Gods' Games We Play

5



Kei Sazane

Illustration by

Toiro Tomose


GODS' GAMES WE PLAY
5




VS. THE GOD-TREE GUARDIANS
“Wh-wh-wh-what
do you think you’re doing,
you shameless tentacles?!”


...Did she plan this moment?
Did she want to talk to me alone?
"Fay. Do you like games?"
HELENEIA
The enigmatic leader of Arcane Court Headquarters' strongest team, Mind Over Matter.


POSEIDON & MINOTAUR!

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Volume 5

GOD'S GAMES WE PLAY

Kei Sazane

Illustrated by Toiro Tomose

YEN ON
New York

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Gods' Games We Play Volume 5
Kei Sazane

Translation by Kevin Steinbach
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Yen Newsletter

Characters



Fay

People expect great things from this apostle, the best rookie in recent memory. He created a new team with Leshea and Pearl.

Leshea

Full name Leoleshea. A former god who awoke after three thousand years sleeping in ice. She adores playing games.





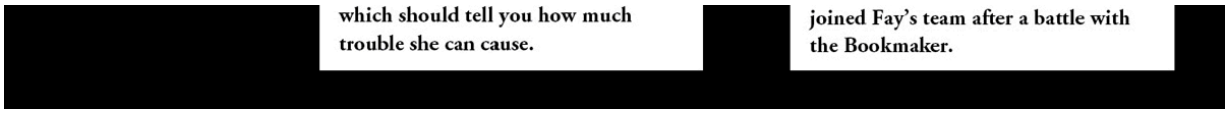
Pearl

An apostle who possesses teleportation abilities. She once earned herself the nickname Assumption-Autopilot Girl,



Nel

From Mal-ra. Formerly retired, she


which should tell you how much trouble she can cause.
joined Fay's team after a battle with the Bookmaker.

Chapter

Prologue

How Dare They Eject Mineself Twice!

1

The sun rose in the sky, reflecting off the buildings of the Ruin skyline and making their dull silver glow.

The time? Seven AM, an hour when most of Ruin's citizens were at home getting ready for the day, leaving the town suffused with silence…

"Grrr! Now they've gone and angered me—the Undefeated!"

Silent except for a voice that bellowed from the Arcane Court building, a voice that was like an explosion and a child throwing a tantrum all in one. It was so terrible that it passed straight through the building's concrete walls and shook the glass of the private residences in the vicinity.

What had happened?

The answer to that question lay in the Dive Center beneath the Arcane Court.

"To think! I dove in there to play the gods' games with Tiny Human, and they booted me out! How dare they?!"

In the Dive Center was a Divine Gate, a statue shaped like a dragon's head, and on top of the Divine Gate sat a girl with her arms crossed in front of her. She had a captivating face, with large ruby-colored eyes.

Yes, she was so lovely that one might describe her with words like *enthralling* or *enchanting*, but beyond her looks, her most distinguishing feature was her outfit. Specifically, her T-shirt, on which the word *Undefeated* was scrawled in enormous letters.

"Well, I *am* undefeated! I guess I can't really blame them for ejecting me out of sheer terror. But that means I can't take part in Tiny Human's game! Oogh, who did this?!" She clawed at the solid wall of the Divine Gate, *grrr*'d again, and then frowned. Suddenly, she snapped, "Human!"

"Y-yes, Lady Uroboros?!" Chief Secretary Miranda said, straightening up when the god-girl addressed her. Miranda might have run the entire Arcane Court branch office, but at that moment, she was thoroughly outranked. The silver-haired girl sitting on the Divine Gate was a bona fide deity. And not just any deity: She was the Undefeated God Uroboros, who for so long had instilled fear into humanity as one challenger after another attempted her game and failed. Charming, sweet, and adorable she might have been, but if she really got angry, she could level the city in a matter of seconds. When she wanted something done, people did it.

"Wh-what do you need?" Miranda asked.

"This Divine Gate kicked me out. From what I saw, it was the doing of four different gods, and I want to investigate the perpetrators. I'm going to list the things that I need for my ritual, and you're going to get them for me."

"A ritual?! I m-mean, uh…what do you…?" Miranda asked with a gulp. Whatever Uroboros wanted, it was something important enough for an all-knowing, omnipotent god to specifically request. Obtaining it would no doubt be a monumental challenge, a Herculean labor. "What shall I prepare for you, ma'am?"

"Two pizzas with extra cheese and five chocolate bars. Also, a choco-banana crêpe sandwich, and some salted-seaweed potato chips. To drink, I'll have a ginger ale!"

"……"

"……"

For a very, very long moment, Miranda didn't speak. Finally, she simply said, "…I'm sorry?"

“Arrrgh! Did you not hear me, human?” The girl, who had begun studying the Divine Gate intently, turned around once more. “Two pizzas with extra cheese, five chocolate bars, a choco-banana crêpe sandwich, and salted-seaweed potato chips. Plus a ginger ale!”

“May I ask, uh, what for?”

“For my lunch, of course!”

“Er… Oh.”

Uroboros sounded quite serious. Miranda stared at her, as confused as one could be when confronted with the supernatural.

“I didn’t realize spiritual beings needed to eat, too.”

“We don’t.”

“Then why…?”

“Because I am undefeated!”

This wasn’t getting them anywhere. It dawned on Miranda that gods didn’t operate by human logic, and she decided to just go along with it. “That makes perfect sense,” she said humbly.

“Doesn’t it, though? After all, I *am* undefeated!” Uroboros was very pleased with this conclusion.

Miranda bowed to her, then took out a communications device and called one of her staff upstairs.

“It’s me. I’m going to list a few items. I want you to get them for me right away, no questions asked.”

Chapter

Player.1

Vs. The God-Tree Guardians —God-Tree-Fruit Basketball①—

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods on high beckoned people, chosen by standards only the gods knew, to play the gods' games. Such people became apostles, able to traverse the superior spiritual realm known as Elements—where, at that moment, Fay found himself looking at a sprawling forest: a sea of green made of trees so tall, they seemed to pierce the heavens.

"This game of God-Tree-Fruit Basketball is about to begin!"

A meep's declaration reverberated through the woods. "*Before we start, let's review the rules. This is the forest of the God-Tree, Yggdrasil. The trees you're looking at are all young sprouts born from Yggdrasil—and you may use* this entire forest *to enjoy the game to your heart's content!*"

At that moment, loud voices could be heard from somewhere behind the meep.

"Kya-ha-ha! We can finally play! Humans never come to this forest! Not ever—but here are some now! At last!"

A group of small, winged beings appeared—fairies called nymphs. They were members of the gods' team. They floated right about the height of a human head on their glittering, butterfly-like wings, and

despite their size, the sound of their voices was immense. There were three nymphs, and each spoke the same words at the same time, resulting in three times the volume!

"*Better brace yourselves, humans—we're gonna make punching bags out of you! Aren't we, Dryad?*" the nymphs said.

"*Perish the thought.*" The response, a woman's measured tone, came from a dryad, a humanoid tree whose whole body was green. Instead of hair, it had living vines on its head. There were three dryads as well, each of whom had a gentle smile on its face. "*If I can enjoy a pleasant game, that's all I want. Greet the humans with a mild manner to put them off their guard, then lavish my attentions on them slowly… Heh heh! I might dabble in imagining it, but I would never actually…*"

"*Dryad, you are twisted!*" The nymphs burst into cackling laughter. Including them and the dryads, Fay saw six figures, but behind them were yet three more, which looked like massive tree stumps walking around on their roots.

"*……*"

They were silent, for the tree spirits called treants didn't speak any human language.

These nine formed the gods' team.

"Okay, hold on just a second! This ain't right, Meep!" shouted a tall, slim young man with handsome, charismatic features. Ashlan Highrols, the leader of Team Blaze, stalked toward the meep where it floated in midair. "It's us against *nine* gods?! I've never heard of so many gods on one team! The gods' games are supposed to be one deity versus a bunch of humans!"

"*They are not* nine *gods. They're a* single *god team!*"

"What's the darn difference?!"

"*The difficulty level*," the meep said succinctly. "*If there were nine gods, the game would be nine times as hard as normal, but that's not what's going on. As explained, they compete as a divine team, making the difficulty level just right!*"

"…Sounds fishy to me."

"*Nope! It's juuuust right!*"

"You're not making me feel better! Well, you heard the man—er,

meep. What's your take, Fay?" Captain Ashlan asked, turning. "If you think we can do this, that'll count for a lot."

"I don't have any idea yet myself. Using this *whole forest* for a game of basketball…?" Fay looked around again.

Undergrowth everywhere, tree roots, vines overhead, and the ground is completely uneven. I can only assume all those things are going to factor into the game somehow.

They were supposed to use the terrain.

That was as close to a hint as the neutral meep could give them.

"I'm happy with anything if it means I can play a game!" said a confident young woman with vermilion hair.

She was the Dragon God Leoleshea—a beauty with amber-colored eyes who had descended from the superior spiritual realm three thousand years prior. A genuine former deity.

"This game called basketball—it's a human sport, right?" she said. "Does that make this forest the court? And I guess we, like, run around it or something?"

"Blech!" said the first of two young women standing beside Leshea.

"Ah, sports. Yes, those I can handle," said the second one. They couldn't have reacted more differently.

The distressed-looking blond girl was Pearl. The one nodding enthusiastically was Nel, a slim, toned girl with black hair. Both were members of Fay's team.

"The day I feared so long has finally arrived," Pearl said, biting her lip. "I knew it would come eventually. The gods' games have so many forms. Not just contests of wits, but battles that test us in combat against the deity, and even games modeled on human sports. Now, at last, I stand face-to-face with that great terror…a sports-based game!"

"Huh? What's so terrifying about it?"

"You're the athletic type, Nel! You wouldn't understand!" Nel looked earnest and ready, whereas Pearl looked like she might burst into tears. "I'm not tall, and I have terrible balance—I fall over just walking down the street! I am *not* happy to see a game where we play sports!"

"Oh…I see, Pearl. With that huge chest, you probably can't even see your feet, can you? I can't claim to understand your experience firsthand, but I can understand that it bothers you deeply."

"Gee, your sympathy means *so* much to me!"

"Just let me handle it. This is my specialty!" Nel was full of vim and vigor. She started doing some stretches. "Master Fay, leave this to me!"

"Good point. This game definitely sounds like it's up your alley, Nel. How's that sound to you, Captain Ashlan?"

"If she's got your referral, Fay, I'm not gonna object." Captain Ashlan had begun bending and flexing, too.

This was a team battle. Human basketball usually involved teams of five people, but they expected the gods' version to be a bit different. The nymphs, the dryads, and the treants—three of each—made up a team of nine.

So this is going to be nine on nine. If we really have this whole forest for our "court," it's more than big enough for eighteen players.

If they had to pick nine people, then they would have to start by choosing an *overall leader* to be their basketball team captain.





There were three apostle teams present. If each of their captains gave their own orders, they wouldn't be able to coordinate tactics, and they might even end up arguing. They needed a single leader who could command everyone on the nine-person team.

"You need a basketball captain? Leave it to me!" a pink-haired girl said, her hand shooting into the air. "As founder and leader of Empress, the garden of maidens, I, Anita, nominate myself as head of this operation!"

Anita Manhattan. At fifteen years old, she was one of the youngest apostles at the Arcane Court, but almost as soon as she joined the Ruin branch office, she had founded her own team and distinguished herself by displaying excellent leadership skills.

"All right, then," Anita said. "By my authority as basketball captain and overall leader, I will now choose the members of our team. Treasured sister Leshea, treasured sister Pearl, treasured sister Nel! You three are with me. As for the rest of the team, we'll just—mrrpfhh?!"

"No one said you could choose anything yet!" snapped Captain Ashlan, squishing Anita's cheeks with both hands. "The overall leader should obviously be either the person with the most wins or the person with the largest team!"

"Y-yes, that does make sense…"

"So, Fay? Who is it? Who's gonna be in command?" Ashlan asked without releasing Anita's cheeks. "Personally, I'd feel better if you were handling things."

"You know, if it's okay with you, I'd rather you do it, Captain Ashlan."

"Well…since you asked." Ashlan scratched the back of his head and smiled sheepishly.

Naturally, Fay hadn't pressed the position of overall leader on Ashlan just because he didn't want to do it. He'd judged that this gave them the best chance of success.

I'm thinking about the difference in our team sizes. Captain Ashlan's Team Blaze has twelve people, by far the most out of the three groups present.

He had experience managing twelve different personalities and

Arises. He was surely the most capable of bringing out everyone's individual strengths in this game.

"All right, I'm the leader. So give me some details. If this is basketball, then there must be a ball and a net, right?"

"*That's correct. For this game, you'll be playing with Yggdrasil's own fruits!*" The meep pointed to the four balls that lay on the ground—or rather, the tree seeds they would be using as balls. They had fallen from overhead a moment earlier, and they consisted of:

——A green one about the size of a coconut.

——A blue one about the size of a coconut, which had nudged some earth aside when it hit the ground.

——A yellow one about the size of a coconut, which had made a crack in the ground.

——And a red one larger than a person that had slammed into the earth with the force of a meteor, creating a crater.

They had varying *weights*—especially that last one. The red ball was clearly different and much heavier.

"The fruits have fallen smack-dab in the middle of the basketball court. Fifty meters away from where you're standing is the god team's goal, and fifty meters the other way is the human one."

In other words, they had a one-hundred-meter space in which to play, and the balls marked the very center of it.

"Huh? But where are these, uh, goals?" Captain Ashlan asked, trying to peer fifty meters into the distance. "I don't see any markers."

"*The goals are at the farthest end of each of your sides. There's an especially large tree growing on each end of the court, and up in its branches—fifty meters up—a white flower blooms. That's the goal. Protect your own goal, while also dropping a ball into your opponents' flower, and you shall score points!*" The meep pointed into the branches.

"We have to climb some giant tree?!" Pearl's eyes were wide. The goal tree looked as big as a high-rise building. The trunk alone must have been ten meters around, and only once they had climbed it would they be able to reach the white flower that was the goal, blooming somewhere among the branches.

——So the "balls" were seeds, and the "net" was a flower.

——Other than those two little substitutions, this was unmistakably basketball.

Except for one thing: They would have to utilize the *entire* forest if they wanted to achieve victory.

"I see you think the goal is too high up there. You are, of course, welcome to lob the balls toward the goal from the ground, but players can also climb the trees. As you can see, Yggdrasil's trunk has plenty of nooks, crannies, protrusions, and handholds, so it's a simple matter of climbing up while carrying the ball."

They weren't sure how they were supposed to reach a goal that was fifty meters above their heads. However, coming up with a strategy for that was what the game was all about.

"You see those trees that are leaning at an angle on either side of the huge tree? I bet you could run up those to get close to the goal, too," Nel said, her arms folded. "And then there are those vines hanging from the branches. You could climb them like ropes to get up. Hey, Meep, I've got a question."

"Ask me anything!"

"In basketball, players dribble the ball. Would kicking these seeds be against the rules?"

"No, that's quite all right. 'Carrying the ball' is just an expression to enable human understanding. My divine master, Treant, has tentacles, for example. However you choose to move the ball is at your discretion."

Behind the meep, the tree spirits, the treants, wiggled the roots that served as their legs. Unlike the nymphs and dryads, the treants really just looked like walking trees. Those roots wrapped themselves around the green ball and duly picked it up.

"My Lord Treant has picked up the ball, which weighs one kilogram and is worth two points."

No one made a sound. Everyone was focused on…not the green ball the treant was holding. They were fixated on the three other balls still on the ground.

"*This game of basketball is a race to fifty points,*" the meep said. "*Perhaps some of you already have an inkling, but in this game,* all

four balls *are in play at the same time. The blue ball weighs two kilograms and is worth three points. The yellow one, twenty kilograms, and it earns you ten points.*"

So there were four balls, and the harder they were to lug around, the more points they were worth.

"Finally, our red ball! This one is 'ground-bound'; it cannot be lifted. It's a tricky little extra element. Score with it? Hah! Getting it anywhere near the flower will be a colossal challenge—but if you put it into your opponent's goal, the reward is—"

"Oh! I bet I know!" Anita exclaimed, flinging her hand into the air. "It's fifty points, isn't it?"

"—one hundred million points!"

"Do we really need a ball worth *that* much?! Well…whatever. So the red ball is an instant win; that's what matters. The others are two points, three points, and ten points in order of weight. And the first team to fifty points wins. Simple enough."

"That's right! But I warn you, be careful about running out of time. Allow me to summon our nectar timer!"

Something else came plummeting from overhead: a cup—like a paper cup—but made of Yggdrasil's woven leaves. With a *plip-plip*, drops of nectar poured into the cup from one of the giant tree's flowers.

"This is your reference *for how much time you have remaining. The nectar will fall at the rate of one drop per minute, so thirty drops is thirty minutes. When the nectar overflows this vessel, I, your humble referee, shall blow the end-of-game whistle!"*

"Hmm?" Fay got the feeling that something was a bit off. The meep was about to continue, but Fay raised his hand. "So what you're saying is that when the nectar cup is full, that's *not* time's up, right?"

"Correct. The nectar timer is only an approximation; time is up when the referee—namely myself—blows the whistle. At that point, the team with more points will be declared the winner."

"……" Fay put his hand to his chin and silently pondered that information. Even the meep couldn't have guessed the potential plan that began to form in Fay's mind at that moment.

"Of further note, in this game you're allowed to steal another player's ball, interfere with other players attempting to score at your goal, and so on. Fundamentally, nothing is against the rules."

"Aren't you practically begging us to rough one another up, then?!" Ashlan exclaimed. "If the gods are going to get physical with us…"

"We're more than prepared for the possibility of casualties. Ah, incidentally, if you're rendered unable to move, you'll be automatically returned to the human world—in one piece! No need to fear."

"I know human sports aren't always safe, but this sounds like it could be a doozie," Ashlan said, turning to Fay with a grim smile. His teammates seemed anxious, too, at this intimation of what was to come. "If we're supposed to assume that we could be taken out by some casual brutality, that means we need to be thinking about substitutes. Fay, Lady Uroboros isn't around, is she?"

"Afraid not. The Divine Gate kicked her out just before she could dive."

If only Uroboros were there…

Suffice it to say, Fay knew how Captain Ashlan was feeling. If they had the (self-proclaimed) undefeated god who had run roughshod over Anubis's maze Lucemia, they might have stood a chance against the gods' team getting physical with them.

Uroboros was thrown bodily backward. "Awww, again*?!"*

That had been her second forcible ejection after the episode in Lucemia.

Why had only Uroboros been kept out? From what Fay could tell, some god had intervened to reject her—but not, it seemed, one of the gods here in Yggdrasil's woods.

"……" Fay was silent for a long moment.

"Fay?" Pearl said. "Is something wrong?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm just hoping Uroboros is all right." He was almost as worried for Chief

Secretary Miranda. Uroboros must have been furious about being punted out of another game, and Fay could just picture the chief secretary trying to calm the god's rage. "May I ask another question?" he said, turning to the meep. "About the 'rough play.' Say a member of the human team gets hurt. Does that nectar clock stop while we swap in someone new?"

"*It does not.*" The meep shook its head. "*The nectar timer is just a natural phenomenon produced by Yggdrasil's flower. It runs continually at a steady pace and will fill up after thirty drops, or thirty minutes of human time.*"

"So play continues while substituting players?"

"That's right. If you take too long with it, you'll leave yourselves open. Better watch out!"

So that was it for the explanation of the rules.

At the exact same moment, Captain Ashlan got everyone's attention with a loud clap. "All riiiight! Rough game or no, humans *invented* basketball! If it's an athletic contest the gods want, this'll be the perfect chance for Lady Leoleshea to strut her stuff!"

Leshea could probably heft the twenty-kilogram yellow seed (ten points) without any trouble. In fact, she could probably do better than lift it: She might be able to fling it right up into the goal.

"I'll bet that god team didn't count on us having a divinity of our own!" Ashlan said.

"*And that does it for the explanation of the* ordinary *rules*," the meep said.

"Huh?"

There was an audible *swssh* as all nine members of the god team, who had acted perfectly indifferent until that moment, turned and looked fixedly at the humans.

"You have among you people with five or more victories in the gods' games. So let's step it up to Expert Mode!"

"Wha—?! Hold on, are you talking about Fay's wins?!" Captain Ashlan cried.

The only people more shocked than him were Pearl and Nel.

"Wait…five wins?!" Pearl stared at her own palm, then looked at Fay. "But I thought you *only* had four—"

"Shh! Keep it to yourself!" Nel said, clapping a hand over Pearl's mouth from behind before she could finish her thought.

That's right: There was a good reason for Fay's teammates to be so shocked.

Nell whispered a warning to Pearl. "Don't forget. They haven't told anyone that Master Fay lost three victories to the Bookmaker. Nobody knows he has three fewer wins than they think, except us and the chief secretary!"

"Y-yeah, I know! But that means he should only have four wins!" Pearl hissed back.

Fay, meanwhile, glanced down at his right palm.

It showed the symbol *V*.

The roman numeral indicated the number of wins he had. The gods themselves had inscribed it there; it was impossible to fake and impossible to hide. Hence the riddle at the heart of this moment.

Pearl's right. We should all be at four *wins. Where did this extra one come from for me?*

The history of Fay's win marks:

1. When he met Leshea, he was at 3-0 (three wins, zero losses).
2. Win: vs. the Giant God Titan: 4-0.
3. Win: vs. the Endless God Uroboros: 5-0.
4. Win: vs. the God of the Sun Army Mahtma II: 6-0.
5. Loss: vs. the Bookmaker, lost three marks: 3-0.
6. Win: vs. the Bookmaker, to bring Nel out of retirement: Nel's losses cleared.
   —Then he and the rest of the team had three wins, zero losses—
7. Win: vs. the God of Underworld, Anubis: 4-0.

It should have been four wins. And yet, there on Fay's hand, and

Pearl's, too, was engraved a *V*.

Why do we have an extra win? Everyone was at three wins immediately after facing the Bookmaker. We all saw one another's scores.

Maybe it had to do with Anubis. There was every chance that dungeon had represented "two wins' worth." But why? Fay was reminded of what Uroboros had said.

"*There were* six *gods in that labyrinth."*

That included Uroboros and Anubis. Which meant that there had been four unidentified gods hiding somewhere in Lucemia.

I don't know why, but there were several gods in that dungeon. Is that why our win marks went up?

Leshea's and Nel's, too. They were looking at their palms, so they were probably wondering the same thing Fay was.

Of course, Fay saw his own palm every single day. The fact that he had never noticed the *V* there before suggested that the change had taken place very, very recently.

"I couldn't say why, but it looks like we've all got five wins," Nel said slowly. "I hope it's not some kind of trap…but it does tell us one thing. The gods' games get *harder* the more you win."

"Aw, gimme a break!" Captain Ashlan was practically tearing his hair out. But then he said, "No, wait. We know that already, right? Or at least, people have guessed that it has worked that way for a long time now. They think maybe the reason no one in human history has ever cleared the games is because that ninth or tenth game becomes virtually impossible to finish."

But now, for the first time, they had proof. Straight from the mouth of a meep who served the gods.

"*Now, hold on a minute*," said the meep, floating over Ashlan's head. "*I only said that we would step up to Expert Mode. That is not the same thing as the difficulty level.*"

"Oh, I get it! Depending on what that means, the difficulty level might even go down, huh?"

"Heh-heh-heh!"

"Ugh, what's with the ominous laughter?! Yo, Fay! *You're* the one with seven wins—help us out!"

"I'll, uh, do my best." Fay nodded at Captain Ashlan, but his mind was already on Expert Mode. The game of God-Tree-Fruit Basketball was exceptionally simple, so he assumed that Expert Mode involved making it more complicated.

"All right, tell us," he said. "What kind of additional rules are there?"

"An excellent question. The newest stipulation is that namely—"

"…a minimum penalty rule comes into play when time runs out!"

The meep was cut off by the three nymphs, who were too excited to wait another moment. Their voices echoed through the woods.

"Listen closely, humans, because we'll only say this once! Expert Mode adds a special calculation in the event that time runs out. At the end of the game, if neither team has scored fifty points, the team with the most points wins—but in Expert Mode, there's a special calculation called the minimum penalty. It means that points from the ball which was used to score the fewest goals don't count. *Oh, except for the ground-bound ball, which scores one hundred million points. That's a special case and isn't subject to this rule. The rule applies only to the two-, three-, and ten-point balls. Only after the minimum penalty is applied will the highest-scoring team be determined. Got it? Then let's—"*

"*Now, just a moment*," a dryad interrupted gently.

The nymphs' verbal torrent suddenly stopped, and they seemed to come back to themselves. "*…Huh? Oops! Did I talk for two hundred hours straight again?*"

"*No, only for a few dozen seconds. However, observe: You see how the humans stand with their jaws agape? They're still struggling to comprehend the rules.*" The green-skinned dryads clapped their hands one time. "*Perhaps a concrete example would help. Suppose*

that when we reach the time limit, you humans have thirty-four points. Further, suppose that you scored them in this way: six goals with the two-point ball (twelve points), four with the three-point ball (twelve points), and one with the ten-point ball. Under the minimum penalty, the points scored with the ball used for the fewest goals would not *count.*"

2-point ball × 6 goals = 12 points

3-point ball × 4 goals = 12 points

10-point ball × 1 goal = 10 points ➡ excluded

Under the minimum penalty, ten points scored with the ten-point ball, which was used for the fewest goals, would be excluded. Therefore, the final score would be twenty-four points.

"Only after the minimum penalty is applied will the scores be compared and a victor determined."

"Huh? Hey, hold on," Ashlan said, frowning. "That means that even if, say, the humans are ahead when time runs out, after this minimum penalty thing is applied, the scores could flip-flop. Who cares if we actually manage to score with that ten-point ball if it's not going to count, like in your example just now?"

"*Now you're getting the idea!*" The three nymphs had perched among the treants' branches. "*The higher the value of the ball, the more the minimum penalty hurts. If you want to make best use of that ten-pointer, you'd better score a lot of goals with it! Right, Treant?*"

"*……*"

"Oh, that's right. You don't speak the humans' language, do you? Don't worry, I'll talk enough for both of us. Anyway, it's all good. That's it for the rules. Hurry up and pick your ten players, humans."

What was that?

The gods' team consisted of nymphs, dryads, and treants, three of each, for a total of nine. If the humans were supposed to pick ten, were the gods being given a handicap? Perhaps this was an act of mercy.

No sooner had the thought crossed the humans' minds than the meep proclaimed, "*All right! Let's meet the final member of the god team!*"

The humans let out a collective sigh. How naive of them to think they'd caught a break. This was an all-out contest between the humans and the gods. There were no handicaps and no mercy.

"Say hello to the Beast of Defense, Goalie Bear!"

"*Rrrawwwrrr!*" The forest greenery shook, and a furry brown bear came flying out—a bear so fluffy that it looked just like a sweet, cuddly toy.

Except for the fact that it was three meters tall. Big enough that even a full-grown human looked like a child beside it.

"Goalie Bear won't take part in the offensive push. It specializes in protecting the divine team's goal."

Pearl pointed at the massive beast. "Don't tell me! Is this bear the legendary—?!" She turned and whispered to Fay, "Fay! I've got something to tell you! Don't tell anyone, but I know what that bear really is!"

"You do?!"

"I'm sure of it! It must be the Bear in the Woods! You know? From the kids' song about the girl who meets a nice bear in the woods?"

"Uh…I'm pretty sure they just introduced it as the Goalie Bear."

"It's *the* Bear in the Woods!"

"Um, all right. It's still the tenth player on the gods' team."

This basketball game was going to be ten on ten. The humans needed to pick ten players.

Who would they be?

Leshea and Nel with their exceptional athletic abilities, certainly. And of course, Pearl, whose Arise seemed likely to come in handy. In which case…

"Yo, Fay!" Captain Ashlan turned and gestured in a shooing motion that clearly meant *stand back*. "This is an order from your commander-in-chief. I'm saving you and your team for later. I'll pick ten of us from Blaze for the starting lineup."

"What? You mean…"

"You heard 'em, right? This game's gonna get rough. No point in you getting hurt before we figure things out."

"I appreciate the thought…I guess…"

"I see!" Anita said, looking deeply moved. "You're going to put yourselves in the line of fire to help find out how to win this game! What beautiful self-sacrifice! Then I, too, shall save myself in preparation for the latter half of this contest, when—"

"You're up first."

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!" Anita's expression twisted in shock. Apparently she'd been convinced that she would get the same kind of special treatment. "But, Captain Ashlan—I mean, Commander-in-Chief! I'm desperate to be on the same team as my treasured sisters! Don't you think it's only appropriate that I should play in the second half?"

"If you survive the god team's 'rough play,' you will."

"But I don't *wanna* be a sacrificial pawn!"

"C'mon, folks, let's get going!" Captain Ashlan grabbed the blubbering Anita by the collar and dragged her away, pulling her until they stood directly under the referee—the meep. "I'm the overall leader here. For my starting lineup, I nominate myself and the nine people directly behind me."

"*Then you're ready to play, yes?*" The meep took out a shining, ochre-colored gourd and placed the opening to its lips, just as if it were a real whistle. "*With Yggdrasil's forest as its stage, this game of God-Tree-Fruit Basketball will now begin!*"

The meep blew into the gourd, producing a blast of noise that reverberated all around the woods. The start signal!

Vs. The Guardians of the God-Tree's Wood
Game: God-Tree-Fruit Basketball
Win Condition 1: First team to 50 points. The big trees in each area host the goals (flowers); points are scored by putting the balls (seeds) in the goals.
Win Condition 2: If the time limit is reached, the team with the most points wins. However, calculation of the "Minimum Penalty" will be enforced.
Other: The four balls are in play

simultaneously. The green ball (1 kilogram) is worth 2 points; the blue ball (2 kilograms) is worth 3 points; the yellow ball (20 kilograms) is worth 10 points.
The red ball (infinite weight) is a bonus worth 100 million points.
The entire forest may be used as a "gimmick."

"*Wahoo! Ready, humans? Here we go!*" the three nymphs cheered. "*We know this forest up, down, and sideways, so we'll give you four minutes of 'study time.' You can use it to strategize, check out the woods—whatever you think will help!*"

"You hear that? They're makin' fun of us," Captain Ashlan growled. "But we'll take any help we can get!" As soon as he was sure that the gods' team wasn't moving from its side of the field, he gave his teammates his best, most valiant smile. "All right, huddle up! We've only got four minutes here. I say two minutes for planning, then two minutes to check out the tricks and traps this forest offers. Okay, plan first…"

"Captain Ashlan! If I may?" Nel called from off the court, where she stood beside Fay. "This is a game, but it's also a sport! And in sports, positions are important. I think it would help to assign offense and defense!"

"Good thinking, Nel! How many for each?"

"I'm not sure…"

"Isn't that the most important part?! Shit… Okay, we'll figure it out during the game. Let's start with five each. Who looks good for offense? Hmm… Zechey, Gratton, Dan, and me. How about you, Anita? Where do you want to be?"

"Just a second, Leader!" Anita said, putting a pause on the proceedings. "Aren't you forgetting something important?"

"Like what?"

"This game has four balls. Handling four balls with five people on offense? Who are they going to pass to? They'll just get taken out

one by one, and the balls will wind up with the other team."

"Huh?! Okay, more people on offense… There are four balls, so we need at least that many people, and they each need someone to pass to, so that would make eight people on offense!"

"Two defenders are never going to be enough."

"W-well, what do you want me to do?!" Ashlan was almost tearing his hair out.

The nymphs were clutching their sides laughing at the human "commander-in-chief."

"Tee-hee-hee! Four minutes go by in a flash, huh? You're already halfway through!"

"Whaaat? Sh-shoot, time's flying…"

Two minutes had passed with astonishing speed, and they hadn't even figured out how many offensive and defensive players they should have.

One dryad crossed its arms and gave them a little smile.

"*We can't blame them, Nymph. This is quite different from human basketball.*" What they said next wasn't a sign of compassion, needless to say, but indicated absolute control of the situation: "*They appear to be completely at a loss for what to do. Very well, humans, let us give you a hint about this game. May it be useful to you.*"

The three dryads spread their arms wide.

"In this game, we gods always proceed according to a certain plan*."*

"Say what?!"

"You could call it a strategy for our total and complete victory. We will proceed in such a way as to bring that plan to reality."

"Gee, thanks for givin' us a sense of what's going on," Ashlan said sarcastically, then swallowed so hard that his throat bobbed visibly. "What I'm hearing is, the gods' plan doubles as their '*rules*.' And we have to guess what those rules are. That might give us a chance of winning."

