line! We need to get in there and hit him with all we got!:: Dahak ordered through the Network.

::God id!:: Boga replied.

They weren't very far away. Given how fast Dahak and Boga were, they'd be able to join the fight in less than a second. But...

"Gyurgh?!"

"Vwugh!"

"Gyuragh?!"

"Hm, so you're finally here," said Hao. "That was slower than I expected."

By the time they were in position to attack, half the Beastly Trees were gone. Both Dahak and Boga let out shocked noises. Every time Hao let his arm loose, at least three Beastly Tree's

heads were pulverized before they lost all their limbs, and finally their trunks exploded. It was barely possible for Dahak to catch the afterimages of his fist, but it was impossible for him to discern what kind of martial arts the god was using. The only thing he did understand was that if any of them were to take a real hit, they'd be done for despite being Dragon Kings.

The remaining Beastly Trees tried a desperate counterattack, but nothing hit. In fact, not even Mdo's bullets, which she'd been ceaselessly firing the whole time, were landing. No matter how they tried to overwhelm him with numbers, Hao slipped through the crowd of combatants and the rain of attacks as though he didn't even exist on the physical plane. It was enough to make Dahak suspect he had Ange's Unique Skill, Uncontainable.

::Gah! How many skills and moves does he pack into every single attack, this bastard?! And yet he completely ignores all the fire and ice surrounding us! They should be dealing a lot of damage just by making contact!:: Dahak complained.

::And the armor doesn't seem do make a difference...id all get crushed. Maybe my dragon scales will be the same way?:: Boga suggested fearfully.

::Maybe... Do you want to stop?:: Dahak asked.

::You're funny, Dahak. Never!:: Boga replied.

Even in the face of Hao's overwhelming martial might, they didn't back down. One had thorny plants growing over his arms, while the other increased the amount of red dyeing his black, igneous rock armor. The pair reached new heights, combining the martial skills they'd built up with their potential as Dragon Kings.

"Dragon Stinger!" Dahak shouted.

The deadly poison that had once ended Jildora had evolved further in Dahak's hands. Countless needles with poisonous color were launched forward with a blast of pressurized air. Each individual needle contained improved "angel killer" poison. If even one were to inject its poison, it would be lethal, regardless of the strength of the victim's body. These objects were the absolute worst, most dangerous weapon.

"Dragon Smash: Floga!" Boga announced.

He compressed the heat, compressed the power, then compressed the compression. Lava from the volcano around them gathered around his arms, which he swung with all his martial skill. This combination of volcanic power with martial arts

was something only Boga could pull off. A massive calamity was contained within his fists, and there was no telling how much destruction he'd cause if he were to use it without restraint.

Just watch, Prettia-chan! Dahak thought to himself.

Both these moves were based on techniques used by Peach Ogre Goldiana: Bee Stylet and Doki Doki Smash. They'd further improved the moves and imparted their own Dragon King flavor, though, so that it would show the strengths of both humans and dragons…and, most importantly, to get closer to the person Dahak loved.

We're several levels weaker than Prettia-chan; that's the truth! So there's no choice but to improve the move with love so that it melds better with the users! Dahak thought.

Though their ranks had been halved, the Beastly Trees still outnumbered their foe. The malicious terrain that was spitting disasters all over combined with Mdofarak's rain of bullets and Dahak's and Boga's fierce attacks, forcing Hao to face it all with the handicap of only having one arm available to him.

Just one is fine. Yeah, we just need to land one hit first! Dahak thought. *We need to make any one of these attacks hit to change the flow of this fight!*

Their morale was high, and they were putting out all the power they could at the moment. Without a doubt, everyone was in their best condition and exhibiting the best teamwork…but even so.

"Burst," said Hao.

Even with all that effort, all that strength, Dahak and the others could not reach him with their attacks. They likely didn't even realize what had happened. What Hao had managed within the span of a single breath was a combination of punches and kicks in all directions that were so fast they were essentially invisible. This came with a succession of sounds like a balloon popping, and everything around him was overwhelmed all at once. The Beastly Trees didn't even have time to let out death screams as they broke apart, while Dahak and Boga lost half their HP.

"Grhak!"

"What?!"

The impact they felt to go along with the damage was absurd. Dahak and Boga were forced back so far that they'd completely left the battlefield.

“Oh? So you survived, even after making me use this,” mused Hao. “You are still only barely clinging to this battle, but that move you tried had potential. Be proud! You’re all strong. Quite strong, at that.”

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The Beastly Trees were gone, and Dahak and Boga had been forced out of the ring. All this devastating information was naturally known to both Mdofarak, who’d been concentrating on support fire, and Grostina, who’d been flying around this entire time for some reason. At this point, there was no such thing as teamwork. So, was escape the only option left to them? No. While the remaining pair’s roles were different from those of Dahak and Boga, who stood on the front line, they still had their eyes set squarely on victory. As long as they lived, Dahak and Boga would rejoin the fight quickly. They just needed to believe in that and act.

“Trinity Launcher!” Mdofarak shouted.

Her three different-colored rings of light expanded and started to continuously shoot out large bullets. The rate of fire wasn’t as fast as Trinity Squall, but their heading was just as scattered, and it was impossible to tell what was being aimed at, if aim was being taken at all. However, the trajectory of these bullets had been calculated in minute detail. Trinity Launcher was effective at wide-range extermination and could attack everything within Mdo’s visual range. Now that there were no friendlies in front of her, there was no need to hold back.

Thunderous noise followed thunderous noise, each source emitting bright light that took over their surroundings. A Dragon King’s rage fell upon the battlefield, eliciting explosions of their respective elements upon impact. Each explosion shaved away at the mountain, and they happened in quick succession in similar places. Divine Mountain Enberg’s impressive form had now shrunk to that of a regular mountain.

Even in the face of such disaster, Mdofarak showed no sign of stopping Trinity Launcher. In fact, she was thinking it wasn’t enough firepower. Her impatience and anxiousness affected her gaze, which she directed at Grostina.

“Not yet, Grostina?!” she asked.

“Hmm, hmhmm! I just finished Buil! Ding! Up!” Grostina

replied coquettishly, complete with a heart mark. “Sorry to keep you waiting so long.”

Grostina had been flying around busily for some reason, and now her voice came down loudly from above. It seemed all her mysterious actions had been preparation for some sort of move. Even now, she was pirouetting in place like a ballet dancer, but that was also likely necessary. If not, it was just hellish to look at.

Given the current situation, her actions just seemed like a joke. However, she was now flanked by several mysterious spheres of a dangerous color. Each was around five meters in diameter, and if one looked closely, they had her purple, poisonous aura swirling around inside. These mysterious spheres were what Grostina had been dancing in midair to make.

