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BLACK SUMMONER

THE HORN SOUNDS IN THE ABYSS

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BELL

"FOR NOW...
SLEEP!"

SERA

"IT DOESN'T
MATTER IF
YOU ARE AN
APOSTLE OR A
DEMON LORD.
YOU ARE MY
SISTER, BELL,
AND THAT'S
ENOUGH FOR
ME."



SERGE

RION

“GO
FOR IT!”
THE TWO
CRIED.

THE
HOLY SWORDS
OF LIGHT AND
DARK LUNGED
FORWARD AS
IF EXPLOSIONS
HAD GONE OFF
BEHIND THEIR
HILTS. THOUSANDS
MET THOUSANDS
IN ONE HUGE
CACOPHONY.



BLACK SUMMONER

Characters

Kelvin Celsius

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

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

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



Sera

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



Rion Celsius

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



Clotho

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



Melfina

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



Gerard

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



Shutola Trycen

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



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.



Alex

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



Sylvia

Delighted she got to reunite with Shutola. Now searching Abyssland for Sister Ellen.



Ema

Relieved she has been reunited with Shutola. Sylvia's adventuring companion. The type to chop things with a greatsword using brute strength.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

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



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



Kanzaki Touya
A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Very oblivious to signs of affection.



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



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



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

The Apostles of Elearis

An organization that worships Elearis as the Goddess of Reincarnation and schemes to resurrect her and bring her back to this world.

The First Seat: Arbitrator
Real name is Iris Deramilius.
Elearis's proxy. Resurrects those she thinks would be useful as Apostles.

The Second Seat: Selector
Real name is unknown.
Only Arbitrator knows his location, but even this info is uncertain.

The Third Seat: Creator
Real name is Jildora.
Possesses the Unique Skill Eternal Return. Has a deep history with Gerard.

The Fifth Seat: Analyzer
Real name is Riold.
The real identity of former guildmaster Rio. Possesses the Unique Skill God's Eye.

The Ninth Seat: Survivor
Real name is unknown.
The swordsman who fought Rion in the Beast King Festival. Possesses a powerful ability to survive no matter what.



The Fourth Seat: Protector
Real name is Serge Flore.
The previous Hero. Defeated Demon Lord Gustau. Possesses the Unique Skill Absolute Gospel. Was the one who invited Kelvin's group to Abyssland.



The Sixth Seat: Condemner
Real name is Bell Baal.
Possesses the Unique Skill Color Corrosion, which allows her to manipulate the intensity of the attributes of those she touches.



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ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Sisterly Fights Can Get Fierce

Even after Kelvin and Gustav's fight was over, the Demon Lord Castle was still shaking from the intense battle between the Demon Lord's daughters. Red and blue clashed again and again in a terrible dance that shifted locations in the blink of an eye, wreaking havoc wherever they went. Despite having started in the sky above the castle, the fight quickly broke through the roof, but then sped down a hallway and was back out in the open again after blasting a hole in a wall.

Bell generated tornadoes in quick succession, not caring in the slightest whether she was indoors or outdoors, and Sera mowed them all down using Bloody Reaper's Tail, a move that involved controlling a large amount of water by having her blood mixed into it. The impregnable castle that once symbolized ultimate power in Abyssland and served as the final destination of the Hero Serge's journey was now on the verge of collapse. At this rate, it would soon follow the fate of the Tower of Trials.

CRASH!

Bell unleashed an axe kick that landed squarely on Sera, smashing her down with incredible force. However, Sera properly defended herself with a crossarm block and therefore did not take much damage. The shock wave bisected the throne in the Demon Lord's audience hall, but that was nothing compared to how much of a beating the entire castle had suffered so far.

"Degradation Block!"

Just as Sera started falling, Bell made the blue wind roaring out of her greaves create five walls and sent them after her. Whereas Degradation Counter formed walls that seemed to embody the martial arts phrase "softness immobilizes hardness" by being as elastic as physically possible, Degradation Block embodied the opposite, "hardness severs softness," by being incredibly hard and tough. And of course, these five walls had been altered by Color Corrosion.

"Fall."

At Bell's command, these walls of wind that were now, for all intents and purposes, slabs of solid iron succumbed to the pull of gravity, further aided on their way by jets of trailing blue wind. Bell intended for them to hit Sera right when she crashed into the ground, smashing her into a pulp. Sera could not simply get out of the way due to how large the walls were, but she naturally had no intention of letting herself be killed.

"Blood Ball. Um, five should do, I think?"

There was no way for Sera to tell how many walls there were from her position, and neither did she know the properties of Degradation Block. Acting purely on intuition, she created just the right number of Blood Balls and set her sights on the approaching walls.

"Hup!"

She leaped into the air with her wings spread wide, using Bloodbending to control the Blood Balls and keep them in front of her.

"Make way!"

One Blood Ball made contact with the first wall, splattering all over it like a tomato and staining the blue red. Having gained control over the wall, Sera ordered it to open a hole in the middle large enough for herself to pass through. The same happened with walls number two all the way through five, with the Blood Balls continuing to make a path for Sera.

Color Corrosion, Bell's Unique Skill, gave her the very useful ability to strengthen or weaken any property of a target, be it a spell or something with a physical form. It was similar to adding white or black to a color on a palette. Bell had managed to develop a unique fighting style incorporating Color Corrosion with close-quarters combat and wind generated through Green Magic. This enabled her to fight effectively both up close and at a distance, meaning she had almost no blind spots. The fact that she had been able to last as long as she had while fighting Melfina head-on indicated that her stats were quite high too.

Of course, Bell also had weaknesses, one of which was time. Unlike Blood Dominion, which took effect instantly, Color Corrosion did so slowly, little by little after the moment of contact. The process was much faster if Bell touched the target directly as opposed to through her wind, and depending on how long

she used the skill for, it was even powerful enough to resist Blood Dominion, as she had demonstrated during the Beast King Festival in Gaun. However, in encounters where blows only lasted for brief moments, Sera had the upper hand.

“Get out of my way!”

“No, you.”

When Sera powered through the walls, she found Bell closing in on her at high speed with wind roaring out of her greaves. They locked eyes, exchanging a verbal joust that were little more than childish jabs. It was only a matter of time before they collided, as both were stubbornly refusing to make way for the other. They’d be darned if they were the first to concede.

“In that case, eat this!”

The two shouted and shifted into attack in such perfect unison it was as if they had planned it out beforehand. From above, Bell shifted into a dive kick with her falling momentum adding to the force of the attack, while from below, Sera whirled in midair to bolster her backhand blow using centrifugal force.

Soon enough, limbs enlarged through Jin Scrimmage and bearing each fighter’s respective colors collided forcefully, representing their wills clashing again for the nth time that day. The wildly blowing winds and shock waves slammed into the castle repeatedly as the sisters snarled at each other in midair.

“Ugh!”

“That’s what you get!”

It was Bell who won this exchange. She did have the advantage of being on top, and she and Sera were locked together for longer than usual, but the biggest reason was that she had enveloped her leg in a coat of wind. This proved effective in protecting it from Sera’s blood, a strategy that Kelvin had also used in his fight with Gustav. Although this meant Bell couldn’t directly cast Color Corrosion on Sera, she could still do so through the wind, which is why Sera was growing weaker with time. Now that she held the upper hand, Bell kicked Sera all the way down to the very bottom of the castle, making her crash

through all the floors.

“Owwie! You made me scrape myself a little! The scratch is already gone, but still!”

Even though Sera fell headfirst, the wound she suffered was nothing that Auto Heal couldn't take care of in a split second. Still, she couldn't help but lick the part of the hand that had gotten hurt, mainly in an unconscious gesture.

Bell descended through the large hole in the ceiling. “Compared to father, the way you use your blood is far too simplistic, Sera Baal. How about you use that pretty head of yours a little?”

“Ah, I knew it. I *was* thinking that I needed more ways to use my abilities. Maybe I should ask father for some advice.”

“Good idea. *If* you manage to survive this fight, that— Huh?”

Bell fixed her gaze on something behind Sera, prompting her sister to turn around for a quick glimpse as well.

The two had failed to notice it earlier when they were in the heat of battle, but there was a crumbling mansion here on the lowest floor of the Demon Lord Castle. Even though this area was underground, the structure was even more massive than Kelvin's residence. Most importantly, Sera recognized it.

“Is that...the house that I grew up in? Wait, but it seems a little bit different.”

“To think we came here, of all places. I don't know whether to call this lucky or unlucky, seriously.” Bell sighed as wind continued surging out from her greaves. “This isn't the Sun Mansion where you lived. This is the Moon Mansion, *my* home. What's left of it, at least.”

“Was... Was it the Hero who did that?”

“Hmph. You think I'll tell you?”

“But you told me the name of the mansion. C'mon, just tell me.”

Bell turned away with an awkward look, clicking her tongue. “Well, this works out. Sera Baal, let's settle our fight here. If you actually beat me, which I highly doubt you will, I'll answer that question of yours. In fact, I'll answer *all* your questions. The ones that I know the answer to, at least.”

“Simple and straightforward. I’m in!”

“You don’t want to know what I’ll ask for if I win?”

“I’m shouldering so much right now, there’s no way I’ll lose!”

“Oh, you will. And when you do, you’ll die a wretched death.”



Illuminated by a pale light that gave it a mystical air, the Moon Mansion that was once home to Bell still had a grace and elegance that was pleasing to the eye and emanated such a solemn and calming aura that it seemed to be giving off moonlight in and of itself. In sharp contrast, the movements of the two clashing in front this mansion were as far from calm as possible.

“Hmph!”

“Rah!”

Sera’s crimson fist screeched towards Bell, but Bell kicked it down with an azure foot clad in wind. When Bell cast a blade of wind over a greave and brandished it, Sera caught it right above her head by clapping her bare hands together and snapped it in the same motion. Similar scenes followed in rapid succession. The speed of the fight was already incredible, but because the two were continuously trying to one-up the other, they were still getting faster and faster.

A saying went that a spar between masters would seem leisurely while a spar between novices was just plain slow. What was happening here, however, was not a spar, and these two girls were no mere masters. They were demons who had long surpassed human limitations. Every clash between fist and leg generated shock waves and produced blades of wind that etched deep markings into the cavern walls. If any run-of-the-mill adventurers, knights, or soldiers had been present, not only would they have been unable to approach the fight, they would have been slammed against the wall by the first shock wave they encountered. If they were unlucky, they would then have been summarily chopped in half by a blade of wind.

Despite being the stage for a fight so far beyond what the common masses could spectate, the Moon Mansion remained strangely unharmed. Aside from

the damage it had borne from the start, its walls were little more than shaken by the shock waves, and the wind blades did not even fly its way.

“Are you being considerate, Sera Baal? You don’t think I can handle all your attacks?”

“Well, that’s because this fight is easy! Because this fight is so easy, your big sister can’t help but be considerate!”

“That’s a lie. I know you’re at your limit. See? See?”

“Hup! Whoop! Yah! Piece of...cake!”

The two had been spreading catastrophe and squabbling for a while now, with their mouths running as swiftly as their arms and legs. Although their words were sharp, it seemed like there were barely perceptible smiles at the corners of both their mouths.

“Don’t those useless bags of fat get in your way? I managed to scratch you just now.”

“Well, your body shape *is* more streamlined for dodging attacks! That’s one thing I agree with you on!”

“You dare?!”

Maybe the barely perceptible smiles were not actual smiles after all. They were smiling, yes, but these were plastered smiles, judging by the anger on their faces.

After a long sweep with her foot was blocked once again, Bell suddenly leaped backwards, putting some distance between her and Sera. “Is that enough warming up?”

Sera grabbed her shoulder and rotated it a few times to check its condition. “Yep, I’m now in top condition. A moderate amount of exercise really does the trick!”

“Then that’s it for the ‘moderate exercise.’ I’m stepping it up a notch!”

A metallic clang rang out from the tip of Bell’s greaves, followed by wind blowing violently all over the floor. Sera identified it as an attack and leaped away as eddies of wind zigzagged all over the place, gouging out the ground

with their passage.

“This...isn’t all you got, right?”

“Of course not!”

Bell, who had one foot raised high above her head, now brought it down in an axe kick accelerated by roaring winds. The ground shook violently, and although this failed to make Sera lose her balance, she could instinctively tell that it was a threat.

“Come on, let’s dance!”

Something shot up out of the floor and stopped in midair, revealing itself to be a dark cube measuring exactly three meters on all sides. The ground was left with a hole that perfectly matched the size of the cube.

So that wind just now was cutting up the ground for this, Sera noted. *Wait, I think I’ve seen this before.* She racked her memories and recalled the Beast King Festival in Gaun. Back then, she had been confronted with the exact same scene that she now faced.

“Does this bring back memories? Just saying, this ground is way tougher than that brittle stage. Grit your teeth!”

Master Caesar, the expert stage craftsman who had created the stages that the Gaun Mixed Fighting Arena used so proudly, was thereby disparaged out of the blue. It was true, however, that the floor here at the Moon Mansion was extremely tough—the structure was still standing despite Sera and Bell going all out, after all. The stone used to pave the ground was a special kind of stone and was extremely thick. All this had been thanks to Papa Gustav going the full mile to ensure that this space was entirely safe for the sake of his beloved daughter. As such, Master Caesar was not in the wrong. Please don’t blame Master Caesar.

Shhhnk.

A large spike in the shape of a pile bunker shot out from the tip of one of Bell’s purple greaves. With an extremely fast motion, she stabbed the floating cube with the spike, then flashed a smile at Sera.

“Uh-oh.”

Just as Sera expected, Bell kicked the cube at her. This was exactly the same thing that had happened in her memory, but the threat was much bigger this time.

First, there were a lot more cubes shooting her way. They were floating up according to Bell’s will in a seemingly endless stream, promptly being stabbed and kicked the instant they appeared. Bell flitted here and there with graceful steps, stabbing and kicking again and again as if performing a dance. As a result, Sera found herself at risk of being crushed by a whole hail of cubes.

“Hup!”

Sera chose to focus on dodging the incoming attacks instead of smashing through them. Smashing wouldn’t have been a problem if the material was the same level of toughness as the stage in Gaun, but Sera’s instinct told her it wasn’t an option this time. In fact, her instincts told her she shouldn’t even touch the cubes.

Of course, her instinct was spot-on. The stone that Gustav had used for this mansion’s pavement was on a whole other level from what Caesar had been able to source. What’s more, Bell had raised their toughness to the very limit using Color Corrosion—by making direct contact, it only took her a split second—therefore making them fly with such momentum that they wouldn’t stop from just having a little blood splattered on them.

If destroying the cubes was not possible, Sera was left with either dodging or parrying. The latter would be viable if it was only once or twice but punching such cubes so many times would hurt her fists more and more. As such, her decision to evade them was best. Although they were flying in hard and fast, Sera was capable of dodging most of them with her extraordinary senses. She had to resort to using her fists every once in a while, but was managing well enough otherw—

“Let’s spice up the dance a little more!”

“What?!”

A blue laser suddenly pierced multiple cubes and slammed into the shoulder

part of Sera's Blood Scrimmage with such force that it left huge cracks in her armor.

The cubes are just to obscure my view! This is her real aim!

The rain of cubes still rushing at Sera was now occasionally interspersed with blue wind in the form of spears being thrown at her without being able to see where they were coming from. The first Debilitate Pierce was the only one that had made a clean hit so far, but Sera was starting to take more and more damage as time passed.

I'm only going to lose if this goes on. Looks like it's about time...

While continuing to dodge, Sera settled her breathing. The dynamic air that surrounded her calmed down slowly but surely.

"Here goes my first time using Goldia in an actual battle!"

The red armor that Sera was wearing suddenly gave off an even redder aura.



Goldia was the school of martial arts developed by "Peach Ogre" Goldiana Prettiana, the Rank S adventurer said to be the world's most powerful close-quarters fighter. Rather than being a set of moves, this was the technique to materialize ki, one's life energy, into a form of attack. Putting this into words was easy, but actually pulling it off required many long years of extremely demanding and unique training. After all, this was an effort to materialize something as indefinite and conceptual as ki without the aid of any skills.

However, the originator, Goldiana, had actually pulled this off. Through her affectionate heart and dogged communication with nature, she had found her real self and awakened to this power. This was how Goldia had been born.

Afterwards, Goldiana had repeatedly achieved feats that astounded the world, and many powerful warriors knocked on the door to her dojo, begging for instruction. They were all masters in their own right, but some were bewildered by her striking appearance and mannerisms and turned back. A few remained, but the majority of them failed to become proficient enough to use this ability effectively and gave up somewhere along the way. That was how tough it was to follow in Goldiana's footsteps. To this day, the only people she

had ever acknowledged as having mastered Goldia were Grostina and Sera.

Goldiana's aura was pink and Grostina's was purple, with the names respectively being Rose Ishtar and Violet Fairy. When the latest successor to the school, Sera, had managed to convert her basic red aura to one that was a much more intense shade of red, she asked her good friend Goldiana to name it for her, and Goldiana had dubbed it Crimson Astrea. There was no particular reason why Sera went to Goldiana instead of anyone else; she just felt like it. She was also taught a phrase that she should say while activating Goldia, but she didn't say it during her current fight with Bell because she was too preoccupied with fielding the incoming attacks.

"Phew..."

When Sera had first tapped into Goldia, she could only produce a faint aura and there was no way to tell what new ability it gave her. Now, however, things were entirely different. Every time she inhaled, the aura around her grew larger. It swelled like a balloon being inflated. An extremely, extremely tough balloon, that is.

Bell had been throwing cubes and Debilitate Pierces at Sera this whole time, and Sera had been evading them with as little movement as possible. Now that she was clad in ki, her ability to sense and comprehend what was happening in her surroundings was far greater than before. Thanks to her heightened senses and innate intuition working in synergy, she was one step away from being able to peer a little into the future. This wasn't quite the equal of Goldiana's Sixth Sense, but it was close.

She's moving less than before, but fewer attacks are landing. What's going on? Bell, who also had very sharp senses, quickly picked up on Sera's change. At the same time, she also knew without a doubt that she needed to do something. As could be expected of Sera's sister, she too had incredible intuition.

"I'm ending this."

Bell charged in after kicking one last cube. Her greaves expelled air with such force that she flew even faster than the cube, practically becoming the wind itself. It was a whimsical wind—no, a whimsical hurricane that zipped here and

there with unpredictable movements. There were still plenty of cubes in the air, making it extremely difficult for even Sera, no matter how godlike her senses had become, to determine where Bell was.

In response, Sera stopped breathing and raised her guard. Crimson Astrea was still incomplete, as she was in the middle of deploying it, and Bell would definitely catch her off guard if she did not remain alert. Sera opened her sharply slanted eyes a little, watching the cubes fly at her in slow motion as she probed her surroundings for Bell's presence.

There she is!

She picked out the single stream of wind making a different sound from the innumerable gusts raging all around. It was a noise that was sharper and higher-pitched than the rest. The source was moving in a zigzagging path that required extreme acrobatics. However, now that Sera had identified it, she would not lose it. No matter how it moved, no matter where it hid, Sera was confident she could follow it with her eyes.

“Debilitate Slash!”

Sensing that Sera now knew where she was, Bell gave up the game of cat and mouse and unleashed two slashes from behind a cube in an “X” pattern. The four cube fragments whizzed towards Sera, helped on their way by additional blasts of wind and accompanied by the two slashes.

Her main attack must be coming next!

Sera braced herself in her red armor and aura. Her intuition told her that there was no way Bell would launch attacks so clearly meant to draw her attention without following up with something else. That could only mean a big one was coming.

“But of course, it's not like me to just sit and wait for it!” she cried.

“What?!”

Sera's wings spread wide open all of a sudden as she stepped forward with one foot and activated her ki. She knew that Bell was currently in front of her, slightly to the side. If she simply charged in that direction, however, she would have to deal with all the fragments and slashes.

“I make my own way!”

The two arms enlarged with Blood Scrimmage moved in a circular motion that was seemingly meant to swipe away all the incoming attacks. Even though Sera’s arms looked grotesque, her gestures were extremely beautiful in their refinement. Surprisingly, the cube fragments got out of the way of their own accord and the double slashes simply dissipated. That only left...

“Gladius Aile!”

When the way opened up, it revealed Bell standing with one leg turned into a sword, which shone an intense blue while giving off a high-pitched hum. The distortion in the air surrounding the sword spoke volumes about how much magic and wind was being concentrated into this attack. The sword was already lifted high up, ready to be brought down at a moment’s notice. No, it was already plunging.

“Ugh!”

Sera raised a fist to block the incoming attack, but the blade pierced all the way through her ki and armor. Just like before, this sword was clad in wind as a countermeasure against Sera’s blade.

“After shouting about making your own way, this is all you got, Sera Baal?”

“What—ugh—do you think?”

In spite of her provocative line, Bell was keenly aware that she should not underestimate Sera. In fact, her Danger Perception was raising a deafening clamor in her mind, and her instincts were corroborating this. The instincts of those who carried the previous Demon Lord’s blood were truly impressive. Once again, it was very much on point.

Right after the sword pierced her fist, Sera clenched her hand with all she had. She paid no mind at all to how the sword was destroying her hand, focusing solely on crushing Bell’s leg.

“Hng!”

A grunt escaped Bell’s lips as the muscles and bones in the foot clad in Gladius Aile screamed in protest. Sera was also in significant pain, but she was dead set

on not letting go. The grin that she kept on her face was perhaps an imitation of Kelvin's.

"You...are an idiot. You think you can get away unhurt after touching my wind for so long?"

"I can say the same for you."

The armor on Sera's right arm shattered as, through direct contact with Bell, its toughness was diluted to nothing. Arondight also became damaged to the point of no longer being usable. At the same time, however, the armor on Bell's foot also disappeared, as Sera, who had bled all over it, simply told it to "go away." The purple greave on that foot had also been lost somewhere. Now, Sera and Bell were only left with their left arm and left leg, respectively.

"Augh!"

Being the first to move, Bell stabbed Sera's flank with the pile bunker hidden in her left greave. This was the same stake that she had stabbed the cubes with just now—it was so huge, the word "gouge" was probably more appropriate than "stab."

Wait, I can't detach it!

Bell was about to release the stake from her greave so that it would remain in Sera's body while she pulled her foot back to unleash more attacks when she realized the disengage mechanism was not working. Her purple greaves had been made by Jildora. Although she did not trust his character at all, she placed a certain amount of faith in the equipment that he made. There was no way that her greave just happened to malfunction at a time like this.

Sera grinned. "I've caught you."

With a sinking feeling, Bell realized she must have fallen for some technique employed by Sera. Even though she had protected the pile bunker with a coat of wind, it still made sense in her mind that Sera had done something. And once again, her intuition was right on the money.

"Tch."

Sera's giant left arm wrapped around Bell's diminutive form and crushed it

with all the strength she could muster.



All the cubes had smashed against the walls of the underground cavern and were now nothing more than piles of shattered fragments. Although this cavern was a closed space, it was gigantic enough to comfortably house Bell's entire mansion, so all the dust that had been kicked up had settled quite soon.

"Owww! Seriously, how could you stab me with something so brutal? What're you gonna do if it leaves a scar?" Sera grumbled as she forcefully pulled out the pile bunker in her side and threw it away. Normally, doing so would lead to a large amount of blood gushing out, but Sera had Bloodbending. She sealed up the wound the moment the stake came free, so there was no problem.

"Then again, I can just ask Kelvin or Mel to heal me. Oh, ugh...I can put on a straight face, but it doesn't change the fact that it still hurts inside. I definitely have organ and bone damage. It'll probably take about an hour for everything to fully heal."

Based on Sera's murmurs, she knew she would automatically heal just by resting—Rank S Auto Heal was just that effective. Then again, despite how composed she seemed, she still had a lot of other injuries besides the one in her side. Her right fist was all torn up, and she had taken Debilitate Pierces in a few places. Bravado was the only way she was still smiling and walking.

Just now, Bell's Gladius Aile had landed squarely on Sera. Sera had been unable to directly control it using Blood Dominion, as it had been entirely enveloped in wind. This was the same thing that Kelvin the battle junkie had done when fighting Gustav, her father.

What had enabled her to resolve this dilemma was Goldia, the technique that she had learned from her close friend Goldiana. On top of buffing her stats, the aura of Crimson Astrea also dealt a weaker version of the effects of Blood Dominion. The most important part, however, was the breadth of its application. This crimson aura could permeate anything, be it wind or barriers. This was how Sera had been able to seize control of Gladius Aile and order it away.

Unlike Blood Dominion, which took effect immediately, Crimson Astrea

needed time. That said, it was the perfect counter to enemies who tried to avoid making direct contact with her, such as Kelvin or Bell. Depending on the way she used this power, it could prove effective against even Goldiana's Rose Ishtar. It was impossible for someone who had fallen by Crimson Astrea to break free. They would have no choice but to bow before the Empress.

"Hmm, should I call everyone through the Network? But it's kinda embarrassing after I make such a big clai— Oh, wow."

Sera was contemplating what to do next when Bell's form was revealed by the settling cloud of dust. The squeeze from Blood Scrimmage just now had left her body mangled from head to toe, meaning she was much worse off than Sera in terms of the severity of her wounds. It was impossible for her to even stand up. Her right foot, which had been crushed twice, now lay limp and useless, and the greave on her left foot was half-broken and threatening to fall off at any moment. She was clearly in no state to continue fighting.

"Ha ha...ha ha ha..."

"Oh, you're still conscious. You okay?"

"If I look okay to you, then you need an eye doctor, Sera Baal."

"If you still have enough energy to crack jokes, then you're fine!"

Sera's bright, warm smile seemed to have taken the wind out of Bell's sails. The younger twin fell silent as she looked up at the ceiling of the cavern. Through the hole that the two had created during their fight, she caught a glimpse of the red moon in the sky. It was a bewitchingly beautiful moon.

"Grebarelka...really is...a good country...after all."

"What're you talking about?"

"Don't mind me... I'm just...talking to myself."

To Sera's surprise, Bell then tried to prop herself up with an arm bent the wrong way as if she wanted to stand up. As if she was trying to demonstrate that she could still fight.

"I...am fine. Yep, I can still keep going. This...isn't enough to stop me. My sword..."

“Hold on; don’t force yourself! You don’t have any means of healing yourself, right? And your Auto Heal is clearly going to need a long while to catch up.”

Just as Sera had pointed out, there was no sign of Bell’s injuries healing themselves. Even so, Bell ignored her admonitions and sat up, panting heavily from the effort.

“Say, are you listening to me?”

“I...am Condemner. I...condemn...sins. That’s...right. I have to...settle our sins. My beloved...homeland...”

It sounded like Bell was trying to convince herself of what she was saying. She coughed up blood with ragged breath as her mumblings became increasingly incoherent and she stopped registering Sera’s voice. And yet, the flame of fierce conviction burned in her eyes.

“You...really? Make sure you...look closely.”

These words rose into the sky, seemingly directed not at Sera but someone else. An instant later, Sera’s Danger Perception seemed to explode.

A...black book?

Abruptly, a book with a cover completely dyed in black and emanating a spine-chilling aura appeared before Bell. There was no telling where it had come from or what it even was. All Sera knew was that it charged her with a sense of foreboding more intense than she ever had before.

“Bell, get awa—”

“And, well...”

Sera’s shout was interrupted by simple, unadorned words that came straight from Bell’s heart.

“This sisterly fight was, well...it was fun. You pass. Big sister Sera, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

The younger girl’s awkward smile was immediately obscured by the black sludge that burst out of the book and swallowed her up. Sera ran as fast as she could, but she was too late. All that was left before her eyes was a black sphere.



“What is this?” Sera murmured in bewilderment.

Suddenly, Kelvin’s voice rang out in her mind. ::Sera, are you okay?!::

Kel...vin? What happened?

::Mel said she feels the presence of a Demon Lord! And just saying, it’s not your dad!::

A Demon Lord? Like, a real Demon Lord?

::The one and only! According to the cycle, the next one isn’t due for several decades or centuries, but... Aaah, never mind the unnecessary details! According to Mel, the Demon Lord’s location is exactly where you are right now! Is someone else there with you besides Bell?!::

Um...

Cracks ran through the black sphere, making it look like a hatching egg.

I, uh, think Bell might have become a Demon Lord.

::Uh...the Apostles can turn into Demon Lords? Hang tight; I’m heading your way— Wait, stop, father-in-law, please let go of my arm!::

::What happened to Sera?::

::I don’t have time to explain— How’re you keeping up with the speed of our telepathy?! More like, how’re you getting in— OW OW OW!::

Kelvin’s voice suddenly disappeared with cries of pain.

“I think it’s already too late, Kelvin.”

The entire surface of the sphere was now covered in cracks. If Sera’s intuition was correct, the egg was on the verge of breaking. Her right fist remained unusable, her abdomen felt like it was on fire, and her shoulder was screaming with pain. She had certainly seen better days. But the situation was not going to wait. The new Demon Lord was getting closer and closer to being born with each passing second.

Sera faced the sphere with a sorrowful expression. “Bell...”



When the black egg that looked like hardened sludge cracked, one of Bell's legs appeared, clad in the same half-broken greave that looked ready to fall off at a moment's notice. The only thing different was that its purple color was now dyed black, and the wind coming from it carried a thick taint of wrongness.

"U...gh..."

When the egg fully collapsed, Bell staggered to her feet, moaning.

"Bell, you..."

"A...ugh..."

Sera found her words dying in her throat as a drop of sweat fell down, tracing her cheek. There was no doubt that Bell turning wicked was because she had become a Demon Lord. She was enveloped in an aura charged with evil, and her red eyes burned with anger towards and hatred for everything in this world. In terms of appearance, the only thing that had changed about her was the color of her greaves. Flipped around, that meant practically nothing about her had changed.

"Bell, you... Your wounds haven't healed."

The Demon Lord was all beat up, dragging a leg so damaged it was a miracle she could even stand. Her body bore wounds from head to toe, cutting a sharp contrast to the strength of her gaze. She was weakened to the point where it looked like she was just a puppet being pulled by strings.

"Se...u..."

The sounds coming from her mouth were all unintelligible, indicating that she was incapable of a proper conversation. Even so, Sera could not help but to talk to her.

"Don't tell me, you knew this would happen? Is that why you didn't use that black book from the start?"

"...ga."

Whoever turned into a Demon Lord would use all their abilities and everything at their disposal to lead the world to destruction. Demon Lord Gustav had brandished his overwhelming fighting strength, whereas Demon

Lord Zel had mobilized his country's entire military. Both had been a force to reckon with, providing Kelvin and his party with fights that they had enjoyed very much—found very challenging. If Bell, an Apostle of Elearis, turned into a Demon Lord, chances were high that she would turn into a being even more terrifying than her predecessors.

However, she had chosen to undergo the transformation when she was on the verge of losing and already had half a foot on the other side. It seemed only natural to assume she had chosen this timing in order to stop herself. Of course, that left the question of why Bell had even chosen to become a Demon Lord in the first place. And although Sera and Bell were sisters, they had been completely serious about trying to kill each other just now, and there were still plenty of unanswered questions. A lot didn't seem to add up in Sera's mind.

By becoming a Demon Lord, Bell should have gained the skill *Mara Pisuna*, which buffed all her stats by more than a thousand, just as it had for Zel. That was an advantage that Sera would be extremely hard-pressed to overcome, even with Goldia. She would very likely have lost.

"Hack... A...gu..."

Bell coughed up blood again, indicating that she must have suffered significant organ damage. Sera studied her closely without saying anything. Did she want to win? Did she want to lose? It was impossible to tell. It was impossible to understand her. What did Bell want so badly that she was willing to join the Apostles of Elearis for? These questions whirled around and around inside Sera's mind. However, she had no time to entertain them.

"...ji."

The wounded Demon Lord, Bell Baal, had adopted a battle-ready stance, likely having determined Sera to be an enemy upon seeing her. She brought her center of gravity all the way down low and glared at her sister like a lion eyeing prey as wicked black wind gathered around the single greave that she was wearing.

"I...still don't get it. I don't get any of it. So I'm just going to do what I think is right."

Sera brought her wounded right arm behind her as if to hide it behind her

body and took a sideways stance with her good left arm—still wearing Arondight and enlarged with Blood Scrimmage—held in front. She slowly opened the fist she had clenched and directed her palm, which was large enough to easily envelope someone, at Bell.

“Come, Bell!”

“Ga...ah...!”

Black wind exploded underneath the sole of Bell’s greave with an earsplitting clap that left cracks on the wall of one corner of the Moon Mansion. Bell herself closed in on Sera quicker than the eye could see.

She’s so fast!

The black wind blasting from Bell’s greaves was practically a tornado now, propelling her significantly faster than before. However, in exchange, her bones creaked in protest and blood spurted copiously from her wounds. The expression of pure rage on her face made it clear that what was happening to her body was the last thing on her mind. She was practically running it into the ground, but she didn’t care.

Both Bell and I are probably going to reach our limits after this exchange. I’ve got to end things before she hurts herself beyond healing!

When Sera concentrated her crimson Goldia aura around her left arm, Bell’s movements changed.

“Ya...gh...!”

Bell whirled around, unleashing a side kick that directed the tornado she had been using as propulsion towards Sera. The winds gouged out the cavern walls upon contact and swallowed up the fragments. Of course, the space down here, the lowest floor, was not entirely unaffected by what was going on. In fact, it was getting close to collapsing.

“Doesn’t matter!”

Sera decided to crush the tornado at its source. This was a strategy that sounded so outrageous one would think it a joke. In fact, it could hardly even be called a strategy. It was brute force, pure and simple. She charged in with the

conviction of letting Bell have her arm. Sera's aura was growing weaker by the minute, indicating that the black wind carried the effects of Color Corrosion, but she did not stop. She pushed through the rubble whizzing all around, doggedly tearing through the roaring gusts.

Eventually, Sera was standing in front of Bell, having successfully dispelled the entire tornado.

"Gu...ah..."

A sword made of black wind shot out from Bell's greave, drawing fresh blood. Gladius Aile had reached Sera's fist once again after having pierced through Crimson Astrea, Blood Scrimmage, and Arondight.

At that instant, Sera's crimson aura disappeared and her Blood Scrimmage armor shattered. There was no way for her to use Blood Dominion on the black blade, as it was still protected by a layer of wind, and her right arm remained far too damaged to punch Bell's exposed body.

"Still...doesn't matter!"

Surprisingly, Sera chose to get even closer, pushing Bell's blade deeper into her left hand. Thankfully, Bell was in no condition to launch any more attacks, but the way Sera was effectively gouging her own wound would turn most stomachs. The only defense she had left, Arondight, was also nearing its limits, judging by the widening crack stretching from where it had been pierced.

Despite all this, Sera continued treading what seemed like a thorny path of self-destruction, and soon, it paid off. She finally reached the base of Gladius Aile. Finally reached Bell.

"It doesn't matter if you are an Apostle or a Demon Lord. You are my sister, Bell, and that's enough for me."

Sera gently placed her bloody right hand on Bell's head.

"For now...*sleep.*"

Bell instantly lost consciousness and her blade of wind disappeared. Sera hugged her body so that she did not hit the ground, but the weight made Sera herself fall onto her behind. She had lost too much blood, judging from the

large puddle surrounding them, and was having trouble mustering any strength.

I'm...a bit sleepy too, I think.

She hugged Bell close while staring at the floor with unfocused eyes.