"*If you prefer to think so.*" The dryad gave him that small smile again. "*All's fair in this game. Bring your wits, your physical skills, and your Arises to the challenge.*"

"You bet! You want a challenge, you've got one!"

They were down to one minute of "study time."

Captain Ashlan started right in: He practically kicked off the ground, throwing himself toward the four balls in center court. The members of Team Blaze were hot on his heels. From courtside, Pearl and Nel cheered at his gallant display. Meanwhile, Fay and Leshea, seated on nearby tree stumps, stayed silent.

"The gods' plan, huh?" Fay mused. He was just as eager as Pearl and Nel to cheer for the human team, but instead he clenched his fists and forced the spectacle out of his awareness. He'd left this in Captain Ashlan's hands; his role now wasn't to cheer, but to observe and ponder.

Step 1: Figure out the gods' plan.
Step 2: Figure out a plan that was better than theirs.

This game, he suspected, would be a battle against the *clock*.

"All right, people, we start with five on offense, five on defense. Same folks I named earlier. Let's go!" Ashlan called as he dashed along the court. "Offensive players, follow me! That includes you, Anita!"

"Y-you know you're headed straight for center court, right?!" Anita said, racing to catch up. She talked fast as she sprinted along. "Shouldn't we investigate the forest tricks and traps now that we've got the positions settled?!"

"Doesn't matter!"

"It doesn't?!"

"We were forgetting something important. *That* thing will give us instant victory!"

Ashlan was pointing at the red ball—the ground-bound seed. It was the largest of the four balls and worth one hundred million points. Victory in a single stroke.

"We can use the last of our 'study time' to figure out exactly how heavy that thing is. Maybe we can't pick it up, but if we could dribble it along like a soccer ball, that'd be all we need! Hnngh! Uh…h-huh?"

Ashlan stopped cold. He shoved the red ball, which was a good two meters across, as hard as he could, but it didn't even budge.

"Grrr… Damn, that really is heavy! C'mon, guys, help me!"

The five offensive players pushed in unison but to no avail.

"Hnngh?! All right, *everybody*, tackle it!"

Ten humans piled against the red ball, and with all of them leaping at it, the ball finally moved…a few *millimeters*. It didn't even seem like it was starting to roll.

"I think we need a bigger word than *heavy* for this thing!" Captain Ashlan exclaimed. He'd been expecting it to weigh a lot, but this was ridiculous. "This is hopeless! Yo, Meep!"

"Well, it is *just a bonus."*

"Spare me the I-told-you-so's. All right, guys, change of plan. We focus on the three smaller balls!"

Ashlan pointed at the other seeds—and at that moment, the god team leapt into action.

"*Your four minutes are up. Doesn't look like you were able to make much use of your study time*," a dryad said, setting off at a run across the grass. Its voice was calm and its movements elegant, but its speed was incredible.

The nymphs howled with laughter. "*Wee-hee-hee! Your luck ran out when you got greedy and went right for the ground-bound fruit! All right, Treant, let's go!*" One nymph settled among the leaves of a treant's branches, and the latter trundled toward the human side on its roots.

If the dryad's movements had seemed almost instantaneous, the treant was like a wall thundering toward them.

"All right, Dryad, Treant! Start with Formation Eight!"

"What's Formation Eight?!" Captain Ashlan said, grimacing.

The god team's actions were always rooted in a certain "plan." But based on what the nymph had just shouted, that plan had at least eight accompanying "formations."

The gods had a lot of cards in their hands—and the humans had

almost none!

"Dammit! We've got no idea what they're planning!" Ashlan said, clutching his head.

"I tried to tell youuuuuu!" Anita yelled as she barreled past him. "First, we have to secure those balls, Leader! Whatever the gods are up to, if we have the balls, their plan won't matter!"

"Let's go for the ten-point ball, then!"

Their options were the two-point ball (one kilogram), the three-point ball (two kilograms), and the ten-point ball (twenty kilograms).

Captain Ashlan reached for the seed—but the moment he stretched out his hand, a treant's roots whipped in from the side and smacked his hand away.

"Huh?!" he said.

"Treants' tendrils are nimbler than they look!"

The ten-point ball went scuttling along the ground. Ashlan's teammates didn't have time to pick it up before it was in a dryad's arms. The dryad lofted it high into the air like a volleyball serve.

"I'm passing to you, Nymph!"

"Wahoo! I'm ready! Leave it to me, Dryad!"

The nymph was right underneath the ball as it descended. Surely there was no way a creature hardly bigger than a human palm could catch a twenty-kilogram ball?

"*O wind, spin up, spin up, spin up!*" the nymph said, activating wind magic. A gust manifested and caught the ball in midair.

"You five on defense, don't let that ball anywhere near our goal!" Ashlan shouted.

"Leader! Allow me to draw your attention to the fact that the gods are focusing their attention on the ten-point ball—the two-and three-point balls are still left!"

"Shoot, that's right!"

Anita was dashing toward the remaining two seeds. Seven of the god team's members had gone to get the ten-point ball, leaving the other two all but undefended.

"B-but then again, the two of them together are only five points! If they dunk on us with the ten-point ball, we'll already be down by five!"

"Not at all! I have an idea!" Anita grabbed the two-point ball. "The real key to this game is none other than the correct *ratio* of points! Specifically, I have realized that a formation that achieves an average value of more than one-and-a-half points per person is the solution!"

Collectively, the three balls represented fifteen points (2 + 3 + 10), and there were ten people on each team. In other words, each player was worth about *1.5 points*.

"The god team has dedicated seven of its members to the ten-point ball. Using seven players to get ten points would be an average of one-point-four. That's actually *in*efficient!"

"So…so we just need to do the opposite!" Ashlan said.

"Exactly! The two-and three-point balls are wide open. If the two of us can score with them, that's a whole two-and-a-half points per person! Our other eight players can try to slow down the gods and the ten-point ball!"

There was the plan.

The gods' team had basically ignored the two-and three-point balls (worth five points altogether). Anita and Ashlan would gladly take them, while the other eight players on the human team climbed up their tree and mounted a staunch defense of the goal.

"With eight separate people guarding our 'flower,' even a team of gods will find it hard to score with that ten-point ball. Five points is all we need if they score zero!"

First things first. They had to get to the other two seeds before the god team.

"I got the three-point ball!" Ashlan said.

"And I have the two-pointer!" Anita replied. "Hee hee! Those greedy gods went right for the ten-point ball, but these lower-point ones are going to win us this game!"

The moment Ashlan and Anita had the balls, there was a rustle of grass, and two dryads came after them.

"Oops! Looks like a couple of balls got away from us. Do you really think you can throw them all the way to the flower?"

"Ngh!" Ashlan looked up at the flower fifty meters above his head. He made to throw the ball, but after an instant's pause, he

gritted his teeth and started running again. He was never going to be strong enough. Ashlan had a "Superhuman" Arise that granted him physical prowess, but flinging a two-kilogram ball all the way up to the goal was beyond him.

"Hey, Anita! Your Arise turns your body into iron or something, right?" he shouted.

"It's called Iron Heart, and it doesn't turn me *into* iron, it makes me *as hard as* iron!"

"So it's Superhuman. Think you can throw the ball up there?"

"It'd be close!"

"Yeah, me too. Let's hoof it to that flower, then!"

Ashlan clutched the ball to his side and ran.

The ground was uneven, as one would expect of a natural forest. The roots of giant trees poked out here and there, and the slightest lapse in concentration could result in them tripping and tumbling to the ground.

"Hurry! That dryad behind you is quick! I don't want to think about what'll happen if they catch you!"

"Captain Ashlan! What about your Arise, Safe Driver?"

"It makes my voice louder! And my hearing gets a little sharper!"

"That's it?!"

"Don't say that! In a game like this, it might just help. Hey, you guys!" he shouted to his teammates behind him.

Ashlan's Arise, Safe Driver, effectively turned him into a walking megaphone. The gods' games were played across huge fields, and communication was often a real problem. If they couldn't hear their allies because the field of play was too large, they couldn't coordinate or share ideas.

Ashlan's Arise solved that problem. He could talk over a tidal wave, a storm, or a roaring avalanche—virtually any natural sound.

"Let us handle the offense!" he said. "The rest of you, guard that goal like your lives depend on it!"

Fifty meters behind him, his teammates nodded in unison, then jumped for the leaves above their heads. Yggdrasil's branches were as large as logs, and the humans went from one to the next, climbing steadily. The branches didn't even flex under their weight.

Eight human team members arranged themselves in front of the flower goal.

They could tell that the god team was coming.

"*Wahoo! Go for it, Treant—charge 'em!*" The nymph tossed the ten-point ball into the air on the magical gust. From behind the tiny deity came thunderous footsteps, and the massive trunks, the treants, appeared.

"They're so fast!"

"Did they just run *straight up* Yggdrasil's trunk?!"

Whereas the human defenders had needed to climb from branch to branch, the treants simply walked up, perpendicular to Yggdrasil's massive length.

"Wahoo! Goooo, Treant!"

The three treants barreled toward the human goal like rampaging tanks—and crashed into the defenders.

"Yiiikes!" the humans cried; members of Blaze went flying this way and that all along Yggdrasil's branches, thrown aside by the treants' assault.

"*Ha-ha-ha! Now your flower's defenseless! Alley-oop!*" The nymph flung the ball toward the goal flower, which stood wide open. Propelled by a whirlwind, the ten-point ball drew an arc straight to it—but the instant before it would have gone into the goal, it stopped in midair.

A wind is blowing from the opposite direction. The gust trying to push the ball into the goal, and the one trying to push it back out, met in the middle.

"What's all this?"

"You gods…aren't the only ones who can use wind magic!" said a silver-haired girl lying prone on a branch. The treants' attack had knocked her aside, but she'd still stuck out her hands and was using her Magical Arise for all she was worth. It was wind magic versus wind magic. A divine gust versus a human one, fighting for control of the ball.

"I'm a new recruit here on Team Blaze," the girl said. "I hope you'll be so kind as to remember me!"

"Way to go, Rax! You may be a rookie, but you're pulling your

weight!” Captain Ashlan cheered.

“Captain, please hurry!” Rax said—it was great that Ashlan was happy with her and all, but she was clearly using every bit of strength she had. “I’m losing this battle! I can’t keep this up for long… Hurry up and score!”

“I’m on it!” Captain Ashlan looked down. Then he discovered that two dryads had snuck up on him, their rich green color blending with the leaves of the tree.

“Oops! Spotted us?”

“Hurry up, Anita!” Ashlan called, lunging for one of the horizontal vines. It swung wildly, but he ran across it as if he were walking a tightrope, heading for the god team’s flower.

“*Grrroooohhh!*” came a beastlike roar. Something huge and brown came hurtling through the copious foliage.

“What the hell?!”

“C-Captain, it’s that thing! The Beast of Defense…”

“Oh, right! The Bear in the Woods!”

Fwooosh. The moment Pearl, who had been observing proceedings from ground level, chimed in with this observation, the scene froze.

“……”

“……”

After a protracted silence, the god team turned toward her as if to ask, *What’s with that name?* Even the Goalie Bear itself looked flabbergasted, as if he wanted to say, *Huh? Are you talking about* me*?*

It was an opening.

Anita snapped back to awareness. “Now, Captain! Do it!”

Ashlan reacted almost as fast. “I’m afraid you’re open, my dear bear!”

He slammed the ball into the goal flower, completely ignoring the still-flummoxed bear.

> “*Gooooaall!*” the meep cried. “*Amazing! The human team has put five points on the board!*”

Even the meep was getting into it. With the god team's overwhelming advantage, it was astonishing that the first points went to the humans.

"*Goalie Bear?! Where were you on that one?*" the nymphs bellowed from far across the field, by the human goal. "*We've put everyone on offense! If you don't keep the basket safe, who will?! Now we're already five points down!*"

"*…Grrrm*," the bear grumbled.

"*It's fine*," said the dryads, two of whom were running along the ground. "*If they've taken five points off us, we just need to respond by taking ten.*"

"Hmm?" Nel was the first to notice that something was *off*: namely, the two dryads sprinting across the forest floor. They had been climbing the god team's tree mere moments ago but had immediately jumped down.

"So that's what they're planning! Captain Ashlan!" Nel shouted. However, he couldn't hear her at this distance, and she knew it. "Get back here! They're planning to commit *all nine players* to hitting our goal!"

"*Too little, too late. Flowers? Fire!*" All three dryads snapped their fingers, and every single one of the innumerable buds on Yggdrasil's branches popped open audibly and began spitting seeds like machine guns.

"Huh?! Yowch!"

The barrage of seed bullets took out several members of the human team. This was a dryad's plant magic. While the nymphs had wind magic, the dryads could control Yggdrasil's plants and flowers.

It wasn't over yet.

"Go, Treant!"

The massive creatures, nymphs still riding on them, charged again. Apostles that had finally made it to their feet cried out as they were slammed against Yggdrasil's trunk.

"Guys?!" the wind user, Rax, called out, her eyes going wide. She was the last person on the human side who could still move—and all three nymphs were gathering in front of her.

"Too bad for you! One little human magic user is never going to

beat us!"

"Eeeeeek?!"

The nymphs unleashed a more fearsome volley of wind magic, blowing Rax backward.

Eight members of the human team lay sprawled nearby. Their flower was completely defenseless, and a nymph lazily drifted over and dropped the ten-point ball into it.

"It's a ten-point goal! The god team has turned this game around, and the score is now five to ten!"

They'd been well and truly worked over. Everyone on the human team wanted to cry.

They were learning that this was not a human ball game. Soccer, basketball, Ping-Pong, tennis, and all the rest, shared one thing in common. When humans played them, there was a brief *break* after a score.

Because there was *only one ball*. It took time to bring it back to the "restart" point.

"But there's no such thing here…" Nel clenched her fists. It killed her that she had been so slow to realize the nuance. "There are four different balls in play. One of them might be used to score, but the battle for the other three doesn't let up for a second."

Anita and Captain Ashlan had made the mistake of breathing sighs of relief. They'd scored with the two-and three-point balls, and then they'd relaxed, assuming that there would be a moment's rest before the game resumed. The dryads had turned that moment of inattention against them, using all the god team's members to score with the ten-point ball.

Again, this was something different from human sports: The *gods* never stopped.

Not now, not later, she thought.

This was sports as real-time strategy, a game where the action never let up for a moment. It was like they were playing chess while having to navigate an ever-shifting game board. Yet they also knew

that everything the god team was doing was in pursuit of a particular plan.

The only question was: What *was* that plan?

"Wahoo! We've got a five-point lead. I hope that's not all it takes to beat you!"

"Oh, we're not done yet!" Captain Ashlan ground his teeth.

Beside him, Anita, along with the apostles who had been blown around, showed that their fighting fire had in no way diminished. They all glared at the other team, roused to fury.

"Leader! What about the gods' plan or whatever it is?" Anita said.

"Don't get too bent out of shape about it, Anita. This game's only just beginning!"

They didn't have any answers yet. The god team hadn't given them a chance to find any. By keeping up an unrelenting attack, they denied the human side any time to think.

Among the participants and observers, Fay alone was looking at something completely off the court.

"……"

The nectar clock. *Drip, drip*, it went.

Drop by drop, the golden nectar fell into the bowl below. Fay studied it intently.

"What if the gods' plan is to…? But if that's true, then…maybe we could turn that against them?" Fay muttered to himself, so quietly that only the vermilion-haired girl standing beside him heard what he said.

Chapter

Intermission

That's Why I Am Undefeated

Gods' Games We Play

In the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court—specifically, in the basement Dive Center—Miranda stood stock-still.

"Ugh, I'm so tired. And my feet hurt…"

She'd been standing that way for an hour already. Under any other circumstances, she would have flopped down onto the sofa behind her and leaned back to enjoy a nice, comfortable break while she watched the gods' games play out. But not today.

"And Fay and his friends *don't have* a Godeye lens…"

The Arcane Court wasn't even getting footage of the game, thanks to an aberration that had been affecting the Divine Gates ever since Anubis's little "force everyone to come to her labyrinth" trick. The whole point of today's game had been to check whether the aberration had been corrected—the general public had never even been informed of the issue.

If that had been the only factor at play, Miranda would have flopped right back onto that sofa—but it wasn't.

"Human!"

"Y-yes, ma'am?!" the chief secretary squeaked, immediately straightening up again.

This was the *true* reason Miranda couldn't relax: Someone who *outranked* her was present. Someone who outranked her by an overwhelming, superlative, utterly unbridgeable gulf of an amount—none other than a god.

"What might I do for you, Lady Uroboros?!"

A silver-haired girl was perched cross-legged atop the Divine

Gate. This was the spiritual body, the form that the Endless God Uroboros had adopted when coming to the human world. Her presence kept Miranda on her toes—and on her feet.

"I've got something to say."

"Yes, ma'am?!"

The girl broke into a broad grin. "This pizza sure is delicious!" She had been wordlessly wolfing down one slice of pizza after another the entire time. "Thin, fragrant, perfectly crisped pizza dough loaded with four kinds of cheese—wonderful. Even my undefeated self could nearly succumb to such a thing!"

"Yes, ma'am, and you might be interested to know that this particular pizza is even better with a drizzle of honey on—"

"What?!" Uroboros's eyes went wide. She didn't even wait for Miranda to finish. "You would put honey on pizza?!"

"Yes, ma'am. It's the perfect complement to the salty flavor of the cheese. Would you like to try it?"

"I would!"

"I'll get some for you right away. Ahem… Incidentally, Lady Uroboros…" This was the perfect opportunity: While the god was enjoying delicious food and in a decent mood, Miranda spoke seriously, carefully. The last thing she wanted to do was upset this deity. "I know you investigated the abnormality with the Divine Gates, my lady. Did you happen to uncover any clues?"

"……" Uroboros abruptly went silent.

"Ack! I—I mean, not to rush you or anything! Er, ahh, you must, of course, investigate at your own pace!"

"I already know."


Undefeate



"Er… What?"

"Heh heh! Do not forget, I am the mistress of a hugely popular game. Adorable, immensely popular, and beloved—that's why I am undefeated!"

"……Right."

Miranda wasn't quite clear what this declaration of her supposed "immense popularity" had to do with the results of Uroboros's investigation. She managed to swallow the question moments before it left her mouth.

"If you would be so kind, perhaps you could explain to me?"

"Sure!"

The silver-haired god bounded down from the divine statue, landing smack in front of Miranda.

"There were *two* divine mechanisms in play. The Divine Gate…"

Uroboros's gaze dropped to Miranda's hand, focusing on a small black device she was holding.

"…and that thing."

"The Godeye lens?!" Miranda burst out.

The lens was just a machine, distributed by Arcane Court headquarters to the branch offices for the apostles' use.

"I was kicked out earlier because there was some sort of mechanism affecting the Divine Gate. And then there was that thing you humans were all upset about because it was sucking everyone into a single game, right? That Lucemia situation."

"Y-yes, I remember…"

"This thing was the mechanism." Uroboros pointed to the Godeye lens again. "It's like… Hmm. Like a collar with a chain attached. When a god pulls on the chain, they can *pull the human* wearing the collar right to them."

"You're saying this is…a divine collar?!"

The Godeye lens was a collar, and the apostles were voluntarily wearing it?

And wait… A god could simply "pull" on this collar and draw all the apostles wearing one to a single place?

Was that the truth behind the labyrinth, Lucemia?

"You mean there was another god there besides you, Lady Uroboros?"

"Uh-huh. Probably the same one that messed with me in the maze, I guess?" The deity turned on her heel. "The source of the power is right over there."

"Uh…that's a wall."

"From that direction of the continent. Do you have a world map? Ah, here. It's right around here."

Uroboros went over to a map of the world hanging on one wall, and with her small fingers, she pointed to…

"The Myth City of Heckt-Scheherezade? Lady Uroboros, that's… that's where Arcane Court headquarters is located."

"Uh-huh." Uroboros nodded. Apparently, she didn't actually care that much about that fact, because she nonchalantly picked up the can of ginger ale she'd left on the floor. "There's a god there. Several of them, actually."

Chapter

Player.2

Vs. The God-Tree Guardians —God-Tree-Fruit Basketball②—

1

The game was God-Tree-Fruit Basketball, and with two minutes and fifty seconds of elapsed game time, the score stood at ten for the god team (1 × 10-point basket) to five for the humans (1 × 2-point basket, 1 × 3-point basket).

"As a goal has been scored, new balls will be provided!"

Plonk, ponk, creak—maybe those were the kinds of sound effects that characterized the three colored nuts dropping from Yggdrasil's branches.

A two-point, a three-point, and a ten-point ball hit the ground at almost the same time—maybe because the goals had been scored almost simultaneously.

"All right, let's get our heads back in the game!" Captain Ashlan shouted.

"*Yippee! You think you've got the hang of it? Let's have a little fun, then!*" the nymphs chortled.

The balls had fallen at center court, and now both the human and the divine teams were making a beeline for them.

"Damn… Everybody, hurry! Forget the stupid ground-bound ball; we can't let those three get away from us!" Ashlan called.

There were three balls. How, then, to allocate each team's resources—its ten players—among them?

"What are they up to over there?!"

"Oops, too slow!" The nymphs' laughter rained down from above. "*If you wait to see what we're going to do, you'll never catch the tempo of the game. Which is to say, they're all ours, Treant!*"

A stump-like treant reached out its roots, thin and fast as a whip, and wrapped them around the ten-point ball, which it passed to a dryad who sped by. The dryad smacked it like a volleyball, passing it to another dryad farther away. Perfect teamwork.

"Damn, they're fast! Fall back, guys, protect the goal!"

"If we *all* retreat, there won't be anyone to stop them from getting the two-and three-point balls! We can't win by playing nothing but defense!" Anita looked across the court and gritted her teeth.

As for the god team, the six treants and dryads were passing the ten-point ball back and forth between them as they made for the great tree. Meanwhile, the nymphs were making a dive for the two-and three-point balls.

"We need to respond with six of our people! Have them take the ten-point ball back, while the other four get the two-and three-point ones!"

"*Told ya, you're too slow! We'll just take these!*" The nymphs dove from the sky, prepared to sweep up the two nuts Anita had her eye on. Except…

"Huh? This…this ball's a bit heavy, isn't it?" All three nymphs frowned. They strained to lift the ball but couldn't do it with their tiny arms and wings. *"Well, whatever! This calls for some wind magic!"*

"Hah! Looking pretty weak there, O gods! Too slow!"

"Wha—?"

The nymphs hadn't even noticed as Captain Ashlan closed in from behind—and with him was one of his team members, a young man stretching both hands out toward the balls.

"Do it, Gratton!"

"Gravity magic, activate!"

A magical diagram appeared in black directly under the nymphs, and a great creaking sound rent the air.

"Eek?! Why are we so heavy?!"

Specifically, the force of gravity had grown seven times greater. By the time the nymphs had noticed the change in their own body weight, the two-point ball (one kilogram) and three-point ball (two kilograms) had each likewise gotten seven times heavier, the extra weight dragging the green and the blue seeds from the nymphs' hands.

"Oh no!"

"Got 'em, Captain!" A red-haired girl came rushing up next, easily tossing the two-point ball to Ashlan and clutching the three-pointer to her side before running off with it.

"How's that for teamwork, eh? Gratton's a two-year veteran mage, and the redhead over there is Zechey. Don't let her sweet looks fool you; she's got a proper Superhuman Arise. She could lift a full-size motorcycle clear over her head and—"

"Captain, behind you!"

"Yikes!"

If it hadn't been for Anita's timely shout, the nymphs' blast of violent wind would have blown Captain Ashlan straight into the air, two-point ball and all.

"Nice pass, Captain! Don't worry, I won't let your sacrifice be in vain!" Anita promised as she caught the ball.

Ashlan, meanwhile, had put everything into his pass, leaving him completely open to the magical gust. It had flung him into the air, and he came back down to earth *hard*.

"Ow, ow, ow… Zechey, Anita! Don't let them bully you out of those balls! Gratton, forget about me. Go cover the girls!"

"You don't have to tell us twice!" Anita, two-point ball in hand, was already racing for the gods' side of the court—straight toward the great tree where the goal flower grew.

She bounded up and over the roots growing from the ground and ran along them until she could jump up to the divots in the trunk. After that, the protruding knobs in the bark served as her footholds as she worked her way upward.

"*You're a pretty good climber for a human!*" the nymphs called out to her. "*Too bad it won't help you. You can never climb faster than we can fly!*"

Anita heard their wings getting closer. She saw the nymphs coming up from below at a tremendous speed.

"Glutton or…Gratton or whoever! I need gravity, now!"

"Ten G's, coming up!"

The black magic circle gleamed, and a beam of light shot toward the nymphs, who were nearly upon Anita.

"Arrrgh! Our bodies are so heavy—again! Oooh! We hate *gravity magic!"*

All three nymphs plummeted to earth, freeing Anita of her divine pursuers.

"Fantastic work, Team Blaze! Now I just have to get up to that flower!"

She continued along the protuberances as if they were floating islands, and she was already more than twenty meters off the ground. One false step would result in a very long drop toward an unavoidable game-over. She had to move as carefully as she could while still going as fast as she dared.

"Let's do this!" she said. She jumped from the trunk into the branches, followed closely by Zechey with the other ball and Gratton to provide support. They spotted the pure white flower and raced toward it.

"Roooooarrr!"

Until a huge, fuzzy brown beast blocked their way.

"I knew we'd see you here, Mister Bear in the Woods!"

The god team's goalkeeper. It had been shaken by Pearl's pet name once, but not again.

"Heh! You know, I really feel sorry for you. You saw your friends the nymphs take a dive a second ago, right? Okay, Gratton, you're up!"

"Activate!"

A dark magical emblem appeared on the branch where Mister Bear in the Woods was standing.

For the third time, the incomparable power of gravity drew its

target inexorably toward the earth.

"Roooooaaarrr!"

"It's not working?!" Zechey cried.

"T-this is not good! Gratton, you have to run!" Anita shouted.

Mister Bear in the Woods, meanwhile, charged. Disregarding the magical diagram that encircled him, he got down on all fours and flung himself forward with tremendous force.

"No way! He can still run with ten times the force of gravity pulling on him?! How strong is this—hrrrgh!"

Gratton went tumbling through the air, propelled by a blow from a bear who didn't seem to care much about the force of gravity. The young man slammed into the tree's trunk.

That moment, though, provided the slightest opening, and Zechey flung the three-point ball toward the goal.

"That's three points for us!" she said. "Wait… What?!"

"Roooooaaarrrrr!"

Zechey's ball bounced away from the goal. The bear, fresh from slamming Gratton backward, had simply turned, reached out a paw, and deflected it.

"No… How can it be so big and still so fast?!"

They had never seen anything as quick and nimble. This was the "Beast of Defense" entrusted with protecting the god team's goal. No matter how fast they threw the ball, it seemed likely that it would have been almost instantly batted aside.

"Hnngh… Fine! If the ball's just going to be deflected…"

Anita, two-point ball in hand, leaped forward. She used a huge leaf like a trampoline to bounce into the air; it sent her almost five meters skyward—far above Mister Bear in the Woods. Anita held the ball firmly overhead with both hands and dove straight toward the goal flower.

"…then I'll drop into the goal *right along with it*!"

"Captain Anita?!" Zechey squealed.

Anita fell toward—or rather dive-bombed—the flower five meters below her. Taking a headfirst dive to score a couple of points seemed certain to leave Anita herself with serious injuries.

"*Two-point goal!*" the meep announced. "*The score is now seven to ten—the human team is catching up!*"

The meep's voice echoed across the court.

But what about Anita?

No sooner had the thought occurred to them than a girl with pink hair crawled out of the goal flower.

"Urgh… Now my hair is full of pollen!" she groaned.

Anita's Arise, Iron Heart, made her body as hard as iron and had allowed her to escape the otherwise brutal fall unscathed.





"I'm okay!" she said. "And the score's a little closer now!"

Back on the ground, a new two-point ball dropped down. It was accompanied by the three-pointer that had been batted away by the Goalie Bear.

"I'll take those!" Captain Ashlan said, grabbing both balls. He'd happened to be standing exactly where the balls came down—luck was on his side. "It's seven to ten! We can work with this—we've got the momentum!"

"Heh heh… You think this game's that easy?"

A rich, sultry laugh sounded among the foliage—drifting to their ears from the direction of the human team's goal tree.

"The score may be seven to ten, but don't forget we have the ten-point ball and every chance to widen the score gap again."

The divine and the human teams squared off right in front of the flower. Six on six. The god team's furious flurry of passes had allowed them to evade the humans and get all the way up the tree, forcing the humans to make a last stand right in front of their goal.

"This is as far as you go!" shouted Blaze's vice captain. He was covered in mud after being knocked around by the treants' attacks while trying to protect the others. "We have the two-and three-point balls. If we stop you from dunking that ten-pointer, we can turn the whole thing around!"

"As I think I just said, it's not that easy. Go now, Treant!"

"Hnngh! Everybody, evade!"

As one, the six apostles got ready to move. They'd experienced the treants' special move, "Over-stompy," several times already. The creatures could only run in a straight line, but they smashed through anything and everything in their path.

If the humans knew they couldn't block the move, the only thing to do was get out of the way.

However…

"Huh?"

The apostles, diving to the left and right, went wide-eyed.

Because the treants *didn't* charge.

"*Hah! Just because I shout out the name of an attack doesn't mean they're going to use it, does it?*" A dryad kicked off a branch underfoot and started picking up speed. The human team had politely jumped aside, leaving the path to the goal clear. "*Treant's Over-stompy has a thirty-second cooldown. One might have expected you to notice that by now.*"

"It was a bluff?!"

They'd been completely had. They'd learned that the only thing to do was avoid the treant's charges, and the dryad had turned that knowledge against them.

——Nymph, the faerie: Weak but able to fly. Special move: Wind magic.

——Dryad, the tree-folk: The most nimble and agile of the players. Special move: Grass magic.

——Treant, the tree spirit: The most powerful but also the slowest. Special move: Charge.

——Goalie Bear, the Beast of Defense: Combines strength and agility, yet only plays defensively.

In short, the humans had a good grasp of the makeup of the divine team—or one might say, they had been *given* a good grasp. They had never imagined that there would be a mind game at work where what they knew was used to throw them off.

"What a shame for you."

The dryad flung the ball at the goal, and the humans, who had ducked out of the way to avoid the treants' body slam, could only watch helplessly.

"*That's a ten-point goal!*" the meep cried out. "*That makes the score seven to twenty, with the god team breaking away again!*"

Elapsed time: Seven droplets in the nectar clock (= 7 minutes. The time's-up whistle will sound after 30 minutes.)
Divine Team: 20 points (10 points × 2)
Human Team: 7 points (2 points × 2; 3 points × 1)

A thirteen-point difference, all told. So much for narrowing the gap—it had grown wider. That fact made everyone on the human team anxious.

Which was precisely when Fay shouted to the meep, "Substitution!"

This was the only possible moment. Before the human team's morale was completely shattered by an overwhelming point disadvantage, it was time to change players and give everyone a chance to get their heads back in the game.

"Captain Ashlan! Four people, please!"

"You got it. Defense, we're subbing out four of you!"

Four members of Team Blaze who had been savaged by the treants' attacks went to the sidelines. In their place, Fay, Nel, Leshea, and Pearl stepped onto the court.

Everyone was already on the same page: Namely, that overcoming a thirteen-point deficit wasn't going to be the work of a moment.

More to the point, there's the question of how *we even do it. We can't just fling ourselves desperately at them. To beat these gods, we need a plan that's better than theirs.*

"Anita!" Fay called before he was even on the field. "Can you jump down?"

"What?"

"The ten-point ball is incoming!"

Anita gasped. "Y-yeah, no sweat!" she said, and then she leaped from the god team's tree. She was in a free fall from fifty meters up, the height of a ten-story building.

Then she hit the ground.

There was a massive cloud of dust, out of which sprang Anita, unharmed—and holding a yellow ball high.

"I got it! I got the ten-point ball!"

In this game, a new ball dropped onto the field after each score. They always fell at center court—and at that moment, *most* of the gods' team members were up in the human tree. Meaning their goal was as good as wide open.

"*So you noticed?*" A dryad descended the tree's trunk as smoothly

as if it were sliding down ice. "*In this game of basketball, when an opponent scores against you, you immediately have a chance to get the same score back.*"

The human team had substituted four players.
In: Fay, Leshea, Pearl, Nel.
Out: Four members of Team Blaze.

"All right, run, guys! Pearl!" Captain Ashlan heaved the two-point ball.

Pearl caught it. "Fay!" she called, passing it on to him.

"Good stuff, Pearl!" Fay caught the ball with one hand, then made for the gods' tree.

The gods have a plan.