“Dancing without care on this transparent stage called the sky, using my bewitching voice for only my sake… My fairy self is currently completely satisfied and in the best mood,” she announced. “My Goldian Aura, which I’ve polished under these conditions, is the peak of what I, the Violet Fairy, can create! I’ll give you the best poison present to pierce your heart!”

“Why are you speaking like you’re giving a presentation, Grostina?” Mdo asked.

“Not! Only! That!” Grostina exclaimed. “But this poison is Dahak’s original blend, which has been shared with me. I’m ashamed to admit it, but not even I know what this powerful poison is made of! If things go wrong, this entire area could be turned into a land of death! But even if that happens, I’m sure Dahak-chan will purify it! Nothing is impossible for the man who turned the Evil Deity’s Heart into a paradise!”

“Please, Grostina, just shoot it already!” Mdo begged her. Her pleading seemed to have an effect, as Grostina finally prepared to attack.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, part two!” Grostina shouted. “And take this: my Looove Staaarduuust!”

She struck a pose that no one should ever be forced to describe as the poison spheres around her were dropped all at once. They fell at a speed much faster than their forms would suggest. Was that because they’d been kept waiting for a while? At any rate, by the time anyone noticed, they were already striking the ground.

“That’s…amazing!” Mdofarak couldn’t help but mutter. Of

course she couldn't—the explosion that happened before her very eyes was even greater than the Trinity Launcher she was still maintaining. While there were fewer total attacks, the poison spread through a truly prodigious area in a purple eruption, which deeply impressed Mdo.

"Dahak is so proud of this one. Even a single breath and it'll take effect immediately," said Grostina. "It's harmless to Mdo-chan and the others since they've prepared for it, but you can't counter it with pure strength of body, Hao-chan! Or at least, I thought you couldn't."

The Violet Butterfly's aura was amplified as she danced across the stage, taking a combat-ready stance. Mdofarak lined up beside her, stopping Trinity Launcher to change the rings of light into something more suited to close combat.

"Circular Arts," said Hao.

His voice came from the center of the explosion. Immediately after, a tornado appeared. Everything harmful was swept away by the wind and carried outward. Hao stood at the center of the storm, almost entirely unscathed. He was swinging his arm in a circular motion, likely to create the tornado. The skin of his palm was burning, but it didn't look like he'd taken any other damage.

"Grfh!" Hao stifled a cough.

It seemed that even for someone like him, poison was effective, and the sudden bloody cough was unexpected, even for Hao...

"Heh, so I couldn't defend against it with just one hand," he mused. "This poison is lethal, isn't it? With the sharp pain that would almost make one fall unconscious and the creeping paralysis, this poison is well-made. Most importantly, it's surprising that it works on my body."

He was smiling creepily, a mix of madness and joy. It was a very familiar smile.

"Oh my, no, he's laughing! I was aiming for instant defeat, or at least unconsciousness. Have you spent time getting your body used to poison? Or is it some sort of skill?" Grostina asked.

"The former," Hao answered. "However, I never expected something this powerful to be made. It was a good miscalculation, even for me. Indeed, allow me to give my thanks now. Because of you, I have managed to experience something new. I'm grateful that you've grown so much. My thanks!"

Hao adapted Shrinking Step for use in the air to close the

distance between them instantly. He moved as fast as he did on the ground, defying gravity to rise like a shooting star.

“Fuse Meteor!” Mdofarak shouted. She’d made the prompt decision to fight and immediately shot out a compressed bullet of light made up of eight different elements. This would endlessly chase its target, and because it traveled so fast, it was basically impossible to evade—or it should have been, but…

“Hmph.”

The bullet was aimed straight between Hao’s brows, but right before it hit, he used his forehead of all things to parry the attack. It was like he had simply headed a soccer ball, passing it to someone nearby.

“What?!” Mdofarak shouted.

“Its trajectory was too simple,” Hao commented. His forehead was bleeding slightly from the parry, but it stopped instantly. Fuse Meteor, having been parried, continued to attack Hao, but he was faster, and it couldn’t seem to connect.

“Fall back behind me, Mdo-chan!” said Grostina. “Violet Fairy: Mode Lu—”

“That isn’t bad either, but in the end, you’re just an inferior version of the false goddess,” Hao interrupted.

The next thing Mdofarak heard was the unpleasant sound of meat being sent flying.

Blood spewed through the air, dying Hao’s arm red. Mdofarak saw it from up close, and even though they were still in combat, her mind froze for a moment, becoming completely blank.

“Gr…fwh…”

It was Grostina who let out a pained voice while vomiting blood. The left side of her chest had been pierced by Hao’s arm. From the positioning, her heart had probably been destroyed. Even so, she was still alive and conscious for the moment, staring into Hao’s sharp eyes as if to plead for something.

“You offered your own heart, didn’t you?” he asked. “What are you planning?”

“M…Mm-hmm,” Grostina managed a coquettish grunt. “Looks like you really did realize it, Hao-chan…but I figured you’d come anyway… You look like a stick-in-the-mud…but you’re surprisingly good on the uptake…the type to take his opponent’s invitations…am I right?”

“For this fight…maybe,” admitted Hao.

“Hee hee hee, I knew it… Now, Mdo-chan?” Grostina signaled.

“Huh? Ah! S-Sorry, right!”

Mdofarak was brought back to the present by Grostina’s voice, so she started to withdraw. Hao took this to be part of some sort of plan, so he also attempted to take some distance for the moment, but…

“Hm?”

He found he couldn’t extract his arm from Grostina’s chest. It was like she was filled with adhesive.

Grostina’s Goldian Aura, Violet Fairy, happened to be very sticky, and once it touched something, it was hard to get it off. Not only that, but the aura she had deployed had its stickiness enhanced to the maximum—Violet Fairy: Mode Lucifer. Not even someone as skilled as Hao could tell at first glance.

“I offered my heart because…it was necessary…to win. It seemed impossible…if I didn’t go that far…” muttered Grostina.



“I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish, but I’m not going to listen to you ramble,” said Hao. “Complete your objective quickly while you’re still alive. I have no qualms about ripping your body apart just like the vegetation here has been ripped apart.”

“Wow, scaaary,” Grostina replied mockingly. “But…no need to worry about me… My final move is already in motion…”

Her purple aura expanded suddenly, swallowing up Hao completely. It wasn’t just the aura’s size that increased, but its stickiness as well, and now not even he could escape under his own strength.

“Ah, so this is how determined you are,” Hao said. “Then I will see the truth of this technique as a present for the afterlife.”

“My, how kind of you… Then here we go…and…wink…”

Grostina gave her best smile, even while coughing up blood, along with a powerful wink. Then…

“Legato Cuore!”