I, Bell Baal, was born to Gustav Baal, the papa whom I deeply respect, and Eliza Baal, the mama whom I deeply loved. Papa used to be the head of the greatest force of demons in Abyssland history, and he made sure that I, his daughter, never wanted for anything. Then again, I had never once left the vicinity of the mansion where I lived, so I had no way of knowing how my wants compared with other people's. Regardless, I enjoyed my life at the mansion and received more than enough love from my mama and papa.

Hm, on second thought, I really do think I had everything I wanted, and I loved my parents very much.

When I had grown a bit and reached the age when I loved playing, papa assigned me Sebasdel as a butler and etiquette teacher. Strangely, however, all the lessons and even the exercise sessions were conducted from beyond my door, with maids I was familiar with carrying messages back and forth. Even I could tell that was weird.

"Papa, this is very inefficient. If Sebasdel is actually skilled, then I want to learn from him directly."

"What?! Hmm, papa is feeling as moved by your kindness as a mountain is tall right now, Bell. However! HOWEVER! My dear cute Bell, you are so cute that letting you meet any boys would be extremely dangerous. All guys are wolves, you hear me? That's right; no matter how nice a guy looks, he's definitely still a wolf who's thinking of gobbling you up! This will be covered on your next test, so make sure you sear it into your mind. In fact, make sure you remember it for the rest of your life!"

"Understood, papa. So, you are a wolf, papa?"

"Papa is as much an exception as a mountain is tall!"

At times, papa said things that I didn't really understand. *Is the mountain*

thing his most recent favorite go-to phrase? Then, several years passed, and I finally got to see the face of my own butler. He was still standing really far away, though, for some reason.

“You know what’ll happen if you lay hands on my daughter, yeah? I’ll make you *wish* you were being tortured through quartering.”

“T-Torture by quartering, my lord? Th-That sounds... Oh, um, it’s nothin, my lord.”

I saw papa say something to Sebasdel with their faces almost close enough for them to touch noses, but I couldn’t hear them well. If I had been better at manipulating the wind, I just might have been able to catch it.

It did not take long before I discovered Sebasdel’s perverseness. Even so, he was an excellent butler. He also had a lot to teach me. I was most interested in his large variety of kicks and all-powerful wind magic. Because I was short, I lacked the reach to fight with my fists. As such, his fighting style was exactly what I needed. So I had him thoroughly pound all the fundamentals into me. I had learned that we demons held power above everything, and I wanted to be of use to my papa and mama one day.

I recalled one instance when Sebas, who had done everything he could to buff his Endurance stat, grunted and shouted, “Harder, please! Kick me like you mean it!”

Just to clarify, we were sparring. Even though Sebas was more than capable of blocking my attacks, he always threw himself in the way instead. I hated it, because it made the maids standing by think we were doing something weird. It didn’t even help to improve my proficiency. At times like these, I seriously resented him.

“Come, now! More! Harder, still!”

“You...piece of trash!”

“Those words are honey to my ears!”

Sebas was a masochist. I just had to give him a few hard kicks and he would tell me anything I wanted to know. Honestly, I didn’t actually hate him that much for being a pervert; it was more accurate to say I thought of him as a

convenient person. If asked to choose whether I liked or hated him, I would only say that I thought him disgusting. Papa clearly felt the same, considering how often he sent Sebas flying.

Knowing that Sebas was actually second strongest after papa made me feel faint when thinking about the future of their organization. *As I thought, it's up to me to stay levelheaded. I want to grow up quickly and run through the battlefields with papa.*

In order to realize this dream as soon as possible, I made sure to drink my milk every morning. I had yet to see any significant effects, but I believed it would pay off one day.

Several years later, I noticed a change. My height? You have a death wish? No, *that* stayed the same. I'm talking about the appearance of someone who seemed determined to get in the way of papa's conquest. Based on what Sebas told me, it was a group of five people from the aboveground called the Hero party. Each member was as strong as a top officer in our army, and it was said that the young girl in white who was likely their leader was in a whole other class of her own.

"Gustav-sama has ordered me to eliminate this group of intruders. I will be away for a while."

"Mm, you go do that and come back soon. You wouldn't lose to these nobodies from who-knows-where, right?"

"Your words of acknowledgment honor me greatly. However, if I can also have a few words of disparagement, it would motivate me greatly for my mission."

"Just drop dead."

"Thank you very much."

After flashing a smile that merely *looked* nice, Sebas headed out to fight the Hero party. And, well, he never came back. The only part of him that came back was his butler jacket, soaked in blood. *He actually died? Just how bad did his case of masochism get? Tch.*

Of course, I knew that papa had become a Demon Lord and that the Hero was

someone who was supposed to take him down. Even though he acted the same when he was around me, I had heard the rumors that he was being called a tyrant out in the world. We demons were honest about our desires and therefore held the status of Demon Lord in ultimate regard, but I understood that the nature of a Demon Lord was to destroy the world. Therefore, it was the Hero's duty to eradicate this threat. Not once in the ancient texts had there ever been an instance of a Demon Lord beating the Hero of the time.

In other words, papa is most likely...

The Hero's advance was blazingly fast. The party took down only the most critical locations and went straight for our officers during each encounter. This hobbled our forces so badly we would lose sight of them, leaving them free to pop up again in some other place and repeat the process all over again. Before we knew it, they were already at the Demon Lord Castle.

"Serge, there's a hidden room here," the elf said. "Uh, I mean, a hidden mansion?"

"Be careful, everyone," the big one murmured. "This might be a trap."

"Wow, such a big cavern," the girl in white exclaimed. "And the mansion's so beautiful."

"Serge, please don't stick your head out without thinking," the childlike one chided.

The Hero party really was fast. Even though papa had assured me that where I lived was the safest and most secure place in the Demon Lord Castle, they found it in no time at all. *Just how powerful and lucky are they?*

The one who was most likely the Hero was the first to notice me. "Huh? There's a girl here."

At the time, I was wearing a Clip of Camouflage, which hid my horns and wings and therefore made me look like a normal human girl. Papa had told me that if I didn't do anything strange, the Hero wouldn't attack me.

"Was she kidnapped by the Demon Lord?" the boy replied quizzically. "Serge, wanna take her in?"

The girl tilted her head. “As in, bring her with us? But we’re gonna go fight the Demon Lord right after this. Wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

“It’d be dangerous for her to stay here too, though,” the big guy pointed out.

“Then this gentleman shall take on the duty of protecting her!” the elf said with a dramatic flourish. “There is no cause for concern. I swear on my alias of Silver Bow th— *bffft!*”

“S-Sorondil?!”

Whoops. I had kicked the elf right in the face through sheer force of habit. There was no helping it, though. After all, I could feel a certain wickedness coming from him. It was a bit different from Sebas’s aura in that it seemed more, uh, sexual. So, since I was at it, I whirled around to throw one more kick.

“Oooof! Ugh...th-this girl is not an ordinary girl!”

“It’s your fault for being a lolicon, Sorondil. Go stand a distance away, pervert.”

“Shut up, you closet pervert, Ragat! What’s wrong with trying to pick up a cute girl?!”

“Sorondil, if you go overboard, it becomes a crime. Want me to report you afterwards?”

“You have a cute face but say the most demonic things, Philip...”

I knew it; my intuition had been spot-on. I found myself wishing I had kicked this Sorondil character one more time.

The white-clad girl approached me. “I’m sorry if my companions surprised you. You have nothing to worry about now; I’ll take responsibility and take care of you.” Then she put a hand on my head and began patting me.

I’m older than you, though. Why’re you patting my head?

This unfortunately proved to be my undoing. The Hero’s hand just happened to bump into my hair clip, which just happened to be loose. Consequently, it fell right off.

“Huh? Um...are you actually a demon?”

“Tch!”

I immediately shifted into battle mode and threw a kick at the girl while inwardly berating myself for being exposed in such a ridiculous way.

“Hup!”

The gallery all exclaimed, “Serge?!” in unison as the Hero easily evaded my sudden attack.

“I’m good, guys!” she said to her companions before turning to me. “Don’t worry, little girl. I’m not your enemy.”

“Who’s a lit—”

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY DAUGHTER?!”

The ceiling exploded as papa crashed down looking far more enraged than I had ever seen him. What happened next was mostly a blur. There were flashes of moments that involved swords multiplying, but that was all I recalled. The only thing I was certain of was that my own strength had fallen short. I hadn’t the faintest idea how I died.

When I came to, I found myself in a shockingly white space.

“I shall grant you new light. Do you believe in the deities?”

Those were literally the first words that the silver-haired girl who greeted me said. Honestly, I thought she was crazy. I found all talk about the gods very suspect, but most importantly, I was a demon, and the gods were our enemies. That said, it was my first time meeting someone saying something so ridiculous with such clear, earnest eyes. I made sure not to show any reaction on my face, though. After all, I instinctively knew that she far outclassed me.

“You don’t need to be so on guard. I’m on your side.”

All my instincts were screaming at me not to fight this silver-haired woman—no, not to fight the terrifying *something else* that was lurking within her.

Because I remained silent, she went on to ask, “Can I convince you to work with me?” in a voice so heavenly that anyone who heard it would say yes without thinking twice. This was followed by an explanation that her goal was to revive the true goddess and purify the world.

This went beyond being suspect to outright insane. However, the woman had a mysterious aura that made it seem like she just might be able to accomplish what she said she would. It irked me to admit it, but my instincts also told me that it was possible.

But if she's "purifying" the world...

"Of course, you will be rewarded. Tell me the one thing that you want most."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

The way the woman replied without missing a beat meant she was either the real deal or a master scam artist. Of course, as someone who had already died once, I did not have to think twice.

"If so, then I want to protect my homeland. From anyone and everyone. Even from the purification of the world."

She giggled softly. "I see. Very well. In that case, let's first save that homeland of yours. The great empire of Grebareika that once shone like a bright star in Abyssland is now a mere candle before the wind."

"Hold on. What did you just—"

"Please do not worry. If you form a covenant with me, I will fulfill my promise. Going forward, I will need you to carry out many missions for me. To that end, I will first give you power. Using Ten Divine Fingers, the ability that Elearis-sama entrusted me with, I shall now bestow upon you a special gift to help you in your quest to make this world a better place."

The silver-haired woman placed her hand on my head, at which point I suddenly started feeling very sleepy.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Iris Deramilius, Oracle of the goddess Elearis. Please call me Arbitrator, which is what the others call me. And you will be Condemner going forward, as you are the one who shall condemn the sin of becoming a Demon Lord committed by your bloodline. I look forward to working with you."

Arbitrator stroked my head gently and my consciousness faded to black.



“Mel, you done clearing things away over there?” Sera asked.

“Just a little more,” Mel replied, fiddling with her Holy Lance. “Okay, all done.”

Bell mumbled a little in her sleep, prompting Gustav to shout right next to my ear, “Is she all right?! Is my beloved daughter all right?!”

I get that you’re worried about her, but I would appreciate it very much if you could spare a few thoughts for my eardrums too.

“Please don’t worry. Mel and I healed her together. We brought her all the way back from the brink somehow. She will likely need rest and a little bit of rehabilitation, though.”

“Wh-What a relief...”

My father-in-law, who was even more gigantic than Gerard, fell flat on his behind as the tension suddenly drained from his body. He would likely not have shown this side of himself when he was a Demon Lord, but right now, he was merely a father. No one would chastise him for looking uncool.

“Isn’t it great, father?” Sera gave his back a few hearty pats.

“Yes... Yes, it is.” Gustav sighed heavily and slumped where he was sitting.

I commented, “On the other hand, you don’t seem all that bad off anymore, Sera.” *I seem to remember you being really hurt too. Maybe their respective healing abilities are just that different?*

When Mel and I had arrived, Sera and Bell’s fight had just ended. Sera was holding Bell tightly in her arms, refusing to let go, while the surrounding walls and ceiling collapsed all around them. Instantly understanding the urgency of the situation, I telepathically asked Mel to freeze the entire space as I ran forward as fast as I could to cast a barrier around the two sisters.

They were unconscious but thankfully breathing properly. However, we could not relax just yet. Their equipment was in a deplorable state and they bore severe wounds all over. One glance at the floor let me know that they had also lost a lot of blood. If Mel and I had arrived just a little later... I did not want to

think about it. That was how dangerous things had been. Still, I had to give Sera props for having had the presence of mind to seal Bell's wounds using her own blood.

"Bell isn't waking up," Sera murmured, squatting down to poke Bell's cheeks a few times.

"You really are energetic," I said wryly. "Can you not poke the patient's cheeks, please?"

Sera's eyes widened. "It's..."

"It's...what?"

"IT'S SO SOFT! What even— This is Rion-grade!"

Can you not treat my sister like some standard? Though it's true that Rion's cheeks are very soft. That's something I'd never deny!

"Oh my, you're right. This really is Rion-grade."

"You think so too, Mel?!"

"Mel, are you seriously joining her?"



But hmm, Rion-grade, you say. That's a phrase referring to the ultimate combination of softness and bounciness. Bell is frowning from how much Sera and Mel are poking her. Considering her thorny personality, once she wakes up, I probably won't ever get another chance. Rion-grade...Rion-grade...

"I-In that case, maybe I'll also—"

"Foolish son-in-law, do you understand what it is you are thinking of doing? If my blessing activates, I will condemn you on Bell's behalf."

"I'm completely in the wrong. I apologize."

Father-in-law, if you clench the hand you have on my shoulder that hard, you're gonna tear it off. And that hostility you're directing towards your foolish son-in-law is a bit too inten—ow ow ow!

While Gustav and I were enjoying some father-son bonding time, Sera and Mel began escalating things. Now, they were stroking Bell's hair and fussing over her in other ways. *Dammit, I stand with the gender equality movement!*

"So...what're you two doing to me?"

"Ah."

"Oh."

Don't you "ah" and "oh" me. No matter how badly hurt Bell was, Mel and I got serious about healing her, so of course she'd wake up with how much you two are messing with her!

"Um...good morning, Bell! It is a good morning, isn't it?" Sera smiled brightly.

"It's always night in Grebarelka," Bell countered.

Choosing to forgo the small talk, Mel asked simply, "May I pat your head?"

"You're already doing it," Bell grumbled. "You're supposed to ask that question beforehand. Jeez, you made me have a weird dream with all the pat—Okay, really, stop patting."

Although Bell had regained consciousness, she did not yet have the strength to fend off the insistent patting and poking. She made a displeased face and vocalized her protests but was otherwise at their mercy.

“Hey, glad to see—”

The moment I stepped forward to offer my greetings, Gustav bowled past me, howling at the top of his lungs, “BELLLLLLLLLL!”

I was slammed against the far wall from how hard he pushed me aside. *I’m glad you’ve recognized me as your son-in-law, sir, but the way you’re treating me is gonna make me cry.*

“Do you hurt anywhere? How’re you feeling?!”

“Your beard is what’s hurting me, father.”

“Hmm, looks like you still aren’t fully recovered yet. Why aren’t you calling me ‘papa’ like you always do?!”

Sera gave her sister a dubious look. “Wait, you what?”

The younger sister turned away. In all likelihood, she was blushing furiously at the moment, judging by how red her ears were. If she could move her hands, she would probably be covering her face.

“Mm? You appear to have a fever, Bell! Come now. Papa shall give you a piggyback ride! Leave it to your papa!”

“Please, just stop...”

In a way, you’re dealing her the most damage here, father-in-law. She’s starting to tear up from embarrassment. You should probably spare her already.

“Father, you’re troubling Bell,” Sera said crossly. “If you don’t stop, she’ll start hating you.”

“I cannot have that. It’s been a while since I last saw her, so I couldn’t control myself. Very well, I shall stop now. I have self-control.”

“Good! And good for you too, Bell. Turning into a Demon Lord didn’t have any lasting effects.”

“Turning into a... That’s right. I did turn into a Demon Lord. How am I okay now?”

“Allow me to explain!” Melfina lifted Holy Lance Luminary as if to show it off while her other hand continued patting Bell nonstop.

The demon girl, who seemed to have given up her attempts at protest, merely looked up. “You’re...the goddess Melfina...”

Gustav looked up. “Huh? She’s a goddess?”

Sera immediately hit back with, “Father, be quiet.”

“Very well, I shall be quiet.”

He really can’t say no to his daughters, huh?

“Holy Lance Luminary here has the ability to eradicate evil and correct wrongness. During the Trycen incident, too much time had passed since Zel had become a Demon Lord, so I was unable to use its power. This time, however, Bell-san had only just awakened, and not even fully, at that. Moreover, the process through which she became one was not natural, was it? Though it does seem strange to make that distinction.”

Bell shifted a little under Mel’s gaze, then nodded. “Yeah, it was forced.”

“According to the footage on the Network, that black book must have been the trigger. Bell-san, because you became a Demon Lord through an artificial process independent of the usual cycle, your transformation was incomplete. Thanks to that, it was a piece of cake reversing it with Luminary.”

This really hits home how incredible it is that we have a goddess with us who doesn’t hesitate to use her divine weapon. Not that I’ll say anything out loud.

Gustav asked with a straight face, “Sera, is this goddess actually a good deity? Going further, is she not a being who deserves our reverence and worship?”

“Are you thinking of joining the Order of Rinne?” Sera tilted her head quizzically. “If you’re interested, their Oracle is right there.”

Someone stop this old man! Colette’s gonna have a fit!

Bell looked at Colette, then made a noncommittal sound. “Hmph. Well, regardless of how it turned out, I’ve carried out my last duty. You all are free to do whatever you want with me now.”

“Really? Then Bell, stop being an Apostle and let’s get along as sisters!”

“Uh...what?”

“Not ‘what’! Your duties are all done, right? That means you’re free now. So I’m gonna spoil you lots going forward!”

“I’ll spoil you too!” Gustav added.

“Father-in-law, let’s leave them be for a while. We don’t wanna complicate the good mood they’ve got going on, right? What’s more, you’re starting to give off Gerard vibes.”

“Mm?! You, let go of me! Let go right now! What does ‘Gerard vibes’ even mean?!”

Mel and I forcefully dragged Gustav away.

“You really are far too easygoing, Sera Baal.”

“It’s ‘sister Sera,’ right? Come on, again.”

“S-Sister...Sera.”

Oh? Is Bell actually pretty weak to pressure?

“You wouldn’t imagine how cold she acted towards Sera when they first met.” I chuckled. “I guess people really do change.”

“Fool son, you just don’t get it. You don’t understand the slightest thing about Bell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bell has always been a genius who was skilled at all things but extremely clumsy in matters of the heart. She just can’t be honest with herself. I do love that part of her, but it also makes her easily misunderstood.”

“Ohhh, I get it now. She didn’t know how to interact with her older sister.”

As it turned out, Bell had never hated Sera. In fact, it was the opposite. She was very much interested in her sister but had no idea how to approach her, with her own identity as an Apostle further complicating the situation. She became so lost that she had ended up choosing to use force, basically taking things to the level of a sibling fight. I could appreciate that part of her, but it definitely was a clumsy way to handle the situation.

Gustav harrumphed. “Well, they’ve had their fight, so all that’s left is for them

to become good sisters to each other. We will just be there to support them.”

“Um, you’re putting a really pretty bow on everything, father-in-law, but if you hadn’t raised them in such complete isolation, the situation might not have gotten this bad.”

“Blame that on the queen of vampires. I did nothing wrong.”

Gustav turned his head to the side, but the gesture conveyed none of the same cuteness as when Bell did it. It actually even irked me a little.



After Sera and Bell resolved their differences, Gustav lifted Bell in his arms. As mentioned before, she was still too weak to walk by herself and needed bed rest. The Demon Lord Castle was as beat up as this underground cavern was, but I had spells that could help with that. According to an exchange I had with Efil and Rion over the Network, they had completely wiped out all the enemies in the area. The last person I needed to check up on was Ange, who I had left facing a bunch of elite black golems.

::Heyyo! Surprise, surprise, I managed to capture all of the golems! That makes me the MVP this time, don’t you think?::

Just as I was thinking of her, Ange’s cheerful voice burst into my head. Apparently, she too had had a resounding victory. Unfortunately, if I really had to decide on an MVP for the day, it would likely be Sera.

Good work, Ange. You didn’t get hurt, right?

::What a silly question, Kelvin-kun. The order to do my best not to damage the golems did make it a lot harder, but I’m me. Not a scratch. With how hard I worked, I think I deserve to be the one to present them to Shutola-chan.::

Okay, okay. You can have Shutola’s smile all to yourself.

::Yay!::

When things settled down, I would have to tweak the black golems to make them more suitable for Shutola to use. *Uh, they’re called Schwarzstille, right?* Each of them had been wielding different weapons, which gave me the idea to give them each different features. Of course, I’ll be running everything by

Shutola first.

Sorry to ask this when you're celebrating, but would you mind patrolling the perimeter to make sure there aren't any enemies left? For all we know, there might be another Apostle besides Bell still around.

::Sure thing, leave it to your reliable big sist— Kelvin! Someone's appeared at your location!::

The warning from Ange came at the same time Sera, Bell, and even Gustav all looked up at the large hole in the ceiling in unison. Someone was peering down.

In a carefree, noncommittal voice, the interloper said, "Aww, I'm so happy for you. Happy endings really are the best. At least, that's what this old man thinks."

I thought I recognized his face but had trouble placing it. He was wearing slightly dirty clothing and had a long katana at his waist. The way he was looking down at us was very casual, almost as if he thought he was meeting relatives.

"Hey there, Condemner," he continued.

"So they sent you, Survivor."

"That's right. They sent this old man. Ha ha. When I heard it was your last mission, I did my darned to fight off my persistent sleepiness and rushed over as fast as I could. Ugh, I want to go home and sleep so badly..." The man covered his mouth with a hand and bit back a big yawn.

I see, so this is Survivor, the Apostle who fought Rion's group in Gaun. If I remember right, his ability enables him to recover instantly no matter what happens to him, even if he gets all diced up or reduced to cinders.

I gulped. *Guys, looks like the fun isn't over yet.*

::Honey, this is probably a serious scene. Please hold yourself back.::

So you say, Melfina-sensei, but your stomach seems to be reaching its limit too. I've been hearing it rumble for a while now. We've already deviated from whatever seriousness there is. I'll do my best to hold myself back, so you do the same. For now, let's just keep watching.

"So, Condemner, are you sure about leaving us?"

“I’ve finished what I promised Arbitrator I’d do, so I suppose so. Though I admit I didn’t expect to survive.”

“You craven! Who are you to speak to my Bell like th—”

“Papa, shut up.”

“Indeed. Papa, shutting up.”

Father-in-law, this is a serious scene. Read the air. Sheesh.

“What a scary father you have. I feel bad for your future husband, ha ha.”

“I don’t plan on having one.”

“That so? What a waste. Well, that aside, I personally am glad you survived. It wasn’t long, but we did work as a team for a while. I’ll tell Arbitrator about your leaving, don’t worry. Your work is done, so I’m sure she’ll forgive you. I hope you enjoy the rest of your life. You have that ri—”

Sera, who had stayed silent this whole time, couldn’t hold herself back any longer. “Wait, what work?”

In this context, “work” most likely referred to Bell’s work as an Apostle rather than her desire to protect Grebareika. In other words, this would be Arbitrator’s aim. Whatever it was, the fact that it was already done did not bode well.

“What? Condemner hasn’t told you yet? I guess not. She did just wake up. Condemner, you mind if I tell it?”

“You sure are talkative today. Guess you always are, though.”

“It’s been a while since I got to talk to someone, so I’m just happy for the opportunity. Among my colleagues, Protector’s the only one who would listen to me, but in her case, she does all the talking and there’s no room for me to get a word in.”

“Protector is very talkative too, true.”

Once again, Sera felt obliged to interrupt. “So, what was your aim?”

“Right, right. I forgot. To be entirely honest, we’re now done with all our preparations for reviving Our Lady. You saw this black book just now, right?” Survivor held up the grimoire that had appeared when Bell had turned into a

Demon Lord.

Sera's eyes turned sharp. "That's..."

"This Black Grimoire's appearance supposedly changes depending on the target, but it's basically a Demon Lord seed. That seed eventually buds, grows, and flowers. When a Demon Lord falls as a fallen flower, a unique kind of mana cycles back into the seed. Then the seed returns to the ground, and after many decades to centuries... Well, I suppose the goddess over there knows better than I do how it all works, right?"

Noticing Sera's expression, Mel shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't talk about it."

Ah, so this is a topic that falls under Divine Binding. If so, what Survivor just revealed is pretty bad. It likely affects the very fundamentals of how this world works.

"To put it simply, Arbitrator's gonna make use of this energy. So, then. Although we failed to secure the sheath, Holy Lance Eclipse has returned to Our Lady's hands, where it belongs. Demon Lord Zel gave us a lot of really high-quality mana, so Condemner, who was supposed to serve as the backup tank, is now freed from her duty! Or at least, that's how it was supposed to go."

"Uh, by backup tank, you mean..." I narrowed my eyes.

"Exactly how it sounds." Survivor shrugged. "If we couldn't gather enough energy to revive Our Lady, Condemner was to become a spare Demon Lord. Then again, it looked like the Demon Lord seed wasn't perfect, so she didn't make the full transformation."

Sera looked at her sister. "Bell?"

Bell nodded. "It's as he says. I weighed the two and chose to protect Grebarelka."

I see. So Arbitrator's goal wasn't to turn Bell into a Demon Lord and kill us all, it was to turn Bell into a Demon Lord so we could kill her. And what she ultimately wanted was the energy from Demon Lord Bell dying. Damn, she really got us good.

“Hey, even I only just learned about this recently, and honestly, I think it’s a cruel thing to ask of such a young girl, regardless of how much we want Our Lady to be resurrected in perfect condition. That’s why this old man is all for you leaving the Apostles.”

For some reason, Survivor choked on his words and began quivering. *Is that from bottled-up anger, like how father-in-law’s been shaking this whole time after Bell told him to shut up?*

“Of course, I’m all for it. I’m for it, but...at the same time, this old man is sad. Very sad! Assassin was first, then Reviver, and now Condemner too?! Why, oh why are all the pretty girls leaving our organization?! Especially Reviver! That mature, bewitching charm of hers was just... I didn’t even have that long to get to know her!”

A bewildered “Huh?” escaped the lips of everyone on our side.

If even the one doing the talking is gonna disregard the serious air here, what am I supposed to do?!

“With Condemner gone, the only girls left are Arbitrator and Protector. The new hire’s a guy around my own age, and he seems really shady somehow! Don’t I deserve a bit more happiness in my life?! What do you think, O goddess?!”

“I’m sorry, please ask the one you’re serving,” Mel replied. “Different jurisdictions.”

I brought a hand to my forehead. “Mel, you don’t have to answer him seriously.”

It was Survivor’s fault that even though the topic of our conversation was serious, it now sounded like we were just joking around.

“Really? Aw, shucks. Well, Condemner, enjoy the rest of your life here in your homeland. Like I just said, I’ll help explain everything to Arbitrator. Oh, speaking of. Feel free to keep the gift you got from her. I’m getting along in years, you see, so I’m getting forgetful. I’ll gloss over it for you.”

“Are you...doing this on purpose?”

“No idea what you’re talking about. It’s going to be lonely, but I pray that we never meet again. Wait, I’m actually an atheist. I guess you got me good there! Ha ha ha!”

The man put the Black Grimoire in his chest pocket and stood up while laughing. Perhaps it was his way of being considerate—if this was his final farewell with Bell, he wanted to be laughing rather than lamenting. Whatever the reason, he had a big grin plastered onto his face.

Now that he’s finished giving us information and it seems like he’s about to leave, it’s time to make our move. Thanks for speaking for so long; it gave me enough time to make a lot of preparations.

“Your back’s wide open!” Gerard roared as he suddenly appeared behind Survivor. He slashed at his back before kicking him down into the hole with us.

“Guaaaaah!”

Chivalric code? Gerard’s Way of the Knight only involves doting on his grandchildren and never taking off his armor.

Come on now, you didn’t think we’d just let an enemy go, did you?



Gerard’s sword, Dainsleif, had caught Survivor on the shoulder and ran deeply down his back in a horizontal line that reached his waist on the other side. Then the knight had followed up with a kick so fierce it seemed to carry all his frustrations from his lack of time in the limelight during Sera’s homecoming operation. Leaving aside the minor question of “How chivalrous is kicking someone down from the back?” a serious front kick from a full suit of armor was nothing to scoff at. The weight of the armor added to Gerard’s power ensured that Survivor fell straight down into the large hole he had been peering into.

“Ah! Ow! Ugh! Oof!”

Every time Survivor bumped into the side of the hole, he let out a wince-inducing yelp. When he slammed his waist against a bumpy part separating two floors, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him even though I was the one who had given Gerard the command.

The contrast with how Survivor tried to walk off in a really cool way just now makes this look even worse.

However, I could see that the slash made by Gerard and all the scrapes and bruises that he was suffering from the fall were recovering. This confirmed Rion and Ange's report. Of course, it wasn't that I doubted them, but it just was different seeing it happen with my own eyes.

CRAAAASH!

"Guuunfh!"

Damn, going headfirst is a pretty bold way to land. I don't think I could do it myself, and I don't want to try. If I did, I just might die. Well, okay, maybe not, considering my stats, but I still am not interested in trying. Now, a precious source of information has come to us of his own accord. It would be extremely rude to just let him go without entertaining him a little, right?

"Hnnng...pwah!" Survivor pulled his head out of the pile of rubble it had been buried in and wiped his forehead. "Phew, I seriously thought I'd die just now..." Although he sounded extremely tired, his body actually appeared entirely unharmed. From what I could tell at a glance, he did not even have a scratch.

I smiled. "Were you really gonna just leave? That'd make you the most compassionate Apostle we've met so far."

"Oh, no, this old man isn't compassionate, just cowardly," Survivor replied, scratching his head abashedly. "It was taking me all I had to put up a cool and casual front. If I was stupid enough to try anything with Condemner, her father would get really angry, right? I reeeally don't want to deal with him."

"You have a point there. Father-in-law would definitely snap."

"Huh? You're married to one of his daughters?"

"A lot happened. It was only just now that I had the misfortune of being acknowledged as his foolish s—"

"Honey," Melfina interrupted.

"Oh, sorry. I got off track."

Whoops, I was starting to have fun chatting with him because we found a

common topic. Gotta change gears.

“Now, I feel a bit bad saying this to the lenient and generous old man, but we can’t let you go home that easily. I’m sure you understand.”

Sera cracked her knuckles threateningly, Mel lifted her lance, and I propped my big scythe on my shoulder. Behind us, Gustav, who was carrying Bell in his arms, started emanating such intense hostility that even I didn’t want to directly look his way.

“Ha ha ha. Um, this old man thinks ganging up on the weak isn’t good. That said, when I’m serious about running away, I’m pretty hard to deal with. Enough to deserve being called Survivor, at least!”

The moment Survivor stood up, shouting a line that I thought I might have heard somewhere, three shadows fell from above, shaking the ground as they touched down. In the order they landed, they were a small girl who had blue hair and was wearing blue clothes, the black knight who had just cut Survivor down and kicked him, and a massive hulk of a man with bulging muscles.

“My liege, sister Efil ordered me to come support you. With sweets as my promised reward, I am invincible. I wish to finish here ASAP and enjoy my time in heaven. Hurry.”

“Augh, the long fall really took its toll on my poor hips. Though it was still a hundred times better than landing on my head.”

“We’re...reinforcements.”

These three, who started running their tongues the moment they appeared, were our reliable reinforcements. Two were Dragon Kings and one was the knight who was one of the most powerful members of our party. The first two were, as could be guessed, Blue Mdo and Gerard. The large man who appeared last, however, was probably a new face for many of my own party members.

Sera looked up. “Oh, is that your human form, Boga? It’s actually my first time seeing it.”

“U-Um, yes, ma’am...”

The big guy was slightly bigger than even Gustav. However, as could be

gleaned from his response, he had a very timid personality. His voice was unbelievably soft for someone of his bulk, sounding like it might fade away with a wave of the hand.

“Sister Sera, Boga becomes a scaredy-cat when he’s in this form,” Mdo explained. “Don’t stare at him. His heart will burst from nerves.”

Sera looked mystified. “Huh? Why? Isn’t Boga the fiercest one among you dragons?”

“Only when he’s in dragon form. When he shrinks into human form, his guts also shrink. Even though he’s still more than twice my size. I honestly fail to comprehend it.”

“B-But...” Boga protested weakly.

Gerard harrumphed loudly. “To think the dauntless Boga has turned into such a coward! Looks like I need to train you again starting from square one. Once lunch is over, we’ll get right to it! We can’t leave you to besmirch the name of Flame Dragon King like this!”

“Nooooooooo!”

Despite how unreliable he seemed in this form, Boga was actually just as powerful as when he was a dragon. *Considering that he’s only just learned how to turn humanoid, maybe he needs a bit more time. For now, we should probably focus.*

I wanted to warn my companions about idle chatter before an enemy but honestly, Survivor wasn’t actually trying to get away.

“By the way, I have a question. What’s with this ice?” the Apostle asked.

“When you fell down, you touched the frozen wall.” I shrugged. “That must be when it got on you.”

“That’s...not quite what I was asking. Um, my feet are locked in ice and I can’t move...”

The wall that Survivor had touched was lined with the ice spell that Melfina had cast earlier to reinforce the Demon Lord Castle’s structural integrity. Specifically, this was the very spell that featured on our family crest, Celsius

Briar. Each time Survivor touched the wall, fragments of the spell got onto him. His ability might enable him to heal from all damage, but it clearly did nothing to free him from external bonds. The entire time the trio had been making their entrance, these ice fragments had continued spreading all over his body, encasing him fully. We may not have had a way to kill him yet, but we still had plenty of ways to make sure he didn't go anywhere.

“Okay, how about this? Let's call a time-out. I admit I went a bit too far. I wasn't even planning on running away. I came with a proposal for—”

“Save it. We'll listen to your justification later. For now...” I grinned, “let's have you spit out everything you know.”



“You'll take us to your main base?”

After we had encased Survivor in ice and confiscated his sword—scabbard and all—we tried speaking to him in a gentlemanly way and got a very surprising reply.

“Owwwww! Yes! That's what I've been trying to say this whole time.” Without much more prompting, Survivor began saying his piece. “That's the whole reason I showed myself. Otherwise, a coward like me would take to the wind the moment I retrieved the Black Grimoire.”

“You think we can just believe you? Oh, right. While you're at it, give us that Black Grimoire too.”

“Sorry, no can do. I already sent it back to our base using my Holy K— Can you not lift your weapon with a straight face? I'm all too aware that we're still enemies.”

You put down the newest member of the Apostles and called him suspicious, but I think you're also plenty suspicious.

“Then why are you, our enemy, offering to guide us to your base?”

“I haven't the faintest idea. I don't know the details, but Arbitrator said she's waiting for you. Specifically, she's waiting for the goddess Melfina. Thanks to Condemner carrying out her duty, we don't need to buy any more time. So she

wants you to go straight to her as quickly as possible.”

“Do we really need you, though? Bell’s with us.”

“You plan on bringing Condemner along in that state? Also, the way to get to our base is pretty special. In order to go in the proper way, you need a functional Holy Key. Now that Condemner’s left the organization, do you think Condemner’s is still usable? Same for Assassin’s. Oh, just saying, there’s no point trying to steal mine. Holy Keys only work when they’re in the possession of their actual owners.”

I shot a look at Bell, who was still in Gustav’s arms, and she nodded to confirm that Survivor was telling the truth.