Although Fay wasn't sure yet, he had begun to have an inkling of what that plan was. If he was correct…well, then the humans were already pretty cornered. Worse than it looked from the score.

They needed a plan that was better than the gods'.

This game is a quick showdown, just thirty minutes. I was able to throw together a plan, but just one. There won't be time to make any adjustments midgame.

That was why he had to keep it secret—the instant the gods saw through his strategy for turning this game around, everything would fall to pieces. He couldn't let them know what it was until the *very last second*.

What was more…

Right now, I've got the two-point ball, Captain Ashlan has the three-point one, and Anita has the ten-point one. The humans are holding fifteen points' worth of balls!

And with only the Goalie Bear guarding the gods' goal flower. If they could sink all fifteen points, not only would they make up the difference in the score, they would even pull ahead by a couple.

"H-hey, wait up! This ten-point ball is just too heavy!" Anita said, breathing hard. Even with a Superhuman ability, lugging a twenty-kilogram ball along was never going to be easy.

“Anita, pass it to me!”

“Treasured sister Nel?! O-okay, it’s all yours!” Anita flung the ball, which arced through the air…

“Heh heh! I’ll take that.”

…only to be intercepted by a green hand. It was a dryad, getting some serious hang time.

“Wha—?!”

“Maybe I should have warned you that I don’t have to come down to the ground.”

There, over Anita’s head, the branches of the great tree crisscrossed crazily, vines as thick as ropes interweaving to form what looked like a spider’s web in the sky. The dryad was coming at them from above, crawling from vine to vine and from one of Yggdrasil’s branches to another.

“This game takes place in three dimensions*.”*

This, indeed, was another difference between the games humans played and those played by the gods. Human games like soccer and basketball took place in two dimensions, width and length. But this game added a third dimension: height.

“Give me back my ten-point ball!” Anita yelled.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. Treant?”

The dryad flung the yellow ball high into the air, toward a treant, the ten-point fruit once again in the possession of the gods.

“Master Fay!” Nel bellowed. “I need to borrow that two-pointer!”

Whack!

Nel kicked the two-point ball so hard that she left a footprint in the ground. It tore through the air with tremendous momentum, impacting the ten-point ball the dryad had thrown. The ten-pointer bounced off its trajectory like a billiard ball.

“*What in the world?!*” As the gods watched, the ten-point ball smacked against the trunk of the great tree, then bounced toward the ground—right at Pearl, who could only look up at it and say, “Huh?”

“Pearl, grab it!”

“Nowaynowaynoway I couldn’t possibly!” Pearl cried, wheeling backward as fast as she could.

An instant later, the twenty-kilogram ball slammed into the earth where Pearl had been standing, kicking up dirt like a meteor strike.

"Nel?! If I'd tried to catch that, there would be a big hole in the middle of me right about now!"

"E-er, yes, right… Sorry, I was thinking from my own perspective. But at least we didn't let them get the ten-point ball from us!"

"Myah-ha-ha! Did you think Dryad was the only one following you?"

"What?!" Nel looked up, but she didn't see any nymphs anywhere —not in the sky and not on the ground.

"Yikes!" Pearl blanched.

The earth at her feet exploded upward, and a treant, carrying the nymphs, emerged. Before Pearl could do anything, it had its tendrils on the ten-point ball.

"Digging underground is a strategy, too! …Hey, Treant, what are you doing?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek! Wh-wh-wh-what do you think you're doing, you shameless tentacles?!"

Thus the ten-point ball was stolen away. Yet for some reason, the treant didn't appear satisfied with that; its tendrils continued to entwine themselves *all* around Pearl. Particularly near her chest…

"These slimy pseudopods are slithering right between my clothes!"

"I get it!" Anita clapped her hands. "The treant is convinced that you're still hiding more balls under your outfit, treasured sister Pearl! Two fabulous globes!"

"They're not baaaaaaaallls!" Pearl gritted her teeth—then she pointed at the ten-point ball in the treant's tendrils. "Why, you… The Wandering, activate!"

"—?!"

The nymphs, the dryads, and the treant abruptly stopped when the ten-point ball disappeared out of the treant's grip and was replaced by the two-point one. Where had the other ball gone?

"Great work, Pearl. Shift Change is going to be a real asset in this game!" Fay now had the yellow ball, and he set off running.

Pearl's teleportation ability, the Wandering, included Shift Change,

which enabled her to swap the positions of any two objects she had touched within the last three minutes. She'd simply traded the two-point ball Fay had been holding for the ten-point one in the treant's grip.

Unfortunately, Fay's Arise didn't make him super strong. He could try to run with the twenty-kilogram ball, but the god team would catch him easily.

Leshea is the physically strongest one among us. But Nel is better in terms of the overall competition—and she's used to dribbling a ball.

In Fay's estimation, it would be harder to get the ball away from Nel than Leshea. So he shouted, "Nel!"

"Just leave it to me, Master Fay!"

She deftly caught the ten-point ball from Fay with her feet and set off down the field. The other human players had all carried the balls—only Nel moved it by dribbling it with her feet, with incredible speed and control.

"*She's quick!*" gasped a dryad, who tried to grab Nel but caught only empty air.

All three nymphs unleashed wind magic in succession, but Nel dodged each blast like it didn't matter that she was maneuvering with a ball that weighed twenty kilograms. This was the fruit of Nel's single-minded focus on developing her athletic abilities.

"*Hmph! All right, I'm a* little *impressed,*" said a nymph. However, the treants were poised to lunge. "*You won't be able to dodge this, though! Go on, Treant! Show them what you're best at!*"

That would be the treants' special move, Over-stompy. All three treants, accelerating to tremendous speed, headed for Nel as she kicked the ball along. They formed an invincible front that nothing could stop. Yet despite the oncoming wall of treants, Nel just gave them an easygoing smile.

"You only ever go in a straight line. All I have to do…is get out of the way!"

In an instant, she recognized the direction of their trajectory and simply picked a new path. She dodged the first treant effortlessly. Then she did the same with the second—no, she tried to, but

something caught her ankle.

"Grass?!" she cried.

"*Excellent, grass! Hold her there!*" a dryad said. It was grass magic, manipulating the vegetation to wrap around Nel's ankles. She crumpled ignominiously to the ground. Then she found a treant's massive body looming over her.

"Now, Treant, bat that ball away!"

"I think not!"

No one watching would have imagined that it was possible to avoid the treant's body slam in that moment—until Nel launched herself up into the air.

With *bare* feet.

She'd shed the shoes and socks the grass had grabbed on to and leaped out of there.

"Wha—?! T-Treant, stop! Emergency sto—"

But by now, the treant was like a runaway train, and it wasn't stopping. It raced past where Nel had been standing until it finally slammed into the first solid object in its path—the great tree of Yggdrasil on the god team's side.

There was a sound like an explosion. The tree shook violently, and the treant finally came to a halt.

"Now, *that* is some power," Nel said, going a little pale at how close she had come to total destruction. The treant's blow had been strong enough to shake even Yggdrasil. If it had hit her, she would have been out of action; no doubt about it.

Just then—

"Nel, behind you!" Leshea shouted.

"Oh, shoot!" Nel said, going even paler.

There were three treants, and she'd dodged only two. By the time she noticed the last one charging from behind her, it was nearly upon her, a cloud of dust billowing behind it.

She would never make it.

Everyone surely pictured Nel flying helplessly through the air. Except one person…

"Don't give up, Nel! Catch!"

"…Excuse me?"

The shout came from Fay, who took what was in his right hand and threw it with all his might.

To be specific, he threw the *meep* who'd been serving as referee.

"The ref is absolutely neutral! Which makes them an invincible shield—even the gods don't dare lay a hand on them!"

"Whaaaaaa—?!"

"What in the world do you think you're doing?!"

Shouts from the divine and the human teams almost merged into one. When the treant saw the meep come flying in front of it, even it looked shocked and screeched to a halt.

With much murmuring, the entire divine team stood stock-still.

"I thought so. That's the secret trick to winning this game!" Fay said.

"*Not allowed!*" the meep cried, accompanied by its whistle. The entire forest of Yggdrasil went silent. "*This is a contest between the humans and the gods. I, the referee, am a third party!*"

"Right, exactly. Which is why you make the perfect shield—"

"Interfering with the referee is outside *the bounds of play. Hence, a penalty! The human team will give all the balls they are holding to the gods' team."*

"Faaaaaay!" Anita came charging up to him. "Wh-wh-what do you think you're doing?! My treasured sister Pearl got you that ball despite being bound hand and foot!"

"It's all right, Anita. It was just a little something I wanted to try. I figured it couldn't do any harm."

"It's…what? You mean this was all within your calculations?" A most unexpected answer, no doubt. The pink-haired girl stood there with her mouth hanging open.

Fay just said firmly, "This penalty is a small price to pay to keep Nel safe."

"Er— Ahem. I thank you, Master Fay," Nel said with a big sigh. "I'll repay you by playing my heart out."

"*All balls will be given to the gods' team, and then we will* restart*! Both teams, please go back to your own tree,*" the meep instructed. The teams retreated to opposite ends of the court.

"Restart!"

At the ref's (that is, the meep's) whistle, both sides ran for center court again. The human team, of course, was focused on getting back some of the balls that the divine team now monopolized. Whereas the gods' team…

…*threw* the two-and three-point balls into the air.

"*Tee-hee-hee! You want these balls?*" the nymphs taunted gleefully. "*Then take them! Here you go!*"

Lifted by a gust of nymph wind magic, the green and the blue balls spiraled into the sky.

In that instant, with the entire human team looking up, the gods took advantage of their lapse in attention to make a push toward the human tree. They had just one ball between them, the ten-pointer.

"What do they think they're doing?! Did they really abandon everything but the ten-point ball?!" Anita shouted, the confusion evident in her voice.

It wasn't possible. The gods' strategy seemed to be to commit *all nine players* to moving just the single ball. That worked out to only 1.1 points per player.

"That's not *nearly* efficient enough! They literally had the two-and three-point balls in their hands, and they gave them up… Why would they do that?!"

"Ah," Fay was heard mumbling to himself. "Now I get it."

It fit the points calculation he'd been doing in his head. Suddenly everything made sense: why the gods would give up the other two balls. If *that* was what they were planning, then he could understand. And if so…

…then from the very moment the game had restarted, with zero minutes elapsed since the restart, the humans had already lost.

Fay didn't have time to feel bad about it. "Pearl!" he yelled, pointing at the two balls in the air. "Can you get up that high?"

"Y-yeah, I can do it!" Pearl nodded, and then she disappeared.

She'd jumped into a golden portal, teleporting herself instantly thirty meters into the air. She was already reaching out both hands for the balls. "I've got them…! And now I'm falling, I'm falling, I'm going doooowwwnnn!"

"Welcome back to terra firma!" Leshea said, catching Pearl as she and the balls reached the ground.

Now it was the humans who had the two-and the three-point balls.

"Leshea, Pearl, I'll leave those balls to you! I'll go on defense!" Fay called, and then he left the girls where they were and went running.

He looked way up into the humans' great tree, where a battle was developing near the human goal flower. Captain Ashlan and his players were squaring off against the onslaught of gods.

"All right, you're in the way! Blow away, little ones!"

"I don't think so! Tempest!" the mage Zechey said, meeting the nymph's wind magic with a gust of her own. As the two gales neutralized each other, dryads dodged left, then right along the branches. Meanwhile, all three treants climbed slowly but inexorably upward.

"Grrr! This is bad!" Captain Ashlan's expression was stiff. The last time they'd been threatened with the treants' Over-stompy, it had turned out to be a bluff—the attack had required a cooldown period. This time, though, those tree monsters were coming at them for real.

"*Hee-hee-hee! All right, Treant, do it!*" The nymphs giggled.

All the humans present flung themselves toward other branches—all except one.

"Nel?!"

"You got the better of me last time," said the black-haired girl, standing firm in the face of the wall of treants bearing down on her, charging so ferociously that Yggdrasil's branches shook. "But Nel Reckless will not be outdone by the same opponent twice!"

"Whoa, hey, hold on! What do you think you're—"

"Outta my waaaaaaaaaaaaay!" Nel bellowed, not at Captain Ashlan, but at the runaway train that was the treants. Up came her

right leg.

Over-stompy was a divine attack, capable of blasting through anything in its path.

But it was up against Nel's Arise, Moment Reversal, which could kick anything back the way it had come—even the power of the gods.

Moment Reversal precisely reversed everything about a motion—its direction, its force. And now it reversed the treants. Or rather, blew them backward and straight into the nymphs and dryads, who were caught completely off guard.

"Never seen that before!"

"What are you doing, letting her kick you, Tr—hwoof?!"

All nine of the gods were slammed into Yggdrasil's trunk hard enough to make the great tree itself tremble. Even they wouldn't be getting up too soon.

"Th-that was incredible, Nel!" Pearl said.

"Yeah, way to go!" added Leshea. They had only been half-watching the battle at the human goal—because they had been climbing toward the divine one.

But they still had to reckon with the flower's last line of defense.

"Roooarrrrr!"

The Goalie Bear came flying at them.

Pearl, however, was already on the move. "You're making this too easy, Mister Bear in the Woods!"

A golden warp portal appeared. Until that moment, Pearl had used Teleport only to run away—but now she did something very different.

The portal showed up directly in front of the Goalie Bear, and the charging animal, too late to change direction, plunged through it—

"Rawr?"

—and was forcibly transported to a branch thirty meters away. In other words, nowhere near Pearl and Leshea.

The goal flower was wide open. No matter how strong the

guardian of the goal might have been, a beast charging straight ahead was as good as powerless before Pearl's warp portal.

"How do you like that? Behold my unprecedented ability to think on my feet!"

"Way to go, Pearl! That was perfect! Other than the patting-yourself-on-the-back part!" Leshea called. Then she flung both balls toward the undefended goal. They dropped toward the flower…

"*It's a double score!*" the meep announced. "*It's now twelve points to twenty, the human team making big strides closing that gap. How will they follow up their—well, now! Looks like big things are happening over there!*" The meep pointed toward the human tree, where all nine members of the divine team lay in a veritable heap.

"Look at those eyes spin! Everyone who got caught up in our good treants' deflected charge is down for the count!"

"Lady Leshea!" Nel shouted, so loudly that they could hear her from all the way in the human tree, a distance of a good hundred meters. "Catch!"

There was a sound like a cannon blast—it was the impact of Nel, a hundred meters away, kicking the ten-point ball.

Boom!

The yellow fruit came rocketing through the air—until Leshea caught it one-handed and slammed it into the still undefended goal flower.

"We have an upset! It's twenty-two to twenty, with the human team ahead!"

Elapsed time: 18 drops in the nectar clock (= 18 minutes).
Divine team: 20 points (10 points × 2).
Human team: 22 points (2 points × 3, 3 points × 2, 10 points × 1).

They'd made up a huge chunk of the score to turn things around. Both teams, human and divine, however, were laser-focused—for in this game, the moments after a goal was scored were *the*

most dangerous of all.

This was when new balls were supplied. And at that moment, most of the members of both teams were up in the trees. They would have to get down to the ground before they could grab the new balls.

The defining difference between the humans and the gods at that moment was *how* they got down.

"*Heh heh! I think I'll go ahead! You humans can take your time climbing down the trunk!*" The nymphs could fly—and all three took off toward the ground. "*Treant! Follow us!*"

The treants jumped down next—they might have left a crater in the ground where they landed, but the treants themselves were unharmed. The gods were on the forest floor in the blink of an eye, whereas the humans…

"Leshea!"

"I'm on it!"

Leshea leapt down, her vermilion hair billowing, and landed softly on the ground. Someone else followed her, diving from a height of almost fifty meters.

"Wait for meee, treasured sister Lady Leolesheeeaaa!"

Thoom! A pink-haired girl slammed into the earth, throwing up a massive storm of dust. "Sorry to keep you waiting, treasured sister! I'm here to help you get those balls!"

"*Yaaa-ha-ha-ha! You're too slow, humans!*" chortled the nymphs, who already had the two-point ball. One treant, meanwhile, held the three-point orb in its tendrils.

And then there was…

"*We're all over these!*" The nymphs and treants looked up, waiting for the ten-point ball to hit center court.

The human team was never going to make it in time. The gods would secure all the balls before Leshea and Anita could get anywhere near them.

"Come on down, now…"

"Anita!"

The nymphs stretched their hands toward the sky—but Leshea picked up Anita and lifted her into the air.

"Uh… Treasured sister Leoleshea? Wh-why are you holding me up? Wait… You're not planning to—"

"Go get that ten-point ball!"

"Huh? Wait, wait, wait, yaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Anita split the air as Leshea flung her skyward as hard as she could, faster than a speeding bullet. She was a human missile!

"I don't know how to *stoppp*!"

Anita did, in fact, grab the ten-point ball out of the air. Her momentum then sent her rocketing across the field, toward the divine team's huge tree, with which she collided with a tremendous bang.

Creak! It was enough to cause the trunk of the great tree Yggdrasil to lean and make a very unsettling noise.

"Great work, Anita! You got the ball!"

"I…I'm flattered by your praise… *Cough!*" Anita said, buried in the ground with the ball in her hands. Even with the protection of Iron Heart, she looked the worse for wear after her encounter with the great tree. "But if…if you'd be so kind as to never do that again…"

"I'll bet if we did that one more time, we could knock Yggdrasil's sprout-tree right over!"

"What would that accomplish?!"

So the human team had the ten-point ball, while the gods held the two-and three-pointers. Was a competition heating up to see who could get all the balls? Many members of the human team steeled themselves—but the battle never came.

They were in equilibrium. Attack and defense by the two teams had turned into a seesaw game.

"Give me that ten-point ball!"

"Nymph wind magic incoming! Blow it back!" Captain Ashlan shouted. Zechey was already jumping out in front, firing off a magic burst of her own.

The dryads snapped their fingers even as Zechey moved.

"Grass, catch her feet!"

But the boy with the gravity magic was already reacting.

"Go—gravity times seven!"

A black magical diagram appeared, encompassing the entire field.

A zone of exceptionally heavy gravity sprang into being, and the grass roots that had sprung up were pushed inexorably down again.

"*Arrrgh! So obnoxious!*" the nymphs cried angrily. "*Treant, smash 'em all away!*"

The massive gods began to accelerate directly toward the human team, but the nymphs cried out again when they saw the black-haired girl standing in the way. "*Whoa! Hey! Emergency stop! That's the one human you can't—*"

"Too late!"

Up came Nel's left leg—and the power of Moment Reversal within it sent the treants and the nymphs tumbling far, far backward. The balls, knocked out of the hands of the treant Nel had kicked and the dryad that treant had slammed into, went flying and then rolled toward the human team.

"I've got the two-point ball!" someone on the human team called out.

"The three-pointer's mine!" Ashlan said, picking it up. "This might just work… We might be able to do this!" He clenched his fist. The human team now had possession of all the balls.

"There's nine minutes left! This is where it gets serious, folks. If we can score fifteen points, that puts us at thirty-seven. Then we just focus on the three-and ten-point balls!"

Thirty-seven points would put them within spitting distance of victory. They had to score fifty points to win, and if they could close out the game using the three-and ten-point balls, then they could forget about the two-pointer (meaning they wouldn't have to devote any of their players to dealing with it).

Meanwhile, the gods' team still had just twenty points. For a team that was lagging behind, even the two-point ball was a precious source of points. They would have to commit some players to going after it.

"We win this with numbers!" Ashlan said. "All right, guys, let's go. Hang on to those balls, whatever it takes. If we can slam these fifteen points into their goal, victory is ours!"

"Hold on, Captain Ashlan," Fay said, curbing the captain's enthusiasm. "This isn't an opponent we can beat by sheer force.

Seeing what just happened makes me sure of it. We need to change our plan, too."

"Of course we do! Nice and careful-like, right?"

"Right. First, throw away the two-and three-point balls."

"I'm way ahead of you! We start by throwing away the… Wait, what?" Ashlan turned to Fay, flabbergasted. "Fay, I don't think I heard you right. Because I *thought* you said we should throw away the two-and three-point balls."

"I knew something felt fishy," Fay said. He was looking at the divine team, twenty meters away, with their great tree behind them. He said:

"How about you drop the act already?"

Fwoooshhh.

Yggdrasil's forest fell silent with almost alarming alacrity. There was a chill in the air colder than a winter lake.

"There's been a few of them now. These…*deliberate* moments. Each time, I noticed something felt off, but this time it was too big to ignore. That's why I'm sure." Fay pointed at the human team's three-point ball and went on, "The ball you gods gave up. Why was the treant that Nel kicked holding it?"

"Huh?" Anita turned toward him, open-mouthed. "What in the world are you talking about?! My treasured sister Nel got this from them through her own skills!"

"No. They *let* us have it," Fay said.

The two point ball and the three-point ball—both had come into the human team's possession when Nel had rebuffed one of the treant's charges and caused the gods to drop them.

"Nel was right when she said she won't be outdone by the same opponent twice. Could the gods actually be kicked backward by the same technique two separate times? Not very godlike."

Once they had discovered that there was a human who could kick back a treant's charge, they should have been more careful the next time.

"So I started to wonder—maybe you wanted us to have the two- and three-point balls. You *wanted* us to score goals with them."

"What?! Wh-what are you saying, Fay?!" Anita asked, drawing back and hugging herself. "They deliberately gave us the balls so that we could score? But why would they… Wait… Am I the only one here who doesn't get it?! Treasured sister Pearl, do you get it?!"

"Of course I do!" The golden-haired girl put her hands on her hips and gave a little snorting laugh. "There's no question. I had a pretty good sense of it from the moment this game began!"

"You did?! Then what are the gods after?!"

"……" There followed a very, very long pause.

"You don't have any idea, do you? Fay, I assume you're not just blowing smoke. But why would the gods actually *want* us to score?! I don't believe it! Tell me why!"

"*They* told *us* right at the start, remember?" Fay said. "They said everything the gods do is rooted in a plan. A strategy."

"Excuse me?!"

"Let's call it the 'Start Time Zero Minutes Time's-Up Plan'… Does that sound about right?"

The nine members of the divine team stood with their backs to Yggdrasil: The nymphs, floating in the air. The dryads, standing in the branches. The treants, bracing themselves against the trunk.

All nine of them, three each of three different kinds of creature, looked toward Fay, and then…

"Kya… Kyaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Ah… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"————————————!"

The forest echoed with explosive laughter. The nymphs threw themselves backward as they chortled, the dryads held their sides with mirth, and even the treants, who didn't speak a language as such, shook with what had to be amusement.

That was all the answer Fay needed. Everything to this point had been—not a bluff, but a show.

"Phew… I guess they've figured us out."

"You see, Nymph? They sniffed us out because you set Treant on before everything was ready."

"Oh, as if you weren't on board with this idea, Dryad! Remind me again who said, 'Let's let them kick us back and give them the balls that way'!"

"Ah, well. If they know what we're up to, then this is where playtime stops…"

"…and the real game *begins."*

The gods smiled, and a collective shiver ran down the humans' spines.

"*Yippee! Eight minutes left. Let's see you fight for it, humans!*" The nymphs' wings shimmered gold, and the instant they saw that dazzling flash, everyone present was reminded: Whatever they might look like, even the smallest of their opponents were numbered among the deities who governed the gods' games. *"Blow away, blow away, blow away all!"*

"Wind! I call on you to protect u—ahhh!" The wind mage girl let out a cry as the nymphs' gust blasted away her feeble attempt to resist it. Her spell hadn't lasted even a second. The pressure from the wind was so intense that they could hardly breathe, the rampaging gale tearing up the center of the field.

"What's the story, Zechey?! You were able to push back before!"

"They were just *toying* with me," Zechey said, the blood draining from her face. Then she shouted, "Everybody, run! I can't hold *that* at bay with my magic!"

"Get behind the huge tree!" said Ashlan. They dove for the trunk, and once he was sure everyone was safely behind it, Fay followed them.

"Yo, Fay! Tell me what the hell's goin' on!" Captain Ashlan bellowed over the roar of the wind.

"Can't you see?! There's a huge windstorm!" Fay shouted back. Even from behind the trunk of the massive tree, Fay could feel the freezing air that threatened to send him flying into the unknown.

Now the gods were truly playing their game. Even the nymphs' fall to the ground after being hit by the gravity magic must have

been part of the act.

"Anita," Fay said. "Do you remember the first strategy you suggested?"

"Wha—? Er, you mean…"

"Ideal points efficiency!" How many points did they need to score per person? A team had ten players, and together the balls could score fifteen points. In other words, if they could score 1.5 points per person, they would be on the right track. "You had the right idea—in fact, I think you grasped the general outline of the game faster than anybody. And in the opening stages, I think that plan was probably the most effective. *Was.*"

"Y-you make that sound very ominous!"

"Didn't it seem strange to you? Every time we played with peak points efficiency in mind, we naturally started scoring more goals with the two-and three-point balls."

"…Oh!"

The human team currently had twenty-two points (2 points × 3, 3 points × 2, 10 points × 1). If, for example, one person scored a goal with the three-point ball, that made their points efficiency three—roughly equivalent to if they scored with the ten-point ball using just three people.

So: Could they score a goal with the ten-point ball using three people?

No. It wasn't possible. Because the ten-point ball was the one that *both* teams gave the most attention to. As a matter of fact, they had both committed more than seven people to the scuffle over the ten-point ball. From an efficiency perspective, it was not going to pay off.

"So instead, we naturally started scoring with the two-and three-point balls, which were wide open. From an efficiency standpoint, it would be the obvious play."

"Y-yes, I see what you mean! We're better at this than they are!"

"No, we aren't."

"What?"

"There's only seven minutes until time runs out—and neither team is going to score fifty points."

"————!" Anita made a choked sound that wasn't quite a cry and wasn't quite a scream. Behind her, Captain Ashlan, Nel, Pearl, and everyone else who had been listening went wide-eyed as if to say: *Oh crap.*

They'd realized. They saw that the humans were completely cornered.

Win Condition 2: If the time limit is reached, the team with the most points wins.

However: In order to discourage stalling tactics, the minimum penalty will be enforced if the game ends by time's up. Points scored by the ball used for the fewest goals will not be counted.

And at the moment…

There were twenty-three drops in the nectar timer (meaning twenty-three minutes had passed, and the leaf would be full after thirty minutes).

Divine team: 20 points (10 points × 2)

Human team: 22 points (2 points × 3, 3 points × 2, 10 points × 1)

When time expired, it wouldn't matter to the gods' team whether the minimum penalty neutralized the two-point ball or the three-point one; they would score twenty points either way—whereas the human team would have to drop the points scored with the ten-point ball.

"That makes gods twenty, humans twelve—gods win," Fay said.

"Say what?!"

"The gods were never trying to satisfy Win Condition 1 (score fifty points). They were always after a time's-up victory when the clock hit zero."

The gods' strategy was the "Start Time Zero Minutes Time's-Up Plan." They would execute it by neutralizing the ten-point ball. They let the humans score with the two-and three-point balls so that the minimum penalty would cause them to ultimately lose the ten

points.

"If I'm right about that, it would explain a lot of the strange things the gods did."

"Tee-hee-hee! You want these balls? Then take them! Here you go!"

The gods' team…threw the two-and the three-point balls into the air.

It was true: The gods hadn't once shown the slightest interest in the two-and the three-point balls. In fact, they had actively *given* them to the humans.

"I'm guessing it's the same with 'Mister Bear in the Woods.' They call it the Beast of Defense, and I think it let us score those goals. I think it was told to."

Let them score their goals with the two-and three-point balls.

True, they'd scored once with the ten-point ball, but that had been a shot by Leshea, herself a former goddess, and the goalkeeper probably decided that even it was at a disadvantage in that matchup.

"B-but why, Fay?! What would drive the gods to a strategy like that?"

"Probably their read on us. They predicted that we humans would hit on the idea of points efficiency—so they came up with a plan to counter it."

Points efficiency plan: Better at actually scoring points. The flipside is that most goals will be scored with the two-and the three-point balls in the interest of efficiency, meaning that the ten-point ball will be neutralized by the minimum penalty. (Vulnerable to time running out.)

Time's-up plan: Focuses on the ten-point ball. Not very efficient, but the ten-point ball will not be neutralized by the minimum penalty, making this plan ideal for taking victory when the time

expires.

The gods had considered both of these possibilities and settled on the time's-up plan. Whereas the humans—once they had chosen to focus on points efficiency—couldn't afford to allow time to run out. They *had* to score fifty points and nab the victory, no matter what.

But they weren't fast enough.

"With this huge gale, we won't be able to move. Seven minutes from now, time runs out—and that's checkmate."

"Dammit, Fay! Can they possibly be that strong?" Captain Ashlan said, gritting his teeth. "Look…I know it's our own fault for misreading the game and falling into their trap, but just pinning us in place with some wind for the entire final seven minutes? That sucks!"

"I told you, Captain Ashlan. And you, Anita. It's going to be okay."

"Uh…is it?" The girl holding the ten-point ball blinked.

"Anita, you've got the ten-point ball, which means we still have a chance of victory. Give it to Leshea."

"Oh!" Anita's eyes lit up.

The humans couldn't do anything in the face of the violent wind—but the former goddess Leshea could potentially charge through.

"Y-yes, that's perfect! If my treasured sister Leoleshea can score another goal with the ten-point ball, we can still turn this around!"

If she scored with the ten-point ball again, the human team would have a total of thirty-two points (2 points × 3, 3 points × 2, 10 points × 2), and the three-and the ten-point balls would have scored an equal number of goals. Meaning they would cease to meet the criterion of the minimum penalty of "the ball that has scored the fewest number of goals." The human team would win, thirty-two to twenty.

"Treasured sister Leshea! It's all yo—"

"That's right. I want that ten-point ball!"

From out of the gale, one of the dryads came leaping.

"*Nymph, stop your wind, if you'd be so kind. I'm going to call my friends.*" The dryad leapt easily up into the branches of the great tree. In response to its request, the violent wind ceased in an instant. Then the dryad cried out, "*My dear little friends… Come on, lemmings!*"

A great rumbling of countless footsteps shook Yggdrasil's forest. Whatever was creating the noise wasn't very large, but there was an army of them, and everyone could feel them getting closer.

"What's coming now?!" Pearl said, bracing herself to fight.

At that very moment, something popped out of the underbrush: an adorable little creature that made an adorable little noise. "*Squeak!*"

"Aw, how cute!" Pearl crooned.

It was followed by another creature, then another—wild squirrels and hamsters, an army of them, an avalanche, pressing in.

"They're so… Wait, there's an awful lot of them!"

"Squeak!"

"Squeak squeak!"

"Squeak squeak!"

"Noooooooooo!"

The human team was overrun by the battalion of squirrels and hamsters, jostled and crushed.

They were so cute!

They were so cute that the humans found themselves unable to fight back.

"Hnngh! That's a dirty trick! How can I use violence on these adorable squirrels—ahh?! Oh no!" Anita cried out as the ten-point ball slipped away from her. It was followed by the two-and the three-pointers, each of them stolen by the squirrels in front and

rolled along by those who followed. They were with the dryad before anyone knew what was happening.

"Squeak!"

With another thundering of tiny feet, the rodents retreated. They'd left behind only a battered and bruised human team lying pathetically (if rather blissfully) on the ground.

"Grrr! Nasty way to steal our balls!" Ashlan said.

"*Heh heh! The nectar clock has twenty-six drops in it. Soon enough, it will be full, and this game will be over*," the dryad replied.

"Hold it right there, you!" Captain Ashlan leapt to his feet and reached out, but the dryad simply kicked off the branch and flew into the air, then landed nimbly and raced for center court.

"Pearl!" Fay shouted, pointing at the rapidly retreating dryad. "Get one of those balls back—I don't care which one! Then you can trade it for the ten-point ball with Shift Change!"

"R-right! But I only have three minutes!"

Pearl's Shift Change worked on any object she had touched within the last three minutes. Either the two-or the three-point ball would be fine—if the human team could get one of them back, they could change it for the ten-point ball.

"That's not much time! All right, people, think about nothing except getting that ball back!" Captain Ashlan shouted, his intensity making the air shiver. "Split up into three groups and go after them!"

A nymph, however, was already hovering over his head. "*Kya-ha-ha! You sure you want to go running off like that? What if I treat you to another blast of my wind?*"

"Hnngh! Incoming! Everybody, take cover!" Ashlan said, but Fay countered with:

"Hold it. This is one of your bluffs, isn't it? You're on cooldown." He ignored the nymph and took off running as fast as he could.

Each member of the divine team had a special skill or ability, but each of those abilities had a cooldown timer.

The cooldown for the wind magic is about eight seconds—but for a storm like that, it must be longer!

It was an assumption on Fay's part but not an unfounded one.