The moment those words left her mouth, a bright light took over the area. It was vivid and purple, instantly swallowing up the pair at its epicenter, eating away at their bodies with deadly poison.

Legato Cuore was Grostina’s last resort, a move that created a poison deadlier than normal limits would allow by drawing on the caster’s life before using their heart as the point of origin for a limited explosion. Because this move used the caster’s own life, Goldiana had vehemently banned its creation. However, since Goldiana’s capture, Grostina had broken that taboo during her training. It was all to rescue her beloved sister from Hao.

I’m sorry for lying, Dahak-chan, she thought.

The three Dragon Kings, Dahak, Mdofarak, and Boga, had trained alongside Grostina for this day. At the same time, they’d come up with several plans. They’d racked their brains so that they would be able to adapt no matter what happened during the battle and win no matter what Hao did. Of course, everything was shared between the four of them.

But Grostina alone had kept a secret: her last resort, Legato Cuore. She’d boasted to everyone that when they were in a pinch, she would use this move to make a comeback. She’d also said that the move would be dangerous to anyone in the area, so when she gave the signal, they should immediately retreat. She’d told them it was something she could only do once, so failure

wasn't allowed. However, she had not touched on the cost of the move, even mixing in some lies about how it would heal her.

"Ohhh! So Gros really did it!" Dahak exclaimed.

"W-Wow, that light is amazing," Boga commented.

That was why Dahak and Boga, who'd rushed back as fast as they could, didn't know what was actually happening and could watch the scene with excitement.

"You two took too long to come back," Mdo complained. "You were so tardy, Grostina and I won in the meantime."

"What the heck're you sayin', you sweets-loving fool?!" Dahak shouted. "All you did was retreat like the plan called for!"

"B-But I think Mdo's support was pretty awesome too," said Boga.

"Yep, Boga seems to get it at least a little," said Mdo. "You should learn from him, Dahak."

"You never run out of snide remarks, do you?" Dahak replied. "But is Grostina okay? She was saying some incredible stuff about creating poison in her body and using it to both regenerate herself and attack, but—"

"Grostina isn't a liar. You should know that best."

"Well, of course, but...we're up against Hao," Dahak answered. "It's frustrating, but he's too strong for us to assume anything. In the end, I'm concerned as a friend."

"Ah! It...looks like the light is settling down!" Boga exclaimed.

His companions both sucked in a breath and turned. The purple light was receding, and the trio was about to move to the next step of the plan. Grostina had believed that this final move would finish Hao off, but the others weren't optimistic enough to think it had indeed settled the battle. There was always the long shot, and the trio continued making the best moves possible to support Grostina, finish off a hopefully near-dead Hao, and adapt to any unforeseen situation. However...the scene that greeted them once the light faded was far too cruel.

"Self destruction, huh?" Hao said. "Not a move I personally like, but I must applaud your resolve. It was a good final attack."

The light was gone, and so was Grostina. All that was left was Hao, his skin now a poisonous shade. The Dragonz froze, their minds blank and unable to process what this sight meant. Even so, they saw that Hao was covered in a lot of blood and came to the worst conclusion—the blood was, of course, not Hao's. Therefore, it could only belong to...

“Huh? Self destruction? The hell’re you saying, you bastard?” Dahak yelled. “Where’s Gros?!”

“I meant exactly what I said. I’m sure you are all capable of understanding,” Hao answered. “Accept the situation already. Force yourselves if you have to. The battle will not wait for you, you know?”

He spoke matter-of-factly, and the worst-case scenario they’d imagined became real.

“YOOOUUU BAAASTAAARD!” Dahak yelled.

“No…” Mdo muttered.

“Ah! Aaah! Aaaaaah!” Boga screamed.

Rage, despair, and depression warped their ability to make decisions…but would they really throw away the chance their friend had given her life for? Was that really all they amounted to? Hao was somewhat disappointed.

But suddenly…the entire continent seemed to scream with a massive crash, letting out a loud sound as it shook heavily.

That was… Hao realized the truth before anyone else by using his detection abilities. Isabel had been protecting the heart of the continent, but her presence had disappeared. He couldn’t tell if she had been defeated or if something unexpected had happened. Still, the loss of the one who controlled all the seals definitely affected the battle a great deal.

“How am I supposed to forgive you for leaving this world ahead of me, Gros? I’d definitely love to give you a scolding, but I’ll let that go for now. You were able to buy enough time for my revival, after all. My word, I’m so blessed to have such a good sister disciple. Just rest now, my cute Grostina,” said Goldiana.

Indeed, long shots like this were always a possibility.

A divine pink light slowly descended to the ground. Between Mdo’s bombardment and Grostina’s explosion of poison, the ground was in a gruesome state, but the figure who descended was completely unscathed. She’d been left alone all this time because she’d had a seal placed on her, but now that the seal was broken by Isabel’s disappearance, she was once again able to move freely.

“P-Prettia-chan?!” Dahak sputtered.

The new arrival was Peach Ogre Goldiana Prettiana, the current Goddess of Reincarnation and likely the only one who could compete with Hao in hand-to-hand combat.

“Thank you for trying so hard for my sake, you three,” she

said. “From the bottom of my heart, I’m grateful.” Goldiana, having revived, spoke to the Dragonz in a tone full of love.

“Th-Think nothing of it!” Dahak yelped. “I’m not worthy of th—N-No, but, Gros!”

“Yes, I know,” said Goldiana. “Her spirit of self-sacrifice was too strong.”

“Urgh…dammit!” Dahak shouted. “I’m sorry! If only I was stronger!”

“M-Me doo…” muttered Boga.

“I…” Mdo began.

“You guys, should you really be indulging in what-ifs right now?” Goldiana asked. “Isn’t the most important thing to take on Grostina’s will and figure out what the next best move is? Your anger, sadness, and despair won’t go away as long as you live, but you can’t forget to look at reality.”

The Dragonz gasped, snapping out of it. Goldiana was feeling the sadness of Grostina’s death more than any of them, and she was managing to push past those feelings to accurately assess the situation. Now wasn’t the time for them to lose their composure. They wiped the tears from their eyes and pulled themselves together.

“You look okay now. Right, then… Hao-chan, sorry to keep you waiting,” Goldiana said. “I’ve returned from the depths of that prison.” She flapped her peach-colored wings as she turned around to face Hao.

“Heh! So they regained their composure in an instant thanks to you,” Hao chuckled. “You not only have strength but skill as a leader as well.”

“Oh? Are you trying to flirt with me?” Goldiana asked coyly.

“No. I was just praising you,” came Hao’s flat reply. His expression didn’t change one iota; he was completely serious.