These Holy Keys sound so annoying. So this is why they sent Survivor, who can’t die, as the envoy.

“Just saying, this old man doesn’t know anything beyond what Condemner knows. It makes me sad to admit it, but I’m an underling who’s pretty much at the bottom rung of the ladder. You can feel free to have Condemner’s babe or a sister use her power on me. Oh, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t ask me about my gift—”

Yep, let’s have father-in-law use Blood Dominion and ask for every last detail of Survivor’s ability.



Three days had passed since Sera and Bell made up and we arrested Survivor. What, “arrested” is not quite right? Well, he *is* locked up in a cell in the castle and is permanently under the effects of Gustav’s Blood Dominion, so I think it’s close enough. Same difference.

A lot happened in Grebareika during this time. The once mighty empire of Grebareika had collapsed and shrunk due to the absence of Gustav and its top officials, but now that they were back, they all swore fealty to the nation once again. It was only a matter of time before those who used to live in Grebareika returned and life was restored to this country.

The first to take action was Reinhart, the member of the Four Demonic Generals with a weird drawling accent whom Rion had taken out in record time.

This demon who looked like a giant snake used to be the king of the neighboring country of Doktoría and therefore knew its current ruler, King Galia, very well. Actually, not only were the two acquainted, but Reinhart even used to be Galia's superior back when they served in the Grebarelka army.

That said, it was only natural for this exchange to happen when Galia came face-to-face with someone he thought had died.

"Gramps, I think I see my late predecessor, Reinhart-sama, standing before me. This isn't good; I must be overworked."

"Ha ha, Your Majesty, it seems I have met my time. I clearly remember seeing off Reinhart-sama, and yet I now see him before my eyes. Please forgive this old bag of bones for leaving you so suddenly..."

"I ain't dead!"

It took quite a while for Reinhart to explain everything, but thanks to his efforts, Doktoría even asked to be absorbed by Grebarelka in the future. I was a bit doubtful about how easily things were progressing, but Sera and Bell took it in stride. Perhaps this was just the way it was in Abyssland.

This whole time, Gustav had been extremely busy. He had a ton of things to do, including reaching out to allies from Grebarelka's heyday, who had scattered throughout Abyssland, and fixing up the city. It had taken Bell all she had to protect the capital, meaning she hadn't had the resources to maintain the structures within. Given how few hands they had on deck, the Grebarelka group was naturally swamped with work. However, Gustav seemed quite happy about the circumstances, as he saw it as an opportunity to show his beloved daughters how hard he was at work. Soon enough, reinforcements would be coming from Grebarelka to relieve some of the burden. I deeply felt the absence of Dahak and his expertise with construction on this occasion.

"By the way, where's Sebas?" I asked. "Despite what he's like, he's your dedicated butler, right?"

Bell shrugged. "He's currently under house arrest to pay for all the sins he committed over the years. He's probably all alone in an isolation cell in the castle being forced to process piles of documents. Knowing how capable he is, though, I'm sure he'll get through it in no time at all."

“As they say, assign the right man for the right job!” Sera agreed.

“Sister Sera, that’s the wro— No, actually, you’re right.”

Sera and I were currently visiting Bell, who was recuperating at the Moon Mansion. Even though her transformation into a Demon Lord had been unstable and easily dispelled, it had still taken a significant toll on her and she needed more time to make a full recovery. She was a lot friendlier now, being open enough to converse with us. Also, she had taken to calling Gustav “papa” even in other people’s presence, probably having given in to his incessant pleading. She had gone past the phase where doing so made her blush as red as a tomato and entered the realm of enlightened acceptance.

“So, how much longer will you and your group be staying in Grebareika? If you’re all healed up, shouldn’t you set out soon to deal with Survivor’s matter? If I’m the reason you’re still here, don’t bother, because I’m fine now.”

Oh wow, she’s seriously gotten a lot nicer, I thought wryly before replying out loud, “We’re not in that much of a hurry. We’ll stay here to help out until backup arrives from Doktoría.”

“And I still haven’t pampered you enough yet, Bell!” Sera drew Bell’s face to her bountiful chest. For some reason, the younger girl’s expression was like a mixture of happiness and pain.

Maybe she’s still tired. Is the menu that Efil carefully thought out not as effective as expected?

Bell sighed. “Never mind. So, did you get any useful information out of Survivor?”

“None at all.” Sera shook her head. “Like he said, he really didn’t know anything beyond what you already told us.”

“Well, learning the location of the Apostle’s base is a big enough plus,” I pointed out. “Saves us the trouble of looking for it.”

“Ange and I would probably have found it by ourselves anyway if we got serious. No, not ‘probably.’ I know we would have!”

“Sister Sera, that’s like saying you’d find a single gold coin buried in the sand

in a giant desert.”

“That’s...not impossible, right?”

“But it would take time, so don’t.” I landed a chop on the top of Sera’s head.

Even though I chided Sera, however, there was a part of me who believed Sera and Ange actually could beat such odds. In fact, before they even started looking, thanks to Sera’s incredible luck, she might even step on the coin the first step she took. But of course, since Bell had already given us the answer, all this was mere speculation.

Just to make sure we got it, Bell repeated, “In the center of Abyssland, there is a gigantic cavern considered as taboo to enter as Boundless Poison is. We demons call it the Evil Deity’s Heart, and no one lives anywhere near it. This place is said to be where, in the age of lore, the Evil Deity was sealed away after losing a large-scale war against the other deities. Arbitrator set her eyes on this location and used her esoteric Oracle techniques to create a sanctuary there. You remember all that, right?”

“And that’s the Apostle’s base.” I nodded. “Yep, got it.”

“Because of Arbitrator’s ability, you can’t find the entrance to the Sanctuary by just walking into the cave. What’s more, the air there is thick with very strange mana that is really harmful to your bodies. To top it all off, the inside of the cavern is a natural labyrinth, meaning that it is almost impossible for someone to find the Sanctuary without knowing its exact location beforehand.”

“Even so, Ange and I—”

“Sera, we get it already, so stop trying to compete. Bell’s just worried about you.”

“What?! Is that true?! Oh, Beeeell!”

“Mmph.”

Once again, Sera hugged Bell tightly. *Bell, don’t give me that look. You don’t need to thank me. Feel free to enjoy Sera’s relaxing embrace as much as you want.*

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door to the room. “Excuse me. Oh? So

this is where you were, Sera-sama.”

“If it isn’t Viktor. Were you looking for me for something?”

The door was opened by none other than Viktor, Sera’s dedicated caretaker. His black carapace shone with its usual eye-catching dull glow.

“Gustav-sama suddenly said he wanted to hold a feast, calling it a ‘celebration of Sera-sama and Bell-sama for no particular reason.’”

Uh, couldn’t you have come up with something?

“That brings back memories,” Sera said, sounding nostalgic. “He used to hold those for me three or four times a week.”

“You too, sister Sera? That’s how often he held them at the Moon Mansion too.”

“You too, Bell? What a coincidence! We really are sisters!”

Wait, hold on. If that’s how often he did it at both the Moon Mansion and the Sun Mansion, the math means he did it almost every day. Father-in-law, just how badly did you want to celebrate your daughters?

“Ahem. In any case, Efil-san and I are currently preparing for the feast. Sera-sama, Bell-sama, I have come to give you advance notice and inform you that I will come fetch you when it is time.”

“He sure is working you hard,” I chuckled wryly. “Is there anything I can help with?”

“Since you’re offering, would you be so kind as to help Vegalzeld create the large banner reading ‘Celebration of Sera-sama and Bell-sama for No Particular Reason’ that will be hung up?”

“Oh, that’s made every time? Okay, got it. Sera, Bell, I’ll see you two later.”

Sera nodded. “Okay. Make sure you control your urge to fight, Kelvin.”

“Even I’m not that indiscriminate...”

Though it’s true that Vegalzeld’s and Reinhart’s names are on my mental list of people that I haven’t fought yet...

“Say, sister Sera, would you like to exchange Viktor for Sebas?”

“No, thank you.”

“Tch.”

Come on, don't click your tongue just because Sera rejected you with a smile. And don't worry. In terms of fighting strength, the two are about equal. Wait, they're not?



The castle that once housed a Demon Lord who had shaken the entire world was now enveloped in a huge celebration. Its black walls—reinforced by Kelvin's magic—reverberated with the sound of Gustav's hearty laughter.

In the dungeon, before one of the cells, Boga and Mdofarak stood guard, listening to the commotion of the party as background music. The cell they were watching held none other than Survivor, who had been inside it for the past three days. The fact that they were stuck there while everyone else was having a blast meant they had drawn the short straw.

“Mdo, what is this?”

“Reward from sister Efil. You want some, Boga?”

Correction: Mdo, at least, was extremely satisfied with the current situation. The bare, dimly lit room was decorated with fluffy white cushions, and she was sitting before a table of cakes that Efil had made with all her heart. Blue Mdo could not hold back her smile as she cast a look over the feast. A part of her was even thankful to Kelvin for assigning her guard duty.



“That’s...too much for me.”

“You sure? You usually eat a lot more.”

“Y-You’re supposed to keep a b-balanced diet and eat m-meat and vegetables too.”

“I definitely agree with you that Dahak’s appetite is unhealthy. Absolutely incomprehensible why he only eats raw vegetables. *Om nom nom.*”

“Uh...”

Boga couldn’t bring himself to reply with, “Isn’t it the same for you?” His current body, though indeed much smaller than his mountainous dragon form, was still very huge. His muscles were as firm as rocks, and his close-cropped hair and sharp eyes alone were enough to make many quail before him. Just like Dahak’s human form, his appearance strongly pointed to him being someone with ties to the underworld.

Despite all this, Boga was having trouble being confident in his much more compact form, as he felt like he had suddenly become a dwarf. The fact that he was now the same size as those who used to appear so much smaller truly terrified him. This was why he struggled to banter with even Mdo, who looked like a child.

“How about you come here and take a seat too, Boga? The ground looks so rugged it hurts my butt just looking at it.”

“This hardness is, uh, just right for me. Fluffiness...makes me uncomfortable. But, thank you.”

“If you say so.”

Of course, it wasn’t as if Boga hated his companions. He felt a certain bond with Mdofarak and Dahak, who he had known since his time in Trycen, and greatly respected Gerard, who often rode and trained him. It was just that when he had assumed humanoid form, he’d realized that he actually had a very cowardly personality. This was both a huge experience for Boga and a wall he had to overcome.

“A-Are we going to be fine? W-Will we be able to stand guard with o-only the

two of us?”

“You worry too much. Survivor is bound with Glory Sanctuary, which I learned from my liege, reinforced by sister Mel’s Celsius Briar. My liege made the bars of this cell as tough as possible, and King Gustav comes regularly to paint more blood on his forehead. Worrying is a waste of effort. Even old man Gerard or sister Sera wouldn’t be able to escape. It’s perfect.”

“Perfect...”

Boga gave Blue Mdo a glance, catching her licking off cream around her mouth, before he peered into the cell again. Survivor was standing stiff as a rod, his body encircled by three glowing rings and numerous layers of ice briars. His forehead was covered with so much of Gustav’s blood it was as if a bucket of red paint had been upended over his head.

“Old man, what is your ability?” Blue Mdo pointed the spoon she had licked clean at Survivor inside the cell.

“Ma’am! My Unique Skill is called Return From Cold Ashes! I can be cut, crushed, roasted, and my body can even be obliterated! But as long as the Lady who gave me my gift exists, I will return to this world! However, I still feel pain and fear! I am infinitely afraid whenever I’m about to die! I live a life colored like ashes! That is why I have this power!”

In sharp contrast to his usually slippery manner of speech, Survivor’s reply was now brisk and sharp. His bindings made it so he couldn’t move, but if he could, he would definitely have saluted.

“Tell us about your birth. What is your real name? What kind of life have you lived?”

“Ma’am! I was born in Gaun, the Country of Beastkin! My real name is Nito! When I was young, I visited Toraj, where I fell in love with the katana and joined a dojo to learn it! After that, I dedicated myself to mastering the sword and founded the martial arts school Wild Beast Style Swordsmanship! I now appear human, but I used to be beastkin! Ma’am!”

Mdo made a dismissive gesture with her spoon. “See how much he’s exposing himself? There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“I...guess...”

Even so, Boga remained uneasy. He started examining the cell bars for faults.

“Phew. Still, we won’t get overconfident. I can immediately sense any issues with the rings, and the way out passes through the party hall where my liege and sister Efil are. The sword he used is under heavy lock and key, and above all else, our very reliable senior is also here.”

A tiny slime peeked out from between another line of cakes on the other side of the one that Mdo was eating. As it turned out, Clotho had been accompanying Mdo with her cake binge. Despite its small size, this clone currently held most of the slime’s battle-related stats.

“Clotho, sir! Th-That’s a relief.”

The Dragonz group held absolute faith in Clotho and considered it their great senior. In fact, they really looked up to the slime’s dragon form.

“Our senior believes in your strength, Boga. So you should believe in your strength too.”

“O-Okay! I’ll try!”

“For now, eat some cake. Sugar is the fuel for all living beings.”

“Understood!”

Boga’s timidity seemed to have gotten a little better. He started shoveling cake into his mouth but then choked.

Cough, cough!

“Your esophagus is smaller as a human. The only person in this world who can eat like that is sister Mel.”

Clearly, Boga still needed more time to get used to his human form. After he regained his breath, he asked, “By the way, Survivor’s sword couldn’t go into Clotho’s Sto...uh, Storage, I heard?”

Mdo shrugged. “Apparently. Even old man Gerard couldn’t draw it, and the scabbard is too tough to be destroyed. My liege also said Analyze Eye didn’t work on it.”

“Wh-What about his scythe?”

“No way my liege would do that to such a precious sample. Very likely, it will eventually be passed to the Research Team headed by Shutola-sama, though we aren’t sure whether it is the sword or the scabbard that is more important. In the worst case where we can’t figure anything out, Clotho can still eat it. Don’t worry.”

“I-I see. That’s a relief.”

The reminder that Clotho could eat Survivor’s sword provided Boga with the reassurance that he needed. How the dragons saw the world was anybody’s guess.

“Mm, on s-second thought, I prefer rocks to ca— Huh?” Boga froze midchew. “M-Mdo...”

“Hold on. Let me finish this strawberry first. I was saving it for last.”

“B-B-But...look!” The large dragon pointed to the inside of the cell, his face filled with shock.

When Mdo looked up, her eyes widened.



The party hall we were having the celebration in was decorated by a large banner reading “Celebration of Sera and Bell for No Particular Reason.” The fact that the general decor of the room was based on skulls used to bother me a little, but I was now numb to it three days later. *I mean, it suits a Demon Lord Castle.*

This party had been called on very short notice. Even so, it was turning out to be just what we needed. Old friends rekindled relationships as new acquaintances celebrated each other’s survival. For example, Bell and Ange were currently sharing a table.

“Say, do you mind if I call you ‘Bell’? Or Bell-cchi? Bell-chan?”

“What’s come over you, Assassin?”

“I can’t just keep calling you Condemner, right? Since we managed to reunite like this, I think it’s a good time to change things up.”

“It’s true you left the organization without saying anything.”

“Wh— You’re not supposed to mention that! My dream was fulfilled at that moment, so it made sense for me to leave then. And at the end of the day, you also left the group, Bell-rin!”

“Can you not expand your repertoire of nicknames for me? Unlike you, I fulfilled the terms of my contract before I left. Did you consider how, depending on the situation, I might have been forced to take responsibility for you dropping out so suddenly?”

“That’s...fair. I’m sorry.” Ange fell to the ground and sat in seiza.

Bell gave her a look, then sighed. “Well...I think Arbitrator saw it coming. So we’re done talking about this, Ange.”

“Wait, did you just call me... You forgive me?”

“I know I’m not the best at expressing my emotions but looking at sister Sera made me feel stupid for bottling so much inside. We’re now, uh, honest friends, right? Or am I the only one who thought we were friends?”

“B-Bell-nyan!”

“Just call me ‘Bell,’ jeez. That ‘nyan’ is for cats and you’re the cat, not me. Speaking of, I’ve been wondering this whole time what’s with the cat ears. They’re— Oh, they’re surprisingly nice to touch.”

Bell began intently rubbing the cat ears attached to Ange’s hood.

The sight of old acquaintances blossoming into friends really warms the heart.

At the same time, Sera and Viktor were at another table, with Sera eating a dish cooked by Viktor.

“You’ve gotten rusty, Viktor!”

“Ku ha ha. It is as I feared. It is going to take me time to get back to how I was before my time away.”

“There’s that too, but the main reason is because Efil’s cooking is too delicious. I’ve gotten too used to her standard.”

“I deeply felt the difference between us when I stood beside her in the

kitchen. The sight of her making dishes more than twice as exquisite as mine at twice the speed truly filled me with awe. Just who is she? My last memory indicates that she is also a master archer, is she not?"

"She's a maid!"

"That's...obvious at a glance."

"Kelvin's personal maid!"

"I see. In short, I should not think too deeply about it."

Okay, what does that mean?

"That said, my favorite is still your 'curry,' Viktor. Because it holds a lot of memories for me!"

"Thank you very much. If you give me that look, I have no choice but to continue striving to improve myself."

"Mm! So, you must live long!"

"Ku ha ha."

Sera resumed shoveling her bowl of meat and potato stew into her mouth.

The good vibes here also really warm the heart. So, um...can I have some of that where I am?

"You lishening to me, fool shon? Here I'm, lovin' Shera and Bell sho mush. But then you show up, tryin'a sh...shteal one'o 'em from me. That's a shin punishable by death!"

"I am well aware. I'm one hundred percent fully aware, so please stop drinking so much, father-in-law."

Is it just my fate to always be targeted by bad drunks at feasts?

Pretty much as soon as the party began, I was accosted by Gustav, who then proceeded to make me pour him drinks as he complained, threatened me, and broke my bones. Unlike with Sera, there was no upside to this situation whatsoever. Add the fact that he was significantly stronger than her, and all that was left for me was pain. Just pain.



Dammit, I didn't expect this one last trial. I suspected father-in-law was a lightweight, but I underestimated how hard this would be to bear.

“What’a you sayin’? The ‘celebration of Sera and Bell for no particular reason because they’re so precious they deserve it anyway’ hash jusht begun!”

Why is it that you managed to say the name of the party so clearly when you’re slurring the rest of your words? What’s more, you even put your own spin on it. I really want to move somewhere else already. Is there anyone who can help me? H-E-L-P!

“Hmph.” Bell, who I just happened to be making contact with, laughed out of her nose at me.

Now look here, you little shit...

She lifted an eyebrow. “I don’t mind helping you, but just saying, it’ll probably backfire since I can’t handle alcohol either. If I go over, the fumes in the air would get to me. I’ve been told I start kicking a lot when I’m drunk. You want that?”

My father-in-law was currently brandishing a bottle of Gerard’s extremely powerful fire spirits. Its alcoholic content was so high, even I wouldn’t want to drink it.

“Uh, no...please remain as you are.”

“Wise choice.”

If Bell and Sera were to get involved, it was possible I would start taking damage faster than I could heal myself. I’m sure Sebasdel would have loved to have been in my shoes, but I definitely did not want to die that way.

“Were you calling for me, Kelvin?”

“Ohhh, my preshus Shera! I called, I called!”

“Sera, stop! Freeze! Don’t get any closer!”

As Gustav’s raucous laughter filled the party venue and I continued negotiating desperately for my life, Mdo, who was supposed to be guarding Survivor, suddenly reached out over the Network.

::My liege! My liege!::

Ugh...what's wrong?

::It's serious!::

I could say the same here! At this rate, those of the Demon Lord's bloodline are going to trigger my blessing for no reason!

::That, I don't really care about. More importantly, Survivor disappeared from his cell! I'm sorry!::

I wish you'd made that apology for the first half of what you said. Wait. What do you mean, "Survivor disappeared"? What happened to the bonds that you and Mel cast?

::I don't understand why, but they're still there. The strengthened cell bars are also intact. Only Survivor is gone. I didn't realize it, Boga didn't realize it, and even our great senior Clotho didn't realize it. This is an emergency situation. This is a world crisis!::

Hmm...so Glory Sanctuary is intact. The fact none of you sensed it means...ah, I see. And you said the bars aren't broken. We also didn't sense anyone showing up in the party hall. I guess he really has disappeared, then.

::How...are you so calm, my liege?::

Well, I did kinda expect this to happen.

::What?::

Survivor's ability—Return From Cold Ashes, wasn't it?—supposedly brings him back to life with no limit as long as the goddess he worships exists. Doesn't that sound too powerful to give a bottom-rung member? It's like he gets to use Melfina's blessing as much as he wants with no downside at all. If I was Arbitrator, I would place someone with that ability much higher in the hierarchy.

::When you put it that way....::

There're a lot of possibilities, such as Arbitrator having lied to Survivor when giving him his gift, but that doesn't really matter to us. Mel and I talked it over and we're pretty sure his ability actually works another way. Remember how his katana couldn't enter Clotho's Storage? That can only mean one thing.

::Which is?:

In any case, there's no cause for panic. Calm down.

After hanging up with Mdo, I telepathically gave everyone an order.

Problem is, how am I going to get out of father-in-law's grasp?



Once I freed myself from the clutches of the former Demon Lord, I called for Melfina and Gerard and hurried to the treasury room of the castle where we were keeping Survivor's sword. Gustav was still drunk, so I had him and the Four Demonic Generals stay behind to guard Bell, who hadn't yet fully recovered.

"Wow, that's a clean cut." I whistled. "Right through the steel door."

The first things that came into sight were the two halves of the treasury room door lying on the ground. The smooth cross section cut indicated that whoever did this had done it with only one slash. To no one's surprise, Survivor's sword was nowhere in sight.

Gerard examined the remains of the door. "Hmm, it looks like the attack was dealt from inside the room."

"Since we moved all the treasure somewhere else, at least there's no worry of anything being taken. But still...it really was a breakout, not a break-in. Mel, maybe we were on the mark."

"Perhaps. We are now a step closer to solving this mystery."

"Getting closer is wonderful, true, but Survivor himself is in the wind," Gerard cut in. "My king, Princess, why do the two of you seem so relaxed?"

"It's not bravado, if that's what you're thinking. It's just that I think we've pretty much figured out how his ability works."

It's not like Survivor can teleport and he's not here to kill me or Bell. He's here to lead us to the Apostles' hideout. He wouldn't have shown himself in the first place if he was gonna run away now. In all likelihood, he's just hiding somewhere.

I continued, “The Apostles move according to the missions they’re assigned, right? I suspect that Survivor’s current orders are to bring us over by a certain time. Or something similar, at least.”

“Perhaps he’s trying to lead us to the Evil Deity’s Heart by escaping and making us chase after him,” Mel suggested. “Considering his ability, when he’s serious about running, he’s possibly even more difficult to deal with than Serge.”

We already knew the location of the Apostles’ hideout thanks to Bell, but the Holy Key that we had confiscated from Survivor wouldn’t work without him. He himself wouldn’t be able to get back without this key, but that wasn’t our concern. *Then again, if Arbitrator really wants us to come so badly, there’s a chance she might let us in once we get close.*

::Kelvin, I found him!:: Ange reported.

::I also picked up on his presence!:: Sera added.

::It took me a while because he’s pretty good at Covert Action, but this big sister always finds who she’s looking for!::

::It seems like Survivor’s hiding in the city surrounding the castle. He’s moving between houses so he can’t be spotted from outside!::

::Noooo, Sera-san! I was gonna say that!::

Ahhh, so he’s passing through indoors. I imagine even he doesn’t think he can escape Ange’s and Sera’s detection. He must be trying to gain time with a head start.

“What do you want us to do? Should we give chase?” Mel asked.

I crossed my arms and took some time to think. *To be honest, I can’t really get all that enthusiastic about a mere chase. We still haven’t found the person Sylvia is looking for, and Touya’s group—oh right, I have to get in touch. I also haven’t started working on Shutola’s new golems. There’s so much to do before the next fight.*

Suddenly coming up with a great idea, I said through the Network, *Mdo, Boga, you there?*

::Yes, my liege.::

::Y-Yes, sir.::

This isn't exactly a punishment for letting Survivor escape, but I do want you two to catch him. The condition is, you can only use long-distance attacks. Hmm, let's say that you have to stay at least a kilometer away. You have until he reaches the Evil Deity's Heart.

::Long distance?! You get me, my liege!::

::Um, s-sir, Mdo is good at sniping, but I...::

I know you aren't all that used to your body yet. So consider this training. At the start, don't worry so much about capturing Survivor and just test your powers however you want. Fortunately, your opponent can recover in an instant, making him the perfect training dummy. Feel free to go all out.

::Training... Sir, yes, sir!::

Boga was great at relying on his stats to push through things with brute force, but his mastery over his flames was still sorely lacking. So it was my hope that he would polish his moves against our escaping prisoner, and I was glad to see that he seemed enthusiastic about the idea. The training that Gerard had promised to do with him would have to wait.

::My liege, what happens if I catch him immediately? There'll be nothing for Boga to do.::

If you can, go for it.

::Understood. I look forward to the sweets waiting for me when I return.::

As expected of someone who often referred to herself as a sniper, Mdo sounded very confident. If the two actually caught Survivor, great. I'd use the simplified teleportation gate in Clotho's Storage to take him to my house. Even if things got dangerous, these two dragons were my Followers, meaning I could instantaneously Unsummon them and return them to my magic pool. *Yep, sounds like a plan.*

You two, note that the Evil Deity's Heart is quite far from here, as it's located in the center of Abyssland. Whether you sleep and eat at the same time as

Survivor or not is up to you. If you ever lose sight of him, let me know through the Network and I'll give you further orders.

::The need for that is near nil. I will end this in no time.::

::I-I'll also do my best.::

Ha ha, I like those replies. Show me what you can do.

The two dragons' high morale took me a little by surprise, leaving me wondering if the cake baked by Efil that they'd just eaten had anything to do with it. *Looks like I can expect them to grow quite a lot from this.*

"Honey, what do you want us to do?" Mel asked.

"After Survivor leaves Grebarelka, we'll continue the celebration. When father-in-law wakes up, let's ask him if there are any teleportation gates we can use in Abyssland. Maybe there'll be one or two that lets us reach the Evil Deity's Heart ahead of Survivor."

While making my way back to the party hall, I retrieved a pendant from Storage. *I hope things are going just as smoothly with Sylvia's group.*



"Phew, I can finally catch my breath...or not really..."

After waking up beside his beloved sword, not quite understanding what had happened, Survivor wasted no time in slipping out of Grebarelka and hid himself in the city outskirts. The grass was more than tall enough to hide his entire form when he stooped a little. Even so, he kept his guard up. Although he had Covert Action at Rank S, he was one hundred percent sure it was only a matter of time before Ange picked up on his location. The fact that he had no pursuers yet was almost miraculous.

"They're definitely letting me run away on purpose, aren't they? The best-case scenario is that they're following me from the shadows, but they did take my Holy Key away. Even if I make it back to the Sanctuary in one piece, would Arbitrator forgi— Uh-oh, there we go."

Survivor grabbed the hilt of his sword and turned around. There was movement above the Demon Lord Castle.

“There is one, no, two big dragons flying my way! Oh my heavens, how on earth did Condemner fight them straight on?! This old man’s gonna cry!”

A dragon the size of a mountain with black, rocky skin and a dragon with three breathtakingly beautiful heads were hovering in midair with their open mouths pointed at Survivor. They were clearly charging up for Breath Attacks, and they knew exactly where he was.

Fweeeen.

One of the three-headed dragon’s mouths unleashed a blue, laser-like ray at a position slightly in front of Survivor’s path and started drawing a circle. A wall of ice rose up everywhere it touched.

“Is that to seal off my path of escape? Well, I suppose that’s a textbook attack. Though I think I can cut my way through this.”

At this point, there was no more meaning in trying to hide within the grass. Survivor stood up straight and ran directly at the ice wall, keenly aware of the dragon mouths following along.

Um, does this mean I won’t get a chance to rest? he thought forlornly in the back of his mind as he cut his way through the barrage of lava bullets falling from the sky and took off as fast as he could.

Chapter 2: Sister Ellen

Several days had passed since I'd let Survivor go and sent Mdo and Boga after him. The help from Doktoria had arrived, beginning the restoration of the capital in earnest. I could've just done it all myself using Adamantite Fortress, but the color scheme would have been a bit, you know, lacking. The toughness would make it perfect for fortification, but this was a city that would soon house the citizens of this country, and color was important in raising people's spirits. Gustav and his retinue left no doubt in my mind that even demons had hearts, and anyone with a heart would prefer living someplace warm.

Since I was excluded from the city restoration efforts, I ended up with time on my hands. I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to fulfill the aforementioned outstanding tasks. For example, fixing up Shutola's new golems. Before getting around to it, however, there was something else I had to do.

"Kelvin, do your best!" Sera cheered.

"Well, you did fight papa to a standstill," Bell said matter-of-factly. "This should be a cakewalk for you."

That something was, of course, a serious fight with the two members of the Four Demonic Generals that I missed in the Tower of Trials, Reinhart and Vegalzeld. *If I don't do this, it's gonna keep bugging me. Can't help it, with me being a battle junkie!*

"Come on, Bell, why do you have to act like that when you actually really care?"

"What're you talking about?"

"I saw how earnestly you were teaching him stuff."

"Th-That's...because Kelvin's going to become your husband. If he gets killed by Serge because he's only been given half-baked information, it'll forever weigh on my mind. All I did was pound everything I could into him at the

moment. Just saying, the Apostles of numbers above mine are all monsters in their own r—”

“See? You’re not being honest again. Pokey, pokey.”

“Stop poking my cheeks.”

Despite the ruckus that Sera and Bell were making in the spectator seats, my attention was fully concentrated on the demons before my eyes. I had to show the gallery my best self.

“Vel, ya gotta work with me here!”

“I know! Transform!”

Reinhart held up his sketchbook and began drawing something with his fingertips as Vegalzeld triggered some transformation right off the bat that gave him a third eye. All three eyes and his hands began giving off a strange glow.

Of course, when Rion and Shutola, the pair that had fought Reinhart and Vegalzeld, came back, I purposely didn’t ask them for information. *I’m so excited!*

“All right, give me all you got!”

“You idjit! There ain’t no way we’ll go easy on a man that Gustav-sama’s acknowledged! We’re goin’ all out from the start! Dagon!”

Reinhart turned his sketchbook towards me, showing a drawing of a tentacled monster. Thoughts like *Oh, is that what they call a pencil sketch?* and *Wow, it looks so realistic*, flashed through different trains of thought under Parallel Processing when the art gradually swelled up and—

“I’m your opponent!” Vegalzeld shouted as he positioned himself between me and the sketchbook and charged straight in. He clenched his four hands into tight fists and threw a bunch of fast punches at me.

“Huh?!”

However, the barrage never reached me. His attacks bounced off a barrier of wind with such force that it disrupted his balance and made him stagger back a few steps.

Oh wow, this spell that Bell taught me really is interesting!

The barrier protecting me was Rubber Counter, a Rank S Green Magic spell that I had developed based on her Degradation Counter. As I did not have Color Corrosion, my version didn't have additional effects, but the elastic wind that had protected the Demon Lord Castle from both Efil's bombing and Mdofarak's sniping was alive and well. The smaller the area being covered, the more effective Rubber Counter was and the more force it repelled external attacks with. Currently, I had it wrapping only around the size of my body, meaning it was more than strong enough to easily withstand the attacks that Vegalzeld had just thrown at me.

"And take THIS too!"

"Oof!"

I kicked Vegalzeld's unprotected abdomen with a leg wrapped in Green Magic with all my strength. This too was a move that I had learned from Bell. Although I was still bad at it, I now knew how to wrap both my hands and feet in magic. I could only do so using Green Magic at the moment, but this was still extremely useful.

"Argh! Oof...off...oof...ACK!"

By repeatedly using Hyper Impact from a fixed direction, even my weak kick managed to send Vegalzeld flying off, entirely helpless. I could also add an edge to my kick like Bell did. There were any number of ways to add my own spin to things.

Next, the octopus.

When Vegalzeld disappeared into the distance, a giant blue octopus filled my sight. *Is this what Reinhart drew just now? It looks every bit a real monster.*

"Go get 'im, Dagon!"

As expected, the giant octopus that Reinhart called Dagon swung its large, muscular legs at me from all directions, trying to slap me into the ground. However, they were weaker than Vegalzeld's fists. Naturally, they were repelled by my barrier and failed to reach me.

No, it seems his real aim is somewhere else.

The training hall was now completely covered with octopus ink. Thanks to my barrier, none of it got on me, but it did completely block my sight. The only things I could see were the octopus legs directly outside my barrier. A few had wrapped around the barrier, holding themselves in place with their suction cups. Apparently, they were trying to get through by squeezing the barrier until it shattered. I could also tell that the air outside was filled with a very unpleasant substance.

If it's in the air, it must be a form of poison or gas. He does look like a snake, after all. Well, I guess I might as well send it away.

I used magic to generate a powerful gust of wind that blasted all the surrounding air in a particular direction.

“Eugh?! Reinhart, you bastard!”

The direction was exactly where Vegalzeld, who had just recovered from being sent flying at the start of the fight, was approaching from. *Thanks for testing what's in the air for me!*

“He just... He used ma poison! I'm sorry! But you can heal yourself, can'tcha?!”

“Getting rid of harmful substances that have already gotten into my body takes time— WATCH OUT!”

“Ah—”

After dispelling Rubber Counter, I dashed straight towards Reinhart. The problem with the spell was that, though convenient, it forced me to stay in one spot. I couldn't move at all unless I expanded its range or dispelled it entirely. What happened to Dagon, you ask? I spammed Wind Shot at it the moment I got out and it turned to mere scraps of paper. Unsurprisingly for something made of paper, it merely had paper armor.

“G-Ganapati!”

Almost as if by instinct, Reinhart produced a piece of paper from his chest pocket. It bore a drawing of an elephant as realistic as the others had been. No,

it was more like a mammoth. *He must have prepared it beforehand. Good idea.*

The giant mammoth landed with an earth-shaking crash. Reinhart took advantage of the dust cloud to unleash what was likely lethal poison, but it was all too obvious. Despite being in such close proximity to the poison, however, the mammoth seemed entirely fine, probably because it was just paper. Regardless, the outcome was the same. *Here, Vegalzeld, have sec—*

“I’ve got my eye on you this time!”

“Whoops!”

The doctor demon actually shot a beam at me from his third eye. *Damn, that’s a cool ability. I admit I did let my guard down because he was so far away. That surprised me a little.*

“Vel, he done gone dodged your att— No, my Ganapati!”

Thanks to the target being so big, I had no trouble landing Wind Shot again and again. Just like the large octopus, the mammoth was reduced to paper strips. I sent these towards Vegalzeld along with all the poison gas. *Ah, looks like some of the gas got into his third eye.*

“Bell, what happened to all the training?” Sera asked.

“What? I fought pretty well, didn’t I?”

“I’m obviously talking about Reinhart and Vegalzeld. Didn’t you say you trained them again from square one after they were revived?”

“Well...papa worked the hardest.”

After this, I managed to get over my lingering attachments.



The infirmary of the Demon Lord Castle was a room filled with cots and medical supplies. After I was satisfied, I healed Vegalzeld and Reinhart and somehow managed to carry the two of them in with Sera’s help. As suited a castle home for demons, there were a thousand and one sizes when it came to the beds. *This large one should be just right for Vegalzeld, I think?*

“Why?! My art! My beautiful art! How did they lose so easily?”