"I saw the way your wings glowed golden when you summoned

that storm."

"*Grrrrr! Stupid humans!*" The nymphs fumed that he had seen through the bluff, their faces going red from humiliation.

"*It's quite all right, Nymph. You bought us more than enough time*," said the three dryads standing in Yggdrasil's branches. Each of them held one ball—the two-, the three-, and the ten-point seeds between them.

Plip.

Another drop of nectar fell into the bowl sitting by the field. Twenty-eight drops (that is, twenty-eight minutes) had now passed.

"I'll hold them for the final two minutes with my own magic."

"Hah! We're not falling for that again! That's a bluff, too!" Ashlan said, not slowing down as he ran toward the divine team's great tree. "'Come on, Lemmings!' has still gotta be on cooldown, too!"

"That was simply a summons to my forest friends. It was no magic spell."

"…What?"

"I still have my *magic."*

Um.

That seemed to be a bit…unfair.

Before the humans dashing across the field could quip back, the dryad raised a hand.

"Green Giant!"

The ground shook, much harder than it had at the approach of the rodent army, quaking and bucking as if the very earth would turn upside down.

The forest of Yggdrasil itself was thrashing and fighting.

"The trees…?!"

This wasn't grass magic anymore—this was *forest* magic. By the dryad's intervention, Yggdrasil's trees were whipping their roots around and stamping the ground like wild horses, without regard for what was in their way. *All* the trees, in every part of the court. Some of the roots were bigger than logs themselves; a whack from one of them could tear through a car like tissue paper, to say nothing of a human.

"*One minute and thirty seconds left!*" the nymphs chortled. "*Kya-*

ha-ha! And you won't get anywhere near us!"

Could they? Could they slip past the roots to reach their opponents?

"Master Fay! We're out of time. I'm going to go!" Nel said.

"Me too!" said Leshea, and both took off running. They evaded a root that came from overhead, dancing neatly out of the way of a strike from the side. They jumped up on one of the encroaching roots and used it to grab on to a vine hanging above them, getting them safely out of the way of the third attack.

Forward, forward, ever forward. The two of them ran after the three dryads holding the balls, not pausing for a second in their headlong charge.

"One minute left! There's no damn time!" Captain Ashlan shouted, pointing at the timer. With a *plop*, the twenty-ninth drop of nectar fell into it. Ripples spread across the surface of the nearly full leaf cup. One drop to go. One minute from now, the next drop of nectar would cause the timer to overflow.

They were down to the last sixty seconds.

"Hee hee, ha-ha-ha! Now, this is something else! You're actually avoiding Yggdrasil's roots! But you've got forty-five seconds… Forty-four seconds… Even if you get the balls, you really think you can make it fifty meters to the goal before time runs out? Maybe it's about time you gave up!"

"*We'll* be the ones to decide when we give up!"

"*Dummies!*" The nymphs laughed again, coldly this time. "*The gods have the right to* make *you give up. Charge them, Treant!*"

The three treants appeared from the flora directly in front of Nel and Leshea and plowed toward them. They'd seen this trick before, though. The treants could charge all day long; Nel could always punt them back with her Arise…couldn't she?

"Wha?! They're so fast!"

Nel couldn't kick in time. The treants came on three times as fast as she'd expected, faster than the speed of sound. They were nothing like a runaway train anymore—more like a cruise missile.

"Kyaaa-ha-ha! This is how they charge when they mean it! Didn't we tell you everything else was just an act?"

"Urgh?!"

"Ngh…"

The wall of treants slammed into Nel and Leshea, sending them flying like leaves fluttering in the air. They landed back in center court by Fay and the others. All the progress they had made with their own desperate charge was undone in an instant.

"This isn't over! We can all run!" Ashlan said. He and the members of his team were all out for blood.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wonderful! Good spirit, humans!"

Ashlan and his people set off. Some were batted back by Yggdrasil's roots, shoved out of the way—and in the meantime, a big, fat drop of nectar was forming above the timer.

"*Nineteen seconds to go… Eighteen… Just kidding! It's actually thirteen seconds. Kya-ha-ha! You're all washed up, humans. It's not enough to get the balls—you'll have to get them into the goal!*" The nymphs laughed and counted off the seconds.

With the occasional anxious glance at the looming nectar droplet, everyone else ran as fast as they could, right up until the final second.

"Three! Two! One! Aaand that's all, folks!"

…*Plop.* The thirtieth droplet fell into the timer, and it overflowed.

The nectar came pouring out, almost audibly. The undeniable, incontrovertible sign that time was up. The meep would blow its whistle to signal the end of the match. Yes, right at that very moment.

Or so everyone thought.

"Kyaaa-ha-ha-ha! We win! And what a win! C'mon, ref, blow that whistle already……! Uh, ref?"

The nymphs looked around, confused.

The forest remained resolutely silent. No whistle sounded. The meep simply held the whistle in hand, not acknowledging that the nectar clock had overflowed.

"……"

"Hey, Meep! What're you doing over there? You can see the timer! It—"

"Everybody, run!" Fay shouted, loud enough to blow away the nymphs' objections. He was pointing at one very specific spot on the court. "Over there!"

"Fay?! What's this all about?!" Captain Ashlan said.

He was just as confused as the nymphs, who blustered, "*What? What?! What's going on? Why are the humans still moving? The game's supposed to be over!*"

Nobody seemed to understand what was happening—not the gods and not the humans.

Which was why Fay chose that moment to announce to all the players, "Time to check our answers." Then he added:

"There's forty-three seconds of additional time in this game!"

"Huh?!"

"Say what?!"

All the members of the gods' team started chattering among themselves.

Additional time: A special exception provided in games like soccer in cases where the game time had stopped, such as when switching out players. If the game time was thirty minutes, the clock would be extended by the amount of time that been excluded so that the players could play for the full half hour.

"Theoretically, it should be the same in God-Tree-Fruit Basketball—any time lost should be provided as extra time!" Fay said.

"…?"

None of the nine gods had anything to say to that. In fact, they hardly understood what this human was talking about. What did he think he was saying?

The issue for them was that additional time was an impossibility in God-Tree-Fruit Basketball. In this game, the timer was simply always running—that was the rule. Player substitutions took place as part of the game, so there shouldn't have *been* any lost time to

make up.

Yet this human was claiming there were forty-three seconds of it?

"Oh, it was there, all right," Fay said. He looked back as he ran across the field—and pointed to the meep holding the whistle. "I told you then. That was my secret trick for grabbing victory in this game!"

"[redacted]?!"

The god team started buzzing again. Those few words, of course, were enough for the wise and knowing gods to understand what had happened.

"Human! You used the meep as a shield because…"

"That's right. I wanted to force a stop to the game."

When Nel had been *in extremis*, Fay had flung the meep at her—and the meep had said…

"Interfering with the referee is outside the bounds of play!"

It was a moment outside the playtime, officially acknowledged by the referee.

With the meep's outburst, the game had been temporarily suspended—which was when Fay knew that extra time was at least theoretically possible.

"We spent forty-three seconds before resuming the game! This match isn't over!"

Every plan had a counterplan. This final strategy, "extra time," could counter the gods' plan.

Plan—Points Efficiency: Vulnerable to time expiring. (10-point ball neutralized.)

➡ (countered by)

Plan—Remaining Time Zero: Stall until time expires and use the 10-point ball to win by the minimum penalty.

➡ (countered by)

Plan—Extra Time: Extend the game time and win without allowing time to expire.

There was just one thing: After the forty-three seconds of extra time were up, the clock would still be at zero. That couldn't be changed.

"Kya-ha-ha! All right, I'm a little impressed! But what good will it do you?"

"You have another thirty seconds at best of this time you've gained. We have the balls. The goal is fifty meters over your heads, and the Goalie Bear is waiting for you."

It was true: The wise and knowing gods also understood how short-lived Fay's little plan would be.

There would be no dramatic comebacks in forty-three seconds. To do that, they would need the balls—and the god team held all of them.

"That's a little problem we solve…like this!" In center court, Leshea's eyes were gleaming. She grabbed Anita by the collar and wound up like a baseball pitcher.

"What? What?! Treasured sister Leshea, may I ask—?"

"All right, Anita! You remember how it went last time. Go grab that ten-point ball!"

"Noooooo!"

"Aaaaaand go!"

Anita, fired forward with all the force of a former god's strength, found herself launched like a rocket—straight at the dryad holding the ten-point ball.

The same dryad who had dropped to the ground, assured of the gods' time's-up victory.

"Wha—?!"

It was the first time the bright green being had shown the slightest hint of shock. After an instant of indecision about whether to simply take the blow or try to avoid it, the dryad clutched the ball close and threw itself to the side, using all the quickness of the divine team's nimblest players.

Boom!

It couldn't have been a difference of more than 0.01 seconds.

Anita, the human cannonball, shot past the dryad and was buried deep into Yggdrasil's goal tree, behind the god.

"*That was a clever way of trying to turn things around, I'll give you that. And you were this close*," the dryad said, clearly relieved to have evaded the play by a hair's breadth. "*But* now *you are out of ideas.*"

"No, that was perfect!"

"Hmm?"

"Y'know, I've just felt like something hasn't quite been right recently." Leshea twirled a strand of her hair, red as fire, around one finger, and made an exaggeratedly thoughtful face. "I'm supposed to be a former god, you know? But lately Pearl and Nel have been getting all the glory. And that's okay, I guess, I've just been wanting…I've been wanting to win in a way that's more like *me*. You know what I mean?"

"…?"

The divine team did not appear to know what she meant.

Look at the situation she was in. What could she be talking about?

Crack.

That was when a crack ran down the trunk of the great tree of Yggdrasil behind the gods. It started from the point of Anita's impact and went from there.

"But what's a me-like win?" Leshea continued to muse. "I think it's got to be something that's within the rules of the game, but at the last possible second, where I use my former godlike powers to snatch victory."

Crack… Creak…

It didn't stop at a single crack; the noises from the tree got louder and more numerous.

"I remember something the meep said. It told us to use the *whole* forest to achieve victory."

Wasn't that what the divine team had done? They'd used the grass on the ground, summoned "lemmings" from the woods, and controlled the very roots of Yggdrasil's trees. The players could use

anything and everything in the forest—that was what gave this game its spice.

And thus Leshea gave a particularly bright smile and said…

"So it's all right if we knock over your goal, isn't it?"

"What?!"

The gods turned and watched in amazement as Yggdrasil's massive tree began to lean at a distinct angle, creaking all the while.

Leshea hadn't been aiming her human rocket at the ten-point ball—she'd wanted to give the great tree's trunk one more giant whack.





Yggdrasil had already absorbed the strength of the gods twice, shaking to its roots each time.

By now, the treant was like a runaway train, and it wasn't stopping. It slammed into the first solid object in its path—the great tree of Yggdrasil on the god team's side.

Anita did, in fact, grab the ten-point ball out of the air. Her momentum then sent her rocketing toward the divine team's huge tree, with which she collided with a tremendous bang.

"I'll bet if we did that one more time, we could knock Yggdrasil's sprout-tree right over!"

This was the third and final time.

Pushed over the edge by Anita, the human missile, Yggdrasil's great tree fell over with a tremendous crash.

"A-all right, but what purpose does that serve?!"

"Puuuuuushhh!"

From just behind the center of the field, the gods heard every human on the other team scream and shout. The gods looked at them with amazement.

The ground-bound fruit. The one-shot win that everyone had forgotten about.

Its virtually limitless weight meant no one could pick it up, but now Fay, Nel, Pearl, Captain Ashlan, and the entire human team were gathered around it.

"Everyone push together! All at once, now!" Captain Ashlan bellowed.

Crrrk…

The humans all shoved until they were red-faced—and the ground-bound fruit began to move, a few scant centimeters at a time. They were pushing it…

…toward the toppled tree. Toward the white flower that bloomed among its branches.

The court was some fifty meters long.

And the goal flower grew fifty meters up in the great tree's branches.

They matched up perfectly: If Yggdrasil's tree fell, the goal flower would topple precisely, inexorably onto the ground-bound fruit.

People think ball games mean getting the ball to the goal, but who says so?

If the ball was too heavy to carry, then just bring the *goal* to the ball.

This was the true core of the "extra time" plan. An upset victory that was achievable with the forty-three seconds added to the clock—while the divine team, who had dismissed the possibilities of those forty-three seconds, reacted nowhere near in time.

Not to stop the great tree from falling.

Not to change the direction of its fall with wind magic.

Then again, maybe it wasn't about being in time at all.

Having been brought to the brink of such an elaborate upset, maybe they simply stood and watched. All of them did. They watched as Yggdrasil's tree fell toward center court…

…and the huge flower that served as the goal slammed directly into the bright red ground-bound fruit.

"Scorrre! It's an instant win with the ground-bound fruit. Our final score is one hundred million, twenty-two points to twenty. By being the first to reach fifty points, the human team wins!"

Yggdrasil's forest resounded with the sound of the meep's whistle.

2

About half an hour later…

"Wait, Yggdrasil's trees can fall over and then just…get back up?!"

"It is a divine tree."

"Er… Yeah. I guess that makes sense." Captain Ashlan scratched his head and smiled wryly.

After having been so dramatically knocked over, the huge tree was now simply raising itself back up into place, like a bop bag. Fay wouldn't pretend to understand how it worked, but like the meep had said, Yggdrasil was divine. He was content to leave it at that.

"Urgh… My head's still spinning," groaned Anita, who lay spread-eagle on the grass. "Treasured sister Leshea…erm…I'm sure glad we won and all, but I don't know about…this."

"I couldn't be more satisfied! It's been so long since I got to show off my awesomeness to help us claim a win!" Leshea's eyes gleamed with an unmistakable sense of accomplishment.

Then there was the gods' team, which had gathered in the center of the playing field, where they were debriefing. All ten of them, the Goalie Bear included, had gathered as soon as the game was over to discuss.

"I'm telling you! You should have stopped that last human missile, Treant!"

"……"

"What? You didn't wanna 'cause it would hurt? Come on, you can survive a scratch like that!"

"*There were other possible plays. If the humans are going to knock down the tree, perhaps we could have the Goalie Bear tear the goal off the branch*," the dryads suggested.

Then the nymphs clapped their hands and said, "*Oh, yeah! Hey, you! Humans! Did ya know? In the gods' games, you can get special rewards by fulfilling special victory conditions.*"

"Just what I've been waiting for!" Captain Ashlan said, turning eagerly toward them.

The rate of human victories in the gods' games hovered somewhere below 10 percent. So apostles who not only won, but took special kinds of victories, could be rewarded.

God's Love: Awarded for winning a game without a single casualty.

God's Diadem: Awarded for defeating a previously undefeated god for the first time.

In this case, it was the latter. The guardians of Yggdrasil's forest were meeting the humans for the first time—so although it wasn't the same as with Uroboros, whom humanity had tried and failed to best for centuries, this team was still officially undefeated.

"What do we get?!" Ashlan exclaimed.

"*Oh, we've got something great for you. Okay, here it comes…is what I'd like to say. Buuut…*" The nymphs turned and looked first at Fay, then Leshea, Nel, and Pearl. "*How many do you all have?*"

"Sorry?"

"I mean! How many rewards? How many do you have?"

"Oh. You mean the Gods' Diadems."

Fay thought back over his career in the games, counting the "loot" he'd acquired from the gods.

From Uroboros, the Undefeated God: the Eye of Uroboros, a treasure (or trash, depending on how you looked at it) that caused the player diving to always encounter Uroboros.

From the God of the Sun Army, Mahtma II: the Sun Flower. Legend says that it can summon the sun.

From Anubis, the God of the Underworld: the Treasure Hall Master Key, which enables the user to summon any one item from the Labyrinth of Lucemia.

"I have three," Fay said.

"*Awwwwwwww! What! A! Shame!*" The nymphs sighed, sounding genuinely sympathetic but also distinctly amused. "*Three is the maximum number of rewards you can receive.*"

"Say what?!"

Who knew there was an inventory limit?

Fay and his team were the only ones to run afoul of this

maximum, but apparently Captain Ashlan, Anita, and the others who had been in the game with them were to be denied any reward as well.

"N-now just a second, please!" Pearl said, immediately jumping forward. "I think I have an idea, Rainbow Flutter Bug!"

"The word you're looking for is nymph*."*

"We have this reward, the Eye of Uroboros, that we totally don't need at all, like not even a little bit! Maybe we could trade it in so that everyone can get their reward?!"

"*No way!*" The nymphs gave an amused snort. "*Awww, I really feel for you. If you drink Yggdrasil's Sap, your Arise becomes a hundred times more powerful. It's great stuff. Oh well. Them's the breaks. Bye-bye, now!*"

"Whaaaaaaat?!"

"Noooooooo! I knew we should've thrown away Uroboros's Eye! It's cursed; it has to be!"

The apostles' despair echoed around the forest.

Fay and the rest returned to the human world.

Vs. The God-Tree Guardians—WIN.
Game: God-Tree-Fruit Basketball.
Time Elapsed: 30 minutes, 43 seconds.

Win Condition 1: Score 50 points.
Win Condition 2: If time expires, the team with the higher score wins.
Other: Four fruits/balls are used simultaneously.
If time expires, a special calculation called the minimum penalty will be applied.

Dropped Item: Yggdrasil's Sap—Not Obtained.
Dropped on Difficulty: Mythic.

3

In an office in the Arcane Court's Ruin branch, the clicking of a keyboard could be heard.

The sound came from Chief Secretary Miranda's desk.

"Hmm, okay. So you can't possess more than three God's Diadems at most. That's new info. Good work, Fay."

"Thanks… Unfortunately, that good work left Captain Ashlan feeling awfully disappointed."

"You got another precious win. To hope for more than that is greedy." Miranda seemed to be in a staring contest with the screen. She'd been questioning Fay for almost two hours. "Just to be clear," she said. "The gods' games go up in difficulty when you've won five or more victories—is that right?"

"That's right, Chief Secretary Miranda," said Nel, who was sitting on the end of the sofa. She nodded vigorously.

"It sure made the game a lot harder—like we say in the report," Leshea offered.

"Okay, well, that confirms it. We got an awful lot of valuable information straight from the god's mouth for a single game. Talkative deity, huh?" Miranda sipped her coffee, looking positively happy. Normally she would have been in a bad mood after working so late, grumbling about "a sleepless night" being "the enemy of good skin," but tonight was one of the rare exceptions.

Fay and his team had added another victory to their total, and they had gotten some very useful information as well.

"That does it for the post-game interview. This is where I'd like to tell you to go back to your rooms and get some rest, but on that subject…" Miranda stood up and looked at the occupants of the sofa: Fay, Nel, and Leshea, along with Pearl, who could barely keep her eyes open under the sandman's assault. "Lady Uroboros had something to talk to you about. Have you heard already?"

"Huh? Uh, no, not yet," Fay said. He'd been wondering about the

silver-haired girl. He'd expected her to be waiting in the Dive Center the moment they got back from the basketball game, but he hadn't seen her anywhere. "I was sure she would be waiting for us."

"She got tired of waiting and said she was going to go take a shower and catch a nap in your room, Fay."

"Was anyone going to ask *me* if that was all right?!"

Even as he spoke, though, Fay heard someone stomping down the hallway.

"Did you summon my undefeated self?!" The door crashed open, and a silver-haired girl bounded in. Her whipped cream mustache suggested she had been helping herself to some ice cream or the like.

"Oh, hey, Uroboros. There's something I'd like to ask you," Fay said.

"Is it about the god who meddled with you, Tiny Human?"

"Oh, you already know about that? Guess I shouldn't be surprised."

He'd told Leshea, Pearl, and Nel about what had happened as well. How, when they had dived through the Divine Gate and his friends had been sent to Yggdrasil's forest, Fay alone had been thrown into some strange subdimension. There had been a god there, but he knew neither their name nor what they looked like.

I'd never heard that voice before, either. I had no idea who it was, but for some reason, they knew me.

And they had clearly regarded him as a threat.

"You were the true danger all along. You will sleep here awhile. The gods' games cannot exist."

What god could that possibly have been? Whoever it was, they'd felt threatened by the prospect of him completing the gods' games. Who knew they could feel that way?

"Yeah, about that." Uroboros plopped down on the sofa across from Fay. "Quick question, Tiny Human. When you beat Lucemia, did it count as two wins?"

"—!" Fay's breath caught in his throat.

"Ah-ha! Well, I had an inkling." Uroboros grinned at Fay's right hand. "Normally, when a human wins one of the gods' games, it counts as one win. Simple, right? But something a little bit unusual happened in that maze."

"I'd say it was more than a little bit," Fay said. Uroboros certainly made this sound ominous. She looked as excited as a child who knew the secret to a magic trick. If she was this confident, she must have already figured out what was going on.

"I told you, did I not, that there were six gods in that maze?"

"Yeah. Is that counting Leshea?"

"Nope. It includes"—here Uroboros held up six fingers—"my most adorable undefeated self, one very soft-headed god of the underworld, and four other sly gods."

"Quite a crowd, apart from you."

"The real question here, Tiny Human, is: *Who was the game master?* Who was really running the show in that labyrinth?"

"What?" Pearl's eyes went wide—Uroboros's question seemed to have snapped her out of her near slumber on the sofa. "The game master was Anubis, wasn't it? She said it herself: 'Nothing is impossible for the game master.'"

"That's naive! Chesty, you're not using your head! No wonder, since all your nutrition seems to go to your boobs instead of your brain!"

"My boobs don't have anything to do with this!"

"That underworld-ruling moron was dead, right? Don't forget, until Chesty and company brought her back to life, she'd given up being in charge of that maze."

"W-well, yes…"

"So there was a stretch when the dummy was dead and wasn't the game master. Maybe it'd make more sense to you if I said the GM's seat was open."

"I get it! That's what you're talking about!" Nel said, jumping up off the sofa. "If the GM's seat was open, a different god could take it over. Meaning there were *two* gods serving as game masters!"

"You got it. There were four gods in that labyrinth, and one of

them had taken over the role of game master. Afraid that mine undefeated self would clear the maze, they panicked and invoked the game master's privilege to kick me out."

So the GM had changed partway through. When the game had begun, there had been some other god occupying the GM's seat left vacant by the absent Anubis. Uroboros's ignominious dismissal from the game had been through that deity's GM privilege.

After all that, Anubis had been brought back to life, and with the revival of the true game master, the true creator of the labyrinth, the mystery god who had been playing the role of GM had to relinquish the position.

So that's it. That's why the labyrinth, and the labyrinth alone, awarded me two wins.

By the strange quirk of having two game masters, it had counted as two wins in the gods' games.

That assumption was most likely correct. After all, it lined up with what that mysterious god had said:

"You were never supposed to be able to clear that labyrinth game. I ejected the snake, Uroboros, from the game, even while knowing that to do so would be to alert her to my presence."

"Huh." Leshea, who had been listening quietly with her arms crossed, let out a small sigh. "I'm not sure I get it, but the point is that there's some weird god running around, right? You're telling us that they showed up in Anubis's maze and started messing around? Don't you know who they were, Snakey?"

"Nope," Uroboros said with a disinterested shake of her head. She didn't even seem particularly bothered at being called "Snakey."

I do *wonder who those gods were, though. Seeing as one of them almost imprisoned me in a subdimension.*

And of course, there was the whole matter of what had come before that—there seemed every chance that the trapping of

apostles worldwide in Lucemia had been the work, not of Anubis, but of these mysterious gods.

"Lady Uroboros," Chief Secretary Miranda offered hesitantly from behind her monitor. "If you'll forgive my temerity, wasn't there something you were going to tell Fay and his friends?"

"Hmm?"

"The matter of the Godeye lens, I mean…"

"Oh yeah! Mineself had totally forgotten!" Uroboros riffled through her pockets and pulled out a small black device. "Here, Tiny Human."

"Huh? A Godeye lens? What about it?"

It was a recording device that apostles took into the superior spiritual realm. Through the lens, recorded images of the games could be broadcasted back to the human world.

"This is where that little prank started," Uroboros said.

"Meaning…?"

"All the humans gathered in that maze were carrying one, right? It was that same deity who did it. The lens is like a collar, with the gods holding the leash. If a human is wearing the collar, you just pull on the leash, and boom! You can drag them straight to Lucemia. That's how their little prank worked."

"What?!"

Fay stared at the tiny camera. Nel and Pearl jumped up from the sofa, turning to Miranda.

"Chief Secretary Miranda?! Didn't the Arcane Court give out these lenses?!"

"Now, now, Nel. Pearl. Don't be hasty." Miranda sighed and shook her head. The look on her face told them she'd been expecting this.

"The Godeye lenses were tampered with by the gods. It's only natural that you would suspect the Arcane Court of some kind of shenanigans, but I want you to remember something. *Where* do they make the Godeye lenses and distribute them to the rest of the world?"

"Wha…?" Pearl said. She and Nel looked at each other.

"W-well, at…at…" Nel sputtered. She couldn't quite get the words out, but the girls' expressions grew stern.

“Headquarters,” Miranda practically spat, then slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Fay had never heard her sound so cold before. It was the unmistakable, undisguised anger of the chief secretary of a branch office of the Arcane Court. “Now, what could this all be about? The Arcane Court supposedly exists to support the apostles who play the gods’ games. And now the Court’s very headquarters… Well. Apostles from all over the world get trapped in a game, and when we pull the curtain back on this staggering incident, the culprit turns out to be none other than the Godeye lens.”

Nobody spoke. The chief secretary was saying what they were all thinking.

“I’ve made my report to headquarters. Step one has to be talking to them directly. I hear the chairman himself is going to be at the meeting to represent headquarters… Ugh! I can’t believe this.” Miranda heaved another great sigh. “Do you think I could get you to be there with us, Fay?”

“You want me?”

This, he hadn’t expected. He would have assumed participants at a plenary meeting of headquarters and the branch offices would naturally be of at least secretary level. To summon an apostle, even one who had been directly involved in the events in question, to such a conclave…

“If you’re sure…,” Fay said.

“We’ll be trying to find out who’s behind this. We have Lady Uroboros’s word on it—she can’t be wrong.” Miranda leaned back in her chair and stared at the information on the monitor so hard, it seemed like she might bore a hole through it. “Headquarters is home to *a god pretending to be a human*. And I think they might just be our mastermind.”

Chapter

Player.3

Mind Over Matter

Gods' Games We Play

1

Far from the city of Ruin, in the southern part of the world continent, a metropolis floated several thousand meters above the surface. It was the only floating city in this world, in this age.

The scale of the city itself was not all that grand, but it was the place where the "magic" of the ancient magical civilization remained more potent than anywhere else.

The Myth City of Heckt-Scheherezade.

Some three thousand years ago, this world and this continent had belonged to titanic creatures who walked the earth; for humans, there had been no place. So humans had lifted their cities into the air…using a God's Diadem. For among the rewards received for defeating undefeated gods, there was a legendary stone called the Flight Crystal. With it, humans lofted the cities they had built into the sky one by one.

——This was the beginning of the ancient magical civilization—but three thousand years prior to modern day, that civilization had abruptly vanished.

Why had it crumbled? Investigating that question was profoundly difficult due to the dearth of physical remains from the ancient civilization, but one lone example of their magical technology had

remained throughout the millennia: the Myth City. A great silver city floating like a bird in the vast blue sky.

This was the location of Arcane Court headquarters.

One could hear them: *Creak, creak, crack, crack.* Hundreds, thousands of windmills decorating the tower that was headquarters. In the tower's great library, a girl sat reading silently, bathed in multicolored light from the stained glass.

"……" Without a word, without a sound, she sat in the otherwise empty library, reading a weathered book.

She was not a librarian.

She was an apostle of the Arcane Court.

She wore black ceremonial garments worked with gold embroidery, a sign that she not only served at headquarters, but was a member of its most distinguished team. That is to say, the strongest team in the world: Mind Over Matter. (Motto: The Holy See where all souls gather.)

"Heleneia."

A man's rasping voice sounded.

Hearing her name, the girl closed the book she had been reading. "Yes, Father?"

"I've been looking for you, Heleneia."

Unsteady footsteps approached. The girl turned toward the entrance to find a man, old but not yet elderly, walking slowly toward her, supported by a cane. Her eyes widened when she saw him.

"Father, you mustn't! Your body isn't ready yet; you can't leave your room…" She walked quickly over to the man, placing a hand on his back to support him. Slowly, she guided him to a chair and helped him sit down.

"This is pathetic," the man said, shaking his head with the slightest hint of a bitter smile. "The chairman of Arcane Court

headquarters, practically unable to fulfill his duties. Maybe it's time to start thinking about retirement."

"Whatever do you mean?" The girl gave him her sweetest smile. Still, her father shook his head, so she placed a hand gently on his cheek. "It's just an illness. You'll get better with enough rest. But tell me, what's wrong? What was so urgent that you had to leave your room to visit me?"

"Something very ominous has happened," said the chairman, Augusto O. Missing. He leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply. "It's the incident with the labyrinth, Lucemia."

The breath caught in her throat, and her eyes widened again, ever so slightly, but her father didn't notice.

"You know, when more than two hundred apostles were trapped in a game and couldn't get home? Rumors are starting to swirl. People think maybe headquarters was involved."

"Baseless speculation," the girl said softly. In her voice, though, there was the hint of a chill, so slight that her own father would never have detected it. "You want humanity to obtain a Clear in the gods' games more than anyone, Father. What in the world would you have to do with such an unfortunate incident? Anyway, what proof could they possibly have for—"

"Uroboros."

"……"

That brought the girl up short.

"A god has descended to the human world. Not in their real form, of course; I mean in a spiritual body. In any case, this deity seems to have taken a real shine to the human who defeated them. You've heard the reports, that Uroboros is now living at the Ruin branch office?"

"Yes…"

"Well, this god has formally declared that they can sense divine power from the Godeye lenses. Which puts suspicion squarely on the distributor of the lenses—headquarters. The Ruin office is requesting a meeting…" Chairman Augusto shook his head again, feebly this time. He looked lost.

Well, why shouldn't he? This human, this "father," truly knew

nothing at all.

"The other branch offices will be there as well. I expect this to be a long meeting… By all rights, the chairman should be the one to represent headquarters, but to my own chagrin, I have to admit that I don't have the stamina right now."

"I understand completely, Father." The girl nodded and stroked her father's back as he gnashed his teeth. "I, the vice chairperson, will appear on your behalf. You needn't worry about a thing. Ruin's suspicions will soon be cleared up."

"I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"Just leave everything to me." She took her father's hand and helped him to his feet. Then, bracing his back once again, she ushered him to the library door.

"The conference is at noon tomorrow," he said. "I'm sorry about this, Heleneia."

"Not at all. Just make sure you have the doctor take another look at you as soon as you get back to your room, Father."

She watched with a smile on her face until his frail figure was out of sight.

"Uroboros. You snake. Are you really so taken with that human, that…Fay?"

It was not the girl's voice. It was the rippling utterance of a deity, tinged with anger, that echoed around the ancient library.

2

In a conference room at the Arcane Court's Ruin branch office, Fay sat at a round table large enough to fit thirty people or more. At the moment, it was occupied only by himself and Chief Secretary Miranda. Each of them had a conference monitor in front of them. In fact, a third seat, beside theirs, also had a monitor—but there was no one sitting at it.

"Fay. Where's Lady Uroboros?"

"She turned me down flat. Said she wasn't interested. '*You want mineself to go to a meeting? Not until after we've played my game*.' Her words. I thought about it, but she said her game takes a minimum of five hundred hours to finish."

"She and Lady Leoleshea are just the same. The gods really aren't interested in anything besides games, are they?" Miranda gave a tired smile as she turned on her monitor. "We're only having this meeting because Lady Uroboros testified that the culprit is at Arcane Court headquarters. It might have been nice to have our star witness with us."

"The thing going on with the Godeye lenses, right?"

"That's it. We humans can't detect the gods' power, so if they just tell us they weren't able to find any evidence of tampering, there won't be much we can say. Here goes…"

The monitor blinked to life. There was a brief mechanical buzz, and then it displayed a conference screen split into twenty-one segments. The twenty branch offices from across the world, plus headquarters.

"We're the only ones with our cameras on," Fay observed.

"We're just here first. We've got another twelve minutes until this meeting starts, so I think we can just relax. If you need to use the bathroom, Fay, now's the time." Fay wasn't sure if Miranda was joking or not. She spread some papers in front of her. "I think we're in for a long one today."

Twelve minutes later, with the world-spanning video conference underway…

"We detected no irregularities with the Godeye lenses."

The conference fell silent. The words, cool and composed, came from a girl occupying the center of the screen, from where she spoke to the more than thirty participants in the meeting. They were the first words out of her mouth, the moment Miranda, as the one who had convened the meeting, finished what she had to say.