“Baw, you’re no fun. You know, you didn’t *need* to wait there quietly, right?” Goldiana asked. “The more time passes, the more you’re at a disadvantage due to Grostina’s poison.”

“And you weren’t able to eat while you had the seal on you, correct?” Hao replied. “I don’t believe you’re in your best state. You’ve grown dull during that long period of being trapped.”

“Mm-hmm!” Goldiana grunted. “I’m still doing much better than you, with only one arm and exhausted from back-to-back battles. You’re really not going to regenerate that arm?”

“I offered that arm to you after our last fight,” said Hao. “I

have no regrets about it and no intention of regrowing it either. Also, there's no need to worry about my exhaustion. Poison aside, a battle like that is nothing but a warm-up for me. Is it not the same for you?"

"Hm, who knows?" Goldiana replied.

The two sank into silence. Then, after their light verbal sparring, they faced off against each other in the air, all but freezing in place.

The Dragonz watched them for a while, but then things kicked off.

"O-Okay then, we'll help, Prettia-chan!" Dahak declared. "I want to avenge Gros too! At the very least, let us fight beside you!"

"Dahak, no..." Boga muttered.

"Boga is right," Mdo agreed. "Even if we bumble around and try to assist, it won't actually help Goldiana. In fact, we'd be dragging her down. You should know that."

Dahak sucked in a pained breath. "I know. I know, but..." Blood flowed from his mouth. Was it because he was clenching his teeth so hard? "I'm so sorry for being so weak every single time, Prettia-chan!" he forced out. "*Again* I had to rely on you! I'm so sorry, but please avenge Gros! Please!"

"Seeing you admitting your own weakness is more wonderful than words can express," said Goldiana. "The way you look now is very cool to me, Dahak-chan."

"Prettia-chan!" Dahak sputtered.

"Okaaay! You can be moved *later*! More importantly..." Goldiana cooed, "Dahak-chan, Mdo-chan, Boga-chan, I have a new job for you three. I'm going to be fighting with everything that I have, not as the Goddess of Reincarnation, but as the inheritor of the Goldia style. You need to protect our surroundings so that Isla Heaven doesn't get destroyed. With Hao-chan being my opponent, I'm sure we won't have the leeway to care about anything else during the fight. Can I count on you?" she concluded with a heart mark.

Currently, Isla Heaven was in terrible danger thanks to certain people who were battling. Goldiana had felt that even while she was sealed away, and she knew that the crumbling Isla Heaven wouldn't be able to withstand their full power. In order to safely go all out, she needed the Dragonz's help.

"The future of this continent is in your hands, and that is not

an overstatement," Goldiana said, adding in some emphasis for flair. "Can I leave it to you?"

"Our hands... Okay, Prettia-chan, we'll protect Isla Heaven with all we have," said Dahak. "If it looks like it'll break, we'll reinforce it to the limits. And even if it does break, we'll rebuild it! Right? Mdo! Boga!"

Mdo sighed. "I hate all this stuffy enthusiasm...but I like to get payback. Leave it to me. As the Light Dragon King, I won't let this continent be destroyed."

"M-Me doo... I'll do my best...as the Flame Dragon King!" Boga added.

"That's the spirit!" Dahak said. "Then I'll leave him to you, Prettia-chan. I... I lo— No, I *respect* you, Prettia-chan!"

"Oh, come on, Dahak. Why chicken out there?" Mdo complained.

"He was so close!" Boga added.

"Shut it!" Dahak shouted. "Now's not the time for that! Stop spouting nonsense and shape up!"

The trio retreated far back so that they could do their work in safety.

"Heh! Just like children in the spring of their youth," Hao commented. "It's like they were never trying to kill me."

"Hee hee! They're cute, aren't they?" said Goldiana. "And they'll keep growing. They shouldn't be allowed to die in a place like this. Not that Grostina should have either..."

"Do you hate me?" Hao asked.

"Emotions aren't that simple," Goldiana replied. "True, I feel anger and sadness; I can't forgive you. But still, she chose to sacrifice her own life. The heart of a maiden is truly complex!" The air around her abruptly changed. "I, Goldiana Prettiana, challenge you, who defeated Grostina Brujowana, my sister disciple. Do you accept?"

"There's no need to even ask," Hao replied. "Always and forever, I have faced you with that intention. So there is really only one answer."

"Hee hee, naturally!"

Was it because they were each in front of their greatest enemy? The pair smiled at each other, truly wishing to fight.

"Rose Ishtar!"

"I hereby manifest my Authority!"

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The Rose Ishtar Goldiana deployed in this instance was neither her Final Edition nor Mode Lucifer, but the normal version. Anyone watching might have wondered why, but that didn’t stop her from emitting a pretty aura that made her seem stronger than anyone. In short, it was scary how amazing she was.



Meanwhile, Hao had manifested his Authority. According to Luquille, his ability allowed him to freely control his own muscles. There was not a lot of information on it, but despite that, she'd claimed it was not that great a power given how little he changed. Still, Hao had now turned into something completely different. True, his basic shape was much the same, but the color of his skin had gone a steely black and the look on his face had grown even more monstrous. It was hard to think of him as either a human or a fallen angel.

"Hoooooh!"

"Haaaaaah!"

Both of them breathed deeply, and while the shouts they gave should not have been all that loud, their voices managed to shake both the air and ground. The pair heavily affected their surroundings just by existing, and they likely were giving no consideration to anything around them. If any such random concerns were to distract them, they would be instantly destroyed by the enemy in front of them. They both knew that, because they'd fought each other to the death once before.

"Heh! I can't stop shaking even though we're so far away!" Dahak exclaimed. "What pressure, what power! All of nature is screaming, and they haven't even started fighting yet!"

Dahak and the others were watching the fight from a great distance so as to protect the rest of the continent from the side effects. However, no matter how far away they were, they couldn't escape the pressure being given off by the combatants. Even now, they were fighting their fear in order to fulfill their duties.

"Heh…heh heh…so that Hao bastard wasn't serious at all. That pisses me off…" Dahak muttered.

"We don't have time to think about anything irrelevant, Dahak," Mdo chided him. "Hurry and come up with a plant we can use to stabilize this continent and prevent it from collapsing. Boga and I will create the perfect conditions for its growth."

"I know!" Dahak shouted back. "I'm working my Unique Skill, Gemmation, right now! But look! Prettia-chan and that Hao bastard are complete opposites! They're both unfathomably strong, but it looks like a fight between a goddess and a devil—no, the avatar of beauty and a monster!"

"I mean, I only see two ogres fighting each other. Goldiana's title is even Peach Ogre," said Mdo.

“I-I agree wid Mdo…” said Boga.