“Ughhh! How can I, a doctor, be lying down in the place where I work?”

Although there was no longer anything physically wrong with the two, their minds still seemed unstable. This was especially true for Reinhart. *If you have the energy to draw, then walk on your own damn feet! How many pages are you going to draw lying d— Oh, damn, these are a lot more fiendish than before.*

“Your art is as good as ever!” Sera praised. “Seeing how accurate your drawings are even while lying down, you just might be able to match Rion!”

Reinhart’s eyes widened. “What?! That little lady is such a famous artist?! I shoulda asked for her signature...”

Uh, no, she’s not famous. And she isn’t used to writing signatures, so she’ll be troubled if you ask her for one. I know from personal experience.

Reinhart’s ability was one that added a lot of life to a place. On our way down here, Bell told me that his Unique Skill Creature Caricature made whatever he drew come to life. The more he drew something and the more he was satisfied with it, the more powerful it was when it materialized. It was similar to my Summoning, just that his “Followers” were only there for a limited time. And for those who were curious, there was nothing special about his sketchbook—it really was just a normal pad of blank paper.

“Glad they still have the energy to feel frustrated by their performance just now. It actually hasn’t been that long since these two Evolved,” Bell explained from where she was sitting next to the cots, fiddling with her side ponytail.

I looked over. “How long has it been?”

“Well, I started training them right after they came back,” Bell replied. “They then Evolved, and you and your group showed up pretty much right away. They’re not much better than Viktor is.”

“We saw hell...” Reinhart murmured.

“That was a hellish experience indeed...” Vegalzeld agreed, looking off into the distance.

The two demons have really traumatized looks on their faces. What did you do

to them, Bell?

Bell pursed her lips a little. "Papa was always happy to do what I asked him to do."

"Are you seeing the faces these two are making?"

"Sebas was also very happy about it."

"I...see..." I didn't think you were capable of such a bright smile. Father-in-law is one thing, but the fact that whatever happened made Sebasdel happy is all I need to know. This is something I definitely shouldn't dig into. Hold on...something just occurred to me.

"Uh, flipping things around...does that mean these two still have a lot of room for improvement?"

"They do."

"And the more you whip them into shape..."

"The stronger they'll get."

"Interesting." Looks like I've gained something new to look forward to. Mua ha ha.

The way I was being cryptic prompted Sera to ask, "What's wrong, Kelvin?"

"Nah, nothing," I replied, waving a hand. "I'm just feeling good after the fight. All right, it's time to take a look at Shutola's golems."

"I'll assist you!"

"That'd be a huge help."

"We'll strike while the iron is hot! I'm going ahead!"

After instantly changing into her lab coat and glasses, Sera ran off to where Shutola was. The phrase "no time like the present" was probably coined for her sake. She literally lived it every day.

"Was that Vegalzeld's work outfit?" Bell tilted her head slightly. "Sister Sera sure owns a lot of clothes."

"Oh, she's basically just cosplaying. In the first place, she's not wearing a

doctor's coat but a lab coat."

"What's cosplay?"

"Looking the role is strangely effective for getting motivated. If there's any outfit you want, Efil would be more than happy to make it for you. Almost all of the clothes Sera wears are Efil-made."

"Well...maybe sometime."

Bell promptly left the infirmary, perhaps because she wasn't interested in the topic of the conversation. *I gotta quickly go after Sera too.*

"All right, I'm heading out. You two, thanks for indulging me today."

"Hmph, you can keep your thanks. I just wanted to catch a glimpse of the fool hero who dared lay his hands on our princess. Well, I guess you did well for someone who got a double knockout with Gustav-sama."

"Look at you lying through yer teeth, Vel. You were all like, 'I gotta at least get a punch in! The nerve of him! I won't forgive him!'"

"Y'know what? I gotta settle my score with you first, Reinhart. Imma smear a ton of alcohol into your wounds!"

"Oh yeah? Try it if you can! In the first place, during that fight—"

For a moment, I wondered if I'd said something wrong that had made the two demons begin arguing with each other. When I listened more, however, I realized they weren't so much fighting as they were reflecting on the practice match and pointing out where they could've done better. Although their tones and word choices were harsh, what they were saying wasn't wrong. I could tell just how much they loved and cared about Sera. This was true of Viktor too, but all the generals truly thought of Sera and Bell as their own daughters.

"You idjit! Sera-sama's gonna get so shocked she becomes bedridden, and *then* what?! Bell-sama's also in bed recovering! That ain't something a doctor in his right mind would say!"

"Who's the idiot, you stupid snake! Bad men attaching themselves to the princesses? *That's* what's gonna cause them lifelong trauma! No shit I gotta 'diagnose' everyone who approaches them beforehand!"

Ooooookay, now it's just awkward for me to stay. I'm outta here. I didn't know that overprotection was contagious. Regardless, I hope the two of them recover and get stronger soon. That's all I ask for.

"You finally came out."

"Whoa?!"

The moment I stepped out of the infirmary, I found Bell waiting for me, leaning against the wall. It gave me a pretty big surprise because I couldn't sense her presence at all. *You left the room early just to prank me?*

"How rude. Your face looks like you just met a monster."

That's not something you should say with a smug face. You even used Covert Action!

"Says the premeditated criminal. So, what's up? If you were waiting for me, it means you have business with me, right?"

"You could say that. Is Melfina off somewhere else at the moment?"

"Mel? If I recall, she's busy proselytizing with Colette in town over the wonderfulness of good food."

"I'm sorry, what?"

Currently, Melfina was practically an idol in the gastronomy world in Doktoría. The goddess lamented how behind the cooking techniques and food culture were in Abyssland and was therefore preaching about the importance of the Cooking skill and eating better. I heard she was employing a bunch of different strategies, including assigning Colette as spokesperson and passing out samples of amazingly delicious food made by Efil. They naturally were getting a lot of support from the local chefs.



**GOOD
FOOD
IS LIFE!**

Then again, I couldn't remember ever meeting a proper chef besides Viktor down here in Abyssland. Those here were still several notches better than Sylvia's group, but that didn't mean much—their food was still barely edible, and there was little point comparing oneself to those lower down. Perhaps if Mel's efforts succeeded in getting the demons interested in food, it just might make the atmosphere in this land a bit brighter and a little less about constantly killing each other.

Gustav was also being very supportive, I suspect as a way to thank Mel for saving Bell from being a Demon Lord. For some reason, the Order of Rinne was also slowly but steadily gaining a foothold in Grebareika. *Even so, there is a line I just have to mention.*

"What in hell is that goddess doing?"

"That's my line," Bell answered. "But never mind. So, Melfina isn't around at the moment. Before you go to where sister Sera is, lend me your ear for a bit. There's a room perfect for talking just over there."

"Seriously, what's this about?"

"Melfina is using an artificial body right now that makes it so she can't talk about certain topics, right? Come with me. I'll tell you all I know about the Black Grimoire in her place."



The room that Bell took me to had an impressive long table with a skull design surrounded by rows of equally impressive chairs with the same motif. A meeting room, most likely. The thick walls appeared soundproof, making it a great place for a secret talk.

"Take any seat you want. Water is self-serve."

Several pots that seemed to be filled with water were positioned at various places on the table, along with cups. I could feel faint traces of magic from the pots, indicating that they were likely magic items. When I picked one up, I found that its weight didn't change at all, no matter how much I poured. What's more, the water was even cool. *Are these enchanted with a storage function? What an extravagant way to use such a spell.*

“Pour me a cup too.”

“You just said it’s self-serve... Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

After pouring a cup of water for Bell, I sat across from her. *Now then.*

“So, this is about the Black Grimoire that Arbitrator is using to resurrect Elearis, right?”

“That’s right. How much do you already know?”

“To be honest...” I currently knew almost nothing about what the Black Grimoire even was. It was a cursed item that turned targets into Demon Lords. It was a device to collect the special mana needed to resurrect Elearis. Based on the fact that Melfina couldn’t talk about it, it was tied to some great taboo that I probably shouldn’t know about.

When I roughly summed up everything that came to mind and shared it, Bell nodded.

“Mm. You’re not far off, at least. The Black Grimoire appears periodically, in different forms each time, to turn someone with power into a Demon Lord. In papa’s case, it was among the treasures that he seized after taking down an enemy’s castle. In Zel’s case, I think it just appeared as a book. According to Ange’s investigation, he was quite the avid reader, surprisingly. Well, you get the gist.”

Ah, Shutola inherited that from him. The second most numerous thing in her room back home is books, right after plushies. And they’re all on subjects so difficult that even I don’t get them. Oh wait, did Shutola get all the smart genes? Is that why Azgrad and Tabura are the way they are?

“Also, I like the description ‘special mana collection device.’ You’re correct on that count too. Even I haven’t been told what state Elearis is in after having been sealed away for all this time. The fact that she used to be a deity of this world means that no matter how hard we worked gathering mana the normal way, it wouldn’t be enough. Despite the monstrous amount of MP you have, you can’t Summon Melfina’s real body no matter how hard you try, right? It’s the same thing.”

“So you’re saying I can never Summon Melfina, period?”

“Well, it’s not that bad. The amount of mana needed to Summon Melfina, who’s alive and well, is completely different from Summoning Elearis, who’s locked away in an unknown location. Part of this is my intuition speaking, but I think you’ll have a much easier time with Melfina.”

“That’s reassuring.”

To this day, Sera’s and Bell’s intuitions had never once been wrong. *Guess I have no choice but to believe her words and continue working hard.*

“Getting back on topic. In her quest to resurrect Elearis, Arbitrator set her eyes on the Black Grimoire. Melfina won’t be able to tell you these things because of her artificial body, so don’t go spreading it around indiscriminately. I suspect she herself doesn’t want too many to know either.”

“All right, message received.” *I have no intention of telling anyone anyway, and I definitely don’t want Melfina to hate me.*

“The Evil Deity’s Heart is where the Evil Deity who was bound eons ago currently sleeps. He did lose to the other deities, but his power was equal to all of theirs. This is pretty common as far as myths go, but apparently, it really did happen. The proof is the tainted mana that fills the large cave where Sanctuary is.”

“So it’s nonfiction. I’ve been just letting it go all this time, but now I really gotta ask: who’s the Evil Deity?”

“There are a lot of theories. Some say he used to be a deity himself. Some say he’s the progenitor demon who created all other demons. Some say he’s a mistaken creation of the deities. I don’t really know either. It’s not like I was there when the world was created.”

So you’re as much in the dark as I am! Well, I guess it’s not important here.

“In any case, the Evil Deity is a thorn in the side for the other deities. I heard the others also got hurt during the war, with a few worlds having been outright destroyed. Worst of all, they don’t have the means to completely kill him.”

“The scale of what you’re talking about is just...phew. So there are things that

even the deities can't do!"

"They couldn't touch the Evil Deity once he fell into the mortal world. It's the same reason Melfina couldn't come down here except in an artificial body."

So that's where the rule kicks in. Everything sounds so far away and vague, but I guess whether it's true or not doesn't really matter at the moment.

"That's why the deities bound the Evil Deity with the most powerful seal they could cast. The large cave we now call the Evil Deity's Heart was created as a result. It was a massive effort."

"A seal, you say... A binding so powerful it created a massive cave is basically an attack, isn't it?"

Bell looked at me. I looked back at her.

"So, the sealing spell proved powerful enough to bind the Evil Deity," she continued.

Ah, she ignored my question.

"However, the Evil Deity has a unique trait: he can absorb negative energy, such as hatred and malice from the world, and make it his own. Even if he can't break free immediately, this energy adds up over decades, over centuries. At the time of the binding, the other deities didn't know about this ability. They only realized the weight of the problem much further down the road when monsters started growing brutal and ferocious, attacking settlements, acting like the world was theirs. Even then, as I said before, the other deities couldn't interfere directly. They managed to bring things back from the brink by introducing the Oracle of Deramis and overworld Heroes, but not before half of humanity was wiped out."

Oh wow, so this story also goes into the roots of the Oracle and the Heroes.

"However, that was merely a bandage on a festering wound. Powerful monsters continued showing up, and negative energy continued flowing into the Evil Deity's Heart. The deities scrambled for a solution. What they finally came up with was—"

"The Black Grimoire?"

“You already know this part?”

“Oh, sorry for interrupting. No, I just thought that would be the case based on how the story’s going.”

“Hmm, you catch on quick. The Black Grimoire is not a cursed artifact or a sacrilegious item. It’s actually a sacred treasure created by the deities to maintain the Evil Deity’s seal. The monsters were turning violent due to the accumulation of the negative energy that the Evil Deity was absorbing from the world. As such, the Black Grimoire redirects that energy to its holder, then absorbs it all when it’s released in one go and converts it into positive energy. The world is no longer under threat because the Black Grimoire absorbs negative energy even from the Evil Deity. That negative energy affects the holder of the Black Grimoire by giving them the Mara Pisuna skill, but that’s a problem that can be solved by otherworld Heroes. The Black Grimoire is designed to appear periodically in the mortal world based on how tainted the world is. This way, no matter how long the Evil Deity waits, he’ll never gather enough energy for his resurrection.”

“So the world becomes saved...by sacrificing those who turn into Demon Lords?”

“That’s right. For what it’s worth, the Black Grimoire supposedly chooses those who are suitable for collecting negative energy—in other words, those with a high affinity for becoming extremely evil. But who knows how true *that* is.”

Melfina did say that the appearance of the Demon Lord was an irreversible natural phenomenon. I guess this is what she was referring to.

“I’m adding this just in case, but the system of using the Black Grimoire to maintain this world’s balance is something that was decided and put into place way before Melfina’s appointment as Goddess of Reincarnation. Before even Elearis, and the one before Elearis, and so on. This is an absolute rule set in stone by the deities of eons past that even the current Goddess of Reincarnation cannot overturn. It’s just how things are. So...you don’t need to feel bad for her.”

“Oh, sorry, was it showing on my face? Don’t worry about me. Please

continue.”

No matter what, I'll do my best to support Melfina since I'll be her future husband. And I'll never change how I feel. That said, when I think about the painful truth that she's bottling up inside behind the happy-go-lucky way she acts, it makes my chest clench up a little.

Bell took a sip from her cup, then slowly continued speaking. “When the Demon Lord is killed, all the negative energy that they were charged with is released and the Black Grimoire absorbs it. At that moment, it disappears from the world and works on purifying that energy until it is called out once again. The purified energy is returned to the world, completing the cycle. This is the way that the Black Grimoire is meant to be used.”

“You mean it's no longer used that way?”

“Well, you saw Survivor holding it, didn't you? Ange actually grabbed it from Castle Trycen right before Zel died and brought it back.”

“To use the energy it absorbed to fuel Elearis's resurrection?”

“Correct.”

Ahhh, so they're using the mana that the Evil Deity was gathering to resurrect himself to instead resurrect Elearis. I imagine this method gives a ton more mana than they can gather through normal methods. That includes when Zel became a Demon Lord plus when Bell did too, incomplete though her transformation was. But...

“Isn't the mana stored within the Black Grimoire still unpurified? The process normally takes a long time, right?”

“No idea. Even I don't know whether this energy is suitable for resurrecting Elearis. What I do know is that Arbitrator has no intention of waiting for the natural purification process. If she did, she wouldn't be sending Protector and Survivor to invite Melfina to Sanctuary.”

“That's true.”

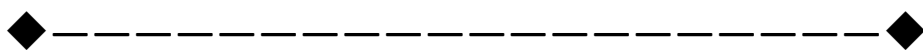
Should I try to ask Melfina regardless? Even if she can't answer me because of Divine Binding, maybe I can glean something from her facial or body

expressions.

“That’s all I know about the Black Grimoire. Oh, right. I’ll also tell you everything I know about the other Apostles. Make good use of this information.”

Bell went into quite a lot of detail, even covering changes that had happened after Ange left the organization. *At this point, I’m starting to get the feeling that Bell is someone who really looks out for other people. Ange has always been propping her up, saying that she has a good heart. Did I imagine how belligerently she acted when we first met? Thank you very much for this information.*

I promptly compiled everything Bell said and posted it to the Network.



The Tenth Seat: Controller

Real name is Tristan Faaze. Bell wasn’t told what gift Arbitrator gave him, but it’s related to his Summoning skill. Tristan himself isn’t all that great in a fight; he’s probably the weakest among the Apostles. He’s currently traveling all over, gathering Followers, and almost never returns to Sanctuary.

The Ninth Seat: Survivor

Real name is Nito. The gift Arbitrator gave him is Return to Cold Ashes. He claims this is a skill that enables him to come back to life any number of times as long as Elearis or Arbitrator are alive, but things don’t fully add up. Bell didn’t think he was lying, though; he, at least, fully believes what he says. Without his ability, his battle strength is below Bell’s. Currently fleeing with Boga and Mdo in pursuit. When he’s not out on a mission, he’s usually sleeping in Sanctuary.

The Fifth Seat: Analyzer

Real name is Riold. The gift Arbitrator gave him is God’s Eye. On top of seeing right through Concealment and Disguise, it enables him to use all eye-related skills at will. Neither Bell nor Ange have seen him in an actual fight, but both agree he’s a type they really don’t want to face. It seems he’s still on the

Western Continent at the moment and has almost never come to Sanctuary.

The Fourth Seat: Protector

Real name is Serge Flore. The gift Arbitrator gave her is A New Journey. It's an escape skill that allows her to nullify her death and respawn at a specified location once a month. She also possesses the Unique Skill Absolute Gospel and is the most powerful fighter among the Apostles. She's always in Sanctuary to protect Arbitrator, so battle with her is very likely unavoidable.

The Third Seat: Creator

Real name is Jildora. Never received a gift as he was not reincarnated. Instead, he has Eternal Return, a Unique Skill that enables him to take over someone else's body. To do so, his target has to be exhausted, he must know his target's identity, and he has to place his hand on his target's head. There is a cooldown period each time it's used. He—or more precisely, the golems in his research lab in Sanctuary—will be a pain to deal with. Supposedly, there are any number of golems in his lab as strong as the blue one we fought in Trycen. He's been cooped up in his lab as of late, working on something. The chances of encountering him in Sanctuary are also very high.

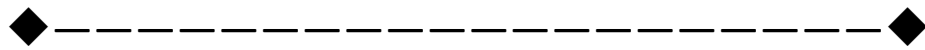
The Second Seat: Selector

Real name is uncertain. Both Ange and Bell have only ever heard his voice through his Holy Steele. It's likely only Arbitrator knows his location. Naturally, the gift that Arbitrator gave him and his battle strength are complete blanks. He's likely somewhere else, as neither Ange nor Bell have ever sensed a presence in Sanctuary that seems likely to be his.

The First Seat: Arbitrator

Real name is Iris Deramilius. She received Reincarnate and Ten Divine Fingers from Elearis. Ten Divine Fingers is tied to Reincarnate, giving her the ability to grant a powerful Unique Skill to those she reincarnates. She can only have ten Unique Skills distributed at any given time; attempting to give out any more

might make the eleventh person die or she'd have to immediately take the gift back. Supposedly, only she and Protector can retrieve her gifts. She's waiting in the deepest part of Sanctuary for Melfina, plotting to resurrect Elearis.



Even after Ange, Bell, and Estoria left the organization, it still had a few very colorful characters. *I guess things aren't going to be so easy.*

"You look happy," Bell noted. "You're making a completely different face from just a second ago."

"Huh? Really?"

"The corners of your mouth are raised."

Sorry, I wasn't aware.

"As I'm sure you understand now, not all the Apostles are in Sanctuary. There are those who're in an undisclosed location, like Selector, and there are those carrying out their own tasks outside, like Analyzer and Controller. That means my information might not be a hundred percent correct. Regardless, all that's important is stopping Elearis's resurrection, right? Make sure you're clear on who you need to fight and what you need to do."

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

"In the first place, you have a strong tendency to get tunnel vision when it comes to fighting. You went right where papa wanted you to go and fought back-to-back battles in the Tower of Trials without a second thought. A part of you is still coolheaded, meaning you're able to self-reflect and hold yourself back, but you're not exercising that part of yourself enough. Have you thought about how sister Sera would feel if anything were to happen to you?"

Uh, how strange. When did this turn into a scolding? Everything she's saying is on the dot, but I'm not sure how much more damage my heart can take.

"Kelvin, are you feeling frustrated because there's no longer anyone around who is stronger than you?"

Ouch.

"I knew it. The fact that you beat papa, who's the best fighter among us

demons, means you've gotten strong enough to defeat at least the lower Seats of the Apostles. Here in Abyssland, the dragon kings are probably the only ones left who can fight you toe to toe."

"Whaaat?" *Wasn't this the land of my dreams?!*

"Don't look disappointed. You ought to be aware of what having such power means—"

"Sorry, I know I have things to work on." *This conversation is definitely going to last a long time. If I don't do something, I'll be late for my promise with Sera. No choice but to hit back a little.* "But, Bell, you also shouldn't sacrifice yourself for everyone's sake anymore. You'd make Sera, father-in-law, and the Four Demonic General tutors really sad."

"I-I-I know that!"

Nice, I got her to turn her head. Seriously, why are all the demons here so altruistic?



After using the simplified teleportation gate to pop back home, I headed upstairs to grab some materials I needed from my room. On the way, I bumped into a beauty with lustrous black hair and porcelain white skin whom I hadn't seen in a while. It was none other than Rosalia, who had really been coming into her own as a maid as of late. She appeared to be searching for something.

"Oh! Welcome home, Master."

"Thanks. Are you looking for something, Rosalia?"

"Not so much *something* as *someone*."

"Ah...Huba again?"

"Embarrassingly, I do believe she is lazing around somewhere as usual. But please do not worry. When I find her, I will educate her properly." Rosalia smiled as vigorous, chilly air crackled around her right fist.

Mm, that's some good chilly air.

"Good luck with that, and don't work yourself too hard. By the way, Boga has

also turned into a dragon king.”

“Oh my, is that right? This is news that deserves celebration indeed. Still...I’m afraid I find myself feeling somewhat jealous. He and Mdo were but young whelps during our time in the Dragon Knight Order and yet they’ve now completely surpassed me. Is Dahak also feeling impatient?”

“He is, but it feels like he’s managed to convert half of it into motivation. He left all of a sudden in search of the Earth Dragon King. Maybe when he comes back, we’ll find out he’s also become a dragon king.”

“I see he’s putting in effort in his own way. And yet, compared to those three, I’m simply...”

In a departure from her usual noble self, Rosalia was blushing with mortification. *Just how much of a brat is Dahak in your mind? He was already the leader among you dragons back in Trycen, wasn’t he? It’s just that he acts a bit too much like a delinquent.*

“Are you thinking of securing one of the dragon king seats yourself, Rosalia? We’re a bit tied up at the moment, but when we have time, we’ll definitely lend a hand. I’m all for you maids getting stronger.”

Rosalia was a white dragon who used ice elemental Breath Attacks, so it made sense for her to want the seat of Ice Dragon King. *Not that I know the current one’s location.*

“The offer makes me very happy, but I believe I am still too immature to surpass my mother. I will continue working on improving myself both as a maid and as a fighter for a while longer.”

“I see. Wait a moment. Your mother is a dragon king?” *This is my first time hearing this.*

“Oh, I guess I never did tell you, Master. My mother is Salafia, the Ice Dragon King, who has her nest on Leigant Ice Mountain on the Western Continent. It will be a long while before I manage to catch up with her.”

So, Rosalia’s mother is the Ice Dragon King and Dahak’s father is the Darkness Dragon King. It’s starting to feel like I’m bumping into dragon kings every time I turn a corner. The only ones I still don’t know anything about are the Wind

Dragon King and Lightning Dragon King.

“The truth is, I stayed with Azgrad because my mother ordered me to. As part of my training.”

“By that, you mean the Dragon Knight Order?”

“Yes. She’s always been emphatic that taking care of others is a dragon’s duty. To quote, ‘Go experience what it’s like being deeply involved in the lives of humans.’ Ha ha, it was exactly the kind of thing that she’d say.”

“Right, taking care of others. Depending on that interpretation, being a maid could be exactly what you’re looking for.”

Based on what I’ve heard so far, it seems like the Ice Dragon King is a wise and reasonable person. Dammit, that means I can’t just go picking a fight with her like I did the Flame Dragon King. I have no reason to do so. For now, at least.

“That might be so. My mother is so filled with feelings of motherhood that she even descended to a human settlement to kidnap a child to raise. That was how Azgrad and I first met. My, this topic brings back so many memories.”

“Uh...hold on. The topic suddenly took a very sharp turn.”

“I’m sorry?”

The Ice Dragon King’s actions sound shocking, but I’m even more surprised by the fact that if it was Azgrad and Rosalia’s first meeting, it means he was kidnapped as a child and raised by a dragon! He was a feral child?!

“Is the reason he’s so good at riding dragons...”

“Because he practiced with me when he was a child, yes. He’s probably as good at it as running on his own two feet. Having watched him grow up, I think of him as a younger brother—no, as a son. Even though he’s returned to Trycen, he and my mother still think of each other as family, and she’s also taken a great liking to Lunoir. Since Lunoir helped eliminate pests that were nesting in my mother’s mountain, my mother gave Lunoir her Dragon King Blessing, something she can only ever give once.”

So that’s the story behind how Sylvia got the Blessing of the Ice Dragon King. I’m learning so much from this entirely unrelated conversation.

“Oh, that’s right. Master, since Mdo and Boga have become dragon kings, how about asking them for their Dragon King Blessings? It is with your aid that they obtained the seat of dragon king, so I’m sure they would be happy to impart it.”

“Right, their blessings. That was a thing...”

“Is there a problem?”

Whoops, it totally slipped my mind. Right now, Boga and Mdo are both hard at work pursuing Survivor. I can’t Unsummon them, which means I’ll have to wait till they’re done.

“Ahh...they’re off working on something else right now. I’ll ask them when they’re back.”

“Oh, is that so? The benefits of receiving their Blessings are great. They powerfully buff attacks that the beholder deals using the relevant element while also making them almost impervious to it. I believe you have seen these effects for yourself, considering Efil-sama is always by your side. Very few other bonuses are as favorable for someone who uses magic as you do, Master.”

Oh yes, I’m well aware. Efil was entirely fine even when she was hit by the Flame Dragon King’s attacks; it was only her maid outfit that got ruined. If I’m to get a Dragon King’s Blessing, I’d probably want it from Mdo because I use White Magic. But considering it’s Efil she adores, I’m a bit worried about whether she’d give me her Blessing. Technically, I’m her master, but I don’t know how much that counts for. Oh well, I’m sure things will work out.

“I’ve always dreamed of the day I’ll get to give someone my Blessing. The mere mention of it is music to my ears.”

“Well, it’s never a bad thing to put in the effort. How about you set Mdo’s and Boga’s current strengths as a goal and work towards it?”

“I shall do my utmost. With that said, I think it is about time I resumed looking for our habitual slacker. If you find her before I do, please let me know. Well, then.”

After bowing deeply, Rosalia gracefully disappeared into the depths of the house.

All right, I'm gonna grab that thing and head for my underground golem workshop.



"So this is where you were..."

"Ah...aha ha...Master, please pretend you didn't see me!"

When I reached the workshop, I found a maid in a miniskirt, hiding in a corner and breathing quietly. However, Sera and the rest were also there, so there was really no point to her attempt at stealth.

"She was already here when I arrived," Sera told me. "Did you give her permission to come into this room?"

"I'm pretty sure I didn't..." I turned to Huba. "Let me guess, you've been using this as your go-to hiding spot to skip work when I've been gone?"

She looked down sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Master. Yes, I have."

Ah, she's definitely in for a severe reprimanding by Ellie and Rosalia later. Well, I'm aware of how tough it is being a maid, so I'm actually pretty impressed by how boldly she slacks off. That doesn't mean I won't punish her, though.

"When we're actually back, you're prohibited from eating meals cooked by Efil for a month."

"WHAT?!"

"And I'll leave Ellie and the rest to decide what else to do with you."

"B-But Efil-sama's food is the only thing that I have to look forward to!"

If it means that much to you, then don't slack off. Then again, even though I marked this room as off-limits, I keep the most important stuff inside Clotho's storage, so the only things here are the somewhat expensive tools.

"All right, moving on from Huba's case... Everyone, are you ready?"

"Anytime, dearest brother!" Shutola replied, sitting cutely on the ground, hugging a plushie.

Sera placed her fists on her hips. "Heh heh, I paid Melfina off with food and brought Colette here!"

“I received a prophecy from Melfina-sama telling me to come lend a hand,” Colette confirmed. “I shall serve with all my heart and soul.”

The group wearing lab coats had a new member too.

“W-Wait a minute. Why am I here? And what’s with this outfit?!” Bell asked, sounding flustered.

Wow, I tried asking without hoping for much, but she actually wore it.



“Well, Sera was really insistent that she wanted you as a member of the Research Team. So I immediately had Efil make your lab coat. Looks like the size is just right. You look great in it.”

“It suits her so well!” Sera agreed proudly. “As expected of my little sister!”

“Ugh...”

It's much easier getting into the mood for a task by wearing an outfit related to it. This is by no means my personal hobby, no. If anything, it's more Sera's hobby. And since we're doing this, we're gonna go all out in converting the Schwarzschild into the perfect golems for Shutola to use. Our goal is to surpass Jildora's handiwork!



Several more days passed since our return to Abyssland from Parth. We had spent the time doing our best to gather information about Sister Ellen in order to fulfill our promise to Sylvia. On top of combing the vicinity around Grebarelka, we asked King Galia to help investigate all the nearby countries. The process of Sera asking her father and her father giving King Galia a direct order was very smooth; we got a report back from Doktorica the very next day.

Rion, Ange, and I were going through the materials we had in front of the newly restored Blood Fountain, a famous tourist spot in Grebarelka. No, we didn't choose this location because we wanted to fool around. I was on a walk with the two, trying to get a breath of fresh air, when a demon showed up all of a sudden, thrust a whole bunch of documents at us, then took off again. He was clearly in a huge hurry. A lot of things were probably moving right now, all under direct orders from the former tyrannical Demon Lord, who was my father-in-law. *Sorry for everything, secret agent demon.*

This was why I was now sitting on the edge of the Blood Fountain, sandwiched by Rion and Ange and running my eyes over reports while mentally giving thanks to all the demons who were probably exerting themselves behind the scenes right now.

“Hmm...no one's seen a silver-haired woman and there are no signs of one having stayed anywhere. Could it be that Sister Ellen was purposely avoiding

settlements?”

According to the investigation, there was no information whatsoever about someone matching Sister Ellen’s description having passed through this area. We had started off thinking that we would get something pretty quickly because of how conspicuous a beautiful silver-haired woman would be, so it was a bit of a disappointment.

“I also did some digging when I had time.” Ange shrugged. “But things were the same on my end. The impression was not so much that we didn’t find her as I don’t think she ever came this way.”

I rubbed my chin. “You really think so?”

“Sylvie did say that Ellen-san came to Abyssland through the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell,” Rion pointed out. “Just like how going through the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory led us to Boundless Poison, the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell is probably connected to another place. That would explain why she never came to Doktoría.”

“Oh, good point. That might be it.” *Gah, I must have gotten stupid from becoming so occupied with my hobby lately. How did I not realize something so simple? I gotta get my head back on straight.*

Ange patted my shoulder. “Well, don’t let it get you down. In the first place, although it seemed likely that Sister Ellen went through Toraj, we didn’t know for sure. By confirming that she *didn’t* come through this way, we’ve done valuable work in confirming that she *did* go through Toraj. At least, that’s the way this big sister of yours thinks.”

Rion’s hand shot up. “I think so too!”

“Thanks for trying to cheer me up, you two,” I chuckled. “I guess I’ll leave it at that, then. All right, I’ll send this report to Touya now.”

I took out the same pendant that my four disciples owned and fiddled with it.

“Huh? It can do that?” Rion asked with wide eyes.

“Apparently, Mel got really gung ho while making them,” I said with a shrug. “She only told me afterwards, but it can do a whole lot of things.”

“It’s pretty much a mobile phone!”

When she puts it that way, I guess this is basically like sending an email. I never explained it to Touya’s group, but I’m sure they’ll notice. After all, they’re high schoolers. And there are four of them. I might just be generalizing, but I’m pretty sure they’re knowledgeable about this kinda stuff.

“Still, silver hair,” Rion sighed. “That actually sounds nice.”

“Hold on, Rion. What you’re feeling right now will pass. I think you’re best the way you are right now.”

Your big brother is strongly against you dyeing your hair!

“Aha ha, don’t worry. I’m not implying that I want it. I wouldn’t look good with it anyway. It’s just that we’re basing our search on how Sister Ellen has silver hair, and both Sylvie’s and Colette’s look so beautiful. As a girl, there’s just a part of me that can’t help admiring that sort of thing.”

“Oh, I totally get you!” Ange squealed. “It’s just so nice, isn’t it?”

I frowned quizzically. “Is that a thing?”

“It’s definitely a thing!” the two answered in unison.

I mean, I guess Rion’s free to admire whatever she wants as long as that’s all she’s doing. It’s true that Sylvia and Colette are beautiful and cute, and the two of them even look mystical as long as they’re not triggered by food or Melfina and keep their mouths shut.

“Oh, speaking of silver hair, Arbitrator has silver hair too. It’s so long it almost touches the floor. I can’t even imagine how much trouble it is to care for it!”

“Awww, I really love long hair too. Oh, hey! It’s most probably not true, but what if Sister Ellen turns out to be Arbitrator?! Ha ha ha!”

“Aha ha, you have such a great imagination, Rion-chan! Even I never thought of the possibility!”

“Well, you were Arbitrator’s former colleague, which makes it harder to think of stuff like that,” I pointed out. “In the first place, Arbitrator is a former Oracle of Deramis, right? Does she actually look similar to Colette? If she’s Colette’s ancestor, it wouldn’t be strange for the two to have similar hair colors.”

“Well, what you’re saying makes sense, but...Colette is a lot more, um, blessed.”

“Blessed?”

“As in...in the bust department.”

“I...see...”

The conversation died down.

Um, you two, can you not go quiet all of a sudden? What am I supposed to do with this topic, especially when I’m sitting between you two? You’re leaving me high and dry!

Suddenly, what sounded like a ringtone from an older mobile phone—*ding-ding!*—rang in our heads, making us jump.

Whew, saved by the bell! Did Melfina choose this particular ringtone?

“Oh, hey, it’s Miyabi. She got back to me so fast.”

What’s more, a second look revealed that what had come wasn’t a message but a call. *Wow, she’s figured out how to use this thing even faster than me, and I was taught how to use it. I didn’t even know this thing could make calls. I’ll have to interrogate Mel later.*

“Um...is that you, Miyabi?” What I was holding *looked* like a normal pendant, so I wasn’t sure whether I was using it correctly. Either way, there was no point in delaying, so I tried “picking up.”

“Huh, so this really is a phone. Wait, I’ll put Setsuna on.”

Oh wow, I’m hearing her voice directly in my head as if we’re using telepathy. Looks like Ange and Rion can also hear her just fine.

“Hold on, you want me to talk? Is this a phone? A-Are you sure it’s okay? It won’t break if I touch it, right?”

“It’s fine. It’s not physical, so your curse with tech won’t activate. Talk as much as you want.”

“I... No, no, I really think you should be the one to do this, actually. You know that I’m still using a, uh, flip phone! No way, there’s just no way! You even use

Lain and stuff! Please! You do it!”