"*Headquarters has conducted its own investigation of the Godeye lenses in response to the Ruin branch office's claims that they are imbued with divine power, and that they were somehow connected to the Lucemia entrapment incident. However, no signs of anything unusual were found.*" The young woman who served as vice chairperson stared straight ahead as she spoke, refusing to make eye contact with any of the others who were gathered there. "*Interviews were also conducted with staff and apostles associated with headquarters, but it was determined that none of them should be considered a suspect in the incident. A detailed report will be prepared on the subject.*"

Beside Fay, Chief Secretary Miranda raised her hand. "May I ask a question? I'm not the one who discovered the abnormality with the Godeye lenses. It was Lady Uroboros. Are you still going to maintain that there's nothing wrong?"

"*We cannot be certain*," the young woman said, shaking her head. "*Insofar as there are only* humans *at headquarters, we have no one capable of detecting the mighty power of the gods. As much as it pains us, the most headquarters can do is to look for any physical or material abnormalities in the lenses. If you could convince Lady Uroboros to come to headquarters herself, perhaps the situation would be different.*"

"I see," Miranda said, slowly crossing her arms. It was the Ruin branch office that had made the claim that there was divine power within the Godeye lenses, but the unfortunate truth was that humans couldn't sense that power. They had no specific proof to offer. Which was exactly why they had wanted Uroboros to attend the meeting and give her testimony.

Something's bothering me, though. Something about headquarters' unflappable confidence.

What particularly nagged at Fay was what the young woman had said after making her announcement. He took it to mean that if only Uroboros would come to headquarters, they might have been able to prove something.

What was the flip side of that statement?

It sounded to him as if headquarters was very *confident* that

Uroboros would stay where she was.

Was it just his imagination, or did it seem like they were all too familiar with Uroboros's attitude, with her complete disinterest in the human world when it came to anything besides games?

"Are there any other questions? I'm afraid the chairman is feeling poorly, so I will continue to answer any inquiries in my role as vice chairperson."

Silence.

None of the representatives of the various branch offices looked particularly eager. Apostles around the world had been trapped in Lucemia; if they could have proven that there was some gimmick by which the Godeye lenses caused the disciples to gather in a certain place, the other chief secretaries would almost certainly have become disgruntled.

But no one had proven anything, or could.

Certainly not as long as the undefeated god, Uroboros, refused to go public.

"Headquarters will also continue its investigation into the incident in the labyrinth of Lucemia. With that, I think we can conclude today's—"

"Sorry, could I ask one thing?"

The interruption came from…Fay.

On the monitor, he saw the young woman peer at him with her large jade-green eyes, her face frozen in a rictus of suspicion.

"*Fay Theo Philus*," she said.

"Oh, you know who I am?"

"Why, yes. Your reputation has certainly reached us here at headquarters. I'm quite interested in you myself."

He was known to even the vice chairperson at headquarters…

No. Right now, at this moment, there was a better way to refer to her:

Heleneia O. Missing.

Leader of Mind Over Matter, the strongest team at Arcane Court headquarters.

Her jade eyes had a trace of blue in them, as did her long lavender hair, which was tied in pigtails on either side of her head.

Fay had never asked anyone how old she was, but just judging by her looks, she seemed to be his age.

I'm not sure I get it. As far as I know, this is *the first time we've met, but I can hear an edge in her voice.*

She seemed strangely menacing. It wasn't aggressive enough to be outright hostility, but the tone in which she spoke to him was as flat and hard as a steel wall.

"By clearing the labyrinth of Lucemia, you freed all the apostles who were trapped in that game. I must thank you."

"Gosh, don't mention it. I sure didn't do it by myself."

"What's this? Modesty? Trust me, there's no one who would doubt the skills or abilities of the man who's recorded such a sterling streak in the gods' games. Seven wins and no losses. *So. What was your question?"*

"Oh, it's just something I was wondering about. No big deal." With that preamble, Fay fixed his gaze on the young woman, who was still staring straight at him. "That thing you said earlier. '*Interviews were also conducted with staff and apostles associated with headquarters*' about the Godeye lenses. Who did those interviews? Did the chairman speak to those people personally?"

"As I said, the chairman is feeling poorly. He's focusing on his recovery at the moment."

"So you're saying…"

"I was the one who performed the interviews."

"All right, so that would mean—I'm just asking to make sure this is on the record—*no one interviewed you*, Heleneia?"

"……" There was an instance of chilling silence.

Then Heleneia said probingly, "*Do you want to interrogate me here and now?*"

"Hey, I don't know anything," Fay replied with a shrug. "Only the gods can detect the interference of other gods. That's why I thought Uroboros's testimony would be so important."

"That's true. We would, of course, welcome Lady Uroboros if she wished to come to headquarters and allow us to examine her."

"Cool. We'll drop in on you as soon as we get the chance."

The young woman, the vice chairperson, seemed surprised—her

breath caught, and her eyes widened.

That was ridiculous. Uroboros would do nothing. Was Fay suggesting that a deity who spent every moment thinking only of games and who could have cared less about the humans' situation would go all the way to another city?

Fay, at least, thought he could see the confusion written on her face.

"*Lady Uroboros will be with you?*" the young woman ventured.

"Nah. We've got a *former* god here."

"You can't mean…the dragon god who awakened in the rare earth belt of the Great Northern Cold-Wave Zone?"

"You got it. I think Leshea might be able to sniff something out."

Having lost her status as a god, the Dragon God Leoleshea had also lost her ability to detect other gods. She probably had only a tenth of her "sense of smell" left. Nonetheless, it seemed likely that when they walked into Arcane Court headquarters, she would know if something was up.

"What with how you've already got *four whole gods* right there at headquarters," said Fay.

Four powerful gods. With that many of them in one place, even Leshea's enfeebled nose would be able to pick up their scent.

"……" The girl with the lavender hair was silent for a moment; then she let out a long breath. "*Be our guest. If it helps us figure out what's going on, headquarters would welcome your visit. Now then… If there's nothing else, I'll call an end to this meeting. Thank you all for your time.*"

She cut the connection from headquarters, as if to say that this discussion was over.

The feeds from the other cities winked out one by one, until Fay was left looking at a solid black monitor.

"Ugh. Well, no surprises there," Chief Secretary Miranda said with a big yawn. "I guess it only makes sense that no one at headquarters would know any more than we do. You have to be a god like Lady Uroboros to detect anything." She stood up and immediately gave a great stretch, working out the kinks from sitting up so straight for so long. "Fay, what was all that stuff about—"

Fay interrupted her. “Chief Secretary, look at this!” He pointed at the screen.

Present: 2. Exited: 19.

One other city was still active in the meeting. And it was…

“The Myth City? Headquarters?!”

“*Yes. There’s something I forgot to ask*,” came a girl’s voice. Heleneia hadn’t left the meeting after all. She’d simply turned off her video—but she was still connected to the call.

But why? Did she create this moment intentionally? Did she want to talk to me alone?!

“Fay. Do you like games?”

What did that mean? He didn’t understand the girl’s question. What a strange thing to ask someone with such a long and successful record in the gods’ games.

After a moment Fay said, “If you mean that literally, then of course.”

What the young woman said next, however, left Fay speechless, and even the chief secretary didn’t know what to say.

“Would you consider quitting the gods’ games?”

“I’m sorry… What?”

“There are countless human *games in this world. More than one person could play in their lifetime. Why, then, should one be uniquely devoted to the gods’ games?”*

For a moment, Fay was lost for an answer—not because he understood and agreed with her, but because what she was saying almost didn’t make sense.

Isn’t she the leader of headquarters’ most famous team? A group that’s scored seven victories in the gods’ games?

Standing beside him, Miranda looked like she could hardly pick her jaw up off the floor.

“*Well?*” the girl’s voice asked.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Fay said to the pitch-black monitor, looking squarely at it even though he couldn’t see the

person he was talking to. "But I have my own reasons for challenging the gods' games."

He'd made a promise. One he wasn't about to break at this young woman's seemingly random suggestion.

"I want to go back to being a god, and you want to find your friend."

"I promise I'll play with all my strength—so we can clear those ten games."

"*…I see.*" The screen remained dark, only the girl's voice reaching them through her microphone. "*So you still don't know. You haven't learned that humanity must* not *achieve ten victories in the gods' games.*"

Fay sucked in a breath. What did that mean?

Even as he leaned toward the monitor, the girl said, "*If you're coming to headquarters, just let me know ahead of time.*"

Then the young woman from Arcane Court headquarters disconnected the call and actually left the conference.

3

With the conference over, Fay said had goodbye to Chief Secretary Miranda, and now he was back in the apostles' dormitory. He lay on the floor of his room, staring up at the ceiling.

"……"

It was something of a personal quirk: When he needed to think, he liked to do it lying down instead of sitting in a chair. But if he lay in bed, he might fall asleep—the hard floor was better for pondering.

This is the third time I've lain here in this room thinking this hard.

The second time had been just recently: the day he'd returned to the Ruin office after half a year away. After he had met the Dragon God Leoleshea, who looked so much like the red-haired older girl in his memories that he'd almost had trouble separating them in his

mind.

When had the first time been, then?

It had been the day when the team to which the rookie, Fay, had belonged had broken up.

Why had they broken up? As a rookie, he hadn't understood any of it, and he remembered now how he'd felt that the only thing he could do was spend the entire day lying in this room, gazing into space.

"You said you just got back here after six months away, right, Fay? You must have been on a team before that. Couldn't we join with them?"

"The team broke up."

"Did you have a fight?"

"No, everyone got along great. It was very sudden. I went to the team room one day and was told they'd decided to split up…"

That was what he'd told Leshea when she had asked him about it—but thinking back on it, there had been one sign of what was coming. A few days before the team's dissolution, Fay had heard the young man who was their leader mumbling to himself.

"I shouldn't have seen it, but I did… We're not supposed to clear these games…"

At the time, Fay hadn't known which games he meant specifically—but today, when he heard what Heleneia said, he'd finally connected the dots. Could it be that their leader had meant *they shouldn't clear the gods' games at all*?

"Whoa, hold on!" Fay exclaimed, bolting upright. "In that case… what did he 'see'?"

His former team leader had seen something; that much was obvious—something that had caused him to conclude that they shouldn't clear the gods' games.

"If I could ask him about it…maybe I would understand what

Heleneia was saying."

Fay felt his heart beat faster. With an anxiety unlike anything he'd felt in any game, he reached for his communications device on the table.

"*Oh, hello. Fay?*" said the voice on the other end. "*What's going on? If you're still thinking about that conference—*"

"Chief Secretary Miranda," Fay interrupted. Then he took a breath, trying to give himself a moment to calm down before he continued speaking. "Could you find out where Chaos is right now? I mean the leader of Awaken—my old team."

4

The next day…

"…and that's why I'd like to talk to Chaos again."

"I think '*and that's why*' is a bit pushy!" Pearl exclaimed.

They were in Chief Secretary Miranda's office, sitting around the table: Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and Nel.

"Ugh… My brain's so full, I feel like it's going to burst," Pearl sighed. She wasn't disappointed so much as she was genuinely overwhelmed by the amount of information Fay had just given them.

"That was fascinating hearing about your former team, Master Fay," said Nel, who was seated beside Pearl. She crossed her arms and looked serious. "I simply assumed you must have left your old team in order to form a new one with Mistress Leshea, but now I know your old team, Awaken, broke up. And that immediately before it did so, its leader, Master Chaos, said something that, in hindsight, sounded very important."

We shouldn't clear these games.

That, to Fay, lined up with what the young woman from Mind Over Matter, the strongest team, had said.

Namely, that the gods' games must not be cleared.

"Mistress Leshea, if anyone here seems likely to have some idea of what this is about, surely it would be you?"

“Not a clue!” Leshea shook her head vigorously, her vermilion hair swishing around her head. “Speaking as one of the gods who once oversaw the games, the gods absolutely welcome humans who want to test themselves in the games. If the humans win, the gods are happy to acknowledge their defeat, and if any human ever achieved ten wins, I think the gods would be only too happy to congratulate them. I guarantee none of them would be upset to know someone had beaten them ten times!”

“Yeah, it seems like it,” Pearl concurred, taking a cookie from the table. “What was your impression of the meeting, Chief Secretary?”

“Pretty much what you’d expect.” Miranda was at her desk, having a staring contest with her monitor. “Headquarters’ chairman is recovering from a serious illness, so Heleneia, his daughter and the vice chairperson, appeared on his behalf. I pretty much assumed she was going to say she didn’t know anything about the divine power in the Godeye lenses. A simple enough excuse, since humans can’t detect it.”

“Why did she say that stuff to Fay, then?”

“This is just my guess, but I think she didn’t want him to gain an advantage over her.” Miranda tapped her terminal. A large screen set in the wall flashed to life, showing pictures of Fay and Heleneia.

7 Wins: Heleneia O. Missing (team: Mind Over Matter).

7 Wins: Fay Theo Philus (team unnamed).

“It still bugs me that your team doesn’t have a name yet, but let’s set that aside.” Miranda pointed at the monitor. Specifically, at the neatly aligned number sevens. “They’re neck and neck. Fay has as many win marks as the leader of the world’s strongest team.”

“Oh my gosh! He does! That’s amazing!”

“That, however, is according to the Arcane Court’s official data—which doesn’t account for the loss of three victories to the Bookmaker. Anyway, the point is, Heleneia believes Fay is tied with her.”

Fay’s true victory count was six. Fay had dived into two games

without a Godeye lens—the battle with the Bookmaker and then the contest of God-Tree-Fruit Basketball—so headquarters hadn't been able to see them. Hence, there was a disconnect in the number of wins they attributed to him.

"Again, I must emphasize that I'm just guessing. Heleneia is the chairman's daughter and the leader of the strongest team in the world, and Fay has caught up to her at an incredible pace. I think it's only natural for her to see him as a rival."

"If you'll pardon my saying so, I had much the same thought," Nel said with a nod. She looked a bit uncomfortable about it. "If we continue at our current rate, we could conceivably achieve the first Clear in human history before her team manages it. Perhaps the best way she could think of to slow us down was to claim that we shouldn't achieve ten wins in the gods' games. What do you think, Master Fay?"

Fay reflected for a second. "I don't think we know enough to determine the truth yet."

He couldn't dismiss Miranda's and Nel's suggestion that this was a way for Heleneia to control a rival—but that didn't explain his old leader's agonized murmuring about how they weren't supposed to clear the games.

But Leshea, a former god, said this isn't ringing any bells with her. That only makes me more curious as to what Chaos saw—what he learned.

"Chief Secretary Miranda, were you able to find out anything? I mean, about what I asked yesterday?"

"Chaos's location? The most recent record is from six months ago." She tapped her terminal again, and the screen changed to show a handsome young man with dull blue hair. "That's when he submitted the request to dissolve your old team. After that, he cleared out of the Arcane Court dormitory, then left Ruin entirely."

"Do you know where he went?"

"The Relic City of Ange." With that, Miranda slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose, looking put-upon. "The place where the traces of the ancient magical civilization were discovered. If you want to go there to do some sightseeing, I won't stop you—just

make sure you put in the paperwork for the time off. *And* make sure you come back this time."

Several days later, Fay and the others arrived in the Relic City of Ange, only to discover that Chaos, the leader of Fay's old team, had *already* moved on to another city entirely.

Chapter

Intermission

The Era of the End of Humans and Gods

Gods' Games We Play

High up, higher than the birds, a gleaming silver city drifted among the wisps of cloud in the blue sky. This was the Myth City of Heckt-Scheherezade, where the magic of the ancient magical civilization remained richer than anywhere else.

It was silent in the library there. One particular room, where hundreds of books of records of ancient times rested, had gone nearly a year without seeing any visitors—because no one *cared*. What had happened in times so long ago was of interest only to a handful of scholars.

So the girl was alone again today.

"……"

The girl with lavender hair sat quietly, studying a book with her jade eyes. She turned a page with only a soft rustle.

Then she heard footsteps approaching, gradually growing louder.

"Heleneia."

"It was my decision alone. I attempted to trap the boy, Fay, in the superior spiritual realm, knowing full well that you would resent me for it." *Clack.* There was a sound of shoes on the floor, but Heleneia didn't even turn around; she merely continued, "But I failed. I was rebuffed by his Arise. Whichever god gave it to him, they must have truly loved him. I don't know who named his Arise, but it's striking: They call it May Your God, meaning 'He who has been granted the divine love of the gods.'"

"I'm aware of that. I want to know what we do next," the voice responded gruffly.

"If he comes to headquarters, you mean?" The girl closed her book. "We don't do anything. Even if he has realized—or will realize—what I truly am, our goal and our actions will not change. They *must* not change."

"……" She was met with silence.

"In fact, Chaos, I'm more worried about *you*." Heleneia, her hand still on the book, turned to confront the tall, slim young man before her. "You're our team's coach. We could never have devised this plan without your help. I thank you."

"Sure thing."

"You are also, however, the only human on our team. Perfectly, completely human—unlike myself, in which the human and the divine mingle."

"Uh-huh."

"I've also heard that you were the leader of Fay's old team. It crossed my mind that when you see him again, it's possible that, in a rush of sentiment, you might decide to become his ally."

"……" Silence again.

"Well?"

"You're not wrong to wonder, Heleneia. But you've got it backward." The young man took an old book from the shelf: a volume of research on the ancient magical civilization. Gazing down at its cover, he said, "I want to put a stop to the gods' games for humanity's sake. What helps humanity will help me—and Fay. So I'm never going to waver from the vow I swore to you that day."

"I'm pleased to hear that." The slightest smile crossed the girl's lips. It was the first expression of emotion from the young woman, who had remained almost totally impassive throughout the entire video conference with the branch offices. "The plan with the Labyrinth of Lucemia required time. They may have broken out of it, but we must not give up. I will have to ask for everyone to lend me their strength awhile longer."

Standing behind the young woman and young man, under a flickering overhead light, were three apostles. The door to the great library was closed—how had they gotten in there, and when?

They were Mind Over Matter, the world's strongest team.

A demure-looking red-haired girl.
An intelligent-looking young man with a monocle.
A brown-haired boy with a big smile on his face.
And their leader, Heleneia.

Gods, all four of them.

More precisely, perhaps, one of them half human and half god; the other three spiritual projections of deities.

All of them powerful beyond compare.

"D-do myew think our big sis Anubis won't help us anymeowr?" the red-haired girl asked hesitantly—the Great Beast, Nibelung. The god who had bestowed upon humans the cornerstone of Superhuman Arises looked distraught. "This one helped design the Sleeping Lion and Sphinx bosses in that dungeon! It's meowy disappointing…"

"Oh-ho! There's no need to look so down, Nibbly. Gods ought to be unmoved. But also whimsical. That's what makes them interesting." The brown-haired boy laughed in a clear soprano voice. Despite his youthful voice, and the certifiable sweetness of his boyish features, his tone bespoke wisdom beyond his apparent years. "I dare say that even my own cooperation here is a passing fancy. Isn't it, Hecky?"

"Elder," Heleneia answered with a sigh. "I'm not Heckt-Maria here on the surface. I'm Heleneia O. Missing. I wish to remain a human a little longer."

"Do pardon me."

"And one other thing." Heleneia gave a childish—though pained—smile, and in an uncharacteristically teasing tone, she said, "I regard you, elder, as a valued companion and comrade. I do wish you would do what I ask, not for whim or fancy—but from the heart."

"Mm… W-well, yes, of course…"

"Hee hee! Meow, it's Ararasoragi, the great King of the Spirits, who's lost for words. Oh, Heleneia! Gramps talks tough, but put your heart on your sleeve and down he goes, meow!" The red-haired

girl's shoulders heaved with laughter. "The gods are all-knowing and all-powerful. That's why they never choose all at once but show favor to individuals. But you were different, Heleneia. You were a god, yet you begged me for my help. It was so ungodlike, how could I not be charmed? That's why I agreed to work with mew!"

"It's because I'm half human. I'm very good at…ungodlike things." Heleneia sighed again.

Half human: Even the all-knowing, all-powerful gods couldn't guess all the emotions contained within that word.

"I'm looking forward to working with mew, too, 'Nafutayua,'" Nibelung said.

"……" The young man with the monocle only nodded. This god hardly ever spoke—but not because he couldn't. This, too, was a game. How much could he communicate without words? He simply enjoyed finding out.

These gods, like all the rest, loved games.

And the plan they had decided on?

"I'm sorry, my dear father." There, in the overwhelming silence of the great library, bathed in the modest light of the lamp, the young woman Heleneia looked up as if praying. "Your daughter isn't going to clear the gods' games. She's going to destroy them."

This girl stood in the liminal space between humans and gods, and she had a plan to tear them asunder once and for all.





Chapter

Player.4

What He Saw That Day

Gods' Games We Play

1

The Relic City of Ange: It was here that, decades ago, the existence of the ancient magical civilization—which until then had been only rumor—was first proven.

They'd had a whole fleet of cities that sailed the skies—but for reasons unknown, they had fallen to the ground one by one, and the magical civilization had faded into legend.

Their relics, their ruins, lay here. From ground covered in volcanic ash, the excavation of those ruins continued even now.

After more than a full day of travel on the continental railroad, Fay and his teammates arrived at the Relic City, their train pulling into view of an ashen-gray landscape.

"It seems very, uh, quiet," Pearl said.

"Quiet? I'd say downright lonely. I thought there would be more crowds," remarked Nel.

The two of them looked this way and that, taking in the city scenery as they walked down a flagstone path.

The place was, in a word, old. For one thing, there were no skyscrapers. Nothing that looked like a corporate office or high-rise apartment building, just a lot of weathered structures built of gray brick. A complete change from the polished urban cityscape of Fay's home base of Ruin. To top it all off, there wasn't even an Arcane Court branch office here.

"I was looking forward to some food tourism," said Pearl, opening a sightseeing pamphlet. "But this place isn't known for any particular cuisine. It doesn't have any famous hotels. Souvenirs are limited to cookies and chocolates with 'Ange' written on them. It practically takes all the fun out of a trip!"

"This place doesn't even have any local games?!" Leshea shrieked. She was walking at the head of their group, also studying one of the pamphlets. "You've got to be kidding me. It's the *Relic* City. They could at least have games that take place in the ruins or something. And there's not even an Arcane Court branch office… Ugh." She heaved a sigh. Then she made a half turn, her shoulders slumping. "Let's go home, Fay."

"Yes, Fay, we should go back."

"Mm-hmm. I see no compelling reason to stay in this place."

Leshea and Pearl agreed, and even Nel nodded, throwing her weight behind the suggestion.

"I hate to say it, Master Fay, but I think our trip was wasted. Insofar as your old team leader, Master Chaos, isn't here, there's no reason for us to stick around."

"Good point…" As he walked along with the three girls, Fay looked down at the communications device in his hand. The monitor showed the address of his former team leader, Chaos. It was supposed to be a corner on this main street—specifically, the corner they had just passed. Yet all they had seen there was an abandoned house. Chaos had come to this city some six months ago, and it looked like he had already moved on to someplace new.

What's this about, Chaos? You moved all the way out here from Ruin, and you didn't even stay the better part of a year?

Why had he chosen *Ange* to begin with? This frontier burg without even an Arcane Court branch office? Its lone distinguishing feature was the remains of the ancient magical civilization to be found there.

"I guess that's another lesson in not relying on Chief Secretary Miranda's info," Fay said. This was the second time it had let him down. Her hot tip about a red-haired girl six months ago had turned out to be just a rumor, and now Ange was looking like a wild-goose

chase, too.

"There are still seats available on the train leaving this evening, Master Fay. That would get us back to Ruin late tomorrow night," Nel suggested.

"Yeah. I'd sort of been thinking of this like a sightseeing expedition, but…"

Fay looked around the avenue. He saw parents and children—local families—and workers from the excavation site. There wasn't a single other tourist there. Apparently this place was one big archaeological dig, pure and simple—not somewhere people came for fun.

"Okay, let's start preparing to go ho—"

He was interrupted by something that came rocketing down from straight over his head.

"Tiny huuumaaan, waaaaaaiiit!"

Boom!

The thing impacted the street with the force of a meteor, kicking up a blast wind and making a tremendous noise.

"Eek!" cried a nearby citizen.

"Wh-what happened?! Did gunpowder ignite?!" exclaimed someone else. People who heard the ruckus came running. The thick cloud of dust finally cleared to reveal a gigantic crater.

What had hit? A missile? A meteorite?

"Nope! It's mineself!"

A silver-haired girl leaped clear out of the crater, which must have been three meters deep. She twirled in midair, so vigorously that her T-shirt—a grotesquely overdone thing with the word *Undefeated* emblazoned on it—rolled up to her midriff. Then she landed squarely in front of Fay.

"Uroboros?" he asked.

"Tiny Human! Looks like I win our game of tag!"

"I didn't know we were playing tag. But anyway, don't tell me you came here all the way from Ruin?"

"Sure did! You sneaked out while I was sleeping, so I had to chase you!"

This, incidentally, was a misunderstanding. They hadn't *sneaked out* while Uroboros was sleeping; she'd simply been snoozing so soundly that they'd been completely unsuccessful in every attempt to wake her up.

"I mean, you said you didn't care about human investigations," Fay reminded her.

"Uh-huh. Hey, where are we anyway? Ooh, wait! Could this be…?" Uroboros looked around, taking it all in. The explosion occasioned by her landing had, miraculously, not resulted in any casualties, but it had attracted a crowd of dozens of onlookers.

"Master Fay…I think they're starting to look at us, too," Nel said.

"Fay, uh, we should probably move," Pearl added.

Uroboros's sharp ears picked up their whispered conversation. "Don't like it here?" She clapped her hands. "Then accept mine invitation!"

"""What?""" the others chorused.

"Here we go!"

Before Fay knew what was happening, Uroboros had grabbed his hand. Then he felt himself rising into the air, and then there was a shock that rattled his brain as everything before him went white.

The next thing he knew, he felt himself hitting the ground, hard.

"Ouch!" Fay cried.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Tiny Human?"

"I think I might have crushed my pelvis… What did you just—Huh?!"

Fay realized he wasn't standing on the main street anymore. Had they flown through the sky or simply jumped through space?

"Oh, I know where this is! It's the excavation site on the edge of the city, isn't it?!" Pearl said, promptly producing her pamphlet. It bore a photo on a two-page spread, which she compared to the worksite in front of them, looking from one to the other. "I knew it! It says that the area on the western edge of the Relic City of Ange has yielded a whole range of relics from the ancient magical civilization. She brought us right to the dig, Fay!"

"That's what this is?" he asked.

It was a sprawling site covered in ash. There was a faded golden altar, as well as stone pillars engraved with characters in a language that obviously belonged to no living tongue. Several of the pillars were broken in half, but some were still complete.

The most striking thing there, however, was the massive wall of black stone that towered directly in front of them. It was a long rectangle, like a painted scroll. Like the pillars, it was crammed with unfamiliar letters.

"Could this be…?" Leshea looked up at the wall, then took a step closer. She smiled, almost nostalgic. "'*We—humans and gods—of their fellowship are proof.*' This is the language of the ancient magical civilization. I thought I recognized it."

"Huh! Is that what this is?" Fay couldn't read the characters carved into the black stele, but if Leshea, herself a living fossil from the time of the magical civilization, said that's what they were, he believed her. "Uroboros? Why'd you bring us here?"

"Hee hee! I can see you have questions, Tiny Human." Uroboros sounded downright pleased. "Well, I *am* undefeated, after all. It occurred to me that I made a promise to this one god a while back. And this would be the perfect place to meet them."

"Huh?"

"There's someone I want you to meet, Tiny Human. I might just call them right now."

Someone she wanted him to meet? Fay couldn't imagine who. Leshea, Nel, and Pearl looked equally puzzled.

At that moment, Uroboros said, "It might take them a while, so you humans can just play the time away!"

"…Hmm?"

"…Huh?"

"…Fweh?"

"…What?"

Poof. Uroboros patted the ash-covered ground. The moment she did so, a huge ring that glowed with silver light appeared at the feet of Fay and his companions.

A ring in the shape of a snake eating its own tail.

It was the ring of Uroboros, a symbol of infinity, the beginning and the end becoming one. The area encompassed by the ring became translucent even as they watched, a shower of rainbow light playing over it.

"This is—!"

"It's the same light from the Divine Gates?!"

A profound power, a sacrament, connected the human world to the superior spiritual realm as easily as that.

By the time they realized what had happened, Fay and the others were diving through Uroboros's ring into the world of the gods.

Chapter

Player.5

Vs. Li'l 'Don —And Then There Were None①

—

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods' games, played by the gods on high: Chosen humans became apostles and could travel to and from Elements, the superior spiritual realm.

Fay and the others landed in some ruins rich with the smell of earth. They were in what looked like a large room with five exits, each leading to a dark passageway. They could see candlelight flickering within.

"Looks like Uroboros sent us…somewhere. Whether we wanted it or not," Fay said. He suspected this was a god's playing field, in this case designed to look like some underground ruins. The ceiling was made of packed earth, and when he touched the wall, he found the soil was loose; part of the wall crumbled away under his fingers.

"This is a pretty depressing place. It smells moldy, and the air is so thick," Nel said with an edge of nervousness. Elements were usually grand, as befitted the holy dwelling place of the gods. These ruins, though… They were, indeed, quite depressing and more than a little eerie.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Master Fay. Any god who would dwell in such a gloomy place must have a most unpleasant game in store for—"

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud! She was interrupted by pounding footsteps that came rushing toward them.

"Ah! Ha! Hah! Welcome to my labyrinth!"

The deity was a pelt-wearing humanoid—a large-ish goddess who had two horns like a bull's growing out of her forehead. She looked reserved and demure, though her outfit was rather primitive, an animal hide that left her shoulders exposed.

"I, and I myself, am the master of this underground maze—the human/beast-god Minotaur!"

Minotaur: the "bull" god who ruled a subterranean labyrinth. This deity's most salient characteristic was…a chest so large that it seemed to say, *Well? How about* this*?!* As she ran along, it bounced up and down, causing the onlooking Leshea and Nel to exclaim, "Look at the size of those!"

"Welcome, you four humans, to… Huh?" Minotaur swept them with her gaze, but when she got to Pearl, she blinked. Then she gave the girl a hard stare, but she wasn't looking at her face. No, the god was studying Pearl's own prodigious chest, plainly visible even with her uniform on.

"She hasn't lost!" Nel shouted. "You might have the size advantage in absolute terms, O Minotaur, but if you go by ratio of height to bust, then by my judgment, you're almost equal! This could be the biggest battle in history!"

"The biggest battle of *what*?!" Pearl interjected, but the Minotaur simply pointed at her, eyes shining. She appeared to be overcome with joy.

"Ahhh! A member of my own tribe!"

"Excuse me, I'm a human! And where do you think you're pointing?!"

"Could it be?! Could it be that you're my own older sister, separated from me some five hundred years ago?!"

"No, I'm definitely not!"

Who would have expected Minotaur to see Pearl as her peer? Apparently, in the eyes of the "human-beast god," Pearl's chest was as good as any deity's.

"Yep, you're sisters, all right. Your chests *and* your personalities

are both of a piece!”

“You too, Leshea?!”

“Welcome, humans. To start things off, behold my brilliant maze!” Minotaur spread her arms gleefully. “In this labyrinth, you, the human players, run away from me, the god, and try to get to the goal before I catch you! Hee-hee-hee! I’ll bet you’ve never seen such a splendid labyrinth before, have you, humans?”

“Oh, sure we have,” said Fay.

“What?” The horned goddess blinked, completely taken aback. “Maybe I’m hearing things. I thought you said…”

“Ahhh… Yeah, uh, sorry. I hate to break it to you when you’re feeling so bullish about your maze, but…” Fay shared an awkward smile with his companions. “We, uh…”

“We just cleared a labyrinth game,” Pearl said.

“I see… Yes, with all the gods out there, I suppose this was bound to happen eventually,” Nel added.

“It’s a *game overlap*!” chirped Leshea.

Yes: The games had overlapped. Anubis’s labyrinth game and Minotaur’s. In the broadest terms, as games where the players tried to escape from a sprawling maze, they were the same. The gods each created whatever kind of game they wanted. They didn’t know what the other gods were doing.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what?!” Minotaur backed up, deeply shaken. “But…but my maze game has monsters! You can defeat them to earn items, and then at the end, there’s a major sequence where you battle me as the final boss! I’d like to see any other game match *that*!”

In fact, another game had matched it exactly. She was literally describing the concept of Anubis’s dungeon.

“They really are similar,” Fay muttered.

“I don’t mind playing the same game twice,” Leshea volunteered.

“I don’t, either, if it’s not too long,” said Pearl.