“Whaaat?!” Dahak exclaimed. “No, no, do you two have empty holes for eyes?! Look closer, they’re totally different! True, Hao is a devastatingly handsome man, but Prettia-chan’s got to be on a totally different level! Also, I finished the plants! Come on!”

It was clear that Mdo and Boga wanted to tell *him* to look closer. The trio continued to argue as they got to work.

While at first it might have looked like they were messing around, there was, at least, a reason for this. That is to say, their environment was so harsh that if they didn’t make light of it, even their Dragon King-level mental fortitude would crumble. They were in the midst of a no-holds-barred fight between two beings who could destroy the world, with no lifelines or safety precautions, trying to do repair work. Does putting it like that help one to imagine their situation? They either needed to distract themselves or get drunk; being sober would not do in this situation.

Zvwmmm!

All three of them let out surprised noises at once. Goldiana and Hao had finally begun their fight. Their only weapons were their own bodies. This would be a pure melee match, as if to say magic was impure. The two utterly transformed combatants used all the skills they’d polished up until now and unleashed the full might of their bodies, which they had trained past any normal limits.

I… I can barely see them! Dahak thought in wonder.

He could hear tremendous clashing sounds, as well as sharp shock waves that seemed to almost cut into the skin. Despite all that, he was unable to see the all-important fighters. It was the same for Mdofarak and Boga. Of course, it was likely the combatants were moving around at high speed, fighting all over the place—at least, imagining so was all the trio could do.

“I! Can’t! Believe! You only have one arm!” Goldiana shouted.

“And I! Can’t! Believe! That you are human!” Hao responded.

“Well! I *am*! Technically a Goddess who used to be human!”

“What a coincidence! I also used to be human! One that chased strength single-mindedly as well!”

Punches, kicks, throws, haymakers, counters… A wealth of moves were used in the space of an instant. One wrong move could mean instant death. Despite that, it almost seemed like they were having fun with their exchanges. These two, who had

reached the peak of martial prowess and no longer had any need to strive to greater heights, were finally able to clash with someone else without having to hold back at all. To them, this was like paradise, or like their dreams had come true: a real moment of joy.

"So, you can withstand even that?! How sweet this is!" Hao exclaimed.

"Hao-chan!" shouted Goldiana in reply. "Your face! You're smiling!"

Hao's Authority was a simple one that allowed him to control his own muscles. If he wanted, he could expand them even more, increasing his size. However, Hao did not want to do that. No matter how much power he had, if his body didn't have the speed it needed to allow him to use his moves, there was no point. That was why he didn't use his power to give himself more muscles, but to transform those he had into more efficient, stronger versions of themselves. From harsh training heedless of death to mortal combat against strong opponents to seeking new horizons, repeating this cycle allowed him to gain the blessing of the wicked god, and the more he trained, the more he headed for certain death, the more he evolved.

Though he had originally been human, he was chosen by the gods. Having transformed from his mortal body, he could be compared to the highest rank of god, like Addams. The ultimate in martial arts, used by someone with the flesh of a god, was unstoppable, even to other gods. At the very least, that was how it had been up until now.

"It's a waste! That this body! Is a prosthetic!" Hao exclaimed.

"I! Find it more of a waste! That you're missing an arm!" Goldiana replied. With her normal Rose Ishtar, she found she was able to fight equally with Hao with his manifested Authority. Their power, speed, decision-making, and most importantly their martial prowess, was totally equal. It was enough to make one think that she should have just used a variant of Rose Ishtar or even unveiled her final form.

However, Goldiana purposefully chose not to. Her reasoning was simple: This was the version she was most comfortable with. Certainly, Final Edition or Mode Lucifer were far superior in terms of the stat boosts they gave, but since they changed her into a form that was extremely different from her normal one, Goldiana would be unable to express her full martial prowess,

which she considered most important in this fight. That was especially true for Mode Lucifer, as not much time had passed since she'd developed it, and she hadn't had the time to adjust it to its optimal form. Of course, that still held true, which was why Goldiana went with the version that she had the most experience with and could trust.

"Hrmph!" they both grunted at the same time.

Thousands of clashes had happened since the battle had started. Veins were visible on their clenched fists, traveling all the way up to their upper arms. In the end, they were still equal.

"Heeey! Just a single punch can flip over the ground! My plants can't hold it! Mdo, can you reinforce them with your ice?!" Dahak shouted.

"I *am* already!" Mdo replied. "The ice is just getting overturned along with the ground!"

"M-My volcanoes…are also gedding blowd away the moment I make them…" said Boga.

The Dragon Kings, who were busy reinforcing the ground under the fighting pair, seemed like they might be the first to give out.

Actually, not that much time had passed since Goldiana and Hao had started fighting. At most, a few minutes. Compared to the fights happening all over the continent, it was still in its opening stages. However, they were already much more heavily wounded and exhausted than anyone else. They were bleeding all over, and in such awful states that there was basically no spot on them that wasn't wounded. Both should have possessed Rank S Auto Healing, but even with the power of that skill, the damage they were dealing far outweighed their recovery speed.

"Haaah, haaah…" Hao panted.

"Hmm, hmm, ahaan!" Goldiana did the same, though in her own style.

Their exhaustion was obvious just from listening to their breathing, as it was labored despite both of them supposedly having infinite stamina. One combatant's breathing sounded quite strange, but surely that was not the case.

"Oh crap, this is seriously crazy…" Dahak muttered. "At this rate, my promise to Prettia-chan… I…"

"Not enough…sweets… So hungry… No more… I'm at my limit…" Mdo said faintly.

"I… I can't erupt anymore…" Boga said as well.

The three Dragon Kings who were doing their best to maintain the land were even more exhausted than the combatants. The three of them were lying spread-eagle on the ground, unable to stand up.

Goldiana and Hao were on their last legs as well, which was clear even to Dahak and the others. The next moves would likely be their last.

"Whew." Goldiana calmed her breathing. "I've managed to save the bare minimum of stamina. What about you?"

"I am in a similar state," Hao admitted. "I'll be able to throw out my best attack."

"Excellent. Ah, but before that, I'd like to say something."

She gave a sudden wink, which was a big surprise attack, but Hao wasn't moved. It was no less than one would expect of the strongest seekers of power.

"What?" Hao asked.

"I think I know why I find you so similar to my master," said Goldiana.

"Your master?" Hao paused to think. "Ah, you said before that I was the spitting image of your master. I'll say this once again, but I am not—"

"My master, I know," Goldiana responded. "Yes, indeed. You are a completely different person. And there's no way there's some punch line, like him being you after reincarnation."

Hao didn't respond. He was waiting for Goldiana to finish. He seemed to be at least a little interested in where this was going. Either that, or his passiveness was out of respect for his enemy. Still, Hao maintained his combat readiness while he waited for Goldiana to speak her mind.