“I do know you’re using a flip phone, and this has nothing to do with Lain. I just really don’t want to talk to that guy. Don’t worry. You can talk from there.”

“Are you sure? Really, really sure? It won’t suddenly explode, right?!”

I guess technology working too well can be a problem sometimes too. I can hear the entire exchange on the other side, crystal clear. Um, should I call back a bit later? Miyabi hating me is nothing new, but Setsuna being that flustered definitely is. I guess there’s nothing we can do on our end except wait until she calms down.

“Um, hello? It’s me, it’s Setsuna. Can... Can you hear me, Kelvin-san?”

“Nice and clear. You okay there?”

“I... I’ll do my best.”

Is she really gonna be okay?

“So, did you guys read the stuff I sent over? We did some digging on our side, but we haven’t been able to find any signs of Sister Ellen at all.”

“Um...yes, right. We all read through it. It’s so comprehensive! Sylvia-san and Ema-san are very thankful. They said that thanks to you, our search radius has been narrowed down a lot. It really is incredible. How did you do all this in such a short time?”

“Uh...trade secret.”

She probably won’t believe me even if I tell her we mobilized an entire country of demons, so let’s keep quiet for now.

“How about on your side? Did you find any clues?”

“We went through quite a few countries, but we didn’t get much either.”

“I see.”

“Oh, but there was one thing. It’s an eyewitness report from a child who was part of a passing caravan, so we don’t know how credible it is. He also said it was from far away, and it was quite a while ago, so he couldn’t even remember the details.”

“Still, tell us.”

“Well, he said he saw a pretty, silver-haired lady wearing clerical vestments, an outfit rarely seen in Abyssland, heading in the direction of the Evil Deity’s Heart, which is apparently a very dangerous place that the demons consider extremely taboo. We discussed it and concluded that this alone doesn’t sound reliable enough for us to—”

Funny name for a pla— Wait, the Evil Deity’s Heart? If that’s true, it ties in directly with Rion’s offhanded suggestion just now. But still, what are the chances? Is the person who raised Sylvia and Ema like her own children really Arbitrator, the leader of the Apostles of Elearis?

“Ange, did Arbitrator wear vestments?”

“Actually, yep. At least, whenever I returned.”

Uh-oh, I don’t think I like where this is going. Everything is starting to point towards Sister Ellen being Arbitrator. Trying to avert my eyes with wishful thinking isn’t gonna help anyone, but the problem of how I should break this to Sylvia’s side remains. Hold on. Lemme think this through. What possible reasons would Sister Ellen have for heading towards the Evil Deity’s Heart?

Sister Ellen really is Arbitrator. The likelihood of this is extremely high.

Sister Ellen is Selector, the only Apostle we still don’t know anything about. The likelihood of this is also high.

The medicine that Sister Ellen needs to heal her illness just happens to be around the Evil Deity’s Heart. She might have gotten unlucky and had an encounter with an Apostle that left her unable to move. This seems a lot more like wishful thinking.

Considering this realistically, one seems the most certain, with two being the runner-up. There’re just too many common points between Sister Ellen and Arbitrator, what with them both having silver hair and wearing similar clothes. The possibility that it’s number three is low, but we can’t entirely rule it out.

“One more question, Ange. Has Sanctuary ever had any infiltrators during the past few years?”

“Sorry, I’ve no idea. I’ve always returned using my Holy Key. Only Arbitrator, who’s maintaining the place using her Oracle techniques, and Protector, who’s always with her for protection, would know. We can ask Bell-chan too just in case, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

“I see...”

I guess not even the Apostles know everything about their hideout. Is there a way for us to know for sure with the information we already have in h— Wait, I’ve got an idea.

“Ange, sorry, one more thing. Please upload a mental image of Arbitrator to the Network. Remembering faces is a piece of cake for you, right?”

“Sure, I can do that no problem. What’ll you do with it, though?”

“You’ll see. Please and thank you.”

“So...like this?”

Ange closed her eyes and the image of someone who was presumably Arbitrator instantly appeared on the Network.

Whoa, she really does look like Colette. If anything, she looks like she could be Colette’s older sister. Like, I can see her being a saint, but it doesn’t feel wrong to call her a holy mother either. She’s got the chest for it, at least.

“Kelvin, what were you thinking just now?”

“Wh-What? I was just thinking how similar she looks to Colette!”

That was close. All talk about chest size is taboo right now. Let’s quickly move on to the next step before I get stabbed by Ange.

“Next is your turn, Rion.”

“Me?”

“Please draw out the image that Ange just uploaded. As accurately as possible. Like a photo, if you can. Do you have something to draw on?”

“Yep, I just so happen to have the sketchbook that Hart-chan gave me. Clotho, gimme?”

“Hart-chan”? Oh, she’s talking about Reinhart.

“Yep, here we go!”

Rion cheerily took out a large sketchbook from Clotho’s Storage. Written in large letters on the cover were the words, “To the great artist Master Rion, from Reinhart of the Four Demonic Generals!”

Is that a signature? Did you get a signature from Reinhart?

“Oh, I knew you’d be curious! The other day, Hart-chan and I signed and exchanged sketchbooks! I was so nervous drawing my very first signature. This is just an ordinary sketchbook, but I feel like it makes my art better somehow.”

Reciprocal signing? Now that’s new. Is that like painters exchanging outfits? That aside, the way Rion’s smiling right now while talking is just way too cute. She’s such an angel.

“I’ll be done really soon!”

Damn, look at her pencil go.

Rion finished up in pretty much the blink of an eye. “How’s this?”

“Why are you always so incredible?” I sighed in admiration.

Ange smiled wryly. “This alone could probably fetch enough for someone to live comfortably on for the rest of their life.”

With the absolutely perfect picture in hand, I was finally ready for the last step. I scanned it with the pendant, then sent it to Touya’s group.

Ding-ding!

Basically, I was hoping that I could confirm Sister Ellen’s appearance with Sylvia and Ema. *It almost feels wrong having such advanced technology in this world.*

Setsuna’s voice suddenly reappeared inside our heads. “Something’s happening! Miyabi, something’s happening! I didn’t touch it, I swear!”

“Please calm down,” Miyabi replied. “We just got a message with an image attached. That’s it.”

I didn’t think it would surprise Setsuna that badly. Sorry.

I spoke up. “Hey, Miyabi? Sorry for the trouble, but can you show that image

to Sylvia and Ema please?”

“Phew...” Setsuna sighed audibly with relief just before a ruckus went up in the background and quickly grew louder.

“Kelvin-san, where did you obtain this?!”

Oh, that's Ema's voice. She's so loud. Hmm, but if she's reacting this way, then I guess it really is option one after all.

“Just confirming, is the person in that drawing Sister Ellen? Are you sure?”

Still practically shouting, Ema replied, “Yes, this is our mother, no doubt about it! This is the person that we’ve...been...looking for...” Her voice was starting to break up with emotion.

“Mm, I also think this is mother,” Sylvia added in her usual deadpan voice. “Her outfit’s a bit different, though.”

Should I really tell these two Sister Ellen's true identity? Or should I give them some time to calm down first? Even if I do talk about it, this is a matter that gets into Melfina's real identity, so I'd have to let them know about her too.

After thinking about it, I said, “I think it’s best we talk about this in person. Would you mind if we met up?”

I know, I know. I can't not tell them. However, I'm not sure I can explain it well by myself, so I'm gonna have everyone sit in too. That's probably the best thing to do.

Sylvia did not miss a beat. “Okay. Where are you now?”

“In the capital of Grebareika. As for you guys...” I used the pendant to check the other side’s location. “Oh, you’re pretty far.”

Although Abyssland was generally known as the underground world, geographically it was one huge landmass in the middle of the Blood Sea. There were myths about how there was a waterfall to hell on the other side of the Blood Sea and a ceiling in the sky, but that was not relevant at the moment.

If I was to draw us on a map, Grebareika would be on the eastern edge and Sylvia’s group would currently be on the western edge. In all likelihood, that was probably where the Waterfall of Heaven and Earth led. Halfway between us

was the Evil Deity's Heart, which was obviously no place to rendezvous.

"All right, fine," I said. "We'll come get you."

"You will? How?" Sylvia sounded mystified.

"Luckily, it turns out I'm connected with someone who hid a bunch of teleportation gates all over Abyssland out of concern for his family. I'll get permission from him to use those gates and come through one close to your location. Then I'll bring you guys back the same way."

"Teleportation gate? Okay, that works," Sylvia replied. "We don't have the qualifications, so you'll have to take us through."

"All right, it's decided. We'll—*Sera will*—go ask now. I'll contact you again when we have permission. Get to a safe place and wait for my call."

That should be good for now. All that's left is to pray that father-in-law has a teleportation gate close to where Sylvia's group is. As for filling them in on everything when they get here...I'm sure Shutola and Colette will do a good job.



Thanks to Gustav's teleportation gates, I was able to fetch Sylvia's group without any mishaps. We then gathered in the meeting room that Bell had previously taken me to. Considering what we were going to be talking about, I asked only Sylvia, Ema, and Setsuna to attend. For some reason, Nagua kicked up a huge fuss about it. *What bothered him that much? Well, this is related to the reason for their journey, so I guess I can see where he's coming from.* On our side, I asked Shutola and Colette to join us in case I needed help clarifying anything.

"Kelvin-san, the leader of our party is technically Touya. Why did you ask for me instead?"

"Of my four disciples, you're the most reliable. I know Touya's gotten a lot better, but let's be honest: we all know what he's like. Miyabi probably wouldn't want to be here, and Nana's a bit too carefree."

Additionally, from what I could see, Setsuna had the most talent for battle among her group. Something seemed to have blossomed within her during her

fight with Rion, and her improvement since then had been nothing short of impressive. Thanks to always being wary of what Touya might do, she was sharp and could think fast. All things considered, she was the disciple I currently favored most, hands down.

“I get what you’re saying, Kelvin-san, but...”

Ema cut in. “I have a question that’s far more important: isn’t this the Demon Lord Castle? You called this city Grebarelka, right?”

Oh, she’s getting right to the heart of the matter. Looks like she’s calmed down and returned to her usual self.

“It’s not like I’m trying to hide it,” I replied. “You’re right—it is.”

“Um, I was taught that Grebarelka ‘was’ the home of the previous Demon Lord’s army. The place is now full of demons, though. Was this place *not* destroyed long ago?”

“Nope, it was definitely destroyed. But a lot happened, and now Gustav and the Four Demonic Generals who served him were resurrected and—”

“Wha— That’s a huge crisis!”

Shutola sighed from her position on my lap. “Dearest brother, you omitted too much.”

There’s so much to explain, your dear brother isn’t sure he can cover everything properly. Colette-san, Shutola-san, take it away!

I gave Shutola and Colette very slight nods.

Colette spoke up. “This is a matter that deeply involves Deramis. Allow me to take over the explanation.”

“If there’s any part that you don’t understand, I’ll break it down for you,” Shutola added. “Please feel free to ask questions.”

Thus began the debriefing hosted by the Golden Sage and Silver Saint.

I knew I could count on them.



“So, Sera-san is the daughter of the previous Demon Lord...and Mel-san is

Goddess Melfina...and mother is a former Oracle of Deramis and an Apostle of Elearis—”

Despite how well Shutola and Colette explained everything, there was just so much information and it was all so shocking that Ema started muttering to herself and entered her own little world. She was clearly going to need time to process everything.

“Hm.” Sylvia, on the other hand, had almost no reaction at all.

Is she okay?

“So, yeah. Our goal is to take down Arbitrator, the leader of the Apostles of Elearis, and to stop Elearis from being resurrected. We think Arbitrator is Sister Ellen, but of course, we don’t know that for sure yet.”

Sylvia looked straight into my eyes. “But the possibility is extremely high, right?”

I returned her gaze. “Yes.”

“Okay. Understood.” Without saying anything more, Sylvia turned to shake Ema back to her senses. Compared to her companion, she was taking everything much more in stride.

Shutola, you weren’t using Retributive Persuasion on her, were you?

::Dearest brother! I wouldn’t use it on a friend!:: Shutola exclaimed indignantly. ::And even if I did, it’d have almost no effect on Lunoir or Ashley!::

Whoops, I made her angry.

When Shutola Evolved into a sage, she’d gained a new Unique Skill called Retributive Persuasion, a skill for negotiation. It was terrifying in that it enabled her to box someone in using logic and force them to even accept conditions they knew to be disadvantageous. The more hostile the other party was, the more effective the skill was; flipped around, it was pretty much ineffective against those Shutola was friendly with. Layering logic upon logic, she could make an opponent cripple themselves by their own will.

The most important aspect of Retributive Persuasion was that it did not force opponents to accept something against their will. No, instead it made them

fully believe something from the bottom of their hearts. In the past, Demon Lord Zel had used Royal Decree to brainwash his people, but it was coercive and therefore there were inconsistencies that could be picked at. In contrast, although Shutola was limited in the kind of people she could use Retributive Persuasion on, it enabled her to control people's hearts in a way that felt much more natural. I could hardly think of another skill more useful for diplomacy. Apparently, it had worked against Vegalzeld of the Four Demonic Generals too.

"Ah...thank you, Sylvia. I think I've come to terms with things now."

"Mm. Having a calm mind is important."

It wasn't long before Ema came back to herself. She was still clutching her head, but it looked like the way Sylvia was stroking her hair was helping her to just stay sane.

"Say, what was Sister Ellen like?" I asked. "Might seem a bit late considering our situation, but I wanna hear how you two see her."

"What was she like?" Ema repeated. "Hmm, it's pretty hard to put into words, but...she is our mother, our teacher, and our benefactor. We respect her more than anyone else, and she is the role model we strive to emulate. She picked us off the streets and raised us with an abundance of love. For someone who was known to be frail and sickly, she was very energetic and always beat us at arm wrestling. In fact, she was actually quite strong."

"Mother taught us how to use a sword, magic, and everything else we needed to survive," Sylvia added.

"Really brings back memories. We would try fighting her together but still didn't stand a chance. We cried so much afterwards."

"We triggered all the booby traps she set up. Good memories."

"Right, right! One time, we fell into a hole so deep it took us an entire day to get back out. So yeah, she was someone who had a playful side too."

Uh, this is different from what I expected. At least, that's not what a normal nun does and those are not things to teach children at an orphanage. This also sounds very different from Ange's and Bell's descriptions of Arbitrator's character.

“I...see. So Sister Ellen is the reason you two are so powerful.”

Ema nodded. “We are where we are thanks to mother’s teachings. She was great at figuring out each person’s unique talent and helping them develop it. There’s this guy we consider our brother, Edward, who left Lifril Orphanage before us. He’s now a politician in the Rizean Empire.”

“I’ve heard of him!” Colette exclaimed. “Lord Edward is famous in Deramis too. He managed to calm the previously war-loving mood in the country and is a pacifist who is a strong proponent for seeking ways to live in peace with others. Rizea and Deramis used to be constantly at each other’s throats, but relations have improved dramatically since he was installed.”

Even Colette knows of him. Look at these big names just dropping out of the sky. Considering Sylvia became a Rank S adventurer and a general of Trycen, it’s almost like this orphanage was a vocational school. But what was the point of nurturing such talents if she meant to purify this world from the start? Or am I misunderstanding what the Apostles mean?

“Okay, now I get how incredible Ellen-san is. However, that doesn’t change our goals. As soon as Mdo and Boga get in touch, we’re going straight to the Evil Deity’s Heart. What will your groups do?”

“We...want to help you, Kelvin-san. And Melfina-sama,” Setsuna answered slowly. “I don’t know how helpful we can be, but we’d really appreciate it if you’d bring us along.”

Hmm, I expected her to say that. But the Heroes are still developing their strength. Fruit that’s not yet ripe for picking. Maybe this calls for another demonic boot camp.

I nodded. “All right, I understand. How about you two, Sylvia and Ema?”

“I want to go and meet her myself,” Sylvia said emphatically.

“You sure?”

“Mhm. Sometimes, we have to make decisions that hurt. But we can’t stop. We have to face it and forge on. That was one of the lessons mother taught us.”

There was no hesitation in Sylvia’s eyes. Ema was still slightly shaken, but it

was clear she shared Sylvia's opinion.

If they confirm that their mother really is someone trying to destroy the world, I wonder if they could still fight her? I can't tell. Worst case, they might join the Apostles and become our enemies.

"I...understand," I said carefully. "All right, let's talk strategy, then."

That would be delightful in its own way. Sorry...I meant, if that happens, we'll do our best to dissuade them.



After talking with Sylvia's group, I headed to the training hall to confirm how much stronger my disciples had gotten. Shutola had promised to learn medicine from Vegalzeld, so we parted ways for the moment. I brought Colette with me since she was chomping at the bit to cast her barriers, Tabernacle and Alcadia, as usual. There was a part of me that felt like I was appropriating the esoteric arts of the Oracles for my personal use, but Colette seemed happy, so I left it at that. Regardless of how freely I liked to live, I was not one to deprive a saint of her happiness.

::Is that not merely self-justification?::

Oho, it's been a while since Melfina-sensei read my mind.

The fact that Mel had replied through telepathy indicated that, of course, she was not with me in person at the moment. I would have loved to have sat her down and interrogated her for a whole hour about how she was reading my mind. *Does her being—claiming to be—my legal wife automatically mean our hearts and minds are connected?*

::Right, people are quite split on whether pineapple should be in sweet and sour pork. It is important to ask beforehand. I suppose there's no helping it. It'd be a waste, so I'll eat this for you.::

Oh, sorry, our hearts were not connected after all. Looks like she's just sending her replies to the wrong person. But boy, she sure sounded passionate about what she was talking about. Got a bit emotional... Oh.

"What's wrong, Kelvin-san?"

“Setsuna, when you eat fried chicken with Melfina, don’t just squeeze the lemon over it without asking.”

“I’m sorry? Where did that come from?”

I’m teaching you how to get along with the goddess of this world. She’s not picky about her food, but she does have preferences. If you put lemon over her fried chicken, she’ll eat it all, then order another batch just as large.

“I understand, Kelvin-sama!” Colette gushed. “Your words resonate with me so much it hurts! When eating, Melfina-sama overflows with such beauty that it makes me want to serve her and adore her with all I am. However, to do so would be to forget my insignificance and step out of line; it is a transgression deserving of punishment. By suppressing my own desires and admonishing myself, my faith is further purified! Ohhh, but there is a base and vile part of me that wishes to receive that punishment—”

“All right, it’s time. I’ll be heading to the training hall first. Setsuna, you go bring Touya and the rest.”

“O-Okay. Um, what about Colette? Want me to take her?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll carry her on my back. She’ll eventually come to her senses.”

“Um...you seem to have gotten really used to handling her, Kelvin-san.”

“Nah, you’re imagining things.”

Sure, Colette acts weird, but after being around her day and night, there’s no way I wouldn’t get used to it. My sole worry is that she doesn’t drool or bleed on my clothes. In her current state, her mouth and nose are like loose faucets.



That night, I was lying in bed alone in my room—for some reason, Gustav refused to give me permission to stay in Sera’s room—sorting through the information that I had gained during the day.

The overall evaluation of my four disciples was that they still weren’t ready yet to face the Apostles. Their levels had gone up, perhaps from fighting demons on the road during their travels through Abyssland, and their fighting skills and techniques were more polished than before. However, to be honest, it

still wasn't enough. Considering the composition of their group, Sylvia probably got the last hit on the majority of their opponents, and they did not have Experience Sharing like I did. At the rate they were improving, I could not in good conscience bring them along to the Evil Deity's Heart.

I think they might need that short-term, intense boot camp after all. Maybe I should ask Bell tomorrow; she's the one who helped train the Four Demonic Generals up to their current strength levels. What, Sera? She's absolutely hopeless when it comes to teaching. She picks things up by instinct, after all.

"I should ask Nagua and Ariel to join in too. Nagua won't listen if I'm the one telling him, though, so I'll have Gerard go instead, since the two are cl—"

Creeeeak.

"Honey, are you busy with your thoughts?"

My muttering was interrupted by the sound of my door opening. Melfina slipped in, wearing a thick coat.

Hmm? That's a rare thing for her to wear.

"I was just thinking about how to cultivate Touya's group," I answered. "Mdo and Boga are probably getting close to reaching the Evil Deity's Heart, which means we don't have much time left."

"Right, they each send a report every night around this time through the Network, don't they? If I remember right, they said they'd negotiated with Survivor to not attack him at night in exchange for him not trying to get ahead. I'm surprised you let them do that."

"The later they arrive, the more time we have. And it was Survivor who proposed the idea. Thing is, recently, their reports are only about how well the hunt is going. I have to remind them to tell us where they are every time I reply."

Of course, flipped around, it could be taken as an indicator of how zealous the two had gotten about their task. Due to staying in dragon form for a prolonged period of time, Boga was using his flames very aggressively. That said, he wasn't doing it in a sloppy way—interestingly, he was actually properly coordinating his attacks with Mdo's Breath Attacks. The fact that Survivor was still evading them

did not mean they were doing it wrong; it was merely a testament to his abnormal resilience.

“By the way, Mel, why’re you here this late at night?”

“A wife is visiting her husband’s room late at night. You’re sharp enough to pick up on what that means, aren’t you?”

“I... I see. But couldn’t you at least have given me advance notice?”

Leaving aside the question of how appropriate it is for a goddess to say what you just did, have you forgotten that we’re currently in Sera’s family’s home? Even if Sera is fine with it, if father-in-law ever catches wind of this, he’s going to make me cut my stomach open.

“Oh? I seem to remember sending you a message saying that I’d be coming tonight. Did you not receive it?”

“All I received was your opinion on sweet and sour pork.”

“Oh... Oh no.” The blood drained from Mel’s face.

Did you swap what you meant to say out loud and what you meant to send? Hold on...who did you say the line to, then?!

“Th-There’s no point crying over spilled milk. There’s something I want to show you!”

“What is it?”

“Heh heh heh... Here it is!”

With a rustle, Mel let go of her thick coat.

“Is that the dress the Adventurer’s Guild prepared for you for my Promotion Ceremony?”

Underneath her thick coat, Mel was wearing a stunning dress the color of the sea. It looked amazing against her beautiful white skin, drawing my full attention. Before I could even think about why she was doing this, my mind was already overloaded with appreciation.

“That’s right. I was the only one who didn’t get to wear it at the time. And I haven’t really had an opportunity since— Oh, wait, I think I wore it for a really

brief moment after the Beast King Festival. In any case, tonight is a reveal for your eyes only. What do you think?”



Mel turned around in circles, sending her dress fluttering.

Dammit, she's actually really cute!

"P-Passable, I suppose!"

"How strange. That line gives me a feeling of déjà vu."

"I-It's the only resistance I can manage, so just shush and accept it."

"Message received."

The sight of Melfina giggling prompted me to stand up and go over to hug her. Even I didn't know why I did it; I just felt like it.

"Oh my? Are you not going to dance with me?"

"I don't know how to dance. Please don't ask too much of me. I'm uncultured."

"Is that so? Then let's stay this way for a while."

"And, uh...Mel."

"Yes?"

"Don't shoulder everything all by yourself, okay?"

"I'll be fine as long as you're by my side."

It was only when I hugged her tightly that I realized how fast her heartbeat was.



Deep within the cave called the Evil Deity's Heart, at the very center of Abyssland, was an extremely complicated labyrinth. Somewhere in this labyrinth lay the entrance to the Sanctuary, a place that Arbitrator had created using Holy Chalice, one of the esoteric Oracle arts. It was a supersized barrier in the shape of a temple that purified all forms of poison and curses. Thanks to that, the inside of the temple was filled with holy energy despite its location; there wasn't even a hint of wickedness inside.

It was deep in here that Arbitrator—or Iris—had taken up residence. In the middle of a space surrounded by stately walls that seemed at once close and far

away was an impressive temple that wavered like a mirage. Everything here was pure white, further adding to the sense that it was all merely imagined.

Within the temple was a tiny cradle. Iris was at its side, the smile of a holy mother on her face as she stared inside.



“Awww, even Condemner left in the end. That sucks.” Serge was lying on her back on the roof of the temple, her lips pursed in a pout.

All the Apostles used to gather there. Was Serge grieving that their numbers had grown so little? Or was she feeling lonely from no longer having someone she could casually chat with? Either way, she seemed very human.

Unmoved by Serge’s words, Iris’s expression and voice remained filled with love and compassion. “Condemner fulfilled her duty. And in a stroke of fortune, she survived. This is something that we should celebrate, not lament. The right thing to do here is pray for her happiness and fulfill the promise we made to her.”

“The few occasions where I got to chat with other girls are entirely gone now! And they were the only thing I had to look forward to. It’s not a stretch to say this is a crisis!”

“If you wish to use your time in a meaningful way, take a look at this perfect and sublime smile. Babies are always precious and are among life’s treasures. One look and you will be enlightened as to how insignificant your worries are.”

“I’d love to, really, but you’re the only one who can see that baby, right? That’s asking a bit much of me.”

“Oh my, I had forgotten. In that case, allow me to have all the delight and honor to myself for now. She is in great spirits today. My heart overflows with joy.”

“There’s another lost sheep here who’d really appreciate some attention, by the way!”

Iris went back to her task of watching over the baby inside the cradle. Serge could try to initiate conversation all she wanted, but even she couldn’t carry on for long when there was no one reciprocating. She now looked vacantly out over the unchanging white scenery, rocked with loneliness as she recalled how easy Assassin had been to talk to, how much fun she’d had exchanging girls-only dirty banter with Reviver, and how Condemner had always stayed to listen to the end despite looking surly and annoyed.

Arbitrator’s sure changed. In the past, not only was she up for indecent talk,

she'd even bring up topics herself...

Serge recalled the times it had happened back when Iris had led Deramis as its Oracle.

"I've never done so, either now or in the past."

"Aha ha, you could tell? I was trying to act like this is a serious scene, but I guess I really can't pull one over you. You're so good at reading my mind."

"How long do you think we've known each other for? I can pick up on the slightest changes in your mood. Enjoy the peace now while it lasts. I sent Survivor as a guide, and he should be back soon. And with him will be those who wish harm on Elearis-sama. There is no moment more perfect for resurrecting Elearis-sama as the one true goddess. Ah, the time is nigh!"

"Oh...you sent Survivor as a guide?"

Serge was by no means making light of Survivor's ability. However, her intuition as a Hero was telling her that Melfina's group would have found this place anyway, even without a guide.

"And now we have all the MP we need, thanks to Condemner. The rest is for you to deal with, so I'm back to being my usual bored self."

"If you truly have nothing else to do, how about fishing inside of your Holy Key? If you're lucky, you might find the perfect item for killing time."

"Nah, I'll probably draw it, like, right off the bat thanks to my luck. So that's boring. Hmm...should I just go ahead and enjoy this life where everything is provided and— Huh? Arbitrator?"

The leader of the Apostles had suddenly torn her eyes away from the baby and gone quiet. Wondering what had happened, Serge leaped down from the roof and turned around to look her way. Their eyes just happened to meet.

"Protector, I'm giving you your very last mission: ensure that only Goddess Melfina and Grim Reaper Kelvin Celsius enter here. Block everyone else. Promise me you can do it. You *can* do it, can't you?"

The last order each Apostle received was their ultimate mission. For Bell, it was becoming a Demon Lord; for Nito, it was guiding Kelvin's group to the

Sanctuary. Although the specifics were different for each Apostle, the moment they completed this final mission was the moment their wish would be granted. In other words, Serge had just received her very last mission as an Apostle.

“You’re gonna bring that up at a time like this? You just have to ask and I’d do anything for you, Arbitrator. Oh, but the last time, I ran my mouth and bragged about how the Cradle doesn’t need protecting anymore, so it’s gonna be reeeeeeally awkward showing up in front of th—”

“You *can* do it, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am, I can totally do it! C’mon, don’t get so angry. The way you apply pressure while smiling is seriously scary!”

“I will do my best.”

After the two shared a laugh, Arbitrator raised a hand and the cradle gently floated up.

“So, do you think you can hold them at bay?”

“I can’t say for certain, actually. They got me good at Deramis, and I’m sure they’ve gotten even stronger since. If I go all out with my skills, I think I can *maybe* handle four people as strong as Melfina was at the time. Any more and I’d seriously consider running away.”

“That will do. Creator and Controller will draw the rest away. No one will get in the way of Elearis-sama reuniting with Melfina at the right moment. Serge Flore, my closest friend and most trusted confidante, I believe in you.”

“Mh-hm, and I’ll live up to your expectations!” Serge pounded her chest in an exaggerated manner.

Arbitrator gave her a gentle smile, then disappeared into the depths of the temple with the floating cradle following after her.

“‘Serge Flore,’ huh...” the former Hero murmured softly to herself.

Suddenly, a loud *clunk* rang out, followed by rumbling traveling through the floor.

“Hm? Is Arbitrator not around?” a mechanical voice asked from the stone plaque marked with “III” in an otherworldly language that had appeared.

“You sure showed up at a weird time, Creator. Arbitrator’s busy with something right now. What’s the matter?”

“Not much; just a heads up. Survivor’s approaching and he’s being chased by two huge dragons. They’ll be here in half a day’s time. I’ll continue keeping an eye on them through my golems.”

“I see, so they’re finally here. I bet Survivor slacked off along the way. That old man’s just incorrigible, ha ha.”

“He ran all the way here with two dragon kings breathing down his neck. Considering his specs, I’d say he did pretty good, actually. Judging things according to your own abilities is one of your bad habits, Protector.”

“Okay, I’ve seriously had my fill of lectures. I’ll pass your message on. So, off with you. Shoo shoo!”

“Hm, then I shall take my leave. I’ll report again if anything changes.”

After Creator’s voice faded away, the stone stele sank back into the ground with a heavy rumble. Not bothering to watch it all the way through, Protector leaped back up to her usual perch on the roof of the temple with a light step. She looked out to see the same old featureless white scenery continuing as far as her eye could see.

Chapter 3: An Old Man's Tribulation

Survivor was running. Survivor was dying. Survivor was reviving. Survivor did not give up. He had started near the eastern edge of Abyssland and was now nearing the Evil Deity's Heart, having been barraged by showers of rain and lightning every step of the way. This harsh journey of pain and terror was nearing its end.

"I recognize this gross, oily feeling of miasma on my skin," he exclaimed, breathing heavily. "I'm almost at my goal!"

In the course of carrying out his mission to guide Kelvin's group to the Evil Deity's Heart, Survivor had overcome innumerable trials. Besides dodging the never-ending attacks from the two dragon kings, he also had to worry about food and sleep. Although he was a chosen one, an Apostle, and had the ability to revive himself whenever he died, his body was still human. If he didn't eat, he'd get hungry. When nature called, he needed to answer.

For food, he hunted what he could while running and borrowed the falling hellish flames to cook the meat. He threw away what pride he had and let loose what needed to come out while running or, when possible, hid in a corner and finished up in a split second. Sleep, however, there was no getting around. He was not skillful enough to dodge attacks or continue running while sleeping, and if he went without rest too long, he knew he would eventually trip up. He wouldn't die, but the chance of being captured was high. Even if he hid somewhere, the dragon kings could just turn the entire vicinity into a field of flames, which was obviously not an environment conducive to sleeping.

When Survivor racked his brains, however, he came to a realization: were not the dragon kings in the same situation? They were living beings too and would therefore need to eat and sleep just like he did. Chasing him without rest should be equally tiring for them.

So he tried negotiating with them. On the second day, he shouted to the two dragon kings while still running, "Hi! Can you hear me? Hi! Sorry, but I have a

suggestion! What say you to a short break?!"

"Didya hear that, Mdo?! He just shouted something!"

"I know. He is suggesting a break. Clearly a trap. An excuse to slip away."

"Ya think so? But Master said Survivor shouldn't be able to disappear by himself. And even if we lose sight of him, we can just report it. We don't have anything to lose listening to what he has to say, don't ya think?"

"Boga, you... Are you sleepy?"

"Very! I use a ton of energy, so I really want a proper rest. You need one too, don't you? Not having time to eat sister Efil's sweets has made you really cranky; just saying."

"Won't deny it. Point taken. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

The two were offering seemingly legitimate reasons, but in truth, Boga and Mdofarak were just starved for sleep and sweets, respectively.

"Okay, I'll give the signal!" Crimson flames rushed out from the cracks between the black rocks on Boga's back. Dozens of explosions rang out in quick succession as those flames shot out as projectiles. On this journey, Boga had come up with a new move called Volhelm, which was basically a fireball that could chase targets like a homing missile and cause a large-scale explosion upon landing. He could fire a maximum of thirty of these at the same time and had killed Survivor with it several times already.

This time, however, the missiles did not fly Survivor but an open plain a short distance away. The crimson projectiles flew through the air single file before landing in the field.

"Ugh!" Survivor unconsciously grimaced when the deafening roars and shock waves washed over him. When he looked up, he found a huge crater in the middle of the plain with small fires still burning here and there. Anyone with eyes could see that the ground was still extremely hot. "Is that a message?"

In the middle of the deep crater was an untouched circle. This was clearly intentional and therefore meant something.

"Hey, old man! We'll hear ya out, so get your ass in there!" Boga shouted.

Survivor understood that his suggestion had paid off, but he mumbled, “I’d have preferred it if they weren’t so violent about it...but I guess I’m in no position to complain.”

Regardless, he turned to begin running towards the indicated location. Seeing this, Boga and Mdo also started circling down before eventually landing in their humanoid forms. A blue-haired girl in a blue outfit and a towering man with bulging muscles faced Survivor, who had arrived first.

“Well, hey. Really appreciate this, you two. Thanks for listening to my suggestion. As they say, it never hurts to—”

Interrupting Survivor, Blue Mdo proceeded to rattle off in a cold, dispassionate tone, “Nito, or as you are also known, Survivor of the Ninth Seat, we are implementing a six-hour rest period starting now. During the rest period, we will not attack you and you are only allowed to move around within this area. When the rest period is over, you may have a one-kilometer head start before we resume attacking you. If you leave the area during the rest period without permission, the arrangement is off and we will reject all further attempts at negotiation. The same conditions will be applied tomorrow and onwards. If you accept this offer, take one step forward. If you reject it, say so or indicate it any other way. If you don’t decide within the next ten seconds, we will take it as a rejection. One, two—”

Rather than a negotiation, this was merely Blue Mdo spitting out conditions and asking for Survivor’s acceptance.

Man, she looks like a child but definitely carries herself like a king. Not only is she not interested in asking my opinion, she’s even counting down so I don’t have time to think, much less speak. What’s a cowardly old man like me to do? There’s only one answer, right?

Survivor wordlessly took one step forward.

“We acknowledge your acceptance, Nito. The rest period will begin now.” Blue Mdo paused and turned to her companion. “Boga, do you have anything to say?”

“I, uh, am fine. Your suggestion was...good.” Then Boga started as if something had occurred to him and said to Survivor, “Oh, but, please be quiet

when you sleep. I'm...a light sleeper. I wake up very easily."

"I...see..."

Boga seemed to have lost all his attitude and firepower in human form, acting entirely opposite of how he normally was as a dragon. He was so timid that the slightest stimulus would wake him from his sleep, thus his request to Survivor.

Survivor, however, did not know this. He thought, *Is he saying that he's keeping an eye on me even when he's sleeping? The fact that he purposely warned me in such a roundabout way makes it clear I can't underestimate him either.* Thanks to Survivor reading too much into things and interpreting Boga's words in a way that worked out in his favor, the Flame Dragon King's reputation was protected today.