“Nor do I have any objections. In fact, our experience might serve us well in the same kind of game.”

“Same, same, same! Stop saying *same*!” Minotaur wailed, her voice echoing around the labyrinth.

"Awww… This stinks." The bull goddess sat down on the floor, and tears began to gather at the corners of her eyes. "Waaaaaahh!"

She started to cry, her eyes getting red and puffy as big, fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Huh? Wh-whoa, I don't think it's anything to cry about…," Fay said.

This was getting more uncomfortable by the minute. How could they make her feel better? Fay and the others looked at one another, and it didn't take them long to notice something strange going on at their feet.

Plop!

Minotaur's tears pooled on the floor, until the liquid was almost as high as the humans' ankles.

That was *way* too many tears!

"Waaaaahh!"

The goddess's weeping flooded the floor and promptly formed puddles, then pools, until the water was around Fay's knees.

"H-hey, uh, hold on! Minotaur? My lady? At this rate…"

"At this rate, we're going to drown!"

Nel and Pearl tried to persuade her to stop crying, but it wasn't helping.

The sobbing deity sucked in a big breath, then shouted: "Poseidooooooon!"

At that moment, the water around the humans' knees exploded.

"Who dares to bully my *friend*?!" someone bellowed.

Before Fay and the others could figure out who was shouting, the ceiling of the ruins came crashing down, burying them in earth and dust.

Before he knew what was happening, Fay found himself floating on a vast blue ocean.

He wasn't swimming—he and the others were, of all things, *riding* on a massive jellyfish that bobbed on the water's surface.

"Say, Fay, do you suppose this means that underground labyrinth

was deep below the ocean?" asked Leshea.

"I guess so. I never would have imagined there was this much water above those ruins. You know, I thought I heard somebody shouting just before the ceiling caved in."

The surface of the ocean swelled, and then, with a great spout of water, a massive white whale came flying out of the spray.

"This is my Elements!"

A girl with bright blue hair was standing on the whale's nose. She had a baby face that made her look even younger than Pearl, and her eyes glittered with curiosity. In her hand she held an outrageously large trident.

"When one speaks of Poseidon, the sweet deity of the sea, it is me they speak of!"

Outwardly, she seemed just on the cusp between being a little girl and a young woman. She looked adorable, but there was no denying the sheer presence she projected—definitely that of a god.

"You say you're Mistress Poseidon? But we're supposed to be facing Mistress Minotaur. The labyrinth collapsed, and…you're saying this is *your* Elements?!"

"No, no, no!" The young-looking deity waved her trident. "I'm not Mistress Poseidon, I'm *sweet little* Poseidon!"

"Y-you actually want us to call you that?!" Nel asked, shocked. "I h-have serious reservations about addressing a god with such familiarity. Perhaps we could compromise and say Lady Poseidon?"

"No way! If you really want to call me that, then address me as sweet little Lady Poseidon!"

"I'm having a flash of inspiration!" Pearl exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. "How about Li'l 'Don?"

"I'll allow it!"

Oh, enough…

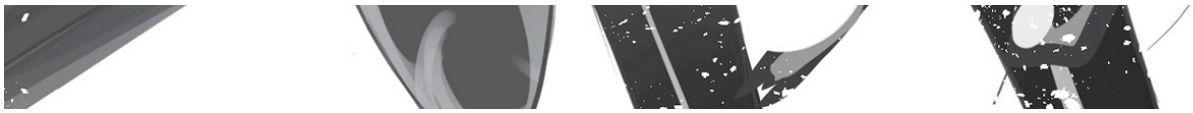
As Fay and the rest of his companions looked on in exasperation, Minotaur sprang up and onto the white whale.

"Li'l 'Don here, see, she likes being called *little* and *sweet* and

stuff.” She grabbed Poseidon from behind in a hug. The hulking Minotaur and the nearly child-size Poseidon looked almost like a mother and daughter, the one embracing the other.

“Heh-heh-heh… Game overlap. Who would have guessed? In that case, instead of sweet little Mino’s labyrinth, you may face *my* game, humans!” Poseidon gave them an unexpected grin. “Ah, you wonder what my game might be? Then let me tell yo—”





"Li'l 'Don's game, see, it's called 'And Then There Were None,' and it's a labyrinth-superstition game!"

"Mino?! Why would you take the wind out of my sails like that?!" the sea god said, turning.

Minotaur just giggled and patted Poseidon on the head. "Don't you have other things to be doing, Li'l 'Don?"

"Hmmm… Well, I suppose I'll leave it to you to explain the game, then. Farewell!"

With a great leap, Poseidon went flying off the white whale's nose and plunged into the deep blue sea. There were a few bubbles as she went down, and no sign that she was coming back up.

"Wha—? She didn't d-d-drown, did she?" Pearl asked, staring wide-eyed at the water.

At that exact moment, the sea, which seemed to go on endlessly, split in two.

With a tremendous roar, the two split again, so that now there were four pieces. They continued dividing, splitting into ever smaller, more complex parts, to form a maze of the sea.

"Wh-what in the world is this?!" Pearl cried.

"Another god who doesn't hold back on the theatrics. That's quite a way to use an ocean." Fay jumped down off the back of the jellyfish—and landed on solid ground. With the sea split, he and his companions were able to stand on what had been the ocean floor.

There were walls everywhere, but not walls made of concrete or earth. They were made of seawater, and they formed a gigantic maze. Since they were made of water, the walls were bluish and translucent, and Fay could see fish swimming around in them.

"It's like we've been dropped into an aquarium." Hesitantly, Pearl touched a wall. There was a *plip*, and ripples spread through it just as if she had touched the surface of the ocean.

"Heh heh! How's that for a surprise?" Minotaur said, poking her head out from deeper in the maze. "Take a look through the wall. What can you see?"

"Hmm? What can I see?" Nel stared hard at the seawater wall. "All I see are schools of little fish swimming around in there…"

"No, no! Look at the surface. You can see your own face, like a

mirror, right?"

"Oh, yeah, I've noticed that… Hmm?"

Nel leaned in. She could see a faint reflection of herself and the others, a perfectly ordinary natural phenomenon.

Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and herself. All four of them were there.

And then the pale images of their team grinned at them.

"Yikes!"

Everyone gasped and jumped back, even Fay; they all felt chills run down their spines.

At almost the same moment, the Fay, Leshea, Nel, and Pearl who were supposed to be merely reflections jumped forward, crashing through the wall in a spray of water.

Completely identical copies of each of them.

No sooner had the fake Fay and his crew emerged than in the distance, the white whale let loose a great spray that came crashing down like a waterfall.

"Eek?!"

"Hrrrk?!"

They were blinded by the spray. When their vision cleared…

Fay A, Leshea A, Nel A, Pearl A
Fay B, Leshea B, Nel B, Pearl B

The eight of them were in a circle, and on their chests they each had a badge that said either A or B. In the spray just now…

…the fake team and the real one had been mixed together.

"Whaaat? Hold on just a minute here!" the Pearl with a B badge cried at the top of her lungs. "I'm the real Pearl, so why am I B?!"

"Wh-what are you talking about? *I'm* the real Pearl, that's why I'm A!" the Pearl with the A badge shot back. "You dirty, scheming little fake! Fay! Fay, *you* must be able to tell that I'm the real Pearl!"

"Fay! I'm the real one, aren't I? With the B!"

The two of them looked identical—but then so did the two Fays to

whom they were posing the questions.

"Well, let me ask you something, Pearl. You see 'me A' and 'me B' here—can you tell the difference?"

""No, I can't!"" Pearls A and B answered immediately and in unison. It wasn't just that they sounded alike, either. Every nuance of their inflection and tone perfectly matched the other's.

"What do you think? Exciting, huh?" said Minotaur, sounding elated. "The fakes are *all Li'l'Don*! See, she can copy anything reflected in the surface of the ocean. First she copied herself and divided into four, then each of those four copied one of you!"

"My goodness…so the false me is actually Mistress Li'l 'Don?!" Nel A said.

"Truly a display of skill. To attempt to hoodwink even my real self by flawlessly imitating my mode of speech…!" said Nel B. The two glowered at each other.

The two Lesheas, by the way, showed no particular sign of fighting, but chose to simply study each other quietly.

"Now, let me explain! This game is about escaping from the Ocean Maze Atlantis! If you can get to the finish line before Li'l 'Don's fakes, you win!"

So it was all about who could get out of the maze first. Anubis's game had been a dungeon, as it were, but this was more of a proper labyrinth, in the form of a time attack against their doppelgängers.

"Oh, there's one other special victory rule," Minotaur said, clapping her hands. "Assuming the 'real' team gets to the finish line first, you then have to say which four out of the eight of you are the fakes!"

"I see," Nel A said, gritting her teeth. "So we can't just make a beeline for the goal. We have to engage with everyone else as we work our way through the maze and try to find some way to ascertain who's real."

"Then the question becomes, how do we tell the real 'us' from the fake ones?" Fay A said, taking up the theme. "I have a question for Lesheas A and B. Can you tell who the fakes are?"

"Probably not," Leshea A said, shaking her head. "The

physiological info has been copied perfectly."

"The Arises, too," added Leshea B. "This is a god's transformation—copying a human's Arise is child's play for them."

At that, Fays A and B both grimaced. "It looks like we could spend a hundred hours talking it out and not get any closer to the truth. Which means there must be some other way, right?"

"Truth Touch! It'll give you a clue as to who's the real you!" Minotaur went over to the two Lesheas and tapped each of them on the shoulder.

"Any player can touch anyone *except their own double* and say 'You're real!' or 'You're fake!' If you call fake and touch one of the fakes, they'll disappear and drop out of the game. If you call real and touch a real person, they'll stay right where they are. That'll make it nice and obvious to everyone what the truth is! There's just one little catch…" Minotaur's eyes squinted with pure joy. "If you get it wrong, the one who made the declaration will disappear and be out of the game! So be careful!"

Concretely, then, it meant this:

★Truth Touch

1. Pearl (real) touches Fay (real) and says, "You're real!"
   ➡ (correct). Both remain.
2. Pearl (real) touches Fay (real) and says, "You're fake!"
   ➡ (wrong). Pearl disappears.
3. Pearl (real) touches Fay (fake) and says, "You're fake!"
   ➡ (correct). Fay disappears.
4. Pearl (real) touches Fay (fake) and says, "You're real!"
   ➡ (wrong). Pearl disappears.

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Leshea B said, nodding eagerly. "It gives the advantage to the real folks, which is only right. The fakes can't use Truth Touch to make the real players go away."

She meant something like this:

5. Pearl (fake) touches Fay (real) and says, "You're real!"

➡ (correct). Both remain.

6. Pearl (fake) touches Fay (real) and says, "You're fake!"
   ➡ (wrong). Pearl disappears.

As options five and six demonstrated, no matter how she tried, the fake Pearl would never be able to make the real Fay disappear. Option five would only confirm that Fay was the real deal, while six would result in the fake Pearl's own disappearance, *and* they would know Fay was real.

"Precisely!" Minotaur clapped her hands happily. "*There's no combination in which Truth Touch is advantageous for a fake to initiate.* Ah, incidentally, the four fakes know who they are. Since all four of 'em are just Li'l 'Don in disguise! Think of Truth Touch as a little way of bridging the gap between what the humans know and what the god knows!"

Using Truth Touch would only put the fakes at a disadvantage—this was a mechanic that favored the (real) humans.

"Okay, let's go over the rules!"

Minotaur snapped her fingers, and a myriad of bubbles rushed up the seawater walls, forming letters.

Vs. The Sea God Li'l Poseidon
Game: Labyrinth-Superstition Game—"And Then There Were None"

Win Condition: One of the four real players must reach the finish line first.
Further, once the finish line is reached, all eight players must be correctly identified as real or fake. (E.g.: Say that the real players are Fay A, Leshea B, Nel B, and Pearl A.)
Lose Condition 1: A fake gets to the finish first.
Lose Condition 2: The spokesperson for the

real players fails to identify the fakes correctly.
Other 1: Branches in the maze are marked WAY FORWARD and WAY BACK.
(These markings are always correct, so following the WAY FORWARD signs will be the shortest route to the goal.)
Other 2: The god (the four fakes) knows which of the players are fake.
Other 3: The eight players may all use Truth Touch.

★Truth Touch—

1. Players may use Truth Touch on any other player *except their own double*.
2. When they touch another player, they declare, "You're real!" or "You're fake!"
   You're fake!—If correct, the touched fake vanishes.
   You're real!—If correct, the touched real player remains unaffected.
3. If mistaken: The person who initiated the touch disappears. Be careful!

At the far end of the large area where they had gathered, there were eight start points, one for each of the players.

"Everyone, choose a start point! By the way, each one is a different distance from the goal, so pick wisely! Know which one you want?" Minotaur was holding a cowbell—something usually seen around the neck of a cow wandering in the fields. Now Minotaur gave it a good ring. "Start!"

They were off and running—eight players plunging into Atlantis, the labyrinth of the sea.

2

The Ocean Maze Atlantis: Fay stood at the entrance, which was a blue so deep that it seemed like it might suck him right in.

"There are just too many things about this that bug me," he murmured, poking a finger into the maze's seawater wall. A little splash of water shot out. The walls were made right out of the sea, so just like the surface of the ocean, if he put a finger through one, he'd find it underwater. "For one thing, could you just take a shortcut straight through the walls? Assuming you were prepared to get pretty wet? Of course, I guess if you don't know which way the finish line is, it wouldn't help much."

He had the B badge on his chest.

Yes: Fay B was the real Fay. Which was another way of saying that Fay A was the fake, but no one else would have had any way of knowing that.

"I have the same dilemma as everyone else, too. Leshea, Pearl, and Nel—the copies are all too perfect to be sure which is which. And we're supposed to use Truth Touch to figure it out?"

Was that really correct? They had a fifty-fifty shot. If they were right, they could get rid of one of the fakes, but it carried a substantial risk of being wrong and disappearing *them*.

Using Truth Touch without any further information is just a game of pure luck—and I'd like to make outright gambling our last resort.

So what, then? Watch and wait? Fay couldn't do that—this was a race. While the four real players were waffling over whether to use Truth Touch, the fake ones would make it to the goal.

And there was another thing: The name of the game included the phrase "And Then There Were None." That smelled fishy. It might have just been a sly hint at how to complete the game—but as game names went, it made Fay very uneasy.

Well, one thing was clear: Standing around would only be the end of them.

"I guess in this game, you *have* to take the risk with Truth Touch if you want to win," Fay muttered.

From directly ahead of where he stood thinking at the entrance to

the maze, Fay heard footsteps.

"Heh-heh-heh! I see you're all flummoxed!"

It was Fay A, wearing the badge with the letter A on it. Fay B knew he was the real Fay, so obviously "A" was the fake. He sure hadn't expected his double to walk right up and say hello, though.

"Li'l Poseidon, right?" Fay said.

"Indeed!" The god smirked with Fay's face. Fay saw his own face in the mirror every day—and he never smiled like that. It was a very strange feeling…and then the god said, "You're the only man on a four-person team. You've got flowers in both hands, as they say!"

"…Sorry?" For a second, he was at a loss for words after hearing such a thing come out of the mouth of a god in his image. He wouldn't say such a thing. He, the real Fay, would never, ever talk that way. "Don't tell me you came over to me just to say that?"

"Hee hee! It's no use pretending! Tell me, with which of these women does your heart truly lie?"

"……" Fay was silent.

"Wha—?! No! Your heart truly lies with…*me*?! You fell in love at first sight, human?!"

"Stop making my body say gross stuff!" Fay burst out. He couldn't help himself, the way Fay A (fake) was squirming and cooing.

He'd never known: It was only when he saw his own body making these perverted pronouncements that he learned the true depth of shame a person could feel.

"Ahhh, but I have my dear Mino! Her chest makes the *best* pillow! I know how she acts, but she's really quite the lonely type. Oh, how she misses me when I'm not around!"

"Now it's *love* talk?!"

"Gya-ha-ha-ha! Very well, farewell, then!" Fay A said, and raced off into the maze. The real Fay watched him go, pressing his hands to his forehead. He had a headache.

"I guess she's probably pulling the same thing on everyone else…"

The Ocean Maze Atlantis, start point C: Staring at the translucent, deep blue wall, Pearl clenched her fist.

"I've had a flash of insight! I have a great idea. These walls are like jellified seawater—but if you touch them, the surface ripples, which shows that they aren't very solid. In other words, if we smash the walls with sheer strength, we could get right to the goal!"

"Oh-ho? So you know where the goal is already?"

"I do not…! Huh?"

Pearl heard a sweet voice from right down the hall ahead of her. As she watched, a blue-haired god holding a trident jumped out.

"Eeek! Li'l 'Don, it's you!"

"Indeed, it's not!"

"Huh?"

Before Pearl could even ask another question, the god wavered like a mirage—and then changed shape. She became a baby-faced girl with golden hair and blue eyes…

"I'm Pearl!" the girl said. "I really, truly swear it!"

"Wha—?!" Pearl cried, her voice cracking from sheer shock.

Nasty! The unctuous tone! The way she peered up through her eyelashes, just begging someone to like her… Pearl knew those were her traits, too, but the god had exaggerated them to a disgusting degree. Moments ago, when they'd all been together, she'd acted exactly like the real Pearl—but now, when it was just the two of them, it got weird.

Pearl realized that the god was teasing her.

"I'm Peaaarl," the other Pearl crooned. "Don't you liiike me?"

"Wh-why, you…"

Pearl's shoulders began to quiver with rage, which made the fake Pearl grin. She pointed right at Pearl. "Oh! I found the fake! The fake with her big ol' boobs and her big empty head!"

Crack.

Something snapped in the real Pearl's brain.

"Who are you calling faaaaaake?! You're gonna disappear! Truth Touch!"





“Oops, sorry! You can’t use Truth Touch on your own double! Can’t you even remember that, Miss Real Thing?”

“I hate youuuuuu!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Okay, see ya in the maze!”

The god in Pearl’s body skipped away into the labyrinth, leaving the real Pearl flushed and furious.

The Ocean Maze Atlantis, start point F: Confronting the translucent, deep blue wall, Nel (real) crossed her arms.

“A race through the labyrinth… It would make sense for an athletic person like me to rush straight for the goal, but if I get there without meeting Master Fay or the others, then the true-false test at the end would be completely down to luck, and that worries me.”

At a minimum, she wanted to meet three people. If she could find, say, Fay A, Pearl A, and Leshea A, and figure out whether they were real or not, then by definition she would also know if the B copies were her true companions.

“I’m not hitting on any way to figure out if they’re real except using Truth Touch…but can I really trust that? It’s all luck. Unless there’s some other way to tell if—hmm?”

Nel’s sharp senses detected footsteps coming her way.

“Who’s there?” she demanded. “Hmph! Are you my fake?!”

From around the corner appeared Nel herself—the fake one. The moment she saw Nel’s face, she pointed and exclaimed, “Fake?!”

“My fake…or should I say Mistress Li’l ’Don?!”

“Bingo! But without the truth check, you’d never know!” The god who looked like Nel puffed out her chest proudly. “For I know all about you! Example: I know how discontented you are with the small size of your own chest!”

The god pointed straight at Nel, who bent forward as if to hide her bust.

“Urgh?! I d-d-do not…”

“Ah, but you need not bewail it. For your behind amply

compensates! Behold!" Fake Nel stuck out her behind at her real counterpart. "So round and taut! You should put this bum to good use and—"

"Don't *do* that with my body!"

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha! I'll see you again…in the maze!"

As the real Nel stood there blushing furiously, the fake one ran off, cackling.

The Ocean Maze Atlantis, start point H: Leshea was trotting down the path into the maze. Every branch was politely marked with coral signs that said WAY FORWARD or WAY BACK, a major clue to the direction of the finish line.

"Hmmm… If I want to make it to the goal before those fakes, I just need to follow the WAY FORWARD sign every time. But if I clear the maze too quickly, without seeing anyone else, I'm going to sweat when it comes time to pick the real players. The message seems to be: If you don't want that, take the "way back" and join up with the others."

First came the "way forward." Getting a grip on the entire labyrinth had to be the priority. She was hoping she could find a likely place to wait and join up with the rest of the gang, but maybe it was a forlorn hope…

That was when Leshea heard light footsteps coming her way.

"Hello? Who are you? My double, right?" she asked.

Two girls with identical vermilion hair ran smack into each other. Of course, their meeting was intentional on the part of the fake, as the real one quickly understood.

"Now, *you* are… Hmm?" The god in Leshea's form studied her intently. "Not human. A former god, maybe? Why are you with these mortals?"

"Because I wanted to play more games!"

"Couldn't you have done that as a deity?"

"I wanted to play even more than I could as a god."

The two girls reached out toward each other at the same instant, as if synchronized. Their fingertips brushed one another's chests—and at that instant, one of the Lesheas flickered like a mirage and disappeared.

Only the true Leshea was left.

"Is this that Truth Touch thing? Oh, but you can't use it on your own double, so I guess Poseidon just ducked out." Leshea crossed her arms and pondered. "Something about this doesn't feel right. Truth Touch is definitely an advantage for the real players, but it's hard to judge the moment to use it."

Deciding she had spent enough time standing with her arms crossed, the real Leshea set off again at a brisk trot. Poseidon was already on the move. If their encounter just now had been a sort of greeting…

"Then I think she'll make her play once three of us are together."

Chapter

Intermission

After All, I Am Hugely Popular

Gods' Games We Play

At that moment, there was absolutely no sign of anyone around at the excavation site near the Relic City of Ange. Normally it would have been teeming with hundreds of workers, performing the endless labor of removing layers of ash and digging into the hard ground.

However, there was actually one being present.

"Sheesh! It's their first time adopting a spiritual body, so they want me to tell them how? How can an omniscient god not know that?"

Uroboros sat there, using a massive pile of debris in lieu of a chair. She'd cleared all the humans out using a recognition disruption barrier.

"Well, it's fine. After all, I am hugely popular."

She had one knee up and was leaning against it, resting her chin in her hand. She grinned and, like she was speaking to an old friend, said, "Taken an interest in Tiny Human yourself, have you?"

Chapter

Player.6

Vs. Li'l 'Don —And Then There Were None②

—

Gods' Games We Play

1

In the Ocean Maze Atlantis, Fay (real) slowly opened his eyes with start point G behind him. On his chest was a badge with a letter B.

"Looks like I'd better go. First things first—I have to figure out how to convince everyone I'm the real me." He set off walking through the massive maze forged out of the very sea. "Guess it depends who I run into first."

※Note: Please enjoy the following from the perspective of Fay B (the real Fay).

Splish, splash. There were little puddles of seawater left on the labyrinth floor, and Fay kicked up small splashes with each step.

If Anubis's maze had been a dungeon in the manner of classic adventures, this was a proper labyrinth, designed to confuse and mislead. For one thing, the path itself was different. In Lucemia, the halls had been wide enough for an entire party to walk abreast, but the passages here were far more cramped. Even walking by himself,

Fay could only just squeeze through them.

There were also far, far more corners.

"If I just take turns at random, I'm going to forget where I came from before I know it," he muttered. He crouched down and picked up a small stone. There were plenty of them right at his feet and a panoply of shells, too; the sort of thing one could only find on the seafloor. Fay had picked up a particularly unique rock, shaped like a star. He placed it at the point where the passage turned. It was a guidepost, a way of telling any players who came after him which direction he had picked.

"I wonder when I'm going to run into the others. I hope I meet the real players—but then again, the whole problem is that I won't know for sure if they're real… Huh? Are those footsteps?"

Fay heard a pounding; something out of the ordinary was rushing his way. He reflexively got ready to fight. Who was it—or *what* was it?

He *sensed* that it was simply too big to be Leshea, Pearl, or Nel—none of them would have made such a racket even if they were running at top speed.

"Gasp! Don't tell me there are monsters in here?!"

He'd had an inkling that there might be—no maze created by a god was going to be *just* a maze. There would have to be traps to impede his progress, or otherwise monsters.

"Mrrrooooooo!"

"Minotaur?!"

"I play the part of a wandering monster in this maze! I play pranks on any humans I catch!"

The human-beast god came rushing up—except that, as she charged onward with all the speed of a raging bull, she raced straight past Fay.

"Huh? She ignored me?"

Why?

As Fay listened to Minotaur's pounding footsteps fade into the distance behind him, he heard a helpless cry.

"Noooooo!"

He knew that shriek!

"Pearl?!"

Next he heard Minotaur say excitedly, "I've finally found you! My sister separated at birth! You *are* my sister, right?!"

"I keep telling you, I'm human! Hey, wh-wh-what are you—"

There was more screaming and chuckling.

Hesitantly, Fay peeked out around the corner to discover Minotaur hugging Pearl (with an A on her badge) from behind, the god's hands in a death grip around her chest.

"This fabulous chest! This couldn't belong to any human!"

"It definitely could! Oh! Fay B! Are you the real Fay or the fake? I m-mean, forget about that for now, just help me, please! This groping god is putting my chastity in danger!"

"……" Silence from Fay.

"Hey! Why are you just walking past? Isn't this the part where you help me?!"

"Phew, I'm satisfied!" Minotaur gave a great yawn and wiped the sweat from her brow. Her eyes were shining. Apparently, she'd had her fill of cozying up to Pearl. "All right, I'll see you at the goal!" she said, and then she charged off with the same reckless speed that she'd charged in with, plowing right through the walls of seawater, leaving a great hole.

"That's a bull for you…always graceful," Fay mused.

"Shouldn't you be more worried about my safety?!" Pearl demanded, getting to her feet. She looked somewhat the worse for wear. Then, however, she seemed to have a thought, and her eyes opened wide. "You must be the fake, Mister Fay B! The real Fay would never have silently ignored me when I was in distress!"





"Nope, I'm the real thing."

"……Are you really?" Pearl A eyed him suspiciously.

Fay, of course, knew that he was indeed his real self, but then, from his own perspective, he didn't know whether Pearl A was real or fake. In other words, they each had reason to doubt the other.

"First things first. Pearl, listen to me."

"What is it?"

"I know we're both feeling a little suspicious, but I think we should work together. Then we should each suggest a plan of action that would be advantageous to the *real* us. Because any plan that would benefit the real us would be a disadvantage to the fakes. They would have to include some lies in their idea in order to make it more beneficial to them."

"I get it!"

"If we can pinpoint those lies, we'll know whether we're real or fake, right?"

"……" Pearl A looked silently at him.

"Is everything all right?"

"It's nothing… That's a very real-Fay-like idea, but then again, it's always possible that you're the fake, and you only came up with such a convincing idea to make me think you weren't…"

Fay could only nod at that. It was possible. This was a god's idea of a game, so there would certainly be tricks to confound the real players.

"Okay, but you can't know that for now," he said. "How about we take a walk first?"

"No objections from me!"

"Cool. While we walk, let's go over our victory conditions."

They started into the maze, turning in the direction Minotaur had smashed through a few minutes earlier.

"Um, well, the basic premise of our victory is…that the real players reach the finish line before the fake ones, right?"

"Yeah, I think so. One of the four real players has to reach the goal first. The catch is, you can't be in too much of a hurry, either. The ideal thing would be to run into as many other players as you can *while* working your way steadily toward the goal, considering

that once you get there, you'll have to say who's real and who isn't."

Figuring out which was which—that was going to be the real test.

"Truth Touch really is the only way to tell for sure who's real and who's fake, isn't it? It's just like Li'l Mino said—it's beneficial to the real players. Using it the right way is going to be the key…" Pearl A glanced over at Fay, clearly contemplating whether she should use Truth Touch on him.

"Hold it, Pearl. It's dangerous to use Truth Touch while it's just the two of us. Let's wait until we find at least one more person."

"Huh?"

"There are no witnesses." Fay held out a hand to forestall the impatient young woman. "If you're going to try Truth Touch to confirm whether I'm the real thing, we ought to have a third party here. If one of us is a fake, they might claim the Truth Touch had exactly the opposite outcome as it did."

"Oh… Yeah, of course!"

"One more thing. Truth Touch gives us two choices. This is just my take, but I think it's better to go with 'You're real' than 'You're fake.'"

(For the case of Pearl A)

1. Tells Fay B (real), "You're fake" = wrong, so Pearl disappears.
2. Tells Fay B (fake), "You're fake" = correct, so Fay disappears.
3. Tells Fay B (real), "You're real" = correct, so both remain.
4. Tells Fay B (fake), "You're real" = wrong, so Pearl disappears.

"We know this much: If all four of the real players disappear, we can't reach the goal. So instead of option one and option four, which would cause the real player to disappear, it's better to do the touch with 'You're real,' where we both stay here, like option three."

"Huh… I guess I see." Pearl nodded vigorously. "That's very convincing. It's almost as if you're thinking like one of the real

players…”

“I told you, that’s because I am one of the real ones!”

The two of them were interrupted by a loud *tak!* of shoed footsteps behind them.

“Stop right there! I’ll thank you to add me to your company!”

Leshea came flying around the corner, vermilion hair billowing. On her chest was a B badge.

“I heard what you were saying!”

“Leshea?! N-no, I suppose I should be careful to call you Leshea B. Anyway, *you* stop right there!” Pearl hurriedly thrust out her hands, trying to keep Leshea from getting too close. She was probably wary of any fakes. “Fay, do you think Leshea B here is the real thing?”

“As far as I can tell.”

The young woman’s appearance and voice fit Leshea’s to a tee. Even Fay couldn’t detect anything suspicious about her—and yet it wouldn’t have been surprising if she was the fake. Poseidon’s transformations were just that flawless.

“I hear you. You’re saying you don’t know if I’m the real thing or not.” Leshea came to a screeching halt. “One thing I know. At the very least, one of you two—I’ll take the liberty of calling you Fay B and Pearl A—is definitely real.”

“Huh? H-how do you know that?” Pearl asked, looking as shocked as if she’d been trapped by a fox spirit. “As far as you know, both of us could be fakes, right?”

“I think that’s very unlikely, which is why I came jumping out. Listen, I was hiding just around the corner, listening to the two of you.” Leshea B pointed down the hallway. “You started going over the rules of Truth Touch, right? But two fakes would never have that conversation—because they’re all Poseidon in disguise. She knows perfectly well how Truth Touch works, so she wouldn’t need to talk it over with herself.”

That meant at least one of them was a real player who needed to

confirm the rules. Because she'd been able to deduce that either Fay or Pearl were real, Leshea B had been willing to show herself.

"Once I knew that, I knew this was my chance. Because when *I* use Truth Touch, the real one of you will report the results faithfully, right?"

"U-um, on that subject…" Pearl furtively raised her hand, then looked back and forth between Fay and Leshea. "If we're going to use Truth Touch, I think I should be the one to use it on one of you. Can I do that, Leshea?"

"I won't stop you. But what's your reasoning?"

"I just thought it might be heartening if I could be sure who was the real Fay or the real Leshea. If I'm wrong, all it means is that I'll disappear, and, uh…I won't be that much of a loss to our team's strength. If there's a risk, I should be the one to bear it, I thought."

"……"

At that, Fay traded a long look with Leshea B.

It made a certain sense. In her own way, Pearl was thinking through the best means of using Truth Touch. If they *could* confirm who the real Fay or Leshea was, that alone would be a big boost to the human cause.

The question is, is it really Pearl? If this is about the risk to our "strength," then it might as well be me using Truth Touch.

From Fay's own perspective, actually, he had the most trouble envisioning how he was of use in this game. Nel and Leshea were fleet-footed, and if they knew which Nel or Leshea was real, she could help them out by getting to the goal faster than the fakes. As for Pearl, she had her Shift Change. Even if one of the fakes was within touching distance of the finish line, Pearl could potentially swap them with a real player and turn things around.

Pearl, Nel, and Leshea all have abilities that could prove really useful in this game. I'm the "coin" that's least valuable.

But perhaps this thinking was too hasty. Should they really take the gamble called Truth Touch right now?

"I appreciate what you're saying, Pearl. But my feeling is that we can hold off on Truth Touch for now."

"S-still?!"

"Who knows? Maybe there's an item or something somewhere in this maze that can determine who's real and who's not without using Truth Touch."

The labyrinth itself had to have some tricks, traps, or other gimmicks. They could take the risk of using Truth Touch after they had found out what those were. After all, Fay suspected the Truth Touch system itself *was* a trap.

"As far as Truth Touch goes, I'm perfectly happy either now or later." Leshea B looked left and right down the hallway. "But whatever we do, I want to hurry up and work on this maze. The fakes—the god—know this place inside and out. They have the rules down pat, and they're going to have the advantage over us."

"I agree with that," Fay said. "Something else bothers me, and it's the name of this game. 'And Then There Were None.' It's disturbing, right? Like a warning: *One way to lose this game is for everyone to disappear.* And we know that the gods aren't soft—you can't win their games without taking some risks, right?"