"And yet, I still mistook you," Goldiana continued, "because your lifestyle of greedily pursuing strength is exactly like his...to a cruel degree. You see, my master also prized strength above all else. You could say he was possessed by the idea of it."

"Oh? How interesting. So, what happened to that man?" Hao asked.

"We had a fight to the death, and I won," Goldiana answered. "I killed him with my own hands." She seemed sad, but her eyes held a strong will in them as she showed Hao her fists. "You see, there was a time when he wasn't obsessed with power," she said. "But he changed. He coveted strength so much, he crossed a line he never should have crossed. That's why I had to make things

right. And you resemble him not just on the outside, but on the inside too. Surprisingly so."

"Heh! Is that so?" said Hao. "Then just try to kill me like you did your master. There's no telling what I might do, possessed by my pursuit of strength as I am."

"No, I won't do that," Goldiana replied. "You see, I still regret that day, even now. Though I didn't have as much love as I do now, if I'd been able to show him even an ounce of love's power, I may have been able to change him."

She shifted her gaze from her own fist to Hao and once again took a fighting stance.

"That is why this is the day I've been waiting for. I want to use love to teach someone else who's at the peak of strength in a different way from my master to be the strongest. I will teach you the sum of all I have learned: that you will be much stronger filling your body with love rather than madness!" Goldiana finished off her speech with a heart mark.

"Heh...heh heh heh! Heh heh ha ha ha ha ha! You really are an amusing man!" Hao said, laughing. "I see. You certainly are aiming for a different sort of strength than I am! Totally different! In that case, I need to show you the sum of all I have learned as well!"

"You seem to have used a word I'd really like to correct you on, but I'll pretend I didn't hear it for now!" Goldiana exclaimed.

"Heh heh, my thanks," Hao replied. "Well then, it's about time we finished this. We will see who is truly the strongest!"

"That is exactly what I wanted!"

Goldiana and Hao disappeared at the exact same time. Well, actually, they'd each just lunged forward to hit their opponent with their last and greatest attack.

Prettia-chan... Dahak thought with worry. His consciousness was hazy, but he was still watching. He saw the moment the goddess and monster (from his perspective) clashed. Up until now, he hadn't been able to really see any of the fight, but he somehow managed to see this last moment with perfect clarity.

The strike Goldiana unleashed was a punch that she was specially known for: Doki Doki Smash. He'd seen it many times before, and it was a fierce and sharp move. She looked more beautiful than ever (from Dahak's perspective) as she was unleashing her attack, and even though this was a familiar move to him, its execution was so beautiful (from Dahak's perspective)

that he couldn’t help but fall for her all over again. And more than that, it was *powerful*.

Meanwhile, Hao used the finisher he trusted the most: Absoluteness. It was, in essence, a straight punch. However, that straight punch was being thrown by a god, with everything Hao had behind it. The speed of the punch was quite literally godly, able to pulverize anything in its path. Even Dahak, who was in the midst of falling in love all over again, couldn’t help but notice its execution.

These final attacks, unleashed by each combatant with full trust in their skills, were strangely simple. But they were made with as much strength as could be mustered to bring down their opponent. What would happen to the world when these strongest attacks clashed? At the very least, Dahak and the others, who were the closest to them despite being a fair distance away, wouldn’t come out unscathed.

No matter how this ends, no matter what happens, I’m going to burn this sight into my eyes, Prettia-chan! Dahak swore in his mind. The blurriness of his vision due to his exhaustion didn’t matter. He opened his eyes as wide as they would go to try to witness the end of this fight.

However...

“Khah hah! My apologies for interrupting at this time, but do excuse me!”

Both combatants let out noises of surprise. The unexpected voice distracted them from reacting in time, probably because they were each so focused on their opponent. They stopped just before their attacks hit and turned to the source of the voice to see a corrupted piece of meat with a large open mouth about to swallow them whole.

Special Chapter: Additional Printings Celebration Party

Everyone had been weird lately. Strangely restless, like they were hiding something. Why? I could imagine the protagonist of some terrible fiction wondering that right about now. But I possessed all the detection skills out there, so I could figure it out. And indeed, I did. Heh…how could this have happened? If possible, I'd have wanted to stay ignorant!

Oh, but I digress. Anyway, it's, uh…basically, they were planning some sort of celebration, and they were keeping it a secret from me. Sera and Gerard had always been terrible at keeping secrets, and this was no exception. I pretty much immediately had to start pretending I didn't notice anything *for them*. Yeah, they were averting their gazes and seemed on the verge of saying something about the celebration more than once. They were hopelessly bad at it.

On the other hand, Ange and Shutola were scarily good at acting. Ange was originally an assassin, so she was able to act completely normal. Or, actually, maybe it wasn't acting? After all, doing what you would normally do isn't really acting. As for Shutola, she used the skills acquired from all her experience in politics to prevent me from catching on to anything. It all came to nothing since Sera and Gerard were around, but if everyone had acted like these two, I would never have realized anything. Truly regrettable.

"In fact, they realized that I was pretending for their sake. Oh well, that all ends today. I managed to get this, after all."

I took out an invitation. It had a date and location on it and really drove home the point that I had to be there. No sender was noted, but the handwriting was Rion's. So, most likely, this celebration would in fact be a party. Still, what was it about today? It wasn't anyone's birthday, nor was it a holiday or some other special day either. I wondered…

"It's not like there's *zero* chance of this being an enemy trap, but I'd be kind of happy about that too. So either way, I'll happily participate! Hup!"

The invitation also told me to make a flashy entrance. I did as I was told and made a dynamic entry into the venue.

“Hello there, your star has arrived! Now’s the time for applause!” The first one to greet me was actually Director Shin. Not only that, but she was dressed up in actual girly clothing, unlike her usual director’s outfit. It was a rare look.

Huh? Why’s she here? Is today really that big a deal? Though my head was full of questions, the thunderous applause that followed erased it all.

“Congratulations, Kel-nii!” Rion exclaimed.

“Congratulations from the bottom of my heart, Master,” said Efil.

“So, the day has finally come, my liege!” Gerard shouted.

“Heh heh! Well, of course Kelvin would pull it off! Heh heh!” Sera sounded very proud.

“This is a very auspicious day,” Shutola agreed.

I looked around at my friends, who had all dressed up for the party. Everyone seemed happy as they congratulated me. Gerard was actually on the verge of tears, and Sera seemed to consider this her own accomplishment.

“Uh, ah…thanks?”

“Jeez, why does that sound like a question, Kelvin-kun?” Ange teased me.

“No, I mean, uh…sorry. Honestly, my mind hasn’t really caught up to the situation…”

“Aha ha! Oh, dearest brother, it’s too early to be moved! You need to save your tears for later!” Shutola said.