"Understood," Survivor replied. "This old man won't say anything unnecessary. Let me know when it's time. I'll just be sleeping till then." He walked a distance away and, for the first time in a while, fully lay down on the ground. Just in case, he watched the two dragon kings to see what they would do, catching one setting out a feast of confectionaries and the other taking out an extra large mattress and promptly falling asleep. Their complete disregard for Survivor creeped him out so much that his heart beat anxiously even during the rest period.

The three of them spent the following days following this routine. Theirs was a bizarre relationship where, most of the time, they were pursuer and pursued, one side prepared to kill without mercy and the other coming back to life without end. However, all this was soon coming to a close. The Evil Deity's Heart was just up ahead, and Survivor's mission was almost complete.

"Whooooooo! This old man is almost done! Here goes my dash to the finish line!"

"What the— Fuck! The geezer's gonna reach the Evil Deity's Heart, Mdo!"

"We underestimated the one-kilometer restriction. Killing him is easy, but capturing is next to impossible."

"We don't have time to make excuses! What should we do now?! If we do nothing, old man Gerard's gonna punish me!"

“You know what? Let’s destroy it.”

“Destroy what?”

“The Evil Deity’s Heart, of course! If the goal doesn’t exist, then Survivor can’t reach it!”

“That’s freaking genius!”

The two dragon kings were in a strangely excitable mood due to the consecutive days of being uncontrollably aggressive and the tension of being so close to the end. As they charged up their most destructive Breath Attacks, Survivor felt a sense of foreboding in his heart.

At that moment, an exaggeratedly theatrical voice said, “Now hold on a moment. Goodness gracious, even after becoming dragon kings, you two are as unruly as ever.”

Boga and Mdofarak recognized the voice. It belonged to the shadiest man from their old home of Trycen, the man with extremely affected mannerisms who should have died at Efil’s hand. They looked up to see the former general of the Mixed Monster Order, Tristan Faaze, looking down at them from the back of a golden dragon and fiddling with his trademark feathered cap.

“Should I say ‘I’m glad to see you again’? The rush of nostalgia that I felt seeing you two prompted me to show myself!”

Mdo remained silent as Boga growled, “Tristaaaaan! I knew that bastard survived!”

Tristan was wearing his usual smile, the one that seemed to hint that he was up to no good. There was no telling what he was plotting, but Mdo and Boga knew that a situation where he was involved would never end peacefully. The pair were now significantly more wary than they had been while pursuing Survivor.

“Ohhhh! Did you come to save this old man? Well done, Controller! Thank you for drawing away the dragon kings’ attention!”

Survivor heaved a sigh of relief at the sudden appearance of an ally. An ally he had not actually thought of as an ally, but under these circumstances, an ally

nonetheless. In a happy surprise for him, the two dragon kings would find Tristan a significant roadblock and have no choice but to direct their attention away from the Evil Deity's Heart. Or at least, that was what he thought.

"Boga, we're not wasting the Breath Attacks we charged up. Let's still destroy the Evil Deity's Heart."

"Hell yeah! Got it!"

"Wha— Why?!"

Unfortunately, Mdo and Boga looked at Tristan for only a moment before proceeding to ignore him and unleashing their fully charged attacks on the Evil Deity's Heart. Survivor's wail rang out in vain as Mdo's Sagittarius and Boga's Volcano Formation fell upon the large cave entrance without mercy. The vividly colorful bullet and crimson fireball both held enough destructive power to cause terrain-altering catastrophes. There was no telling what would happen to this forbidden land when they landed.

Tristan was undoubtedly a troublesome opponent. Mdo, who had previously fought him alongside Efil, understood how easy it was to be ensnared by his grand gestures and glib tongue. At the same time, this experience had taught her how to deal with him: she simply had to ignore everything that came out of his mouth and finish him off in a businesslike manner just as her role model, Efil, had done.

"Controller, do something about this!"

"Goodness gracious, what a handful you all are. Anra, Lenge-Range, go."

Two magic circles appeared in the path of the Breath Attacks. Mdo and Boga knew this magic circle very well. After all, it was the exact same one that appeared when their master, Kelvin, used his Summoning skill. The size of this magic circle varied according to the size of the Follower that the Summoner was calling out, and the ones Tristan had cast were both quite large, about the same size as Mdo's circle.

"Hsssss!"

Clack, clack, clack!

A snake and a rhino beetle appeared from the magic circles, both white, without a speck of blemish. The snake's body was so long it seemed like it could touch both the sky and the ground and still have enough left over to coil around itself, whereas the beetle hovered in the air with a large horn held up high in pride and its wings buzzing with a noise that grated on the ears. Despite their abominable appearances, the two emanated strangely divine auras.

"Our attacks will still land," Mdo noted.

The identity of these two Summons was unclear. However, the Breath Attacks had already been fired and there was no dodging them. Just as Mdo predicted, they scored clean hits on the two white forms—Sagittarius on the beetle, Volcano Formation on the snake.

The white beetle screeched in agony as its carapace was penetrated by a burning laser. But this was only the beginning. When the attack entered its body, it immediately split into eight bullets of different colors that burst out, turned back on the beetle, and reentered its body, repeating the process multiple times. It was as if these projectiles had a will of their own and were determined to make a pincushion of the creature.

After the time Mdo's most powerful attack, Sagittarius, had been blocked by Bell's barrier, she had developed an improved version dubbed Meteoric Snipe. This octo-elemental attack was effective against enemies of all elements and even possessed homing capabilities, effectively functioning as an auto-sniping weapon that was impossible to hide from. When Mdo had determined that attacking the Evil Deity's Heart would be difficult due to the white beetle's interference, she had switched to using this attack instead in an attempt to eliminate the monster.

The white snake that became the target of Boga's Volcano Formation faced an equally wretched fate. It had put its body forward as a shield to bear the brunt of the attack, but when the crimson fireball made contact, it started burying itself deeper and deeper inside. The creature's presumably tough skin and scales were instantly turned into charcoal and burned away as the attack forced its way into its body. Once the fireball was fully inside, the beast underwent a drastic change. Its pure white scales blackened as protuberances appeared all over, quickly exploding and spewing crimson flames. The great

snake writhed in agony as fire burst from its eyes and mouth, and erupting volcanoes seemingly formed along the length of its body.

“Hissssssss!!!”

The fireball dubbed Volcano Formation was, put simply, a volcanic spark. If it landed on the ground, a volcano would rise up, and if it was buried inside a living creature, that creature would be seared with hellish flames from the inside out. The flames, in seeking escape from exits besides the mouth and eyes, would burst from other parts of the body in a manner similar to erupting volcanoes. When in dragon form, Boga was not bothered in the least about concepts such as “being humane,” so currently, he was a fearless warrior who sought only victory in battle.

“Wha— Healing Invocation!” Tristan cast a large-scale spell that healed the snake and beetle in the nick of time. At this point, Mdo’s and Boga’s attacks had run their course and the two white creatures that were in excruciating pain regained their strength.

Tristan pretended to wipe sweat off his forehead. “Phew! You two really are dragon kings! Oh, that definitely sent chills down my spine. However, I can’t very well let the Divine Pillars I captured with so much trouble die so easily.”

Mdo narrowed her eyes. “Divine...Pillars?”

“Oh, did I not say? The monsters serving me are gods from a bygone era that I’ve Contracted with! This is Zahahka the Divine Dragon, Lenge-Range the Divine Beetle, and Anra the Divine Snake. It took me quite a lot of effort thanks to your group killing Galonzolf the Divine Wolf and Diamante the Divine Beast!”

The Divine Pillars were creatures that the previous Goddess of Reincarnation, Elearis, had created and stationed around the world. Although they had grown weaker with time, they were still considered minor gods, and Tristan was claiming that he had them under his command.

That did not seem right to Mdo. Once, when she was scouring the Follower Network, she had learned that the MP cost of Summoning anyone with a class related to the gods was higher by a magnitude of dozens. It was unclear whether the Divine Pillars had actual classes, but such beings were clearly too powerful to be subjugated by a mere Summoner. Even Mdo’s master, Kelvin,

whose max MP had reached a frankly ridiculous number, was incapable of Summoning Melfina in her real body.

“Aha! Have I finally piqued your interest? Very well, allow me to enlighten you. The gift that Arbitrator gave me was Divine Manipulator. I, Controller of the Tenth Seat, hold the power to control even deities!” Confirming that he had Mdo’s and Boga’s attention, Tristan continued. “Oh, are you two getting careless because you almost killed my Followers? That would be a problem. If you don’t stay alert, you might just let an opportunity to win slip through your fingers.”

Mdo was fed up with Tristan’s exaggerated gestures. He had always been like that, trying to control the mood by speaking with unnecessary theatrics. Of course, she had no intention of playing along and was thinking of quickly finishing him the way Efil did.

“True to his name, it appears Survivor has managed to survive and come back to us.” Tristan clapped, still seemingly delivering lines from a stage. “Living through being pursued by two dragon kings is a feat indeed. Don’t you two think so as well?”

Mdo and Boga tuned him out and looked closely at his Summons.

::We’ll use the Network to avoid Tristan getting involved in our conversation,:: Mdo declared. ::Quickens the exchange of ideas too.::

::Got it. So, our opponents are minor gods. Do we have a strategy?::

::Strategy? We don’t need a strategy against inferior beings, especially when they’re hurt. We’ll use brute force, like Master always does. Should be more than enough.::

::Hell yeah! We’re on the same page. Let’s do this with a bang before that bastard Tristan gets up to anything!::

::Understood. Master’s group should be here soon. Let’s welcome them with some fireworks!::

When the mighty dragon kings finished talking, Boga brought his mountainous bulk forward while Mdofarak backed up a little. Thick, roiling black smoke billowed from Boga’s back, reminiscent of a volcano on the verge

of erupting. At the same time, multicolored orbs of compressed energy gathered in front of Mdo's three mouths.

"Mmm, I see you two are now as well trained as that maid was. What a far cry from when you were in the Dragon Knight Order!"

"Hmph! You're talking about when you were head of that weak-ass Mixed Monster Order, right? When General Azgrad split off to form the Dragon Knight Order, your order became nothing but a mere husk!"

"Boga, don't bother. You *are* right, though."

The dragons' provocative words were based on truth. In the past, Azgrad and Tristan had failed to see eye to eye, so Azgrad left the Mixed Monster Order to form the Dragon Knight Order, taking all the dragons and their riders with him. Naturally, this had greatly undermined the Mixed Monster Order's fighting strength and, therefore, its standing. The branch had eventually regained some of its strength thanks to Tristan's machinations, but for a while, it had fallen so far that it was called the weakest branch of the Trycenian military. It was the only stain on Tristan's otherwise bright and successful record.

"You're right; that was a painful, mortifying part of my life. I'm sure my subordinates and the monsters who remained for my sake had a tough time as well. However, once we got over that low point, we no longer had anything to fear. As they say, what doesn't break you makes you stronger!"

Unfortunately, if Tristan was someone who could be shaken by a mere mention of his past, Mdo and Boga wouldn't have had to be so wary of him. Not only did he appear unfazed, he had even turned what they'd said into a prompt for a spiel on life's tragedies.

::Boga, ready? Let's destroy him.::

::Let's.::



Thanks to Mdo and Boga giving us advance notice, we arrived at the Evil Deity's Heart around the same time they did. After taking one of Gustav's teleportation gates, we quickly headed for the entrance to the giant cave.

When Gustav was leader of an empire that had almost united the entirety of Abyssland, he had gone to the trouble of installing emergency teleportation gates throughout the land. Each of them was linked up to gargoyle-shaped batteries charged with enough MP to power the gate several times over. The fact that none of them had been discovered yet spoke volumes about the surprising amount of effort he had put into preparing everything. In the vicinity of the Evil Deity's Heart alone, he had four gates in each of the cardinal directions.

The reason he had installed all these gates, according to him, was so that he could make a quick getaway or launch surprise attacks on an enemy whenever he needed, but I suspected it was more for Sera's and Bell's sakes. Thanks to him, we were able to assault the Evil Deity's Heart with ease. *Apparently parents can dote on their children so hard their actions end up benefiting the rest of the world.*

Through the Network, I said, *It looks like Mdo and Boga have made contact with Tristan. They're facing the dragon, beetle, and snake Divine Pillars. Each is only barely stronger than the Divine Beast we fought before. Mdo and Boga should be able to easily finish them off.*

::Dearest brother, don't forget that the Divine Pillars get stronger whenever one of their number is killed!::

I know. That's why I'm sending you to back Mdo and Boga up. You got this, right?

::Yep! I'll teach Tristan a lesson!::

I smiled a little hearing Shutola's cute voice through the Network. We had zero interest in having a proper conversation with Tristan, but if I was to send someone to face him, Shutola was best for the job. Other than me, she was the one who had the longest history with him, and it was my hope that she could settle everything with Tristan through this opportunity. If I was being completely honest, however, I was also sending her to the fight because I didn't want to bring her with us into the Apostles' hideout. At the end of the day, she was more of a civilian than a fighter, and there were probably really powerful enemies lying in wait within.

Diversion team, how're things going? I asked.

::I've drawn away a whole bunch of golems!:: Sera replied.

::Same here, my king.:: Gerard added, ::They look similar to Shutola's.::

Alex just went, ::*Arf!*::

Mdo and Boga were facing Tristan east of the Evil Deity's Heart, so I had ordered these three to create the biggest commotions they could to the north, west, and south. Their roles were to provide diversions so the rest of us could charge into the Sanctuary. I had chosen them for the job because they were great fighters when alone and also because they were my Followers. I could Summon them again once we were inside in order to quickly regroup.

The plan was to have Sylvia's and Touya's groups arrive on the scene after we had made the area a bit safer. Once I assessed the situation and determined which teleportation gate they should go through, I would call them using the pendants that basically functioned as mobile phones. I was looking forward to seeing what difference the brief training they had received from Bell would make. For some reason, Gustav had joined in halfway through, but I chose to believe that everything was fine. Should be, anyway.

I myself was running with the main strike force that consisted of Efil, Rion, Ange, me, and a plus one. Melfina and Battle Clotho were on standby inside my magic pool as reserves. The Apostles seemed especially concerned about Melfina, so I wanted to keep them in the dark about her location for as long as possible.

Who was the "plus one," you ask? Ha ha ha, come on. Who could it be other than our trump card, Colette? Since she could not keep up with us on foot, I was running with her in my arms in a princess carry.

Pant, pant!

No, I was not joking; Colette really did have an important role to play. At this very moment, she was using esoteric Oracle arts to keep our presences entirely obscured. This was the same technique she had employed for my practice wedding with Mel in the Great Cathedral of Deramis. The see-through barrier cast over us could block even the detection abilities of someone on Sera and

Ange's level, making it so that we only had to worry about directly entering someone's line of sight.

It's a bit late to say this, but did the deities maybe give the Oracles a bit too much power? Little wonder they're all so fanatical about the goddesses they serve.

::And here we are at the Evil Deity's Heart.:: Rion poked her head out. ::Wow, that's deep!::

Ange looked equally impressed. ::This is my first time looking at it from the outside too. So it's basically a giant pitfall trap. Or should I say 'a path to the afterlife'?::

The giant cave stretched all the way down into the depths, with the bottom being entirely shrouded in darkness and the walls lined with vicious rocky protrusions that were each like a cursed sword. This close, the miasma in the air was extremely thick. The hole was so huge that the other side was out of sight. Descending without something like the Fly spell would be suicide.

"According to Bell, Sanctuary has multiple entrances," I said out loud. "However, these locations change every time, making it impossible to figure out the correct way in without a Holy Key. This is where you come in, Colette. I'm hoping that, as a fellow Oracle, you can sense the disturbance in the air due to Arbitrator's power. I'll use magic to protect you from the miasma, so you focus on finding that entrance. You *can* do it, right?"

After inhaling and exhaling deeply, Colette replied, "Yes!"

Okay, I'm counting on you and I trust you, but...can you not breathe so heavily in this place with thick miasma in the air?

Without further ado, my group hopped into the cave in search of a way into Sanctuary. I remained at the center of the formation, Colette in my arms, as Efil, Rion, and Ange circled around me protectively, the first riding a Pyrohydra and the other two using Sky Walk. In light of how much poison there was all around, we definitely did not want to stay here any longer than necessary.

"Kshaaaaaa!"

Unsurprisingly, this taboo location known as the Evil Deity's Heart was not

going to let us search in peace. It wasn't long before a massive centipede-like monster that, despite not having wings, flew at us, rapidly moving its countless spiny legs and making hair-raising hisses from its large open mouth. Colette was protecting us from being detected, but we were still visible. And since this monster saw us, it naturally attacked.

According to Analyze Eye, these were called deathpledes and had stats on par with Rank S monsters. As it turned out, the area was home to very powerful creatures, perhaps as a result of the miasma. I allowed the joy of finally finding the place of my dreams flood my body as I held myself back and ordered those on my team to take care of the deathplede instead.

::I'll chop it up!:: Rion sliced up the monster, her Lightning Enhancement form leaving trails of electricity in the air.

::And I'll behead it!:: Ange cried, but the monster's head was already plunging into the depths of the cave, having been separated from its body before I knew it.

::In that case, I shall incinerate it!:: All that was left of the body was summarily burned to ashes by Efil's arrow and swallowed by her Pyrohydra. Not a trace remained of the very sizable monster, and the encounter hadn't even lasted a second.

What reliable companions I have. They're really reliable, but...GAAAAAH, I want to join them so badly!

Composing myself, I said to Colette, "Even if the monsters coming at us are Rank S, we'll make sure to protect you. So, relax and focus only on search— Uh, your breathing's getting heavy again. You sure you're okay?"

I was trying to give Colette a few words of encouragement when I found her seemingly in the middle of, uh...a climax. Her eyes were unfocused and she was drawing heavy, shuddering gasps. Put simply: she was sexually aroused. Her grip on my robe had also gotten much tighter.

Pant, pant... "I-I'm fine, Kelvin-sama. I almost lost myself when you bestowed your stirring encouragement on me, but I caught myself. I'm feeling very good right now!"

Melfina-sensei, save me, please.

::Hang in there, honey. Colette is aroused in a good way right now. This is the condition where she can perform best. She should be able to find the entrance in no time at all!::

Seriously? It looks like she's aroused in a bad way to me!

“Please rest assured, Kelvin-sama, by inhaling your absolutely...heavenly...fragrance in such close proximity, mixed as it is with Melfina-sama's, my sense of smell is now activated beyond its limit! No matter how well hidden the entrance is, there is no way that I, a fellow Oracle of Deramis, can miss Arbitrator's handiwork!”

Wait, you're not detecting it through its magical signature or something but its smell? What are you, a police canine? Is this seriously how those esoteric Oracle arts work?!

::An-nee, two incoming, one in front and one behind!::

::I'll take care of the back, so you handle the front. Efil-chan, cover fire, please!::

::I've got you both.::

The pace at which the monsters were discovering us seemed to be picking up. Perhaps they were being drawn by the sound of fighting. At the moment, my team had the ability to instantly kill whatever showed up, so we were fine, but I was worried the Apostles would pick up on our presence if too many of them came at once.

We have to hurry.

“I always worked on developing my sense of smell so that not even an iota of Melfina-sama's divine aroma will go to waste when she descends. With the help of the blessing that I received through prayer, I have no blind spots! A mere cave like th— I've found it!”

Wait, seriously? Just like that?

“I sense vestiges of Oracle arts four tiers lower. The closest entrance is...there!”

“O-Okay...”

I’m now fully convinced that Colette has the world’s best nose. At the very least, it’s definitely even sharper than Alex’s. Anyway. Finding the entrance to Sanctuary is already half the battle. We got this.

My group plunged down, carving a way through the monsters by finishing them off before they had time to scream. The lower we went, the thicker the miasma became, but I’d heard that the Sanctuary was entirely untainted. We were also wearing our Goddess Rings. If nothing else happened, we would be able to easily—

“Things never go that smoothly, do they?” I sighed.

“Hey, there. Been a while.” Nito, Survivor of the Ninth Seat, was sitting cross-legged on a flat area in front of the passage in the cave wall that supposedly held the entrance to the Sanctuary.

“That reminds me, Mdo and Boga did report they’d lost sight of you. So you were here, waiting to intercept intruders.”

“Well, it’s more like... How do I put it?” Although my side had immediately gotten ready for battle, strangely enough, Survivor merely looked at us with an apologetic face, making no move to stand up. “Truth is, I fulfilled my last mission as an Apostle, so I can’t get into the Sanctuary anymore. Ha ha ha...ha ha...haaaa... The Holy Key that you guys took from me probably doesn’t work anymore either.”

There was a forlorn note in Survivor’s dry laugh. Apparently, he had discovered he couldn’t get in anymore and was sitting here depressed.

“Just saying, I have no intention of fighting. Don’t mind this old man and go right on past. I’m just taking a rest after running a marathon that I felt would never end.”

“You get tired even though you don’t die?”

“Well, let’s just say that I’m not young anymore. And fatigue is something that builds up over the years.”

“That’s an inconvenient body. Sorry to hear it. However, you are still

technically our enemy. Even if we don't fight, we're gonna have to tie you up."

"I very much want to say no to that. If you try it, I'm going to run away as fast as I can. Is that good with you?"

Hmm, his katana isn't on him. He must have hidden it somewhere.

::Want me to catch him, Kelvin?::

No, there's no point. Even if you do, things are gonna go the same as last time.

If my conjecture was correct, we would need to first do something about Survivor's sword if we really wanted to capture him. And finding that sword now was going to be a pain.

"This old man has a suggestion. If you let me go, I promise I'll never involve myself with your party again. Of course, it is just a verbal promise."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"I have no money and no belongings—there's no way I can prove it. Frankly, I'm a nobody now since I'm not even an Apostle anymore. As I said, I carried out my final mission. You're not exactly here as guests, but I did bring you here. In other words, I'm in the same situation as Assassin and Condemner, who dropped out not that long ago. All I've got left to do is wait for my wish to be granted. There's no reason for me to side with Arbitrator anymore."

As always, Nito had no fighting spirit whatsoever. But we couldn't very well take him at his word.

"Just curious but...what *is* your wish?"

"It's a small and very common one. You asked a whole lot about my background when you had me in custody, right? When I was alive, I was a beastkin and started a martial arts school called Wild Beast Style Swordsmanship. Unfortunately, I never met a student who made me think, 'This is the one!' before I died. I heard my dojo is still around and it's actually pretty sizable, but what I really want is to pass down the true essence of Wild Beast Style to a successor. In short, my wish is for a successor that I'm satisfied with."



One of the teleportation gates hidden to the west of the Evil Deity's Heart

suddenly came to life. Four figures emerged from the portal of light.

Touya looked around. “So this is the Evil Deity’s Heart...”

“Ugh, the miasma.” Setsuna grimaced.

“We’re still in the concealed shrine,” Miyabi observed. “It’s supposed to be much worse outside.”

Nana’s shoulder slumped. “Whaaat...”

This was, of course, the Hero party. They had come through this gate on the opposite side of Mdo and Boga’s fight on Kelvin’s orders. Alex had been fighting here to create a diversion, and it was the Heroes’ job to step in when he eventually had to leave.

“Either way, let’s get outta here. Like Miyabi said, the miasma’s probably much worse outside. Tell me or Nana if it’s getting to you and we’ll heal you with White Magic.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go. Touya, you go first and I’ll follow. Miyabi, get ready to summon your ogre the moment you’re outside.”

“Got it. It’s finally time to show off Vengeful Grave Death Ogre’s true power.”

“Everyone, be careful...”

When the group left the dimly lit shrine, they found the outside illuminated by an eerie light that was not sunlight. No, it was red—specifically, bloodred. The Heroes had gotten somewhat used to this through their travels with Sylvia’s group, but some part of them still refused to accept it on a biological level. Even so, that was no reason to not step out. They had overcome truly hellish training in order to have the right and ability to contribute in this fight. Now they were not afraid of anything else. And with that thought in mind, the Heroes left the shrine behind...

...and instantly lost all the resolve they had drummed up. In an attempt to vocalize their stupor, a dazed “What the...” was all that came out of their mouths. Before them lay a mountain of what looked like junk that, upon a closer look, turned out to be golem parts. There was no way to tell how many golems were there. The now thoroughly dismantled puppets had surely been a

terrifying sight to see. What was left indicated that these golems were entirely different from those in the overworld. Their internal mechanism was far more complicated and there were large gun barrels lying around that indicated they had been equipped with heavy firearms. To their surprise, some scraps were even larger than the Heroes themselves.

“Grrrrrrrr!”

A giant furry form pushed its head up from a ways up the mountain of scrap. It was Alex, the large wolf under Kelvin’s command. He was holding in his mouth a giant sword that the Heroes were unfamiliar with and growled with a voice that instilled terror in their hearts. When they had seen him playing with Rion and Shutola back at the Demon Lord Castle, the impression they’d had was that he was an oversized pet. Now, however, he sent chills down their backs. Little wonder they felt their courage seeping away.

“Th-That’s you, right, Alex? It’s me, Nana!”

“Arf?”

Surprisingly, the first Hero to move was the most timid member, Nana. Her large backpack and chest bounced vigorously as she approached the giant wolf radiating bloodlust.

“Umm...do you recognize me? We were also at the Demon Lord Castle but didn’t get to meet. We...oh, right! We’re Kelvin-san’s disciples!”

“Arf! Awooo, arf, arf!”

“That’s right! We’re the four who nearly died from Bell-san’s training!”

The other three Heroes were now at a loss for words in a different way. Thanks to having the Animal Communication skill, Nana could actually speak with Alex. Her words seemed to have succeeded in getting him to ease up, as he stabbed his greatsword into the ground, causing a bit of a tremor. He then reverted to being an oversized pet, one who was now cheerfully chatting with Nana.

A short while later, Nana turned back to her companions, smiling and relaxed now that she knew what Alex was really like. “Kanzaki-kun, Alex told me what happened! All the golems piled up here were enemies that he defeated! He

finished up just before we arrived and was a little wary of us, that's all." She ruffled the wolf's fur. "You're such a klutz, Alex."

"Awoooo..." Alex crooned, sounding like a dog who had just gotten a scolding.

The rest of the party was having trouble keeping up with the whiplash. They did their best to slap smiles onto their faces, though their cheeks twitched with the effort.

"Arf, awoooo, arf."

"Mm-hm, got it. It's our turn to do our best. Thank you."

Touya spoke up. "What did he say this time, Nana?"

"Um, he's finished up for now, but more golems will be coming out of that big hole over there at regular intervals." She pointed at the Evil Deity's Heart.

This hole was, when seen from the sky, actually circular, even though it looked just like a cliff up close. And it was from this massive pit that the golems would emerge. Touya and Setsuna shored up their resolve again, expecting a fight unlike anything they had faced before.

Nana added, "Alex also said there's still some time before he has to go to Kelvin-san's place, so we'll be fighting together for a while."

"Arf!"

"And that was, 'I'll do my best too.' Aww, you're so cute, Alex!" Nana hugged his furry neck and began rubbing him furiously. It must have felt really good, considering how happy both sides looked.

"No fair; I want to touch him too!" Miyabi declared, quickly clambering up the mountain of golem parts to join the two of them.

"I...suppose this is better than us being stiff with nerves," Touya managed.

"That's true too." Setsuna smiled wryly. "Maybe this was one of the reasons Teacher sent us here, of all places."

The sight of their companions frolicking with the big wolf helped the pair feel calmer themselves. Of course, they did not need to know it, but Kelvin had not actually seen this far ahead.

“Arf! Grrrrrrr!” Alex, who had been rolling about on the ground, suddenly stood up and whirled around to face the Evil Deity’s Heart. He picked his greatsword in his mouth and growled menacingly.

“Huh?” Nana turned to face the same way.

“What happened?” Setsuna asked.

“Um, Alex says that something with a strong smell is coming our way.”

“A golem?!” Touya cried.

“No, it doesn’t smell like iron like the other golems do. It’s more of an, uh, old person scent? Alex isn’t sure because the miasma’s messing with his sense of smell.”

“Old person?” Touya and Setsuna parroted in a bewildered voice.

Although they weren’t sure what Nana was talking about, the fact that Alex was raising his hackles was more than enough reason for the group to ready themselves for battle.

Soon, Alex’s growls raised a decibel as he became convinced of the impending attack, prompting Nana to translate it as, “Incoming!” Alex and Touya stood at the front as Setsuna, Miyabi, and Nana positioned themselves a slight distance behind and tightly gripped their weapons.

“Hup!” A humanoid figure leaped out of the great hole with great velocity. However, upon trying to land in front of the group, he instead twisted his ankle and stumbled with a pathetic “Ah...” And boy, was it a stumble.

“Buuuut...I’m okay! Humph!”

An awkward silence filled the air as the interloper, a middle-aged man, stood up as if nothing had happened and brushed the dust off his worn outfit. He then ran a hand through his dull, messy hair, cleared his throat exaggeratedly a few times, and turned towards Touya’s group before thrusting a finger in Setsuna’s direction. His gaze was so intense that it almost made her flinch, but she managed to stand firm. She glared back at him, bringing her hand to the handle of the katana at her waist.

“So you’re the so-called high school girl that I’ve heard so much about! That’s

such a nice term, isn't it? 'High school girl.' Has a ring that really colors the world. And your black hair is as beautiful as I heard; it truly gives you that Torajian beauty look. Despite my years, I can't help wanting to get it on with you! Ha ha ha!"

This time, everyone on Touya's side ended up taking a step backward, grimacing with disgust.



“Huh? Hold on, why do you all look creeped out? Did this old man say something bad?” Survivor, looked a bit flustered by his audience’s reaction. Their backing up was one thing, but he couldn’t understand why they were looking at him like he was trash. This treatment proved effective at dealing significant mental damage to him even though he was immortal.

“S-Something bad? Um...” Nana, the one who was feeling the most agitated, struggled for what to say. For her, this was a mental attack with a completely different slant from what she had trained against in Deramis. She had nearly no resistance against this kind of thing.

Realizing that, Miyabi spoke up. “There is excessive sexual harassment in your words. Actually, everything you said was sexual harassment. No, your very existence is sexual harassment. Please jump back down the hole you came from.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“What?! Why?! What *is* ‘sexual harassment’?! The three of you *are* ‘high school girls,’ aren’t you? Am I wrong? All I did was compliment her for being a high school—”

“The fact you aren’t self-aware makes it worse. Someone needs to erase you entirely.”

“Oh, c’mon!”

Unfortunately, Survivor did not understand what sexual harassment meant, as there was no such concept in this world. By now, Miyabi was looking at him with even more repugnance than she did Kelvin. The same was true of Setsuna and Nana. To top things off, Touya and Alex shifted their positions as if protecting the girls from a pervert.

“Arf?” Alex had apparently received a telepathic message in the midst of this highly explosive situation. It was from Kelvin. “Arf, arf arf...arf?”

The wolf’s puzzled manner worried Nana a little. “Alex, what’s going on?” Currently, she wanted to be touching him as much as possible to alleviate how upset she felt.

Of course, the old man was also feeling upset—his heart was practically in tatters—but no one seemed to care.

“Awoooo, awoo...” Alex said apologetically.

“Huh?! Why?!” Nana cried in surprise.

Setsuna felt a chill go down her back. “Nana, what did Alex say?”

“He, uh...Alex said he has to go! And that we have to defend this spot by ourselves!”

Shock flooded the Heroes’ minds. *We’re supposed to handle this guy—no, this pervert by ourselves?! they thought in unison.*

“Wh— Come on! Why’re you guys being like this?” Survivor protested. “I’m a nice guy, but even I have limits!”

“So you’ve finally revealed your true colors!” Miyabi crowed. “You’ve gotten sick of waiting and are thinking of assaulting us! I’m sure of it!”

“Noooo!” Nana screamed.

If looks could kill, Setsuna would have ended Survivor a million times over by now. “If you come any closer, I’ll cut you down!”

Touya readjusted his grip on his sword. “Hey, mister, you’re an adult, aren’t you? You should know what you can and can’t do! Please act your age!”

Clearly, nothing Survivor said would make a difference anymore. Unlike Bell’s and Estoria’s disparagement, which he actually found somewhat pleasant, the Heroes earnestly felt disgust towards him, and the shock that came with that knowledge was all too real.

“Ha ha...ha ha ha...”

In fact, it was becoming so traumatizing for Survivor that he started laughing while tears streamed down his face. Having exceeded the stress he could bear, he started plodding forward as his right hand slowly reached for the katana at his waist.

“Looks like you brats need an adult to give you a proper lesson on manners. This old man has had enough. The thing about taking you on as a disciple will

have to wait. Before then, I need to straighten all of you—”

Survivor had actually heard from Kelvin that there was someone here who was talented in iai quickdraw techniques. Knowing that it was a cute young girl and that she was earnestly pursuing the way of the sword, he had gone there in a big hurry, barely able to control his excitement. He did not know what the term “high school girl” meant, but there was something to it that strangely quickened his heartbeat, amplifying his desire to pass on his Wild Beast Style. And yet, the way he had been treated ever since showing up had been absolutely horrible. The only way to soothe his crying heart was to cut down everything with his sword.

“Grrrrr...”

“We... We’ll manage somehow. Good luck, Alex.”

“Arf!”

Alex’s body gave off a bright light, then turned into bubbles of light that faded away. He had been Unsummoned and returned to Kelvin’s side.

“Phew...” Touya exhaled once to settle himself while turning Holy Sword Will into two blades. “Everyone, keep your guard up. This guy’s strong!”

The girls swallowed their fear and braced themselves for the fight.

“Mun-chan, come out!”

“Vengeful Grave Death Ogre!”

“Using Iron Cutting Authority...*constantly*!”

The Heroes were going all out from the start. Nana’s red dragon flew out of her backpack and hovered in readiness, Miyabi’s Black Magic resurrected a massive ogre from the depths of hell, and Setsuna endowed the katana that Kelvin had left in her care, Nehanjakujou, with the authority to cut through anything and everything.

“I see, so you’re the Heroes of Deramis. This old man only hopes you’re weaker than a certain chatterbox.”

Survivor, in turn, assumed the stance to use iai, placing his left hand on his scabbard and right hand on the handle of his sword. There were no longer tears

in his eyes, which held the gaze of a samurai.

“*Rawr...*” Mun, the flame dragon who was watching everything unfold from the air, issued a growl that seemed to blanket the area due to how silent the scene was. Survivor’s joking atmosphere from a moment before was gone, and the air was filled with such tension, it seemed battle would break out the moment anyone took a step.

“Setsuna, don’t approach him carelessly! We’ll stop him from moving first! Glory Sanctuary!”

“And I’m adding Frozen Temple!”

Touya and Nana were the first to make a move. Kelvin had already passed everything he knew about the Apostles’ abilities to the group, enabling them to determine, based on appearance, that their opponent was Survivor of the Ninth Seat. This man employed high-speed iai techniques using the katana at his waist and had such effective powers of recovery that he had survived Efil’s bombing. Considering that, Touya decided to try taking away his opponent’s mobility with the spell he had learned from his teacher, Kelvin, while Nana cast the large-scale Slowing spell that she was so good at.

The moment the two finished chanting, the entire area was covered in ice and ten pillars of ice topped with blue auras rose from the ground as three rings appeared around Survivor.

“Well, *one* of these I know.”

The hand that Survivor was resting on his sword seemed to blur for a split second, and an instant later, the three rings of Glory Sanctuary had been cleanly slashed through.