"Yes! I feel the same way! Especially about the second half!" Pearl A thrust her hand into the air. "Sooner or later, we're going to have to use Truth Touch—and I don't think it would be so bad to get some traction in this game by trying it out! And you, Fay…or should I say, Fay *B*?! You're trying to slow down that traction by saying we should wait. Maybe you're the fake after all!"

"Huh? Wh-whoa, hang on, there!"

Fay wasn't talking to Pearl—Leshea, eyes shining with curiosity, had grabbed him from behind. "Give it a shot, Pearl!" she said. "It's a game—we might as well try anything and everything!"

"I'm telling you, just wait!" Fay shook his head as hard as he could, although it didn't get him out of Leshea's pinion.

This was bad—he was the real thing! But at the moment, Pearl looked deeply suspicious about that. Meaning she was about to declare, "You're a fake!"

"Take a good look at me, Pearl! I'm the real Fay! If you try to determine whether I'm real by touch, you're the one who's going to disappear!"

"All that shouting isn't making you look any less suspicious!" The

golden-haired girl stalked closer, her eyes gleaming. "Haah…haah…I can touch Fay as much as I want… N-no, I mean, this is a perfectly official and legitimate Truth Touch. And so—*touch!* You're a fake!"

Pearl A charged!

"Yarrrrrgh! Stoppp!"

Fay squirmed wildly, moving so fast that Pearl's hand missed him—and landed on his captor Leshea's shoulder.

"Oh…"

"Oh…"

"Oh…"

Pearl A looked on, flabbergasted, as Leshea B vanished in a puff of smoke.

Truth Touch successful!
As Leshea B is the fake, she is removed from the game.

"Wait, whaaat?!" Pearl yowled and fell flat on her backside. As she looked, dumbfounded, at the spot where the vanished Leshea had been standing, a blue-haired god holding a trident appeared.

"Huh! You got lucky, human." She looked down at Pearl and sniffed. "There are three more of me running around. Better get to work!"

Then she vanished, leaving only Fay and Pearl A.

"Leshea turned out to be fake?" Fay remarked. "I knew we'd never figure it out by talking to each other." He hadn't been able to tell until the bitter end. If Pearl hadn't come charging in, it would probably have become almost impossible to ever find out.

"Heh… Heh-heh-heh! I knew it! I knew she was fake! My eye is quite discerning!"

"You were about to erase me!"

"All according to plan. Hah!" Smiling as if she really did feel deeply accomplished, Pearl wiped sweat from her brow. "And at the same time, I've gained some faith in you, Fay. You, Fay B, are the real thing!"

"You mean because I tried to stop you from touching me when you were going to say I was fake, right?"

"Yes! If you *were* fake, you would have been better off trying to get me to trust you and use the touch. Then I would have been wrong and disappeared. But the fact that you stopped me from doing that gives me a lot of reason to trust you!"

By the same token, Fay could also now give a great deal of credence to Pearl A.

Truth Touch is a high-risk, high-return move. If you get it wrong, you disappear. But Pearl took that risk on herself, instead of making me do it.

If she'd been fake, then Pearl A could simply have said, "I'll leave it to you, Fay!" If he'd touched Leshea B and declared her to be real, he would have been the one to disappear.

In other words:

Real: Fay B (confirmed), Leshea A (confirmed), Pearl A (presumed), Nel (?)
Fake: Fay A (confirmed), Leshea B (confirmed), Pearl B (presumed), Nel (?)

He was certain about four out of the eight players and had a good guess about two more. If he could use Truth Touch on either Nel A or Nel B, he would have all eight of them pinned down.

"This is going smoothly…too smoothly, I fear," he said.

"You think? I saw it all coming! Wait, what…?"

There, in the spot where the fake Leshea had vanished, the air began to shimmer, and then a rainbow-colored orb popped into existence and flew straight into Pearl's hand.

Truth Touch reward: Swapping Orb
Break the orb and name a person of your choice. The two of you trade places in the maze.

"I got some kind of item!"

"Hey, that's neat. It's like the unrestricted version of your Shift Change. It would let you change places with whoever is closest to the goal, which would be pretty darn helpful all by itself. Plus…"

"……" Fay fell into silent thought, keeping Pearl's orb in the corner of his eye.

"Fay? Is everything all right?"

"It's fine. Effectively, what this means is that what the fake Leshea said was right."

Truth Touch offered a return commensurate with the risk. It was just as the fake Leshea had said: They needed to assume some risk in order to advance in the game.

"So the fakes don't *always* lie, huh?"

"Wha…?"

"That Leshea may have been fake, but what she said was dead on. That means a fake player gave us info that would be useful to us, in order to pass as one of us. This could get tricky…"

The god had proven extraordinarily, frighteningly adept at weaving together truth and falsehood. Fay felt like he was finally getting a glimpse of this game's true nature.

It's not a game about figuring out whether the players are real or fake. It's about figuring out whether your conversations *are. It's not even really a race. It's a contest with the god to see who can deceive who.*

He set off into the labyrinth with Pearl A.

They came to a branch in the road, with its two signs, WAY FORWARD and WAY BACK. Which to choose? Fay and Pearl each pointed, almost simultaneously.

Just then, a crazed voice came from the direction of the "way back."

"Y-you! *You!* Are you my fake?!"

There were two Pearls.

Yes: Pearl A, who had been with Fay, and Pearl B, who came racing up.

Pearl A pointed at her double and said, "You're a step behind,

fake—or should I say, Li'l 'Don! I eliminated the fake Leshea. The real Fay, Fay B, saw me do it!"

"Huh?! What I'm hearing is that you're both fakes!" Pearl B said, getting ready for a fight. "This was all a plot for you to face me two-on-one and claim I was the fake by majority vote! You know, I knew *my* double was kind of a jerk, but I'm starting to think the fake Fay isn't as nice as the real one, either!"

"What are you talking about?!" demanded Pearl A. "This is the real Fay!"

"When one of the fakes says that, you know they're fake! O-ooh, just you remember this! I'm going to go find the real Fay and get you both back!"

And with that, she went racing off.

Incidentally, she went in the direction of the "way back."

"Oh no! The fake ran away! Should we chase her, Fay?!"

"No… Let's keep moving forward. If we spend too long chasing her, we could end up right back at the start point."

He was sure now that Pearl B was the fake. By getting her to rush back toward the entrance of the maze, one could say that the real players had gained another advantage.

When they followed the "way forward"…

"Huh? Fay, what's this?"

"Must be another of this maze's little gimmicks. There are exactly as many of these shells as there are of us."

There were seven semitranslucent glass shells hanging from a particularly large piece of coral. Exactly as many shells as there were players. Each of the shells seemed to show what one of the players was doing, like a monitor for a game. What got Fay's attention was the order of the shells:

1. Nel A (?)
2. Fay A (fake)
3. Pearl A (real?), Fay B (himself)
4. Leshea A (real), Nel B (?)
5. Pearl B (who had just run away from him—fake?)

There was no shell for Leshea B (fake), who had been eliminated with Truth Touch.

“Your shell and mine are right next to each other, which makes me think…maybe this represents progress through the maze?” he said.

If that was true, then the two of them were currently right in the middle. Nel A was closest to the goal.

“Fay, look! The real Leshea is behind us, so if we retrace our path, we should be able to link up with her. That would make me feel much better!”

“Yeah. Except…

Turning away from the shells, Fay crouched down, picked up the sharpest rock he could find among the many that lay at their feet, and started scratching a map into the sand of the seafloor.

“The shells only show the order. The trap is that we don’t know how much space there is between us. What if it went like this?”

1. Nel A (?): right near the goal.
2. Fay A (fake): still a ways from the goal.
3. Pearl A (real?), Fay B (himself): still a ways from the goal.
4. Leshea A (real), Nel B (?): still a ways from the goal.
5. Pearl B (fake?): at the start point.

“If Nel A is one of the fakes, then we’re in trouble. From my perspective, I know for sure that the Fay who’s behind her, Fay A, is one of the fakes. And if the two people closest to the finish line are both fake…”

“They’re going to beat us to it?!”

Minotaur had hinted that the various starting positions were different distances from the finish line. Maybe Nel A had been the closest to the goal from the beginning. “This is just my opinion, but…knowing Nel’s personality, I think there’s a good chance she would race straight for the goal as fast as she could because she wouldn’t want the fakes to get there first!”

“Yes, but you could say the same thing even if Nel A is fake. The doubles are perfect imitations of us. So there’s every chance that a fake who copied Nel’s personality would also race straight for the goal.”

“Oh, there sooo is! We have to do something about this, stat!” Pearl A held out both hands. In her palm was the Swapping Orb,

which shimmered a rainbow of colors. “Fay—you just need to use this orb to change places with Nel A. Please, go to the head of the field!”

“Me?”

There was no question that this was a good time to use the orb—but it was Pearl who had earned it. A rare item, gained for being willing to take the risk of using Truth Touch. Shouldn’t it have been Pearl, then, who changed places with Nel A at the front of the race?

More than anything, though, there was the simple fact that, from Pearl A’s perspective, she still couldn’t be completely sure that he, Fay B, was the real thing.

“It means a lot to me that you trust me, but are you sure? As far as you know, there’s still a chance I could be the god in disguise, right?”

“I have faith that you’re the real thing, Fay B. And one thing’s for sure: If Nel A is fake and we leave her where she is, she’ll get to the finish line, and we’ll be done for!”

What was more, Pearl couldn’t very well use Truth Touch on Fay at that moment, because there wasn’t really any point to it if there wasn’t a third party present to attest to the result.

From my perspective, the moment she offered to give me the orb, I was as good as certain that this Pearl is real. If she weren’t, she would trade places with Nel A herself and head for the goal.

What about him, then? What could the Fay with the B badge do to make Pearl confident that he was real?

“Pearl, touch me.”

“Wha—?”

“I don’t mean Truth Touch. You have to have touched something in order to use Shift Change on it, right?”

“Oh…I see!”

She quickly placed a hand on him. For the next three minutes, she was able to trade places with Fay.

“I’m going to go on ahead,” Fay said. “But if you ever think I might be fake, just Shift Change and trade places with me. Then you’ll be at the front.”

1. After activating the orb: In first place, Fay B (self); second place, Fay A; third place, Pearl A and Nel A (?).
2. After using Shift Change: In first place, Pearl A (real?); second place, Fay A; third place, Fay B and Nel A (?).

That way, Pearl could go to the front if she wanted.

"Um…Fay!" Pearl was looking intently at the seven shells. "Once you use the Swapping Orb, Nel A is going to show up with me, right? Do you think I should use Truth Touch on her, saying, 'You're fake!'?"

"Meaning…?"

"Meaning! If Nel A is fake, she'll be scared of my touch and run away, just like my fake (Pearl B) did earlier!"

"And what if she doesn't run away?"

"Then that means there's a good chance she's the real thing, so I would change to 'You're real!' Then again, I guess the fake could always stand her ground to make me *think* she was real…"

It was fair enough: By deciding which declaration Pearl would use ahead of time, Fay could confirm the result even if he wasn't present to witness it.

Suppose Pearl said, "You're real," and administered the touch. If, as a result, she and Nel were both still left, then Nel was real. If Pearl disappeared, then they would know Nel A was a fake.

"If I disappear, that will prove Nel is a fake, but if both of us get through this, then I want you to believe we're both real!" In spite of her bold pronouncement, Pearl couldn't hide the tremor in her voice. This had worked the first time, against Leshea—but there were no guarantees that her luck with Truth Touch would hold out twice in a row.

And if she was wrong, then she was gone.

"If I'm completely honest…I don't love this plan," Fay said.

He understood how Pearl felt. If Truth Touch worked this time, then not only would they know whether Nel A was real or not, but by extension, they would also know whether Nel B was the real thing. It would virtually hand them victory.

But with the potential for that immense payoff came the very real

risk that the real Pearl would disappear.

"At the same time, Pearl, your reasoning is solid. So as much as I'm not a big fan, if Nel A's reaction makes you sure—really sure—about which she is, then go for it."

"I will!"

"Just don't get ahead of yourself!" Fay cautioned her, and then he flung the orb to the ground. It shattered, shards of rainbow-colored light glittering around him…

Fay found himself standing alone at an intersection somewhere in the maze.

"I guess this must be where Nel A was," he said. He had swapped positions with her.

That means I'm the one closest to the finish line now. If I just start running, I could get there first. But I can't do that. I still don't know for sure which of the other players are real or fake.

In other words, it was time to go back.

Fay A should have been the next person behind him, and he was definitely fake. In third place behind them was Nel A, and Pearl should have been with her.

"I've got to know how Pearl's Truth Touch turned out!"

Fay mustered his resolve and turned around, racing through the vast sea maze, following the WAY BACK signs at every turn. He ran so fast for so long that he was breathing hard, and yet…

"Dammit! I haven't seen a single other person!"

This was feeling stranger and stranger. He was running as fast as he could, yet he never saw anyone. Surely *everyone* hadn't started working backward through the maze at the same time?

With a mounting sense of dread, Fay was just about to turn left at an intersection when—

"Hey! It's those shells!"

He saw glass shells lined up on a massive piece of coral. They were the same position indicators he and Pearl had found, *except there were only six of them*.

"Oh no…!"

Fay walked up to the coral with a sense of desperation. He looked at the players projected on the translucent surfaces, silently biting his lip.

"……"

None of the shells showed Pearl A.

There was only one conclusion—her Truth Touch had gone wrong. But at least she'd left evidence that Nel A was a fake.

This meant that Fay was now all but certain of who was real and who wasn't.

Presumed Real/Fake Status (in order of proximity to the goal)

1. Fay B (self)
2. Fay A (fake)
3. Nel A (fake)
4. Leshea A (real) and Nel B (real)
5. Pearl B (fake)

Out of Game: Leshea B (fake); Pearl A (real)

Now that he knew who was who, should he run straight for the goal?

No.

There was always a possibility that there was another Swapping Orb out there.

I might be in first place, but I'm on thin ice. If somebody used an orb on me when I was within touching distance of the finish line, it would all be over.

He suspected that in Atlantis, the undersea maze, choosing to advance ahead was itself a trap. He would wait to go for the finish line until he had obtained at least one more orb.

I have to be especially careful of Fay A and Nel A, going backward. Leshea and Nel are right behind them.

The worst-case scenario was if the fake Fay A joined up with the real Leshea and Nel and got them to think that he, Fay B, was the

fake.

"Which means I need to beat him to them…"

Fay turned on his heel and resumed running.

Now he realized that the WAY FORWARD and the WAY BACK signs at the branches were a trap, set by the god for the players. No matter how much you rushed and raced forward, you could always have your progress undone by a Swapping Orb. That was why he was running backward. He would keep choosing the "way back" until he was able to join up with the real players.

"……"

And yet… He didn't understand. Why did something feel so wrong? Why couldn't he quiet the pounding of his heart? His emotions and his mind were reaching a fever pitch, and yet his skin felt cold as ice. If he had to compare it to something, he would have said it was like a poker game where he was confident he was winning when actually the opponent had a view of Fay's cards. It was an odd, floaty feeling.

But he wasn't given the time to think about this nagging doubt. He heard voices and footsteps.

"Those voices…"

From the other side of the seawater wall, mingling with the roaring of the waves, he could hear people talking. He followed the voices around the corner, and there he found…

"Mistress Leshea, you must believe me! I, Nel A, am the real Nel!"

"Don't let her deceive you, Mistress Leshea! I, Nel B, am the real thing! Take a good look!"

"Gosh… What do I do here?"

It was a very distressed Leshea A, flanked by both Nels.

Fay, his breath still short, broke in. "Is it just the three of you here?"

"Fay!" said Leshea.

The two Nels spoke at the same time, both saying, ""Master Fay!

Perfect timing!”” Whichever one was the double, it was truly divine work. Every nuance of Nel’s speech had been copied perfectly.

“I’m sorry to jump right to this. I can’t exactly prove that I’m the real thing myself.” Fay jabbed his thumb at his B badge. “But I can tell you about the others. Leshea A here is the real thing.”

“Ooh!” The Leshea with the A badge grinned widely. “Am I glad to see you. There are two Nels here, but I don’t know which is which—and I can’t even prove to them whether *I’m* real! Speaking of which… How do you know that I’m the real deal, and not Leshea B?”

“Because she’s gone.”

“Huh?”

“She disappeared when we used Truth Touch on her. Pearl A and I found her, and when Pearl A touched her while saying, ‘You’re a fake!’ she vanished, so that proves it. Leshea A—in other words, the one standing right in front of me—must be the real Leshea.”

“Goodness. So my double is already gone? I feel a little bad for her.” Leshea A—well, really, just Leshea now—let her shoulders slump in disappointment.

It was a very Leshea reaction to be not only unhappy, but actively disappointed, that her doppelgänger was gone.

“I have a feeling I can trust what you’re saying, Fay. A little earlier, we came across these weird shells that showed all of us, but there were only seven of them. Which would line up with my fake having disappeared via Truth Touch.” She nodded vigorously. “Working backward, that would imply a good probability that Pearl A, who eliminated my fake, is also real. Isn’t she with you?”

“Uh, well…Pearl A also disappeared.” That was all Fay said to Leshea before he turned to the two Nels. To the one wearing the A badge, he said, “Hey, Nel. Pearl A used Truth Touch on you a few minutes ago, right? You remember that?”

Nel A gasped and flinched as though frightened. She was silent for a hesitant moment, then said, “Yes, that’s exactly right, Master Fay. I encountered Pearl—the one with the A badge on her chest.”

“What?!” Nel B burst out.

“Well, well. You didn’t see fit to mention that earlier,” said Leshea. Both were staring hard at Nel A with suspicious looks on their faces.

Clearly, Nel A and B had been arguing about which of them was the real Nel, leaning on Leshea to be the judge. But Nel A had been hiding the fact that she'd encountered Pearl.

"N-now, wait just a second! I admit, I concealed the fact—but Pearl appeared in front of me so suddenly. She was muttering something, talking very fast, and before I knew what was happening, she had touched me—and then disappeared. But if I'd tried to tell you that, it would just make me sound more suspect, wouldn't it?!"

"I see…"

Nel A's explanation matched what Fay would have expected. Except that where Nel had said Pearl was "talking very fast," in an effort to avoid telling them what she had been saying, Fay knew what it had been—because they had agreed ahead of time.

"I would change it to 'You're real!'"

Pearl A had used Truth Touch on Nel A, saying, "You're real," but she had been wrong and disappeared. Nel A had been trying to distract them from that fact.

Because, of course, if she didn't, they would *know* she was the fake.

"Based on my information, Leshea A is definitely real," Fay said. "I'm less certain about this, but I think there's a high probability that Nel B is also real, and Nel A is the fake."

"J-just a second!" Nel A exclaimed. "What proof do we have that *you're* real, Master Fay B?! You could be a fake Master Fay trying to turn the others against me!"

She wasn't wrong about that. Neither Nel knew for certain whether he, Fay B, was real or fake, and the true danger here was that a real player might not tell the truth, and more to the point, a fake one might not lie.

Truth Touch only confirms whether someone is real or fake, but being fake doesn't mean they're necessarily a liar. The god knows how to mix in a deft bit of truth.

The truth or falsehood of a conversation existed separately from whether a player was real or fake. That was part of what made this game so difficult.

"Let's see… Personally, I think what Fay B's saying sounds pretty credible. Although it doesn't hurt that he's saying I'm the real me." Leshea crossed her arms and looked up at the sky. "I wonder what would happen if we provisionally trusted Fay's explanation. On which theory—here! Touch!"

"Mistress Leshea?"

Leshea had placed her hand on Nel B's left shoulder. As Nel turned at the physical contact, smiling…

"If Nel A is the fake, then you must be the real thing, right?"

Truth Touch rendered its judgment instantaneously.

Truth Touch Failed
As Nel B is the fake, Leshea A has failed the test and is removed from the game.

"—?!" Fay gasped. That was impossible! The objection bellowed in his mind, but he was so shocked that only a choked squeak came out of his mouth.

"Goodness," said Leshea with a look of surprise. She was enveloped in light, then she whipped into the air at incredible speed. Not back to the human world, Fay suspected, but in the direction of the goal.

"No way…"

Leshea had been mistaken and ejected?

Confronted by that fact, Fay began to doubt his own eyes. This was his mistake. This, from someone who could probably count on one hand the number of times he'd made serious errors in the games so far.

It was hard to believe. What in the world had happened?

"Nel B is the fake?" Fay asked slowly.

Something was going on here in the Ocean Maze Atlantis, something strange. Fay had only suspected it before, but now he

knew: Something was wrong. He had been virtually certain that Nel B was the real Nel. The fact that Pearl A had been removed from the maze was the ultimate proof. And yet Truth Touch was telling them that Nel B was the fake.

Did I misunderstand the message from Pearl A? What other possibility could there be?!

"Mistress Leshea?!" cried Nel A. The Nel who'd been confirmed as real by Truth Touch now turned a hard look on Fay. "I should have known. You deliberately painted me as the fake to confuse Mistress Leshea and trick her into failing Truth Touch. That would make *you* the fake! Time to see how you like a taste of your own medicine!"

"No! Wait, Nel!"

Nel advanced on him with her hand outstretched. Fay retreated until he felt his back press against the wall.

If Nel declared him the fake, she was the one who was going to disappear.

What do I do? Something is all out of whack here. And the strangest thing of all is that no one else seems to notice!

At that moment, they heard two sets of footsteps approaching.

"Hey, Nel!"

"Thank goodness we found you in time!"

Fay knew who the voices belonged to before he saw their owners, and a shock of disquiet ran through him. Of course. They *would* show up now, just to make sure they sowed the maximum chaos.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" Pearl B called as she ran up, out of breath. And who should be with her but Fay A, the one who from Fay's perspective was certainly fake. "I don't know which of you Nels is the real one, but Fay B is fake—Fay A here is the real one!"

"I knew it!" cried Nel A—the real one—clenching her fist. "Let me handle this, Pearl. In the name of vengeance for Leshea, I want to Truth Touch this fake Fay with my own hands!"

Confronted with Pearl and Nel thirsting for victory, Fay shouted, "No! Don't do that! Please! I know you're feeling very suspicious right now, but…!"

I can't blame Nel A and Pearl B for doubting my claims. I cast

doubt on both of them, and my mistake got the real Leshea in trouble.

And it was at exactly that moment that the fake Fay had shown up. It was only natural that the two of them believed the fake.

Neither Nel nor Pearl is sure the other is real. Meanwhile, they're completely convinced that Fay A is the real me.

At this rate, the human players were going to take one another out with Truth Touch. They were supposed to be teammates, and they were going to destroy each other.

The name of the game would come true: There *would* be none… of the real players.

This was the god's trick—her secret plan.

And Fay and the others had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

I have to remember. Think back to the moment something felt off. No—it wasn't just a moment! I have to follow it back, get to the place where my entire hypothesis began to go wrong.

1. Nel A was real.
2. That was the reverse of his expectation. (From his own perspective, Fay had been convinced that Nel B was the real one.)
3. Why had he thought Nel B was real?
4. He'd derived it from the vanished Pearl A's message. Had he misinterpreted it?
5. For that matter, was Truth Touch *always* correct?
6. What if there were a way to fudge the result of Truth Touch?

"……" Fay didn't make a sound. This was much like the battle with the Bookmaker: He was trying to figure out what game, so to speak, the god was playing, but because he was dealing with a god, no possibility could be ruled out. He *had* to leave every conceivable explanation on the table.

"All right, then. I want to hear from each of you," Nel A said soberly. "Since all five players are standing here, there's no fear of

the fakes reaching the goal first. So let's start with you, Master Fay A. What do you think is our best move here?"

"From my perspective…" The fake Fay pointed to the badge on his chest. "I want you to use Truth Touch on me. There are two of me here. It would be best if one of you—I don't care if it's Pearl or Nel—can prove which of me is right about things."

"I agree! It would be really heartening to know which Fay is the real one!"

"That's certainly true!" said Nel A, apparently already convinced. Raring to go, she wheeled—on Fay A. "I'm going to touch Master Fay A! Sure you want me to call you the real thing?"

"Naturally."

At that moment—precisely because he had seen all of it play out before his eyes—

Fay saw the god's trick.

"That's it! Nel, wait!"

"Wha—?"

Fay grabbed her wrist before she could move. "This is exactly what Poseidon wants. She's trying to eliminate you, the *real* you, here and now."

"What do you mean?" Nel A said, frowning. It was only natural. From her perspective, he (Fay B) was the fake, and she was understandably wary of a fake suddenly grabbing her hand.

"When your Truth Touch fails on Fay A, the real Nel—you—will disappear. And then what do you think happens?"

"I'm hoping you can tell me."

"The worst thing that could occur in these circumstances is that the real you disappears and the fake Nel stays behind."

"…?" Nel gave him another questioning look. She could hardly grasp how important she was at this moment on some level *because* she herself was the key.

"You're the fastest runner here, Nel, and if only the fake you is left, then the rest of us lose. When the other Nel sets off for that

finish line, none of us is ever going to catch her."

"…!" Nel gasped.

"This is a simple pattern breakdown. From your perspective, if you use Truth Touch on Fay A, what happens?"

A Truth Touch by Nel (real) has one of four outcomes:

1. Touch Fay A (real) and say, "You're real!": Both the real Nel and real Fay remain.
2. Touch Fay A (real) and say, "You're fake!": The real Nel disappears, leaving only the fake Nel.
3. Touch Fay A (fake) and say, "You're real!": The real Nel disappears, leaving only the fake Nel.
4. Touch Fay A (fake) and say, "You're fake!": Both the real Nel and real Fay remain.

This was a Truth Touch trap, set by the god to get rid of the real Nel. That was the whole point.

"The same logic would have applied to Leshea—if the real Leshea had still been around, she could have forced her way to the goal. So Poseidon came up with a trick to get her out of the way first. She led me into making Leshea disappear, so that everyone would start to doubt me."

The god's plot was to eliminate the real Leshea and the real Nel from play.

Then it would be checkmate. Fay (real) and Pearl (real) would have no hope of stopping the fake Nel from racing for the goal.

"……There's some logic to what you're saying," said Nel A—the real one. She slowly drew her hand away from Fay A, no longer about to give him the Truth Touch. "Master Fay B… The truth is, I still think Master A is the real one. If you claim I'm wrong about that, then I'm giving you one more chance to prove your innocence."

"I hear you. This time there's no mistaking it."

He let go of Nel's wrist, then pointed at Nel B and Fay A.

"These two are the fakes. The other two were *already eliminated*

by Truth Touch."

Fay's declaration shocked the remaining inhabitants of Atlantis, the Ocean Maze. But the most violent reaction of all came from the fake Nel B.

"I—I'm the real thing! Pearl, you must believe me!"

Pearl hadn't been there when they found out Nel B was the fake. She didn't know which of them, Nel A or B, was fake, so maybe the false Nel thought she could talk the other girl around.

"And you, Master Fay B!" she went on. "You say I'm the fake—but how can you prove that *you're* real? And if you say Truth Touch, how is that situation any different from what Master Fay A suggested?"

"Of course I'm not going to say Truth Touch. There's another way," Fay said.

Everyone there gasped—even the god's fakes.

"I think the real players here are Pearl B and Nel A. I have a question for them. What percentage chance do you think there actually is of winning this game?"

"Huh?" Pearl said. "Uh, well… You have to correctly guess who's real and who's fake among eight people, so I guess it would be a fifty percent chance to the fourth power?"

"N-no! You know whether you yourself are real, so it's only fifty percent to the third power!" Nel said.

"The real answer is fifty percent, plain and simple," Fay told them. There was a one-in-two chance of victory. He turned to the real Pearl and Nel and held up two fingers. "When you think about it, all you really need to do in this game is get all eight players together and use Truth Touch systematically. You'll be left with two people whose reality you don't know. After that, even relying completely on luck, the human players will win one out of every two times. In other words, you can play this game as a pure gamble."

However…

Would a god ever accept such a tepid contest?

"Instead, you think, *I want this game to be a little more exciting.* Right?" This time Fay turned to the fake Fay and the fake Nel.

"So, Poseidon…or maybe I should say, Li'l Poseidon. You did a brilliant job of taking a game of luck and turning it into a game of psychological warfare. I have to admit, I never saw it coming." He jerked his thumb at himself. "Your trick, your stratagem, was to confuse one of the real players. Make them believe something that wasn't true. And the only person here who's made that kind of mistake is me, Fay B. Which means I *must* be real."

Only he had misapprehended Nel A and B. Which meant, reasoning backward, that he could confidently say he was real.

"The god needed to fool the real players so that they would take one another out. But by the same token, it means any person who was fooled is by definition real. And the only one who was obviously tricked here was me myself. There's your proof."

"I admit, it's very much like the real Master Fay to find a way to explain things that doesn't rely on the most obvious features of the game," the real Nel said slowly. "But that still leaves us with the biggest problem: One of the real players has to reach the finish line first."

Among the five of them standing there, there was no one whom all of them could agree to be absolutely, unquestionably the real thing.

From Pearl's perspective, it was impossible to judge between Nels A and B.

For both her and the Nels, the same was true of Fays A and B.

And further from the Nels' perspective, the veracity of Pearl B was impossible to be certain of.

So which of the five of them should make for the finish line first?

This was the final challenge.

It had seemed like the only way to resolve it was to use Truth Touch…until Fay pointed toward the goal. "Nel, Pearl," he said, turning to them. "Do you know the secret for always coming in first in a marathon?"

2

The human-beast god Minotaur stood at the finish line of the Ocean Maze Atlantis. Behind her were Lesheas A and B and Pearl A, removed from the game by a mistaken Truth Touch.

Normally, being "out" of one of the gods' games meant being returned to the human world, but this game was an exception. Here, everyone awaited the judgment of truth after the finish line was crossed—the final challenge with which the players were confronted once all eight of them were together.

"Oh, look! Look there! Heeeey!" Minotaur waved a big racing flag.

Now, who was in front? Lesheas A and B and Pearl A all watched with bated breath…and then all of them gasped, their eyes going wide.

They heard five sets of footsteps, and five people rounded the final corner at the exact same time, walking abreast.

"Oooh! I get it!" Minotaur stopped waving her flag and grinned broadly. "The five of them all cross the finish line together and in hand. If they don't know who's real and who isn't, then they can all reach the finish line at once!"

Precisely.

Fay's suggestion for how to "always come in first" was to hold hands and walk side by side.

The order was this:

Nel A (?)—Nel B (?)—Pearl B (?)—Fay B (real)—Fay A (fake)

For one thing, it was impossible to check whether the Nels and Fays were real or not. Another important point was that the fakes couldn't eliminate the real players. So long as the real players kept choosing to do nothing, the fakes couldn't use Truth Touch to cause havoc.

"Good thinking! By holding hands, not only can they all make the finish line at once, but the real players can keep an eye on the fake ones right up to the moment they reach the goal!" said Minotaur.

As the five players reached the finish line tape together, there was a burst of confetti.

"Congratulations! I acknowledge that you've met the first victory

condition!” Minotaur applauded unabashedly. “Now it’s time for the judgment of truth! In the spirit of the victory conditions, only a human may answer, and only one of them may do so. Who’s going to give the answers?”

“I am.”

The declaration to the god of who would represent the eight players standing at the finish line came from Fay—who was pointing at the B badge on his chest.

“Only a human can give the answers about who’s real and who’s fake, and I, Fay B, have proven that I’m real. Right?”

At that moment, there was a minor explosion. Fay A convulsed, and a girl—in fact, a god—with a trident burst into view. “Hmph!” she said. “All right, I’ll allow it! Very well. Begin the judgment of truth!”

“You heard her. Okay if I handle this?” Fay looked around at the two Lesheas, the two Pearls, and the two Nels.

“”Sure, go for it!”” both Lesheas said in unison.

“”Y-yeah, of course! I never would have guessed B was the real Fay…,”” the Pearls answered together.

“”Mm-hmm! I wasn’t able to tell which Master Fay was which even to the bitter end. But now that I know you’re the real thing, how could I ever object?!”” the two Nels replied in harmony.

The real and the fake players said the same thing at exactly the same time. Even with the finish line reached, they remained perfect copies, impossible to distinguish from their words or actions alone.

That meant the only way to tell which was which was by reviewing what had happened in Atlantis.

“First things first. I can say for myself that Fay B is the real player, which makes his counterpart, Fay A, the fake. Everyone good with that?”

No one raised any objections. Even Poseidon had already thrown off the guise of Fay A.