No, you’re wrong, you two. Never mind when to cry, I don’t even know what this party is celebrating. You’re overestimating my ability to understand things. Also, why is Director Shin here?

::My word, you always come up short when it’s most important. You came all this way with such enthusiasm and you don’t even know what kind of celebration it is?:: Mel asked in amazement. The telepathic message came while I was at my most confused.

Don’t just read my mind without permission again, Mel! Wait, actually no, you’ve saved me this time. It would’ve been way too awkward to ask what kind of celebration this is. So tell me, what special day is it? I asked through the Network.

::Well, rather than hearing it from me, it’d be better if you saw it with your own eyes. Everything’s been prepared already, after

all.::

Prepared? I echoed.

Mel pointed to a certain spot in the venue. There stood a huge horizontal banner with the name of the party on it.

Oh, of course reading that would explain everything. Uh… "Congratulations on the sale of volume 20"? What's that about?

::Read it more carefully, honey. The part before that,:: Mel suggested.

Before that? I repeated.

At this point, I wasn't even going to bother pointing out that she was reading my mind. In fact, what was more pressing was…

Hm? I wonder why? It feels like my brain is refusing to understand the words I'm trying to read. Like, I can see it, but I can't work up the will to actually read it. Weird. Okay, okay…I get it. I'll read it. I'll read it! I'll prepare myself.

"Congratulations on the sale of volume 20 of *Grim Reaper Kelvin's Agonizing Poem Collection*?!"

"Papa!" DarkMel screamed.

"Aah! Kel-nii's coughing up blood!" Rion screamed.

"It's bloood!" Gerard shouted.

"What's wrong, Master?!" Efil shouted.

I had started vomiting blood out of nowhere before falling to the floor, my eyes rolling back into my head. My friends ran to my side, and I was happy about that. Truly happy. But…

"What the heck does it *mean*, volume 20 of my *poetry collection*?!"

"Don't shout when you're spitting out blood, my liege! Your wound is shallow!" Gerard said.

It's frickin' deep! Deep as an ocean trench!

"Huh? You didn't know about this, Kelvin-kun?" Shin asked.

Hey, you there, director who's casually puffing on a cigar in the middle of the party. No, I mean, suspect*! Explain this simply so that even one with a wounded heart such as mine can understand!*

"Come on, you remember there was a piece in the Adventurer's Directory about your poetry habit, right, Kelvin-kun?" Shin replied. "Surprisingly, there were requests for those poems from readers! Everything's worth a try, so I edited the agonizing poems my research uncovered and sold it in small quantities. Then… Heh heh heh… It was a huge hit! Reprints on reprints on reprints, I'm telling you. And after all that, we're at volume 20!"

“Y-You… How could you?!”

Had I ever taken this much mental damage before? Ignoring any bonds from my previous life, Director Shin’s mistake here would definitely be at the top or just below the top of the list. Also, *twenty volumes*? I did *not* remember saying that many painful things. Shouldn’t it have only been enough to fill a single volume at most?

::Honey, um, well…it’s scary how little self-awareness you have,:: said Mel.

Could you not read my heart right now, Mel-san?! And did you seriously say I lack self-awareness?! That’s gotta be a lie! Seriously?!

“Twenty whole volumes! That’s amazing, huh, Kel-nii?!” exclaimed Rion.

“Hey, dearest brother, I feel like I’ve gotten a little taller thanks to your poetry collection!” Shutola told me.

“I’m currently in talks with my father to see if we can’t officially recognize it as a holy work of the Rinne faith. No need to worry! I, Colette, will stake my life on seeing this through!” Colette exclaimed.

“It’s pretty popular, even in my hometown. It’s crazy how its popularity managed to cross the ocean.”

“I read it when I feel sad and hopeless, and it strangely cheers me right up. I’m not sure how to put it into words, but, it’s like it makes my heart full?” Gerard said.

“Yeah! I can tell how Kelvin-kun has been feeling up until now. It makes me happy somehow!” Ange added.

Everyone started offering more celebratory words while I was still finding myself unable to accept reality. I could tell that they were truly happy for me, but…why was I the only one who hadn’t known about this? With that question in mind, I looked over at Director Shin, my main suspect. My gaze carried the question, attempting to pierce her with it.

Feel it! Feel the sting!

“Whoa there, I see you’re ignoring your girls to bathe me in your hot gaze,” Shin commented. “Is there something you want to say to me, Kelvin-kun? Maybe some sort of love confe—”

“No. You can stop with the jokes. Just hurry up and explain this.”

“Hey now, that killing intent in your eyes is rather serious. Jeez, so I’m not even allowed to play, huh? Okay, I get it, I get it. I’ll explain, so please stop looking at me like that,” Shin said

before pausing. “I sold it without permission! End of story!”

“Okay, got it. You want a fight, do you? I understand, so hit the floor, you criminal!”

And with that, combat began. The director and I took out weapons and faced off against each other, each blasting the other in the face with attacks.

“Aaagh?! What’s going on here?!” DarkMel yelped.

“Calm down, DarkMel. I’m sure this is, you know, *that* sort of thing. Like...a piece of theater!” Sera said.

“Huh? Really? Jeez, I was so surprised because it came out of nowhere!” Rion exclaimed. “Don’t lose, Kel-nii!”

“My word, a battle even on such a happy day... Mm-hmm, that’s our king!” exclaimed Gerard.

“Indeed. Master looks like he’s having fun. I’m glad,” said Efil.

I concentrated my attacks only on Director Shin’s face so as to not hit anyone else in the room. Actually, the director’s Unique Skill was really handy in this specific circumstance!

“So, where are my royalties, Director?!”

“Don’t worry! I donated it all to kids in need in your name!” she replied. “Thanks to your poems, Kelvin-kun, children are being saved!”

“Wow, that puts me at ease—not! But damn you for using it in a way that makes it so hard to argue against it!”

“I’m fighting you as an apology, so let me off the hook,” said Shin. “After all, the chance to have a serious fight with me doesn’t come every day!”

With that, an aerial battle unfolded that would last until the party was over.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing *Black Summoner Volume 20: Mingling Twin Ogres*. My name is Doufu Mayoi, and I'm very happy that I was able to put Prettia-chan on the cover of such an important volume as number twenty. And to the readers of the web version who have picked up this book, thank you as always!

I don't know how many times I've said this before, but it's here! The turning point! And Prettia-chan's cover as well! I think a lot of readers have been waiting for her to be on a cover. Oh no, there's no need to say anything. Yes, I know. I got a divine revelation that this might be the case. Let's just leave it at that!