Besides immobilizing its target, Glory Sanctuary also buffed the stats of the caster’s party members. However, this effect only lasted when the target was actually immobilized. Supposedly, the only way to break free was to destroy the rings after being bound by them; it was nigh impossible to escape any other way. If someone were to do so, having speed on par with Ange’s was an absolute requirement, and they only had the brief window of time between the rings appearing and contracting. Cutting them the way Survivor did was no easy feat.

Touya did his best not to let his surprise show, but his heart rate was through the roof. His eyes had failed to register the moment Survivor had drawn his sword. What was the blade like? What trajectory had it traveled to cut all three rings? He hadn't the faintest clue.

So, this is an enemy on Teacher's level!

Their opponent was an unknown variable, someone who was entirely different from anyone the Heroes had faced so far. They felt all too keenly the fact that he was better than them in every respect.

"Sorry if I surprised you. When it comes to swinging my blade, I match even Assassin in speed. If you value your lives...stay out of this old man's reach."

After giving them his warning, Survivor charged forward in his iai stance, indicating that he was ready to use the slash as soon as he got close enough to someone.

"Dammit! Everyone, heads...up?"

"Huh?"

Survivor had charged forward with incredible vigor. That was great and all, but his speed was extremely slow, even sluggish. An "Uh-oh!" expression came over his face as he realized this halfway through.

"Kanzaki-kun! My spell, it's working!" Nana exclaimed.

After the briefest of pauses, Touya shouted, "Attack! Everyone, attack!"

"Wait, time ou—"

Survivor was promptly showered by Mun's flames and a whole barrage of attacks.



I kept my hand on the handle of my sword as I stared intently at the spot where Survivor had fallen. Mun was unleashing a huge Breath Attack while Miyabi's Black Magic set off a massive explosion. If he really was under Frozen Temple's effects, it was impossible for him to get away. After Mun had Evolved into an ancient dragon, its Breath Attack had become the most powerful attack that a flame dragon could unleash. The fact that Survivor was fully bathed in it

meant he should have been incinerated to the point where not even his bones were left. Touya clearly thought the same. When the black smoke cleared and revealed there was nothing left, he announced that we had won and we finally relaxed.

“Can’t tell if he was strong or clumsy,” Miyabi commented.

“I... I guess. Aha ha...” Nana laughed awkwardly.

The two of them still seemed kind of subdued. *It’s probably because they’re feeling shaken after meeting someone like that for the first time. Of course, to be fair, I was pretty flustered too. My lesson for the day is that my body doesn’t move as usual when the danger I’m facing is different from usual. Then again, this isn’t something I want to get used to. What should I do?*

“Kay, this place should be safe now,” Touya announced. “Let’s get ready for the next wave of monsters! Miyabi, can you let Teacher know we took down an Apostle? Send him an SMS; we don’t want to bother him if he’s in a fight.”

Miyabi complied, taking out the pendant she had received from Kelvin and proceeding to tap it furiously. *It’s always been a mystery to me how she can move her fingers like that. She’s really fast on a keyboard too.*

“Understood. The pervert known as the Ninth Seat rests in pieces—”

“Who’s resting?”

CRAAAAASH!

All ten frozen pillars that had been filling the air with blue light and ice shattered all at once.

Wait, that voice?!

“Ugh!” I whirled in the direction of the speaker and found Survivor, who was supposed to have been incinerated, standing unharmed in the same stance as before. He looked alive and well. *But why’s he in an iai stance so far away?*

Suddenly, I knew with unshakable certainty, thanks to my years of experience and Survivor’s bloodlust, that he was going to draw his sword. And I also knew that his attack would reach us.

“TOUYA, BLOCK IT!”

I shouted a warning just in case, but Survivor drew his sword faster than Touya could react to my voice. The katana came out, slashed, and was resheathed in the same movement with unbelievable speed.

I wonder if I can fend it off with Nehanjakujou's help. Maybe barely?

“Quickdraw: Swallow.”

Something was flying at us from the blade that had been bared for only a split instant. *Wait, that's a flying slash. And it's really sharp and fast!* I also drew my sword, half out of instinct.

CLANG!

“Ughhhh!”

The sound of metal on metal rang out. Was it a coincidence? A miracle? Either way, I had succeeded in cutting down the flying slash. I could hardly believe it. *Maybe my training is paying off.*

“Oh? You were able to react to Swallow. That's incredible. It's supposed to fly as fast as I draw my sword.”

“Th-Thank you...”

I'm so glad to have experience facing Rion-chan's flying slashes. Thanks to that, I was able to make the right call in the nick of time. This is probably what Survivor used to destroy Nana's Frozen Temple. Wait, does that mean he can spam these? That's... Okay, we're in big trouble.

“Nana and Miyabi, step back!” I shouted. “Survivor can unleash flying slashes like Rion-chan can. The attack itself is a bit weaker than hers, but its speed is no joke!”

If it's just one slash at a time, I can handle it somehow. But if he sends several of those in quick succession, I'll be overwhelmed.

While I was occupied with my thoughts, Survivor had assumed his iai stance again.

“*Rawr!*”

Taking that as an opening, Mun unleashed a Breath Attack from the sky.

Survivor's body was once again bathed in searing flames. Or never mind "bathed"—he was *wearing* a coat of flames. It was a one-sided blast of crimson fire. *There's no way he can es— No, this was exactly what happened a minute ago!*

"Whew! That's hot enough to kill...but not quite enough to kill this old man. For me, it's more like...it's a bit too hot to breathe comfortably?"

"R-Rawr?"

Yep, it's not working. He's recovering faster than he's burning. He's being burned alive, but he can ignore it and hold a conversation.

"You're the weird one for being able to block my attack just now. My situation being what it is, I'm really low on stamina at the moment. So I'd really appreciate it if you'd just let me win here..."

"Setsuna, I'll back you up!" Touya cast Divine Saber on his two swords and stood next to me. Just by being near me, his swords could weaken the incoming slashes for me.

"Quickdraw: Hawk."

This time, it wasn't a single slash. Thanks to the sound, I could tell that there were dozens of them. What's more, they flew with pinpoint accuracy and were practically overlapping each other. *Thing is, this is actually easier for me to deal with. If they're overlapping, then I can cut through all of them with one swing.*

C-CLANG!

Good, my eyes are starting to adjust. And thanks to Touya's sword, that just now actually did feel a bit easier than the first attack.

"Huh? You can cut that too?"

Survivor clearly had not expected this outcome. He looked even more surprised than the first time around.

We're getting nowhere, though. I saw that Mun had let up his attack and was standing by, understanding that getting close to Survivor for no reason was dangerous. *I really want to get in a good blow, but if he can withstand even Mun's flames, that leaves—*

“Everyone, let’s take his katana,” I suggested.

Survivor choked. “Wait, what’d you say?”

Is that real alarm I hear in his voice?

“As in...Survivor’s katana?” Touya asked.

I shrugged. “If we can’t kill him, we have no choice but to immobilize him. We can probably do that if he doesn’t have his sword. Worst case, I’ll cut his sword, scabbard and all.”

“W-Wait a moment, you probably shouldn’t do that,” Survivor interjected, trying very hard to sound casual. “Y-You know they say a sword is a samurai’s soul, right? Wouldn’t trying to steal my sword be a biiiit cheap?”

All four of us silently gave him the stink eye.

The old man’s acting sucks. If he was suspicious before, he’s now thirty percent even more suspicious.

“I’m charging in too,” Touya declared.

“Understood. I’ll back you two up,” Miyabi said.

“I-I’ll back you up too!” Nana added.

Good, everyone’s on board. I guess the decision’s easier to make when there’s really only one option. Okay, let’s do this.

“Are you guys...serious?”

“Deadly serious. Also, *old man*, my name’s not ‘high school girl.’”

“Yeah? Then would you mind telling this kind old man your real name?”

It wasn’t like me to actually name myself, but I found myself shouting, “I’m Shiga Setsuna!” when I charged forward, one hand on the handle of my sword. It even felt like a small part of me was enjoying this. *Teacher’s influence must be rubbing off on me.*

Thanks to the hellish training we’d gone through, Touya was in perfect sync with me. He ran behind me just close enough to cover me with Divine Saber. Miyabi followed farther behind, riding her ogre.

Clearly not willing to quietly give up, Survivor got ready to draw his sword. “So, ‘Setsuna-chan,’ then. Now this old man won’t forget your name. With that out of the way, Quickdraw: Star— Huh?”

The Frost Bind spell that Nana had secretly cast had crawled over the ground to reach Survivor and frozen everything below his knees.

If you can’t use your lower body, you can’t use your iai! Now’s the time to close the distan—

“Sike.” Survivor grinned.

Slash.

Touya’s eyes widened. “Wait, you just—”

“That was your foot!” I gasped.

We had clearly underestimated Survivor. To our shock, he had chopped off his own foot. The moment it regrew, the one caught in ice disappeared like smoke. *Seriously, what’s with this guy?*

“Okay, now this old man is coming to you!”

Even though our opponent had escaped our trap, I couldn’t stop anymore. It was only for a brief moment, but Nana’s spell had actually stopped Survivor in his tracks. There was no changing the fact that this was our best opportunity yet.

“I’m going ahead, you two” Miyabi announced as she moved from riding on the shoulder of her ogre to clinging to its back.

Now, Miyabi’s ogre was at the front of our formation, followed by me, then Touya at the rear.

“Ohhh, are you going to use that ogre as a shield? Well, it doesn’t change what I have to do.”

The bloodlust emanating ahead of the ogre informed me that an attack was coming.

“Quickdraw: Starling.”

“You’re not hurting my friends! Icicle Shield!”

The instant Survivor drew his sword, Nana cast a thick shield of ice before the ogre. This spell could move along with its target, effectively serving as a steel wall to ram into an enemy with. Miyabi's ogre was already specialized for charging, so it had great synergy with this spell, giving us the ultimate spear and shield all in one.

"Noooo, I can't keep it up!"

Unfortunately, the number of slashes flying our way seemed almost endless. Unlike the move Hawk, which involved several slashes overlapping each other for greater power, Starling scattered all over like a shotgun blast. I thought that meant each attack probably wasn't all that strong, but it clearly was enough to wear down Nana's Icicle Shield even when she was within range of Divine Saber. Each slash that landed chipped away at the shield. *Uh, were the slashes I cut down actually really bad news?*

"Nana's shield is breaking soon," Miyabi reported. "After it's gone, Vengeful Grave Death Ogre will only last a few seconds. Touya, catch me." Without waiting, she immediately threw herself off the back of her ogre.

"I got you!" Touya swiftly sheathed his sword and caught her with perfect timing.

"So this is the hug that led so many women and girls astray!" Miyabi exclaimed.

"Miyabi, sorry, I don't have time to play along with your jokes right now!"

Ah, I'm pretty sure Miyabi was being serious. But I agree we don't have time for it now. The slashes are doing a number on the ogre and they're still coming. Just how many are there?

"I know." Miyabi lifted the staff in her hand. "Vengeful Grave Death Ogre, use all your remaining energy and run as fast as you can."

The giant form that was now free of its rider changed the way in which it was running. It leaned forward and dashed at full speed with perfect form like an Olympic athlete. *Every time I see that, I almost can't believe it's an ogre. It's so fast.*

"That's not gonna reach me, though," Survivor said knowingly.

Sure enough, the ogre's body was starting to fall apart. Although it had gotten faster, it was already in a very bad state. If it took one stronger slash, it'd immediately be done for.

"I know that too," Miyabi replied. "Dead End Crush."

The muscular form of the ogre suddenly ballooned and burst, filling the area with black energy. This was the same self-destruct move that Miyabi had used against Rion.

"Ohhh, so it's a smoke screen!"

We had never expected Ogre to reach Survivor from the start. Its job was to explode as far away from us and as close to him as possible. The slashes coming our way were still showing no sign of letting up, but now, the old man had lost sight of us.

"Flying Slash!" Touya and I shouted.

It wasn't as if Survivor had a patent on flying slashes. So Touya and I unleashed the move we had learned from Rion—four slashes from Touya and three from me for a total of seven. Ours were inferior to Survivor's in both speed and power, but my slashes had the ability to cut through anything. Knowing this, we continued charging in.

"This is—"

Survivor's hand seemed to pause for a brief second. *Did our slashes coming out of the smoke screen catch him by surprise?*

"This is getting scary, so this old man is gonna run— Huh?"

Nana had been hiding in the black smoke cloud and caught Survivor's foot again using Frost Bind. She had chanted it at the same time Miyabi had done the explosion spell, then activated it at the perfect time to make Survivor trip a little. He was quite shaken by it.

"This again!"

He cut off his foot without hesitation. However, that was enough time for my flying slash to land on him.

"Whooooa!" The old man abruptly contorted his body in an effort to dodge the

incoming attacks. Not to protect his body, but his sword. *Did he prioritize the katana because of his nonsense about it being his soul? No, that's definitely not it. He's trying so hard to protect his sword; it's not normal.*

“Even if you slice me to bits, I can reco—”

“RAAAAWR!”

“Gah!”

Due to my slash landing, Survivor had no way of dodging Mun's abrupt nosedive. The flame dragon stomped on him so hard that his right arm and everything below his abdomen was squashed, leaving his upper body floating in midair. Only then did he realize I was behind Mun's back.

“How are you there?!” His eyes widened in surprise, his left hand holding his katana after barely succeeding in pulling it to safety.

Right after unleashing my slashes, I had used Sky Walk under the cover of the black smoke to circle overhead and hide on Mun's back, where I was invisible from the ground. Nana and the others had also helped to keep Survivor occupied, so he'd had no idea that I'd changed positions. The cost of this maneuver, however, was that I was exposed to a lot of the slashes in the air and, having failed to parry all of them, had taken a significant amount of damage.

“But it was all worth it, because this is the end!”

“Interesting! It's a showdown, then!”

Survivor reached for his katana with his right hand, which had already regenerated all its subdermal muscle. The part of his body that had been crushed was restored as if nothing had happened. This was the moment of reckoning for Nehanjakujou and me. I used Sky Walk to gain purchase for my feet, desperate to swing my sword faster than our opponent. We were both in an iai stance, and I was at a disadvantage due to having blatantly lower stats and being injured.

“Bright Heal!”

“Belial Lance!”

However, I was not alone.

Touya healed me with White Magic as Miyabi riddled Survivor's body with dozens of black spears using Black Magic. The attack did not just destroy his body but stayed embedded, which meant his rapid regeneration skill did nothing. This was the same as having bound him, as it interfered with his ability to draw his sword. In contrast, I was in top condition thanks to Touya.

I've got this. I'm giving this one swing everything I have!

"HNNNGGGGG!" Survivor also drew his sword, ignoring the spears that were tearing his body apart.

However, Nehanjakujou responded to the swing that I was pouring all my heart, mind, and soul into by giving me even more speed. "RAAAAAAHHH!"

Our swords locked for a second, then mine slid right through Survivor's. His form was no longer before me; all that was left was his broken sword and the blade fragment, stabbed into the ground.



At the moment, I was dashing down a great gorge using Sky Walk. There was thick, roiling miasma in the air that would probably have melted me alive with a mere touch, but I was clad in holy energy thanks to a spell that Touya had cast on me.

"Still, why am I doing this?"

"Because it's training! Kelvin-kun asked me to train you, so that's what I'm doing," said the voice coming from the other katana on my waist next to Nehanjakujou.

This sheathed sword was none other than the true form of Survivor, whose actual name was Nito. I had indeed chopped him in half, but apparently, that wasn't enough to kill him. On top of that, if I kept him in his scabbard like I was doing, his blade would regenerate naturally. *He really is a piece of work.*

As it turned out, Nito's Return to Cold Ashes was not a Unique Skill that gave him super regenerative abilities but one that enabled him to create a transient body that he could control at will. He could not change the appearance of that

avatar or its physical capabilities and was limited to one at a time. When he tried making a new one, the old one would disappear straight away. The only things he could adjust were his memories, and that was exactly what he'd done to feed Sera false information when she had forced him to expose everything about himself. Despite appearances, Survivor was actually pretty shrewd. That said, Kelvin had apparently seen through everything.

"I swear I thought I was safe inside this extremely tough sheath made by Creator. I also thought Assassin was the only person fast enough to keep up with my quickdraw and attack me during the brief time I draw myself. But then you have, uh, the ability to cut anything you want? Honestly, I think that's kinda cheating."

"Please be quiet. Even though it was Kelvin-san who introduced you, I'm not good-natured enough to immediately trust someone who was my enemy a moment ago."

I was in this place with Nito on my waist because of a sudden message from Kelvin. When we'd defeated Nito and Miyabi had updated Kelvin through the pendant, Kelvin had told me to bring Nito and join him. When I asked why, he said I was the only one who would be able to keep up with the battles inside the Sanctuary.

I was about to go, "No, no, no, why me?!" and turn him down, but Touya immediately jumped in with, "You did it, Setsuna! You got recognized by Teacher! I'm so happy for you! Well, I'm also a bit frustrated that it wasn't me. Dammit! But don't worry. If we could take down an Apostle by ourselves, I'm sure we can hold this place even with just the three of us. Don't worry about us and go ahead to where Teacher is!"

When I heard this, I shouted inside my mind, *Has Touya finally lost his last marble?!* Of course, Nana didn't say anything because she'd never protest anything Touya said. Miyabi, who hated Kelvin, sent me off with an amused face for some reason—I felt like it was a reminder that I still don't get her sometimes.

And so, here I was.

Still, why did Kelvin-san choose me? I don't think I'm that much stronger than

everyone else; there's no way I can beat someone on Nito-san's level by myself. I guess I am starting to see how the rush of battle really sets a naive heart racing. Wait, no, that wasn't a joke! That pun was just a coincidence!

"Setsuna-chan, why're you making faces?"

"As I said, that's no joke!"

"Y-You don't have to hate me that much...boo hoo hoo."

Huh? Did Nito-san say something just now?

"But no matter, because this old man wouldn't get discouraged so easily! I know that girls are just crankier when they haven't had action in a long time!"

Hold on, is he sexually harassing me right now? This is enough cause for me to cut him, right?

"That said, this old man has a suggestion. Do you want to practice Wild Beast Style's ultimate move here?"

"How does that follow?!"

"Moving around a lot and working up a sweat naturally makes you feel good. Hmm, seems like you already know how to make flying slashes, so let's start with Swallow. Just think: if you combine your Iron Cutting Authority and Wild Beast Style's moves, you'll be unstoppable! And I'll have a legitimate successor, so we both benefit. You can't say no to that!"

"As I said, can you not act like I've already agree—"

"Watch out, monster ahead! Come on, focus on the moment you draw your sword!"

"ARGH!"

After that, I ended up earnestly practicing my iai quickdraw on all the vicious monsters that showed up along the way.

Why do I feel like I'm dancing in someone's palm?

"Ohhhh, that's good! A flying slash as fast as your drawing speed that's absolutely unblockable! You definitely have the talent to surpass this old man one day!"

“Huff, huff... I thought I was gonna die! That was definitely a Rank S monster!”

I swung my sword like a madman. I killed monsters like a madman. And yet, they still came at me out of nowhere.

What’s this place, a monster nest?

Before I knew it, I was applying what Nito taught me on everything that appeared. As a result, I thought I felt the speed of my slash getting a bit faster. No, it was definitely faster.

Turns out humans really do grow when pushed to the brink of death.

“In the...first place...why do you want to make me stronger, Nito-san? Just saying, I’m *not* gonna be the successor for Wild Beast Style.”

“Well, there’s someone else that I really want to beat as a fellow swordsman. However, I wouldn’t be able to win alone, so I’m starting to think I’d be satisfied even if I sent a disciple on my behalf.”

“I’m not your disciple either!”

“You’re spirited; I like that! An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a Hero for a Hero!”

I seriously have no idea what he’s saying. It’s not like he’s one of those passionate hot-blooded sports coa—

“Oh hey, incoming. And they’re no pushovers!”

I sincerely wished he wouldn’t sound so casual about it. However, it was true that powerful presences were rushing my way very quickly. Two of them, actually. *Huh? But these signatures...*

“Oh, Setsuna-san!”

“Mm, Setsuna.”

I knew it.

It was Ema and Sylvia. They had probably been drawn by all the noise from my previous fight.

“Why’re you two here?” I asked. Then my eyes widened. “Wait, the miasma! Neither of you have a barrier! Are you okay?!”

They were likely using Sky Walk to get through the sky, and that I understood. However, it looked like they hadn't taken any precautions against the thick miasma in the air within the Evil Deity's Heart. To be here regardless was like sticking a bare hand into a poison swamp.

"No problem. Ema's fixed my state," Sylvia replied with her usually expressionless face.

I frowned in bewilderment. "She...what?"

"Sylvia, don't say anything unnecessary." Ema sighed.

Ah, there must be a Unique Skill that Ema-san is using.

"Um, are you two alone?" I asked, changing the subject.

Ema nodded. "Kokudori's one thing, but we thought that Nagua and Ariel wouldn't be able to make it here, so we left them behi— We entrusted them with taking care of the monsters emerging from this large cave. Right now, they should be replacing Gerard-san in the north."

"Mm, and we're heading for the Sanctuary," Sylvia added. "Kelvin told us through Gerard-san that the entrance is open."

"I...see."

That means their goal is the same as mine, right? I got lucky. I know how strong they are after traveling with them for so long. I couldn't ask for more reliable allies.

"I'm actually heading for the Sanctuary too." I gathered the courage and asked, "Would you mind if I came with you two?"

"You too, Setsuna?" Ema smiled. "Of course! We welcome more hands. Let's do it."

Sylvia nodded. "We got this, Setsuna."

"This old man will give it his all too, Setsuna-chan."

I gave the katana at my waist a poke. *You surprised me by speaking so suddenly.*

"Uh, well, let's go. Aha ha..."

Guess I ought to explain about Nito-san on the way. Uh, where should I start?

*“There are *three* cute girls currently surrounding this old man! After so many long years of suffering, I’m finally being rewarded!”*

Maybe I should just throw away this piece of trash after all.

Chapter 4: Hero vs. Hero

Everything in this space, be it the walls, the floor, and even the ceiling, was white. This whiteness was pure and free of blemish while at the same time also ethereal in a way that made it difficult to gauge its substance or distance. Right, a better word would probably be “mirage.” Before we knew it, Colette and I found ourselves in this place with just the two of us.

“Hmm, this is a problem. I didn’t expect to get separated from Kel-nii and the others the moment we got inside.”

That’s right. We had gotten separated. Colette had managed to open the hidden entrance inside the Evil Deity’s Heart by working really, really hard. That part was fine. When our group stepped through, however, we had all appeared in different areas. Thankfully, we still had access to the Network, which was how I learned that Kelvin, Efil, and Ange had also been sent to different locations and were going around trying to gather information. I wanted to do the same, but my attention was drawn to what I was seeing.

“This is Holy Chalice, a large temple made in a separate dimension using one of the esoteric arts passed down through the line of Oracles. According to stories, a past Hero used this place as a base of operations. The Oracle who casts it can freely change what it’s like inside and where the entrance leads. This makes it one of the most useful techniques we have for defense. What we have here, however, is completely beyond what I can make with my MP. I can’t even imagine how much power Arbitrator has to amass to—”

“Well, sure, it’s probably impossible for you if you haven’t Evolved yet,” a voice interrupted.

I looked around and noticed a large temple seemingly made out of the same material as the walls. There was a girl sitting on the roof of that temple, cheerfully kicking her legs. I recognized her.

“Then again, Iris didn’t manage to become a saint when she was alive either. It’s a tough world out there, isn’t it?”

“Fuu-chan...” I murmured.

The girl’s name was Serge Flore. She was the previous age’s Hero, which made her a predecessor to Touya and his group. Oh, and mine too, since I’m also technically a Hero. *I was never at school much, though, so I’m not quite sure how to act according to the whole social hierarchy thing.*

“You... You actually remembered my nickname?! That’s right. I’m Fuu-chan! Oh, you’re great! You get a hundred points!”

Oh, Fuu-chan’s a really good sport. I think?

I tried talking to her. “Um, we’ve met before, right? It was very briefly at Deramis. Do you remember?”

“Of course I do! I make a point to never forget cute girls I meet. You’re Rion Celsius, Kelvin Celsius’s little sister, right? The fact that you didn’t attack me the moment you saw me gives you max points in my book! Yep, it really is conversation that makes a person.”

I knew it; she knows who I am. I’m all for finishing off enemies when you have the opportunity, but Fuu-chan’s got A New Journey. It’s been more than a month since the last time we fought her, which is the amount of time she said her Unique Skill needs to reset. Even if we manage to kill her, she’ll just reappear somewhere as if she were a character in a game reverting to a save point. That means the best thing to do is to capture her. But that’s gonna be the hardest thing to do, knowing how strong she is. Last time, our whole party was working together but there’s only Colette and me here. What’s worse, this is home base for the Apostles. In other words, an away game for us. Also, Fuu-chan is unburdened and in full health. Uh, hold on. Are Colette and I in trouble here?

“Serge-sama, if I may ask a question—”

“Colette, I won’t respond if you don’t call me ‘Fuu-chan.’ That’s, like, a base rule.”

“Uh...Fuu-chan-sama, then.”

Ah, Colette compromised.

“If you are open to settling things through words, we will respect your wishes.

That said, may we ask why we were all separated?”

“Ah, well, that was Iris, not me. All I’m doing is staying here and protecting this place. You’re gonna have to ask her about that sorta thing.”

“In that case, where is Iris-sama at the moment?”

“In here.” Serge pointed down towards the entrance to the temple. Even though the temple was so white it almost seemed to be gleaming, we strangely couldn’t see far inside. It wasn’t a matter of it being light or dark; it felt like something magical was interfering with our vision.

“Would you allow us through?” Colette asked.

“No can do. I normally just laze around doing nothing, but even I have a duty. I was told to not let anyone other than Kelvin and Melfina through. So you two are gonna have to stay here and we’re gonna have fun chatting.”

“In other words, Kel-nii and Mel-nee are ahead?”

“Oh, whoops.” Serge stuck out her tongue and grinned sheepishly. Despite her reaction, however, it didn’t feel like she thought it was that much of a problem.

“Unfortunately, Fuu-chan, we can’t just do nothing. We *are* going to have to get inside.”

“Yes. Rion-sama, allow me to lend what limited aid I can provide.”

Serge’s laughter filled the air. It was the kind of laughter that someone gave after hearing something unexpected. “Just saying, but there’s a veeeery fine line between courage and foolishness.”

“Mh-hm, I know.” I nodded. “It’s a famous saying.”

“If you know that, then let’s not do this. The only people who start fights they have no hope of winning are heroes and— Oh wait, you *are* one.”

“Yep! I’m a bona fide Hero summoned by Kel-nii!” I shouted as I drew Aklama and Caladbolg and charged forward.

Although I had yet to do anything heroic, I was proud of being a Hero my brother had called to this world. This was the one thing I didn’t want anyone to

deny. When I activated both Lightning Enhancement and Thunderclap Edge, roars of thunder and streaks of purple lightning trailed in my wake.

“In that case, let’s see if you can reach where I am without anything happening to you!”

“Fuu-chan-sama, merely waiting for your Absolute Gospel to take effect would not be a wise choice here.”

“Huh? Why?”

Sensing the flow of MP, I paused for a split second. Right after Colette finished speaking, a different kind of light came to life, encircling the temple.

This light...it’s a magic circle!

“I did have the opportunity to do some training with Touya and Sylvia-san, but everyone is well aware that I am not a fighter. I doubt I can even scratch you, Fuu-chan-sama. However, I hope you have not forgotten that I, just like Kelvin-sama, am a Summoner.”

Oh, right. I totally forgot because I got used to watching Kel-nii, but Summoners are normally support. It’s not a class for close quarters.

Serge made a noncommittal noise. “Okay, what’ll you Summon, then? Captain Cliff of the Holy Knights? A stone sculpture monster? I’m sorry to break it to you, but none of them are strong enough to make a difference here.”

“Oh no, it’s not them. I’ll be Summoning...” Colette grinned mischievously, “...your former party members.”

“AUGH?!” Serge’s voice cracked so badly it surprised me. She whirled around to look between the four magic circles surrounding her position, her composure from before entirely gone. Instead, she was drenched in cold sweat and seemed extremely flustered.

“Hey there, Serge!” A silver-haired boy waved cheerfully. “It’s been so long. How’ve you been? I got married, but I’m still technically available. By the way, you have any plans tonight?”

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, my lady.” An elf with a mature gentlemanly aura bowed elegantly. “I have returned from the depths of hell for

your sake. I am Sorondil, a humble elf. Oh dear, what a blunder. I am so smitten by your beauty that my mouth started running on its own.”

A tall, brooding knight shook his head as if feeling overwhelmed. “You really...are precious.”

“Ser...ge?” A man with swarthy skin wearing clerical vestments took an uncertain step forward. “Is that really you, Serge?”

Indeed, from the four Summoning circles appeared Philip Deramilius, Sorondil, Ragat Titan, and Sai Dill, the four ancient heroes who were once Serge’s precious companions on her journey to defeat the Demon Lord.

“So, what do you think, Serge?” Philip prompted. “If you say yes right now, you can be my legal— Well, okay, that might be a bit difficult right now. However, as a wife to the current pope, you’ll be able to live in luxury and never want for anything. Oh, right, you don’t like standing out. I can have everything prepared hush-hush. Imagine how romantic it would be occasionally slipping out of the palace at night!”

“Oh? Oh, what is this?” Sorondil feigned surprise. “Here I was, wondering who this otherworldly beauty is, and it turns out to be Serge! I apologize, truly. Your aura blinded me such that I couldn’t comprehend what I was seeing for a moment. Our long years apart left me worrying that I was putting you on a pedestal and beautifying my memories of you, but clearly my fears were unfounded. Your true beauty never fails to take my breath away.”

Ragat’s line was simple but heartfelt. “You’re wonderful.”

“Ah, I’m sorry I got a bit flustered just now.” Sai looked a bit embarrassed. “Oh, wow, what should we talk about first?”

Serge looked cornered as the four heroes addressed her in their unique ways. I could tell her mind was currently in overdrive.

“No, stop! Don’t come any closer! Don’t you dare! I don’t swing that way!” In fact, it even looked like Serge was on the verge of tears.

Wait, what did she just say?

Colette smiled proudly. “It looks like you’ve caught on, Rion-sama! This is the

Fuu-chan-sama Encirclement Suppression Formation that Shutola-chan and I developed after painstakingly poring over past records and questioning my father and other living witnesses!”

I struggled to wrap my head around her enthusiastic outburst. “Wh-What do you mean?”

“All the Heroes summoned by Oracles in the past succeeded in defeating the Demon Lords of their times and then chose to live out the rest of their lives in this world. Fuu-chan-sama was the only exception; she alone chose to return to her previous world. The reason the other Heroes chose to stay was because they had companions who fell in love with them and were willing to dedicate their lives to them. What was different in Fuu-chan-sama’s case? I could not understand, as the only ones I need are Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama, and yourself, Rion-sama. Shutola-chan, however, figured it out! Fuu-chan-sama, you have a highly unusual disposition, do you not?! One that makes it such that you don’t feel romantically drawn to any man, no matter their personality and character!”

“How did you—?!”

Serge seemed nearly out of her mind. Thanks to Colette’s somewhat dubious strategy, our disadvantaged position had been flipped in one fell stroke. The Oracle of Deramis on a trip was definitely scary, and I very much didn’t want her as an enemy, but that also meant she was extremely helpful as an ally. As Kel-nii said, the heavens had given her two boons and one great drawback. Yep, that was exactly what I was feeling right now.

Hmm, but what could Fuu-chan’s disposition be? All of the ancient heroes are basically different archetypes of the perfect guy, and they’ve got the looks for it. One is a younger guy with shining silver hair and a dazzling smile who has a bit of a mean streak. One is a tall gentleman who, despite being a womanizer, has a certain earnestness about him. One is a quiet, taciturn knight who has trouble expressing his emotions. And lastly, one is a darker-skinned prince of a fallen country—that’s like the most orthodox romantic target.

Fuu-chan’s party is basically the ideal reverse harem. Like, I could definitely see this as the setup for a manga or game aimed at girls. However, ever since they appeared, Fuu-chan clearly looks like she wants to get out of here. There’s

no way she could have created such a perfect party unless she has as much protagonist luck as Touyan does. Hmm, is there anything else that could be a hint? Wait, she said, “I make a point to never forget cute girls I meet.” She also said, “I don’t swing that way.”

“AUGH?!” My voice also broke with surprise at what I had realized. After living fourteen years in modern Japan, even I had heard about this sort of thing, be it from manga, the internet, and so on. The term “boys’ love” was becoming so commonly known that even I, who wasn’t interested in it at all, had heard of it. In so many words, this was gay love. And to my knowledge, a lot of people who had this preference never talked about it. Serge, however, was different.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha! I see. I’ve gotta give it to you. This is as good an opportunity to say this as any other: Colette is entirely right. I do think Sai and the others are the best friends and comrades in arms I could ask for. However, I’m not interested in any of them as love partners. After all, I only love cute girls!” As it turned out, Serge was into girls, not guys.

Three people exclaimed, “WHAT?!” as their jaws nearly dropped to the floor, and Colette’s father, Pope Philip, said, “Ahhh, I knew it.”

Serge continued passionately, “Do I want to stay in this world? That’s not even funny. You know what Absolute Gospel does, right? All the Heroes have that skill. As long as I’m the one with the highest Luck stat around, things happen around me as if I’m the center of the world, as if I’m the protagonist of a story. It’s really useful in everyday life and, of course, in battle. Normal guys probably get into a ton of lucky pervert situations, and I’m sure they appreciate it. Oh, it’s probably great for them. Of course, the same happened with me. Wherever I went, all sorts of guys—cute guys, handsome guys, cool guys, the entire spectrum—approached me. I also got into a lot of situations that often happen to protagonists in manga aimed at girls. Conversely, no cute girls appeared around me at all. All because this skill only works according to what would make the majority of girls happy!”

“Um, Colette, do you think we stepped on a land mine here?”

“Indeed. Just as planned.”

“Uh, all the ancient heroes, aside from your dad, look like they just lost their

souls.”

“Indeed. Just as planned.”

What a terrifying girl Colette is!

“It’s only when I’m with Iris, the only person who has higher Luck than me, that I can truly relax. Those are the only moments when I don’t get into weird situations, and Iris was also kind to me. That’s why I want to pay her back. Right now, she’s in a half-goddess state and is very unstable—her memories are spotty at best. I won’t let you get in her way. Not even you guys.”

Serge’s eyes turned dead serious. She was no longer joking around or flustered. She had regained her focus and conviction.

“What...have we done?” Ragat looked down at his hands.

“I-I can’t believe it,” Sai exclaimed with a pale face. “We were actually backing Serge into a corner with our advances?”

“No, we cannot give up just yet!” Sorondil cried. “Serge, are you sure you’re not just joking?! There must be a misunderstanding here, right?!”

“I’m fully aware that my preferences aren’t the norm. But try being in my shoes. I still remember when all of you proposed to me at the same time! It’s like a guy protagonist suddenly being proposed to by all his guy companions! Of course it’d make me want to return to my own world!” Serge took a deep breath, then shouted wholeheartedly, “I like girls, not guys!”

The finishing blow drew pained grunts from Ragat, Sorondil, and Sai and sent them crumpling to their knees.