“I can also confirm Leshea straight off,” Fay said. “I saw Pearl A

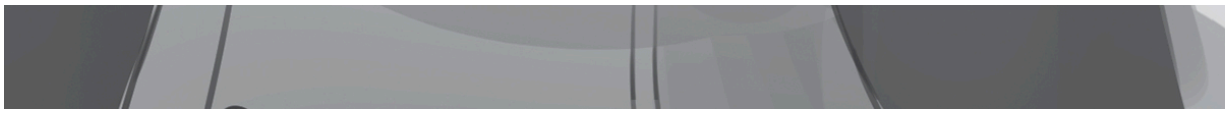
use Truth Touch on Leshea B and cause her to disappear, so I know the real one is Leshea A."

"Going well so far!" Leshea B disappeared, and a second Poseidon popped out in her place. Fay had expected that, of course, but the Nels, who hadn't been sure whether Leshea was the real thing, backed up in surprise. "Here's where the fun begins!" The deity leveled her trident at Fay. "Those four were obvious. Truth Touch gave you the answers. But you'll have to do the rest yourself!"

Poseidon wasn't taunting him; it was a simple fact. The true battle of wits started now. The two Pearls and the two Nels were left. One pair who hadn't been tested at all by Truth Touch, and one pair who had—but about whom there was still doubt.

"Let's move on to Nel," Fay said, turning his gaze on the black-haired girls. Nels A and B looked absolutely identical, and they both sucked in a breath when he said that. "Knowing which one is real isn't actually a problem—because the real Leshea was kind enough to test them with Truth Touch."





"If Nel A is the fake, then you must be the real thing, right?"
Truth Touch failed. As Nel B is the fake…

Truth Touch judged automatically, and if they could trust that judgment, then they already had their answer.

"Nel A is the real thing, and Nel B is the fake. That much is solid. There's just one thing…"

Fay deliberately chose not to finish his thought aloud.

There was just one thing: Which Nel was which had been the *opposite* of what Fay had predicted. It had caused him to lead Leshea into a mistaken choice. That was the god's real strategy, and the trick Fay was going to have to expose. Starting now.

"Poseidon," he said to the god still in the form of Nel B. "I know who you really are, so why haven't you gone back to the god's body yet?"

Nel B caught her breath.

"You don't want to, do you? Because that would undermine your strategy. A ploy that covers two things: the reason I was wrong about which Nel was real, and which Pearl is the real one."

He turned to the twin Pearls and studied the golden-haired girls, one with an A badge on her chest, the other with a B. On them, and them alone, no one had used Truth Touch the entire time.

Leshea and Nel won't know. I'm the only one who saw all the gimmicks at play. So I have to be the one to answer this.

Which was the real Pearl, and which was the fake?

"My first thought was, who *acted* like the real Pearl? You would have to say it was Pearl A, who revealed that Leshea B was fake by using Truth Touch. On the other hand, Pearl B didn't miss a single bit of information that might be useful to the real players."

Pearl B gasped, and her shoulders shook. Meanwhile, Pearl A smiled earnestly. "Y-yes, Fay, of course! We were together the whole time, weren't we?"

But Fay wasn't done.

"Next angle: Who *deliberately* behaved suspiciously? Let's be honest—everyone in this game did stuff that made them look

questionable. Even me. I caused Leshea to Truth Touch herself right out of the game. But that was because I was tricked. The important point is *who tricked me and when*."

In fact, all of them had been taken in. Once they had been suckered by the god's plan, the finger-pointing started, and then there had nearly—as the name of the game suggested—been none.

"I said to the real Leshea that I thought there was a 'high probability' that Nel A was the fake. That's because Pearl said this to me…." Fay continued,

"Do you think I should use Truth Touch on her? If I say, 'You're real,' and disappear, that will prove Nel is a fake!"

And Pearl A had, in fact, disappeared.

"I trusted that, and assumed Nel A was the fake, which is what I told Leshea. And we saw what happened…"

"N-now, wait just a second!" Pearl A burst in. "There's something fishy here! I used Truth Touch, just like I said I would! The result was I failed, but I had faith that that would still help you, Fay!"

"What do you think, Nel? Oh, I'm asking the real one, Nel A."

Nel caught her breath. "I-it's indeed true that I'm the real Nel…" She looked from one of the Pearls to the other, and finally, in a small, uncertain voice, she said, "Um… One thing still confuses me. If it's true what you say, that Pearl A said, 'You're real,' as she performed the Touch, then because I am real, she shouldn't have disappeared, should she?"

"Bingo."

"Wha…?"

"You said it yourself, Nel. You didn't know what Pearl said when she approached you to use Truth Touch. You claimed she was talking too fast."

"…Ah?!"

Yes: This was the true face of the god's *second* stratagem.

Fay turned toward the Pearl with the A badge.

"Time to compare answers, Pearl—or should I say, Li'l 'Don?"

She looked at him like a frightened puppy, begging him not to do this… No. Rather, the god *acted* as if Pearl were doing these things.

"You didn't say, 'You're real,' and perform Truth Touch. You said, 'You're fake,' and then did it, right?"

It had been a complete logical blind spot for him: There was no rule that said anyone else had to *hear* you make the Truth Touch declaration. It would have worked just as well if you said it quietly to yourself.

"You sure were thorough. You—and let's be clear, I mean the god—used the Swapping Orb to make sure I was somewhere else entirely. Just so there was no way I could hear what you said, right?"

Everything had gone exactly according to the god's calculations.

"Fay—you just need to use this orb to change places with Nel A. Please, go to the head of the field!"

Pearl A and Nel A had met up. Fay had been sent far away, so there was no danger of him seeing (or rather, hearing) what Pearl did. Once she was sure that it was just her and Nel, she performed Truth Touch while making the *opposite* of the declaration she had said she would make.

That's why I was thrown off—because I was convinced Pearl had used Truth Touch while saying "You're real."

Leshea had helped rescue him, too. If he himself, instead of Leshea, had performed the Truth Touch on Nel B, there would have been no one left in the game who could get at the truth of the matter.

"Another thing. This was just divine stratagem number two. The real danger was from stratagem number one." Fay cast a look around at everyone standing there. He was greeted by a mix of expressions of confusion and of curiosity. "When did this stratagem start? It was because I believed what Pearl A said that I started to doubt the real Nel. Ultimately, I accepted almost unconsciously that Pearl A must be real. And the trap the god set to make sure I thought that was that very first Truth Touch."

"And so—touch! You're a fake!"

Truth Touch successful! As Leshea B is the fake, she is removed from the game.

When explaining the rules, Minotaur had said, "*There's no combination in which Truth Touch is advantageous for a fake to initiate.*"

"And that was true, as far as it goes. Truth Touch is the special prerogative of the real players. But that was exactly what allowed the god to turn that logic around on us."

The truth was…

Pearl A (real) had not touched Leshea B (fake).

Pearl A (fake) had touched Leshea B (fake).

"The god eliminated one of her own avatars. You wouldn't normally expect someone to do that for the sole purpose of deceiving me alone. But this trap goes even deeper than that. Remember what one of our players said during the rules explanation."

"The fakes can't use Truth Touch to make the real players go away!"

"Think about it—it was Leshea A who said that. The god in disguise."

This was the biggest point.

Did "the fake players can't eliminate the real ones" mean "only the real players can eliminate the fake ones"?

1. No. Instead…
2. Fakes could still eliminate other fakes under this system. But the god phrased Leshea A's words very carefully to lead everyone to think she meant 1 and steer them away from 2.

Using Truth Touch has no advantage at all for the fakes, because every scenario results in a disadvantageous outcome for them.

That much was true.

So who would ever have expected one of the fake players to use Truth Touch at all?

That was the idea Poseidon had wanted to put in their heads, even before the game officially began. And she'd used the form of Leshea to do it.

What was worse…it had worked on Fay twice.

"Here's the god's strategy: She uses the illogical move of Pearl A (fake) touching Leshea B (fake) and destroying one of her own players. Then she uses the equally illogical move of Pearl A (fake) touching Nel A (real) and destroying another of her own players—but by doing those two things, she was able to sow the seeds of doubt among the real players."

Nel gasped. "Wait, Master Fay—but that means…" She held up four fingers, then crooked two of them down again. "The god has four avatars—and she herself eliminated two of them using Truth Touch?!"

"You got it. Illogical as all get-out, right?"

Poseidon had eliminated two of her own fake players. Did she really have to go that far to deceive the humans?

No.

But that was exactly why she had done it. All to deceive Fay, and Fay alone.

"All right. Why don't you lay out your answers for us, then?" Minotaur said, giving him a probing look. "Who are the four real players here?"

"The real players are myself (Fay B), Leshea A, Nel A, and Pearl B. And there you have it."

"You're happy with those answers?"

"Yep."

"You heard him, Li'l 'Don." Minotaur grinned.

At that exact moment, the players Fay hadn't named—Leshea B, Nel B, and Pearl A—disappeared with a loud *pop*.

"Oooooh, darn it all!"

Four Poseidons stood there, all of them beet-red.

"Welcome back!" Minotaur said and gave the four deities a great hug, squeezing them back into one single Poseidon. "Great work out there, Li'l 'Don."

"Grrrr! And I was so sure I could split up their little group before I won!"

Yes: As Fay had said, strictly speaking, if one just got all eight players together and went down the line using Truth Touch, this game would have become a contest of pure luck with a 50 percent chance of victory. However…that was only if one didn't trust a thing their teammates said, and then proceeded completely mechanically through a process of elimination. The game name, "And Then There Were None," was an ironic dig at humans who completely refused to have faith in the voices of their teammates.

"Why, you…" Poseidon looked at them, all of them—Fay, Leshea, Pearl, and Nel—giving them a long, hard stare. "The lot of you never once used Truth Touch while saying, 'You're a fake.'"

It had dawned on the deity that the only time anyone had used the fake-eliminating "You're a fake" Truth Touch was when she herself had done so. The four real folks had never once made the choice to knowingly erase another player. They had lived out a strategy that was the exact opposite of the easy, obvious, 50-percent-chance-of-victory play the god had offered them.

"Well, sure," Pearl said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I wouldn't want to eliminate one of our real friends if I was wrong."

"Yeah! Nor would I. Because I was sure that as long as we had people like the real Master Fay and the real Mistress Leshea on our side, we had a hope of victory," Nel agreed with a nod.

The young-looking god gazed at the two of them, then let out a big sigh. "All right, well. Pretty nice work."

"Hee hee! That was a fun game."

Poseidon stood with her arms crossed, trying to look studiously indifferent, while Minotaur patted her head. "You'll never be as close as me and Li'l 'Don, but for humans, you're pretty good friends!"

"Well, naturally!" Pearl puffed out her chest. "We share trust in

one another that's even deeper than this ocean!"

"I hear you! Humans form teams to face down challenges. And they always give their teams names, right?" Minotaur said.

"Uh…"

"Why even ask, Li'l Mino? Of course the likes of these would have a team name at the very least!" Poseidon said as Minotaur continued to pat her on the head. "Any team as close-knit as theirs must have one."

"A team name……" Pearl froze for a long moment, but then she racked her brain—you could almost hear the gears creaking as the rust began to come off. "Come to think of it, Fay, our team…"

"Never picked a name."

"We still don't have one?!"

"No, I mean…I thought about it. Chief Secretary Miranda would love for us to hurry up and decide, too. She says it's an administrative pain in the neck to have a blank where there should be a name registered." Fay scratched the back of his head in embarrassment; he sounded almost timid.

It was just that, right after Miranda had said that, the trouble with Lucemia had started. Plus, he was never that good at thinking of names, so before he knew it, he'd put the whole question on the back burner.

"Master Fay. This victory makes seven wins for us," Nel said hesitantly. "We've caught up to Mind Over Matter. Now that we have the most wins of anyone in the world—even if we are tied for it—I think maybe it's time we came up with a name for our team."

"Well…er, yeah, I mean, you're not wrong."

"Oh-ho? You haven't decided on a team name yet?" Poseidon said, sounding oddly condescending about it. "Then you'll certainly never be closer than myself and Li'l Mino!"

"Does a team name have something to do with being close?"

"On that note, come see us again one day—with your name!"

Splash!

The walls of the Ocean Maze Atlantis shattered, and the previously divided sea returned to normal. Meaning an ocean's worth of water crashed down toward the seafloor where Fay and his

friends were standing…

And Fay and his entire team were returned to the human world.

Vs. The Sea God Poseidon—WIN.
Game: Labyrinth-Superstition Game—"And Then There Were None."
Time Elapsed: 2 hours, 1 minute, 1 second.

Win Condition: One of the four real players must reach the finish line first.
Further, once the finish line is reached, all eight players must be correctly identified as real or fake.
Lose Condition 1: A fake gets to the finish first.
Lose Condition 2: The spokesperson for the real players fails to identify the fakes correctly.
Other: The eight players may all use Truth Touch.

Chapter

Player.7

Enjoy!

The dig site in the Relic City of Ange stood silent and empty—until, without warning, four figures appeared.

"Ack! Ouch!"

"I landed on my butt again!"

They sprang from the Uroboros ring on the ground, popping out so fast that they flew into the air—which was all well and good until gravity quickly, inevitably caught up with them, and they dropped back to earth and landed on their behinds.

More specifically, only Fay and Pearl landed on their behinds. Nel and Leshea came down on their feet with no trouble.

"Sheesh…," Fay grumbled and stood up, then looked around. "I think I see why we normally use Divine Gates to get in and out of the gods' games… Huh?"

"I've been waiting for you, Tiny Human!" a cheerful voice called from nearby. A silver-haired girl came skipping out from among the ruins. "Perfect timing. I just finished my preparations!"

"Preparations?"

"There's a god who wants to meet you, Tiny Human!"

"Meet me?"

Mentally, Fay braced for anything. A god who wanted to meet him? Surely it wasn't the mysterious deity he'd encountered immediately before the game in Yggdrasil's forest, was it?

That's my first thought, but this feels different.

And there was a simple reason: Uroboros's innocent smile. She didn't look like she was plotting anything.

“I’m sorry, Uroboros, but I don’t have any idea who this god might be,” Fay said.

“What, really? Haven’t you figured it out?” Uroboros gave a teasing grin. “This deity’s manifesting a spiritual body for the first time and doesn’t quite know what to do, see? Whereupon mine undefeated self is helping!”

“Does being undefeated have something to do with that…?”

“Sure it does!”

“No it doesn’t!”

When the gods on high wanted to make contact with human beings, they typically did it in the form of a so-called spiritual body. Gods like Uroboros, whose true form was a ten-thousand-meter-long snake—not human in the least—took on humanlike spiritual bodies when they manifested on the surface. By comparison, gods who abandoned their divine status to become human, as Leshea had done, were quite unusual. Leshea might have, in fact, been the only example in all of history.

“Okay, well, anyway. Who is this go— Huh?!”

Fay was interrupted by a thunderous rumble from the earth, enough to shake not just the massive dig site but the entire city. Then there was another, and another, in a rhythm like footsteps—and they were coming closer. Something of tremendous mass was approaching.

“Wh-what’s with all the shaking?!” asked Pearl, who had grabbed hold of the nearest stone column she could find.

“They sound like footsteps to me,” said Nel, who had dropped into a low stance in order to keep her footing.

“Wait… This shaking…” Unlike the girls, Fay thought the massive footsteps seemed oddly…familiar. He recognized it in his bones—this sense of something overwhelming, something big enough to shake an entire city.

He looked up. Somehow, he knew the enormous impacts were approaching them from the ruin-laden hills.

There was the golden altar, its color tarnished by the elements. There was the stone column, engraved with characters from no current language. The sense of something coming was from beyond

these—from the oblong black wall that stood there like a canvas.

Then, from behind the wall, there came a powerful, cheerful, high-pitched voice.

"Hello, kid!"

Standing up on the hill was a massive woman, with hair like molten rock tied back behind her head. She was easily more than 180 centimeters tall, dressed in a luridly vibrant kimono, the neck of which was open to an audacious degree, showing off her excellent figure.

"It's been a while."

Fay's breath caught as he looked up at the woman who greeted him with such familiarity. She grinned, and her footsteps continued to make the earth shake.

More than anything, it was that molten, bright orange hair that Fay remembered. He knew a god who was over the top like this.

"Titan…is that you?!"

"Are you enjoying the games, kid?" Standing atop the ruins, the god gave him another big grin.

The Giant God Titan…

It had been the day Fay and Leshea had met. They'd jumped right into a Divine Gate, and this was the first god they had battled together. Titan had a body the size of a mountain, fists that could smash a building in a single blow. Yet at the same time, this deity was shrewd and calculating.

That's why they were also called the Sage of the Earth.

Considering how the god's unique characteristics had been incorporated into this spiritual body, Titan probably knew exactly what it was doing when it crafted the outlandish, grinning woman who stood before them.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised. You went to all this trouble just to see me?" Fay asked.

"Yes, well, silly me—I was just so satisfied by our game that I forgot to give you something." Titan placed a hand on the black

stone wall and leaned against it. "You know about this, right? Humans who win the gods' games in certain special ways can receive a gift from the gods."

"Huh? You mean a God's Diadem?" Pearl flinched—and understandably so. They already possessed three Gods' Diadems—which, as a nymph had told them in Yggdrasil's forest, was the limit.

They had the Eye of Uroboros, the Sun Flower, and the Treasure Hall Master Key.

They couldn't accept a fourth.

"So, um, well… You see, we can't accept another reward from the gods…"

"Oh, I wonder," Leshea said with a giggle. "Pearl, you saw me and Fay battle Titan on the feed, didn't you? Titan has been playing with humans for ages now; there's no way it's undefeated."

"Huh? Er, sure, that's true!" Pearl said.

Leshea was right: Titan had a long history of playing games with humans. According to the Arcane Court's records, even in just the last thirty years, Titan had been encountered more than ten times, and humanity had only won 14 percent of the time. There was no way Titan was offering them a God's Diadem, which was evidence that one had bested a formerly undefeated god.

"Huh? What? So…"

"There's one other thing, right?" Fay said. "One other reward a god can give." He looked up at the grinning god lounging on the hill and finally let out a breath.

He remembered. Now that Titan had mentioned it, he did think he knew what she was talking about.

"It was hardly the time for it back then, so it slipped my mind, too," he said. "But none of the apostles went out in your game of Divinitag, did they?"

In that game, players whom the god tagged became the god's servants. And because those players could also be "flipped" back to the human side, there were no casualties in the game of Divinitag.

"Titan is controlling Asta, but that's within the rules of Divinitag.

In other words, she isn't 'out' yet. Sound right?"

One of the ways in which players could earn rewards from the gods was to achieve victory without losing a single apostle.

"I see! 'God's Love' applies in this case!" Nel said, her face flushing. "There are no casualties in Divinitag, so it fulfills the conditions to achieve God's Love! And that's different from a God's Diadem. Even if we have three of those, the cap doesn't apply here. So we're entitled to receive it!"

God's Diadem: Awarded to those who defeat a previously undefeated god.

God's Love: Awarded to those who achieve victory without suffering a single casualty during a game.

That was why the Giant God Titan had appeared. Why it had sought them out, going so far as to assume a spiritual body and descend to the human realm.

"So what exactly are you giving us?" Fay asked slowly.

"……" Titan didn't answer immediately. Instead, the molten-haired god smiled at them—lovingly, as if basking in memories of something long ago. Finally, she said, "Do you like games, kid?"

"…Huh?"

"*I* sure do. All the gods do! But…some of our numbers are twisted. Sad folks who can't just sit back and enjoy a game. Folks who don't believe in the *possibilities* of games."

The wind gusted, rushing through the dig site, where—but for these few humans and gods—there was no one. The wind kicked up the layer of ancient ashes, almost as if deliberately. Titan waited patiently until the gale subsided. Then she said, "I think one of these days, those folks are going to show themselves to you, kid."

"…!" Fay gasped. He'd already had that encounter.

Fay stood wondering whether to reveal that fact, but Titan seemed to see straight through him. "That god's gonna try to confuse you, throw you off. They'll bring history down on you, kid, a

history you don't know—because it's so far in the past that humans don't even need it."

"…I, uh…"

"But!" There was a great crash as Titan stomped on the ground with her right foot, so hard it made her kimono flutter. "These ruins? Three thousand years are the blink of an eye for a god. So we remember the ancient magical civilization. We remember it very well."

Suddenly, Fay realized that Titan's words radiated love, a god's love.

"Even in the time of the ancient magical civilization, humans and gods enjoyed their games together, just like they do now. Games are games in every era, see? You ought to enjoy your games, enjoy them to the fullest." Titan turned aside then, examining the dark stone wall against which she was leaning. "That's why—"

Boom!

Titan slammed the wall with a prodigious backhand. There was an explosion like a cannon blast and a roar loud enough to shake the air. As Fay and the others looked on, cracks spidered along the stone wall.

Krkl…

Krk-krk-krk…

The cracks revealed something remarkably colorful.

There was something inside the wall?

No, not quite. There was something that had always been here on this hill, around which the black wall had been built, as if to bury it. A coating, almost. A cover-up.

Now, thanks to Titan's fist, that frail ancient shell had been shattered.

When the wall fell away completely, there stood revealed…

…a mural in a riot of colors.

A three-thousand-year-old mural.

If they were to believe Titan, it must have dated back at least to

the time of the ancient magical civilization. It had been covered in stone to protect it from the elements.

"Wait! Is that Li'l 'Don there?!" Pearl exclaimed.

"I can see Lady Minotaur, too," Nel said, her eyes wide. "And that black, snakelike thing floating in the sky…is that Mistress Uroboros?!"

The painting depicted humans and gods at their games together. Two of the figures looked like Minotaur and Poseidon, but there were also scores of gods that they didn't recognize. The mural showed everyone playing, humans and gods alike, enjoying their games with childlike innocence.

And the title of this mural?

May Your Gods.

"A team name. This is my reward for you," Titan said. Her molten hair flowed. Then the Sage of the Earth grinned again and announced in a loud voice, "Take it with you, wherever you go from here!"

"……" Fay was silent for a long moment. He thought about it and found he felt almost as if he were in a sort of trance. Confusion washed over him. There was a fearful awe: Was it really right for him and his teammates to take on such a grand name? But there was also joy—at receiving such a tremendous gift, at being given a God's Love like this.

The two emotions mingled in his heart. It was all he could do to answer, and finally, he said only, "We'll cherish it." He looked up at Titan, who gazed down at them. "It's such a heavy name; I don't think I could ever bear it alone. But I've got friends and teammates who will help carry it with me. We'll bear it with pride."

"No need to get too serious, kid. It's like the games—just enjoy it!"

"Right… So there it is. Shall we go?" He turned to see Nel, her smile quivering with excitement, and Pearl, who looked a bit dazed.

Then his gaze settled on Leshea, who wore the biggest smile of all, and he nodded firmly.

“Let’s go to Arcane Court headquarters.”





Afterword

"Games are games in every era, see? You ought to enjoy your games, enjoy them to the fullest!"

Thank you for reading *Gods' Games We Play*, Volume 5!

Humans and gods have at least one thing in common—they all love games!

Volume 5 involves more characters than any other volume to date, if you include those who are simply mentioned. It's not just the gods with their many and varied personalities; we also meet someone who was involved in Fay's old team for the first time. The *Gods' Games* world is getting bigger and wilder—I hope you'll look forward to seeing where it goes!

All right, let me talk a bit about the story! Volumes 3 and 4 were completely dedicated to the tale of the Labyrinth of Lucemia, making for quite a chunk of story. For this volume, we get a one-book-two-games structure for the first time in a while.

God-Tree-Fruit Basketball is a game with some sports elements, so Nel naturally got a chance to shine, but I think Leshea was also finally blessed with an opportunity to really strut her stuff. Captain Ashlan and Anita both got in on the action, too, so it was a pretty lively game.

Incidentally, I, your author, am particularly fond of "C'mon, lemmings!"

The second half of the book is devoted to the battle with Li'l 'Don (Poseidon). She appears on the cover of Volume 5, and I'm also pretty fond of her and Li'l Mino (Minotaur), including their friendship.

——The gods so savor their individuality that they don't form groups.

I sort of feel like someone in this volume said something like that, so I guess that makes these two an exception to the rule—or maybe the rule itself is one of those whims the gods have, and these two just decided to flip it on its head.

The team played Poseidon's game in this volume, but I wouldn't mind being able to introduce Minotaur's game sometime, too…

Okay, it's announcement time!

We've already had the joyous word that *Gods' Games We Play* has an anime in the works, and at the MF Bunko J Summer School Festival, on the twenty-fourth of last month, additional details were announced. The show will be created by LIDENFILMS and directed by Tatsuya Shiraishi.

I have an official announcement! I, your author, have been invited to participate in all the script meetings, and the scripts are coming together with all the excitement of a developing gods' game. I feel confident in sending these episodes out to you!

I hope you'll await further information with eager anticipation!

Now, on to the special thanks.

To Toiro Tomose: This volume's Poseidon is another character of god-tier beauty. Thank you!

To Kapiko Toriumi, who's doing the manga adaptation: Thank you so much for producing such an enjoyable serial every month. I find myself looking forward to every new installment!

And to my editor, N: This work and its anime are indebted to you, not just every month but every day. I look forward to continuing to work with you to make it even more exciting.

Finally, a brief publication schedule.

First of all, my other series, *Our Last Crusade*, has been green-lit for another season of anime!

The third short story volume for that series just came out on

August 20; in the main series, Volume 14 is planned for this winter. I would love to see you over in that series, too!

Meanwhile, I'll be working on Volume 6 of *Gods' Games We Play* as hard as I can! Just wait until we get into the Arcane Court arc and the encounter with the world's strongest team!

Kei Sazane
Summer of 2022

Character 1

NAME Anita Manhattan

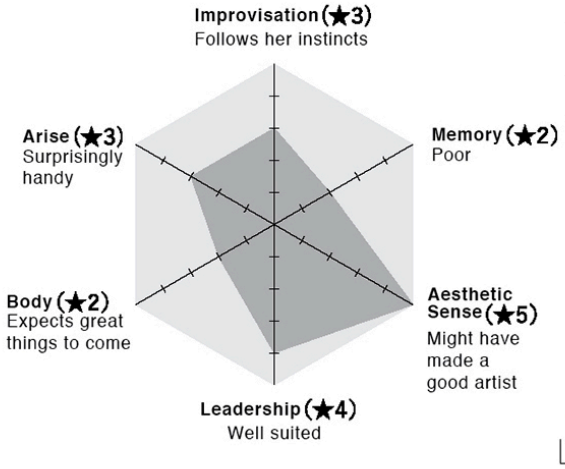
PROFILE

Formed team Empress at the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court at just fifteen years old.

She's trying to poach Leshea, Pearl, and Nel to help make her team better and stronger. In that sense, maybe you could say she sees Fay as her rival?



SPEC

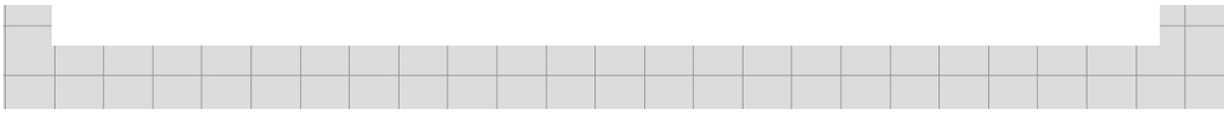


Arise ★3

Anita's Arise, Iron Heart, is categorized as a Superhuman type.
It doesn't feature much in games that are purely contests of wits, but any time there's a battle or sports element, it can save the day in the most unexpected ways…although this was probably the first time she'd ever been fired like a human missile.

Aesthetic Sense ★5

Anita has an unparalleled ability to sniff out lovely things, no matter the time or place, and her judgment is always spot-on.
This means that because she described Uroboros's Undefeated T-shirt as "dumb" and "in totally bad taste," it must be tr— (remaining data missing).



Character 2

NAME Li'l Poseidon, God of the Sea

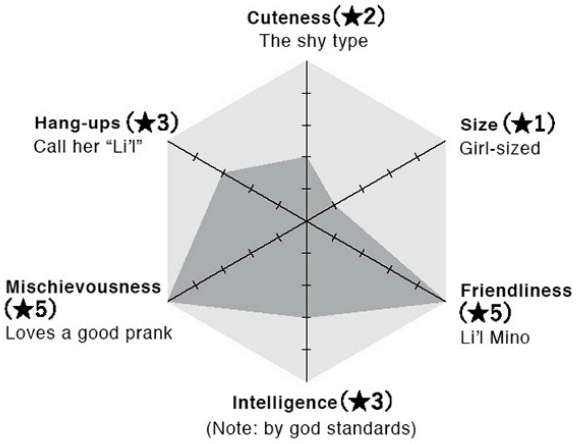
PROFILE

Ruler of the great, wide sea, and the creator of the Ocean Maze Atlantis.

This god has the ability to make a copy of anything reflected in the ocean, and she likes to use this talent to play tricks as well as to incorporate it into her game. She carries a trident, but she frequently lets go of it while swimming and loses it. She has to make a new one each time that happens.



SPEC

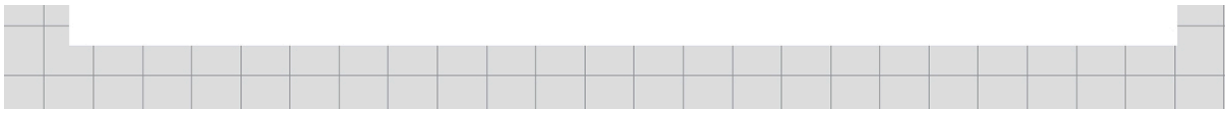


Hang-ups ★3

Poseidon is actually rather particular and has some specific expectations for her game—in the way people address her. For example, she likes people to call her Li'l 'Don instead of addressing her as Lady or Mistress, and in her game, she likes to deploy plans that sow discord among the human teammates—a strategy that also happens to suit her mischievous nature just fine.

Friendliness ★5

Poseidon might be the ruler of the sea, but somehow, she ended up best friends with Minotaur, who makes her home in an underground maze. Where and how did these two meet? God—er, the gods only know, as they say, but whenever the pair has a few minutes to kill, they summon two white whales and go for a cruise on the ocean…



Character 3

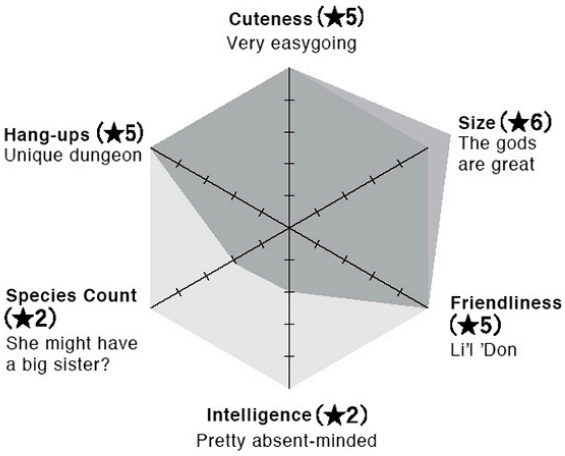
NAME Human-beast God Minotaur

PROFILE

A human-beast god who wanders an underground labyrinth.
She's very relaxed and friendly and is one of the gods who's most curious about humans.
Incidentally, she's just as kind and laid-back with other gods, though Poseidon is the one person to whom she's completely opened her heart. The flip side is that her excitement goes through the roof during games, which makes her feel hot, which sometimes leads her to try to take off her clothes. Oops.



SPEC

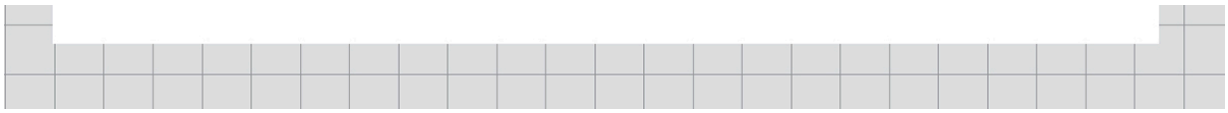


Size ★6

It takes one of godly size to recognize another. The day of her final battle with humanity's representative, Pearl, draws near (according to Leshea).

Hang-ups ★5

Ignoring the fact that it happens to overlap with Anubis's labyrinth game, Minotaur's dungeon is a sprawling, carefully designed and crafted game in its own right.
Incidentally, although Minotaur is the last boss, if during the game players obtain the SSR item Trident of Li'l Poseidon, God of the Sea, through a secret quest, they can get to a special cut scene: Minotaur accepts her defeat, saying, "If it's to Li'l Poseidon…I'll gladly lose…!" and the human players win in one hit.



NEXT

| NEXT |
Gods' Games
We Play



To Arcane Court HQ!

Will Fay finally...

...face the world's strongest team?!



GODS' GAMES WE PLAY

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