Speaking of turning points, your author has entered their thirties out of nowhere. Well, actually, it happened quite a while ago, but it does mean that a decade has passed since I started writing this series. Past Doufu was young, energetic, and in their twenties. Yeah, I can see it now... Anyway, even if I get to my forties, I'd still want to be writing like I am now. When that turning point comes around, I'll celebrate with a Gokayama firm tofu steak.

Finally, I'd like to give my thanks to those who helped make this volume of *Black Summoner*: the illustrators Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama, the proofreaders, and I'll never forget the readers as well. Okay then, I hope to meet you in the next volume. Please continue with *Black Summoner*!

—Doufu Mayoi

Bonus Short Stories

Meditating with Mel

After throwing Mdo and Boga into the Goldian Sanctuary to train, I returned to my estate.

Dahak's focus was incredible. He didn't bat an eye and continued meditating even with Bakke messing with him. At the rate he's going, I'm sure he'll unlock a new ability soon. Even Mdo and Boga seemed like they were getting into it at the end, even though they were in such a state of despair at first. Oh? Someone's in the yard?

Whoever it was, they were being totally silent.

Ah, it's Mel. She must have come back as well. But it's rare to see her all quiet like this outside; usually she'd make a beeline for the food. It doesn't look like she has food in her hands either... Wait, why is Mel sitting like that?

While I was making sense of what I saw, Mel silently continued to do her thing. I observed her from the shadows for a little while, but she only sat there silently...meditating? Her posture was proper, and she had her eyes closed and wasn't moving a millimeter. It looked like the perfect meditation pose (not that I was an expert). Seriously, given how she normally acted, seeing her like this was totally unexpected. Still, she looked like a real former goddess at the moment. It really felt like I was seeing a side of Mel I didn't know.

Still, why is she medita— Oh! Maybe she's doing some secret training in preparation for the fight with the Ten Authorities, just like Dahak?! Mel! All you've been doing recently is eating and sleeping! So, you were actually thinking about how to get stronger? Your stock is going up!

::Er...::

Hm? Was that from Mel? No, it seemed more like an accidental leakage of thought rather than an intended message... What could she be thinking of during this strenuous training?

::I wonder what's for dinner?::

Mel's thoughts interrupted my own, answering them at the same time.

::Think about it, Mel. What dish can be made with the

ingredients in the refrigerator? Hamburg steak!!!::

Um…Mel-san? I thought.

::No, wait! When I concentrate, I can smell something else… Ah, this wonderful scent being carried on the wind is…roasted sweet potato! Let's buy some later! It'll be perfect as a starter for dinner!!!::

Um…Mel-san?!

::And yet, this is the season for hot pot… Hot pot… I want to eat hot pot. Now's the time to concentrate even more, Mel. Right now, your stomach is asking you to add hot pot to the order… Find the right answer!::

In the end, I left the estate so as not to get in the way of Mel's meditation.

Now then, I suppose I should head to the director's place next? I think Gerard is waiting for me, so I'll need to hurry.

::I… I know the answer! Can't a hamburg steak hot pot work?!::

Oh Mel, please stop your leaking thoughts first. I left to be considerate, and the thoughts are still coming at me regardless of distance…

The Aspirations of a Doting Grandparent

After teaming up with Sera to fight one of the Ten Authorities, Gerard was lost in thought.

"Hrm…"

He was thinking. Thanks to his and Sera's new secret technique, Blood Dress, they'd only just managed to turn the fight into a draw. Even so, there was plenty of room for them to have lost.

"If enemies of that level continue to appear, will I really be able to protect my beloved grandchildren? Both as a knight and a grandfather, fulfilling my duty is…"

He was worried. What if an even more powerful enemy appeared, trying to hurt his cute grandchildren?

"I am a shield that protects my grandchildren. Saying that is easy, but reality isn't so. In truth, if someone of Isabel's level were to attack my grandchildren…grkh… I hate to admit it, but I wouldn't be strong enough. Is there some perfect answer to my predicament? Hrm…"

Protect my grandchildren… Protect… Protect… Gerard's doting grandfather brain spun at full capacity, and a moment later, he

gasped in realization. Had a wonderful revelation come upon him?

“That’s right! We managed to avoid the worst because Sera wore me as armor...which means I could just have my other grandchildren take shelter inside my armor to create the perfect defense! Furthermore, speaking frankly, wouldn’t having my cute grandchildren wear me be the best?! I... I might have just stumbled upon a truth of the world. To think that the answer would be so simple and easy!”

A shock ran through Gerard’s body, as if he’d received some sort of divine revelation. However, he’d made a serious mistake in his thinking. His and Sera’s secret technique was only possible because of her Unique Skill, Blood Dominion, which miraculously meshed perfectly with Gerard’s own abilities. Even if someone else were to wear Gerard’s armor, it wouldn’t have the same effect.

“I can’t afford to sit around! I must tell my grandchildren about this groundbreaking method!”

Gerard rushed off, not realizing his mistake. He was, of course, going to the side of his adorable grandchildren. The first would be Rion.

“Huh? Get inside your armor during battle, gramps? Hm...that *does* sound like it would raise my defenses, but I’d lose all my speed. You’d also end up getting fried by my lightning, and most importantly, I don’t think I’d fit!” Rion exclaimed.

“I... I see...” Gerard responded dejectedly.

The faults in his plan had been bluntly pointed out. However, he didn’t give up. Next up was Efil.

“Wear your armor during battle? Um...my apologies, but I don’t believe I would be able to draw my bow while wearing that, Gerard-san. Also, I don’t think doing so would be appropriate for cooking either...” Efil said apologetically.

“I-Indeed, you are correct...” Gerard felt dejected once again. This time, he had been refused for both combat and cooking.

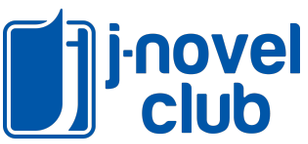
His heart was on the verge of breaking, but he still had one last hope. The last candidate was Shutola.

“Blood Dress isn’t a technique that can be replicated with anyone else, no matter how hard you try,” said Shutola after some thought. “Your Self-Transcendence and Sera’s Blood Dominion are what make it possible. Even if I were to wear you, the sizes of our bodies would be too different, and we would just

get in each other's way. Rather than protecting me, you might just turn me into an easy target instead. Also, you may think of us as your grandchildren, but we're still girls, so you shouldn't say such weird things out of nowhere…"

She continued, but Gerard crumbled to his knees with an audible crash. The rush of perfect logic shooting him down had finally broken his will. And still, Shutola didn't stop. The idea was so terrible that there was no end to the things she wanted to point out.

After that, Gerard's HP was shaved away without mercy, and his so-called great idea—or rather, his wish as a doting grandfather—was crushed.



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by Doufu Mayoi

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