We’re technically enemies now, but I can’t help feeling bad for Fuu-chan. And for the ancient heroes too.

“Mh-hm, it’s just as I suspected. Everyone, raise your faces.” Philip turned to his compatriots, smiling like a messiah. “Since I’m the only one who managed to decipher the true intentions that Serge is hiding with her act, it looks like I’m the sole winner.”

Four voices went, “Huh?” with Serge continuing on to ask, “Hold on—what’re you saying, Philip?”

“Ever since Serge returned to her own world, I’ve been thinking. Why did sweet Serge return without giving us an answer for our proposals?”

“As I said, I—”

“Upon being approached by so many men, Serge no longer understood what true love is. That’s why she’s been testing us. She’s seeing if our love for her is real enough to have lasted all this time. She’s hoping that even if she turns us away with her words, we would understand what she’s really thinking.”

“Wait, no, that’s—”

“And lo and behold, I’m the only one who’s passed her tests. In other words, I’m the only one who’s able to give her true love. Aha ha, I’m sorry, guys! I guess my experience being married gave me too big of an edge!”

Vitality returned to the eyes of the three other heroes as if they wanted to say that they had known what Philip was saying all along.

“That’s my father all right.” Colette smiled with admiration. “He really is unmatched at controlling people’s hearts. He lets them fall as far as they can, then gives them a small bud of hope. Now, no matter what Fuu-chan-sama says next, they will never stop. All that’s left is for them to do *the thing*.”

All the heroes now stood up with the faces of men who had the conviction to accept anything and everything.

“You know what?” Serge sighed and unsheathed Holy Sword Will. Even though her weapon was supposed to have the same properties as Touya’s and was even thinner, the holy energy that hers emanated greatly overshadowed his. “You guys do you. It doesn’t change what I have to do. Just saying, though, I’m completely different from how you remember me. I’ve become quite a bit harder to handle after becoming an Apostle.”

“You’re not the only one who’s changed, Fuu-chan-sama. Everyone here has Evolved after putting in just as much effort as you. Pope Philip and Cardinal Sai became a saint and a daemon, respectively, since you parted with them, and the two who were resurrected had, with the help of Murmur-sama, the previous Light Dragon King, also become a titan and a high elf while alive. What’s more, their presence still seems to bother you somewhat, Fuu-chan-

sama. There is no one more suitable to fight you.”

“Ha ha ha, I wonder how true that is.”

“Ha ha ha, would you like to try?”

Kel-nii, save me! These two people are so scary when they laugh like that!

“SERGE, PLEASE ACCEPT MY FEELINGS!” the four ancient heroes shouted earnestly in unison before directing their attacks towards Serge’s position in the center of the white space: Philip Summoned two dragon sculptures made of stone; Cardinal Sai brought out a red staff and started chanting a spell; Ragat deployed a blue barrier over his shield; and last but not least, Sorondil nocked a silver bow etched with a crest.

“Seriously, no. *This* is my ideal. *Gather to me!*”

The moment Serge stabbed her sword into the temple, four pillars of blinding light burst up from the ground. Each pillar was positioned before an ancient hero and quickly faded to leave a figure behind. I thought they were all human at first, but one had pointy ears, indicating she was an elf. Every last one of them was wearing cute outfits with lots of frills, which let me know they were girls. One was a short nun with silver hair, one a princess with tanned skin, one a female knight wearing heavy armor, and one an older woman overflowing with charm.

“Um, am I reading too much into this, or is—”

“Good eye, Rion! You catch on quick! These are my ideal party members, created through Gather, Legends, my other Unique Skill. Absolute Gospel is a disappointment, but this skill is incredible! It gives me the ultimate party, created according to my ideal gender, looks, and strength, who will do whatever I tell them to! The fact that they can’t hold a conversation because they aren’t self-aware is a negative, but they’re more than enough to defeat all of you.”

So...they’re basically genderbent versions of the ancient heroes. Uhhh, okay, so, if I’m to believe Fuu-chan, this means she’s revealed all her Unique Skills. Absolute Gospel forcefully gives her the disposition of a protagonist, A New Journey basically serves as a save point system, and Gather, Legends creates

companions for her. Whoa, this is basically a lineup of the most hero-like skills ever. Gotta make sure I upload this to the Network.

CLANG!

“Whoa, this feels like fighting my reflection in a mirror. I don’t like this,” Philip grumbled.

“Ugh!” Sai grunted. “All things aside, they actually are strong!”

“Dammit! Why is my opponent not a loli elf?!” Sorondil wailed. “I want to fight the silver-haired one over there!”

Ragat gave him a look. “Sorondil...don’t let your guard down.”

The fight between the real and the fakes had begun. Based on their first clash, it seemed both were using the same strategies and were equal in strength. Back and forth they went, neither managing to gain much of an advantage over the other.

“Now then, before my luck works up and causes any trouble, I’m gonna quickly finish you two off. Rion and Colette, here I come!”

Serge finally came down from the temple roof, landing right in front of me. Of course, she hadn’t gotten any weaker just because she’d created companions using a skill. Additionally, we still had yet to deal with Absolute Gospel. As long as it was active, we would be assaulted by bizarre occurrences even more ridiculous than what had happened when I fought Touya. Recalling that it had been enough to bring even Melfina to her knees, I knew that there was no way we could win if we fought like normal. It certainly didn’t help that our stats were lower than Serge’s. *If only Alex was here, at least...*

I took a deep breath. “Colette, looks like we really don’t have a way out of this. I’ll give this fight everything I can, so please support me!”

“Very well. However, before that...” Colette turned to the pope. “Father, now!”

“Aww, I really wanted to use it after we started fighting and I got a good moment thanks to her luck, but I guess there’s no helping it now that we’re fighting copies of ourselves. Everyone, let’s do it like we practiced!”

“Hmph!” Sorondil crowed, “I’ve known all along that Serge actually hates that skill!”

“Love that falls into your lap merely because of luck isn’t real love!” Sai added.

Ragat did not miss a beat. “And so, the four of us...”

“Will nullify that power of yours so we can have a wholesome relationship with you in your right state of mind!” Philip finished.

The heroes who had been fighting female versions of themselves began chanting a spell that I had never heard before.

What is this spell? And anyway, it’s clear that none of them were listening to a word Fuu-chan said!

“Rion-sama, this is the true power of the Fuu-chan-sama Encirclement Suppression Formation. The four heroes came up with this themselves. It’s an encirclement that renders Fuu-chan-sama’s Absolute Gospel useless. And its name is...”

All four voices shouted, “Destiny Foiled!” Light burst out again from each of them, forming the vertices of a diamond. Rays shot out to connect them together, completing the barrier. I, at least, thought it looked like a pyramid of light.

“I’ll give you kudos for the effort, but I don’t think you succeeded in sealing my Absolute Gospel.”

“This is not a spell to seal your skill, Fuu-chan-sama,” Colette explained. “Instead, it makes it so that your skill doesn’t work. As long as it is up, the Luck stat of everyone here is aggregated and then redistributed equally. In other words, everyone here now has the exact same Luck value.”

“Ohhhh! My Absolute Gospel only works when I have the highest Luck in the vicinity. So now it won’t be activated!”

“That is correct. As long as this barrier is within this space, Absolute Gospel is useless.”

In all likelihood, Pope Philip and his companions had developed this move

after spending a long time brainstorming ways to deal with Serge. As it turned out, there was a very sad truth behind what motivated them, but regardless, I was going to take advantage of it however I could.

“Wow, this is incredible. I’m not lying; I really mean it. Not only did you get me to use Gather, Legends, you even nullified Absolute Gospel. Even though I didn’t let my guard down, you’ve definitely pulled one over me.”

“Fuu-chan, you say that, but you don’t look too concerned.”

“Well, I’ve been in tighter spots. Colette’s still got something up her sleeve, right? She’s been using one of those Oracle arts for a while now.”

Serge turned towards Colette, who looked surprised for a second but then smiled knowingly.

“It seems I’ve been caught red-handed. You’re correct. I have. I’m not much use in battle, so I can only contribute from the shadows like this. I’ve taken the opportunity to fiddle a little with the Holy Chalice cast by Iris-sama. The difference in our strengths was simply overwhelming. It took me this long and practically all my MP just to make a small direct passage between the outside entrance to this space. If I can be frank, I’m ready to produce a beautiful rainbow at any moment!”

A closer look revealed that Colette’s face was actually kind of pale at the moment. *Nooo, hang in there! If you break down here, it’s going to ruin things in many different ways!*

“However, I did complete what I wanted to do. Rion-sama, I leave the rest to you.”

Thud.

The same moment Colette turned behind and her knees buckled, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Soon, the owner of those footsteps appeared. When I saw who it was, I smiled. “Okay, now I think our chances of victory really might be fifty-fifty.”

At the head of the group was Sylvia. “Mm? Who’s that?”

“Serge Flore, the previous Hero,” a disembodied male voice replied. “One of

this old man's old colleagues."

"We've come across a big fish right off the bat," Ema murmured.

"Are you okay, Rion-chan?!" Setsuna exclaimed.

It's Sylvie, Ecchan, Secchan, and...uh, a talking sword?

"Arf, awoooo." (The sword is Survivor, apparently.)

Before I knew it, Alex had also returned to my shadow.



A little while ago, after joining up with Sylvia and Ema, Setsuna was still making her way to the Sanctuary. The fiendish monsters that had given her so much trouble just now were now barely obstacles when the three of them worked together. However, the cave was still massive. Apparently, Sylvia and Ema had been wandering around aimlessly due to not knowing where the entrance was when they had come across Setsuna. Now, they had a guide in Nito, the sword who used to be on the Apostles' side.

"Ahhh, I'm so sorry! I only know the entrance on the east side! It's the opposite side from here!"

Never mind; he wasn't actually useful. The entrance he knew was quite far from the group's current location, and it would take time getting there. That said, continuing to wander about aimlessly was not a solution.

While the three were contemplating going with the path that, despite being far away, was guaranteed, a wolf's howl filled the air. Setsuna could immediately tell that it was Alex, as the memory of his large form and well-groomed fur was still fresh in her mind. The group made their way over to him to ask if he knew what was happening.

"Oh, wait, Nana's still outside."

It was only at this moment everyone realized they didn't have a translator. As they looked at each other with troubled expressions, something jumped off Setsuna's shoulder. That something was so tiny, she had to squint hard to even make it out.

Sylvia seemed to know what it was, though. "Ah, Clotho."

Indeed, this was a Clotho clone that had been secretly following them on Kelvin's orders. It landed in front of Alex, then abruptly ballooned in size. Setsuna, who had not been told about this, was completely bewildered. When the slime reached a reasonable size, it bowed towards Setsuna as if apologizing for catching a ride on her this whole time.

Setsuna, being Japanese through and through, reflexively bowed back. "Oh, no, it's fine."

"You're Kelvin-san's slime, right? Why're you here?" Ema asked, prompting the slime to contort its body. "Are those...letters?"

"Mm. Clotho is smart," Sylvia said.

Ema read out loud, "'Alex will lead you to the Sanctuary. Follow him.' Did I get that right?"

"Arf!" Alex nodded in confirmation.

After gaining their translator, who used a very literal form of body language, the group followed Alex to a cave that was structured in such a way that it couldn't be seen from above. At the entrance, the barrier had already been dispelled, allowing anyone to simply walk in.

Clotho turned around and said, using its body, "The Sanctuary is in here. There's no telling what will happen when we step inside."

Sylvia nodded with conviction. "We're ready."

"R... Right." Ema visibly gathered herself. "Mother is inside!"

The group marched in, having no idea that they were soon about to meet their merry friends and the world's most powerful gatekeeper.



"Now this is just... Good, good. Everyone here has such high levels."

Serge looked a bit surprised by the newcomers, then her expression quickly turned into something else. She studied Setsuna, Sylvia, and Ema closely from head to toe, looking happy for some reason.

"Be careful, Setsuna-chan. Protector may have a cute face, but she's no

different from me on the inside,” Survivor warned her.

Setsuna frowned, puzzled. “Uh...what do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, but please be quiet,” Ema hissed. “We can’t afford to chitchat now.”

Sylvia nodded. “Strong enemy. Gotta focus.”

“Well...” Survivor was about to elaborate but gave up. “Okay. Sorry.”

It wasn’t surprising that no one understood what Nito was really talking about. It was taking Setsuna’s group all they had to not look away from the overwhelming powerful enemy currently before their eyes.

Serge’s eyes stopped scanning the group when her attention was drawn by one of the swords at Setsuna’s waist. “Wait, is that Survivor you’ve got there?”

“Oh drat, she noticed.” Survivor sighed. “I guess there’s no point covering it up. Hi there, Protector. It’s been a while. How’ve you been?”

“I was feeling really depressed just now, but I’ve made a full recovery. So then, why’re you on their side, Survivor? I know you’re not an Apostle anymore, but you’ve got no reason to help them either, right?”

“Well, thing is, it turns out the answer to my wish was much closer than I knew. After being changed from beastkin to human, I’m now enjoying the rest of my katana life. Even if you’re jealous, I’m not letting you take away what I’ve got!”

“Aha ha, then I gotta seize it by force!”

“Ha ha ha! That just makes you a mugger.”

Serge and Nito’s banter sounded friendly, but there was a certain strength in their words that implied they might be serious. Everyone present was drenched in cold sweat.

During this time, Alex sneaked into Rion’s shadow and the two caught up with each other. According to the message Kelvin had left, Alex’s group was meant to be reinforcements and he wanted all of them to work together to take out Serge Flore.

Does that mean he's all right with us killing her?

"Grrrrr." (He said that she'll come back to life anyway, and when she does, he'll take care of her himself.)

Now that sounds more like him. Hmm, it'll be hard regardless. Of course, the situation here is totally different now. For example, Secchan's gotten a whole lot stronger. If it's with this group—

BZZZZT!

Rion abruptly came up to Setsuna's group with a thunderous boom, Aklama and Caladbolg in hand. She nodded as if inviting them to fight with her, then turned back to Serge and raised her weapons in readiness. Setsuna's group got the message and also readied themselves.

Rion, Setsuna, Sylvia, and Ema were all incredible fighters in their own rights, and they were wielding, respectively, Black Sword Aklama and Demonic Sword Caladbolg, Nehanjakujou, Ice Saber Noble Orbit, and Solforme, all remarkable Rank S weapons that were without equal. This top-tier lineup definitely had enough power to at least put up a fight against Serge and her Holy Sword Will.

Serge whistled appreciatively. "Look at how many Heroes are gathered here. There's me, the Hero from the previous generation, one of the current generation's Heroes, and even one that was Summoned out of cycle. Oh, this is gonna be fun. Is everyone ready? Let's do th—"

"Sorry, before we start..." Sylvia said abruptly, interrupting the steady buildup of the serious atmosphere.

Serge nearly tripped and fell, but she held herself back somehow. She asked awkwardly, "Uh, what is it?"

"Did a woman with silver hair this long wearing a nun habit come by here?"

"Silver-haired woman? There's one over there."

It was Colette that Serge pointed at, but the Oracle was currently on all fours and very much in the middle of something. Sylvia shook her head.

"Well...she's not wearing a habit and I don't know if she's the one you're looking for, but there *is* a silver-haired woman in here. You're not getting in,

though. Not on my watch.”

“I see. Then we’ll force our way through.”

Sylvia cast Wintry Expanse without chanting, instantly converting the white ground into a frozen realm. The ice even reached where Setsuna’s group was standing.

Setsuna reflexively leaped back. “Whoa, what?!”

“Don’t worry, this ice only affects enemies,” Sylvia assured her. “Setsuna-san, please support us with that attack of yours. Let’s go!”

Sylvia and Ema shot forward with such perfect coordination, it was as if they had already worked out a game plan beforehand. They were aiming for, of course, Serge. Currently, the Hero’s feet were held in place by ice that had climbed up from the ground.

“Final form of Human-Wolf Union: Triple Wield, Kagerou Mode! Alex, let’s do this!”

“Arf!” (Yep!)

The giant wolf sank into a squirming pool of shadows and followed Rion closely while Setsuna, left behind, placed a hand on the handle of her sword and set her sights on Serge, who had a merry grin on her face.

Ema’s beloved greatsword, Solforme, was a relic pulled from the ruins of a bygone era. When charged with MP, it emanated intense heat capable of melting anything and shone with light so dazzling it seemed like the sun. Never mind touching it, someone who merely got close enough would be roasted alive. As such, it could only be wielded by those who were truly skilled at handling fire. And now, this mini sun was being swung down from above with enough force to pulverize the ground.

“RAAAAH!”

CLAAANG!

Serge drew Holy Sword Will in the blink of an eye and blocked the heavy blow with a single hand. The explosive clash set off an extremely powerful shock wave that shattered even the ice from Wintry Expanse climbing up Serge’s legs.

“Cadence!” Ema shouted.

Right after being stopped by Serge’s greatsword, Solforme’s flames shifted from red to white, filling the space with its intense glow. At the same time, searing heat burst out in every direction, slamming directly into Serge.

Or at least, that’s what was supposed to happen.

Ema had been feeling that something was off for a while. She remembered her sword being far brighter and much hotter. The more Solforme came into contact with Will, the more sure of it she became. Her sword was growing weaker, as if its energy was dissipating. When she used Cadence, her doubts turned to certainty.

One of the current Heroes, Touya, was great at using Divine Saber, a spell that turned his sword to light and gave it the ability to dispel any and all enchantments it touched. Naturally, dispelling an enchantment that boosted damage output was effectively the same as weakening the enchanted weapon. It was said that when mastered, Divine Saber could cut through even the most complicated of barriers. As this was a traditional technique of the Heroes passed down through the ages, Serge naturally knew how to use it, and she was much better at it than Touya. Through deft handling of her blade, she was slowly but surely dulling the raging flames of Ema’s sword.

The diversion is working, Sylvia thought.

Ema was not fighting Serge alone. When she charged in with an attention-grabbing attack coming from up high, Sylvia had been rushing in while hugging the ground. She now gathered the ice fragments from the spots where Ema had destroyed the ground and converted them into icicles floating in the air.

“Icicle Storm.”

The frozen spears were far too many to count at a glance. To make matters worse, Serge was now smack dab inside the light that Ema was generating—she was practically blind. In contrast, Sylvia had Double Magic Armor and could therefore see Serge just fine. She sent all the icicles at Serge while charging in herself.

“Will, let’s show them just a little bit of what you can do.”

The fact that Sylvia could still see meant she had a clear view of Serge brandishing two copies of the same sword in her hands. After making Ema stumble back with a swing so casual she might have been batting away a fly, Serge turned towards the direction Sylvia was approaching from. Despite having been robbed of her sight, the Hero still had an incredible ability to sense what was going on around her. Sylvia made a mental note of this as she cast Arctic Aegis over her arm.

The barrage of icicles flying in from every direction was met by the Hero's sword. Holy Sword and spears of ice clashed violently within Ema's light. Although Sylvia's magic was ice, it was harder than even steel. Furthermore, Sylvia herself was right behind them, her Ice Saber in hand. Serge was at a clear disadvantage due to having lost both her balance and footing, but the big smile on her face had not slipped even a bit.

"Hup!"

The ancient Hero danced within the storm of deadly icicles, her two Holy Swords cutting through some like butter while deflecting the trajectory of others with a touch as soft as a mother lulling her baby to sleep. She maintained eye contact with Sylvia as if to say this was mere child's play for her. As if inviting Sylvia to use her next move.

"Sharing is caring!" Serge called out cheerfully while sending one of the icicles flying back at Sylvia's face.

Of course, Sylvia made no move to evade it, as she had Double Magic Armor, which would kick in all by itself. Sure enough, the attack was reduced to harmless water.

While Serge was dealing with the last of the ice spears, Ema had recovered and charged back in, shouting, "I'M NOT DOOOOONE!" She coordinated with Sylvia so they were attacking both up high and down low at the same time. Solforme was now in a different form called Zolb, with the entire greatsword having become fully crimson and specialized for melting. In contrast, Noble Orbit was clad in a pale, chilling air. Raging fire and extreme cold rushed towards Serge all at once like the jaw of some primordial elemental beast, with Ema's greatsword aiming to split her head and Sylvia's saber being thrust at her

heart.

“Take THAT!”

“Oof!”

“Huh?”

In an unbelievable twist, Sylvia’s saber was parried, and she took the attack in her side, which sent her flying. Thankfully, she didn’t let go of her sword and had managed to get Arctic Aegis into position before the attack landed, so she didn’t take much damage. The shock of the impact had reached even the marrow of her bones, but it could’ve been much worse. Serge, on the other hand, now found that ice, which had transferred from the moment she had landed her kick, was rapidly encasing her foot.

Huh? What happened to Ema’s attack? Sylvia recalled that at the last instant she had seen Serge, the Hero had been holding only one sword even though she’d had two while parrying Sylvia’s thrust. What’s more, if Serge was focused merely on Sylvia, Ema’s attack should have landed squarely. And yet, Serge looked entirely unhurt.

“What’s that?!” Ema exclaimed.

Her fierce attack had been stopped by a giant shield large enough to completely cover Serge’s body. It was decorated with holy engravings. Not only did it handily withstand a blow from Zolb, it even cooled down the heat emanating from the blade. Zolb only got so far as to begin melting the surface of the shield but did not seem capable of doing more. Serge’s defense was now even higher than when she had been using two swords. And for some reason, Sylvia and Ema felt like they recognized the shield.

As the ice continued crawling up her feet, Serge said, “By the way, I heard your real name’s Ashley. That was a pretty sweet attack just now. Before I knew it, I was blocking it not with a sword but with a shield.”

“Not a sword but a shield?”

“Yep. It’s an impressive feat getting me to use this— Yah!”

Several icicles shot towards her as if trying to catch her off guard, but they

were all blocked. The shield was floating in midair so that Serge didn't have to hold it, and its usage came across as being almost effortless.

"Mm. You really have good instincts," Sylvia said appreciatively.

"Attacks usually just avoid me without me having to do anything, so I'm very much on my toes right n— And here we go again."

The smile on Serge's face was finally gone, replaced by a wry look. She looked down at her frozen legs to find her shadow was forming hands that were trying to tie her up. This shadow had been created by the light emanating from Ema's greatsword, extending from everything from the icicles in the air to the combatants themselves.

"Fuu-chan, I'll be taking your arm, okay?" Rion appeared from one of the shadows in Serge's blind spot and summarily chopped off the arm the ancient Hero was holding her sword with. At the same time, black slashes of Agito Kokurai that were hanging in the air thanks to Residual Slice were unleashed all at once.

While moving between shadows, the youngest Hero murmured, "Prison of Slashes, close."





When Rion's figure disappeared into the shadows, the mood in the air abruptly changed with the closing of her prison of black slashes. The slashes left by Black Sword Aklama were stronger and more powerful than anything. While Sylvia and Ema were keeping Serge occupied, Rion had used her Lightning Enhancement along with Alex's Shadow Travel to build her super aggressive barrier of Residual Slashes. And when Serge had been immobilized by ice and shadow, the prison had swallowed her up, taking her arm.

The slashes continued landing with heavy thuds. Several seconds passed, but they still showed no sign of letting up. During this time, Rion used Shadow Travel again and saved Ema, who had been close to Serge's shield. If Ema had remained there, the prison would have closed in on her with Serge.

Rion exhaled deeply as she emerged from Setsuna's shadow. The Hero was still in her iai pose.

"Phew! I'm so glad it went well!" Rion cried. Her heart had been beating in her ear the entire time she was using Covert Action.

Ema also quickly climbed out after her. "I never imagined the difference in strength between us and Serge would be that stark. Thank you for saving me, Rion-san. Your surprise attack managed to actually catch her by surprise and even took her dominant arm, sword and all. I suppose I really am a bit too straightforward and predictable when I fight..."

"No, don't say that, Ec-chan! I succeeded only because you helped draw Fuu-chan's attention. It wouldn't have worked if it was only Alex and me."

"So, Rion-chan, do you think that was enough to defeat her?" Setsuna asked uneasily, still keeping her eyes fixed on Serge's position.

"I doubt it, since I don't have your ability to cut everything. And I'm sure using Shadow Travel to catch her off guard won't work anymore either. That's why I carefully set up so many slashes with Aklama."

"If we're not sure..." Sylvia murmured.

"What do you m—?!" Rion turned around and found Ice Princess in the

middle of chanting a spell. She was holding her sword before her chest and had her eyes closed. A moment later, the MP she had gathered was projected to the roof and took form.

“Glacial Meteor!”

“Whoa...”

The same giant floating glacier that Sylvia had used during her exhibition match with Kelvin during his Promotion Ceremony hung in the air. It was large enough to cast a shadow over a small town, meaning Rion’s group was definitely going to be squashed alongside their opponent if they maintained their current positions. The ancient heroes had already begun running for it.

“When we attack, we use all our strength. Ema, you too.”

“I...suppose you’re right. I feel this might be going a bit too far, but—”

A beautiful voice interrupted Ema. “If you don’t get that serious, you can’t win.” It had come from the direction of the black slashes, which were nearly all used up.

Sylvia promptly let her meteor fall.

“You two, we have to get away!” Ema cried. “Let’s fall back!”

Rion nodded. “Sec-chan, hurry!”

“U-Understood.” Setsuna turned around and started running.

Right before the giant meteor landed, the last of Rion’s slashes disappeared and revealed a gleaming suit of platinum armor. The beautiful knight, whose design seemed the complete opposite of Gerard’s, was crouched over as if protecting something. Something burst out from the knight’s back and slammed into the glacial meteor. It pierced the falling bulk with ease, creating powerful shock waves that left more and more cracks on the meteor’s surface.

Was that...an arrow?

Rion had only caught sight of it for a fraction of a second, and it had been so big that whether it could be called “an arrow” was debatable, but it had definitely looked like one. She hadn’t the faintest idea how an arrow could be fired from a suit of armor, but it was clearly powerful enough to smash through

Sylvia's attack. The giant glacier was already starting to break up into smaller chunks of ice.

"This might be bad," Sylvia murmured softly after all the fragments of Glacial Meteor had smashed into the ground. The white haze that filled the space was cool enough to chill one's skin. However, her intuition was telling her this was not from her own spell.

"Sec-chan, Ec-chan, stay on your guard," Rion warned, and the two nodded.

When the haze cleared away, it revealed the suit of armor from before—and Serge with a nocked bow. Of course, she needed both hands to use the bow. In other words, the Hero had somehow recovered the arm that Rion had cut off. There wasn't even a scar; it was as if she had never lost the limb in the first place. However, she did have wounds elsewhere on her body, and her feet were still encased in ice.

"I was pretty serious about killing you," Rion sighed. "Fuu-chan, how'd you survive all that? And what's with that bow?" she asked, half as a joke, not expecting an actual answer.

Serge chuckled proudly and said, "All I did was use Will's ability. I think your Heroes already know this, but Holy Sword Will is able to change its form according to its wielder's will. That's how I made a copy of it just now. However, I have to say this: that's only the most basic application of its ability. Being able to make whatever weapon I want means being able to make whatever armor I want too. It's all down to strength of imagination. Now, as for how I blocked the attack, I ordered the Holy Sword in the hand that was cut off to turn into a suit of armor and protect me. While it was doing that, I retrieved my arm and stuck it back on using White Magic. Just like this!"

Serge chanted a spell, and all the wounds on her body faded away. She had no qualms about revealing what she had. Just as Ange and Bell said, she really was a chatterbox.

"Rion, you actually did really well; this is basically my last resort in emergencies. You came very close to beating me."

The Hero knocked her knight a few times on the chest, and it turned into a shield that floated in midair. The burn marks from Ema's attack that had marred

the armor were nowhere to be seen on it.

“This is your last warning, everyone. If you still insist on fighting me, I’ll have no choice but to get serious about taking your lives. As in, I’ll fully utilize this Holy Sword’s abilities, and I’ll even use this Holy Bow. After trying it out just now, I’m pretty sure this bow is more powerful than Rion-chan’s slashes. Are you all sure about this?”

The Hero held her large white bow aloft and gave her attackers a look as if to say that she would not chase them if they turned tail and left.

“Are you serious?!” Survivor sputtered. “Not only is your strength off the charts, you can even change your weapon at will AND heal yourself?! That’s just cheating. This old man is going to cry. Ladies, are you sure about this? Your only chance at victory is a one-hit kill, either by beheading her or destroying her heart. You’re all still young. This old man thinks there are times when running away is the right thing to do!”

Ema shook her head. “Setsuna-san and Rion-san, feel free to leave if you wish. Sylvia and I are staying, though. Because we think our mother is inside.”

“I’m hungry,” Sylvia added. “I want to eat mother’s food again.”

“I’m in the same boat,” Rion said. “I need to regroup with Kel-nii and Mel-nee.”

Setsuna shrugged. “And there you have it, Nito-san. Should the two of us run away by ourselves?”

“Ugh, the mood is now... Setsuna-chan, a fight with your life on the line is dozens of times more effective than normal training. This is a great opportunity to perfect your understanding of Wild Beast Style!”

“Then we’re doing this!” Setsuna shouted with conviction. Judging from the looks on the others’ faces, retreat had never been an option.

“That’s a pity,” Serge sighed. “I’d much prefer if we all went out for a date or something instead, but there’s clearly no changing your minds. I hope you don’t die too easily.”

She took a step forward, then another, crushing the ice underfoot without

paying it any mind. After letting an arrow from Holy Bow Artemis fly, she broke into a trot that quickly turned into a charge, her floating shield staying close by.

“Quickdraw: Swallow!”

Setsuna’s flying slash flew with the same speed as her quickdraw, cutting down the projectile. Four fighters and one sword rushed forward together, but Serge kept them at bay with a barrage of arrows. These projectiles were being called arrows because they were coming from a bow, but they were actually the size of ballista bolts, which were normally used for castle sieges. The fact that a single bolt was enough to shatter Sylvia’s Glacial Meteor meant that each one packed the same amount of damage as a Rank S spell. Worst case, it had even more punching power than Efil’s Melting Blaze Arrow.

Rion and Setsuna roared with fighting spirit as they countered the arrows with Agito Kokurai and Quickdraw: Tsubame. However, even though Agito Kokurai was one of the more powerful attacks in Rion’s arsenal, the slashes proved weaker than the arrows from Artemis and were summarily erased upon contact.

Setsuna’s attacks fared much better, as they were imbued with Iron Cutting Authority. The moment they left her sword, they cut down everything in their way, arrows or otherwise. They were effective even against Serge’s attacks.

“Sorry, Sec-chan!” Rion apologized. “Can you cut them all down?!”

“I have no choice, right?! Everyone, I’ll buy you time to prepare your next moves!”

Serge’s arrows and Setsuna’s flashes were flying at roughly the same speed. As long as the group had no other way to deal with the arrows, relying on Setsuna was their only recourse. What they *could* do, however, was make things easier for her.

“Sylvie! Ec-chan!”

“Mm, I’ll make a wall.”

“I’ll bolster it!”

Chanting filled the air as Rion, Sylvia, and Ema threw up a barrier of blue ice,

crimson flames, and purple lightning.

“Gigas Keravnos!”

“Iceberg Wall!”

“Volcannon Wall!”

Serge found her way suddenly blocked by a mountainous wall of ice seemingly cold enough to freeze the world clad in furious flames, with a giant guard dog made of crackling purple lightning perched on top. Together, the three components formed an impenetrable barrier that looked like a depiction of hell.

“That’s an interesting way to combine fire and ice, and you even have lightning too! But...” The Hero leaped up and continued climbing by kicking the air in a zigzag pattern, accelerating with each step. Her weapon changed shape once again. “It’s a bit too thin to withstand a blow from Holy Hammer Mjolnir!”

Now, Will was an enormous hammer chased with platinum ornamentation similar to that on the sword and bow. The weapon’s size was so impressive that it seemed more fitting in the hands of a giant, but Serge brandished it with ease. When she reached halfway up the wall, she unleashed a horizontal swing with all her strength.

All three elements that made up the wall rushed at her at the moment of contact, but she paid them no mind. They weren’t enough to fatally wound her, and she figured she could heal herself back up with little effort. She followed up her swing, shattering the barrier. The scene was like a page out of mythology, both bold and fantastical. At the same time, it was also a display of conceit.

Sylvia simply said, “Ema.”

“I know!” her companion cried in reply. “I’m using all three chains!”

Serge frowned at the sensation of something wrapping around her. None of her detection skills were reacting, and nothing seemed off about her body. However, she was sure beyond a doubt that something had been done to her.

Ema’s Unique Skill, Chains of the Shunned, froze someone’s state, maintaining both buffs and debuffs. For example, someone who was poisoned could chug as

many antidotes and cast as many antidote spells as they wanted and would remain poisoned. This skill was effective even on Sylvia, who was impervious to practically all magic.

To use this skill, Ema's target had to be within her field of view and she had to cover their form with her hand. She could only "fix" a maximum of three targets at the same time, but at the moment, she was using all three chains on Serge. Due to this, as long as Ema remained standing, Serge would continue being beset by Burning, Frozen, and Paralyze, the three debuffs she had picked up after upon making contact with the wall, and there was nothing she could do about it.

My heals aren't working. They really did do something to me.

Sure enough, when Serge tried casting Healing Magic on herself, she discovered what had happened. This enabled her to immediately decide her strategy. In short, she had to defeat her assailants as fast as she could.

"Artemis!"

She returned Will to the form of a bow and shot a few arrows from the air. The ice slowly but surely freezing her body was interfering with her mobility, and the burns spreading over her skin hurt badly. As a result, the speed of her attacks had fallen a notch. To compensate, she used Sky Walk to zip about with three-dimensional movements to make her attacks more complicated.

"What?!" Ema gasped. "How can someone who's debuffed so heavily move like that?!"

"Calm down!" Setsuna shouted. "I can cut down her arrows!"

"The longer she takes, the more my ice will grow. She has no choice but to come to us," Sylvia calmly pointed out.

"You bet I'm coming!" Serge chortled. "And I'll be using all my strength!"

She closed the distance with zigzagging movements, but Setsuna calmly cut down all her arrows. Seeing this, the ancient Hero got impatient and decided to use her next trump card.

"Holy Lance Answerer."

She created purchase for her feet in midair, then abruptly kicked off to rush towards Rion's group, lance in hand. The sound of weapons clashing head-on filled the air. Just like when she was using the bow, Serge's movements wielding her spear had gotten noticeably slower. Despite being surrounded, she made the most of the extra reach that the spear gave her and deftly used Holy Shield Aegis to parry everything coming her way. Both sides were equally matched at last. And as time passed, Serge slowly began falling behind.

Suddenly, Ema realized that there were two shields floating in the air. She grimaced, desperately hoping there wouldn't be more while also taking it as a sign that the Hero was starting to feel cornered. At the same time, she felt a sense of foreboding.

"Disaster Ray!" A thick laser beam shot out of Serge's hand with no chanting or telltale movements beforehand. Just like Chains of the Shunned, Serge merely had to point her hand. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the torrent of light was more than powerful enough to erase Ema in the blink of an eye.

"Best way to counter this." Without hesitating, Sylvia stood between the laser and Ema, using her body as a shield.

"Sylvia?!" Ema gasped in surprise as her companion generated claws of ice to grip the ground while waiting for Double Magic Armor to automatically activate. Sure enough, when the beam slammed into her, it was reflected.

As Serge was busy unleashing her attack, Setsuna cut down one copy of Aegis and Rion ducked in to slash at Serge directly. The Hero dodged the blow by a paper-thin margin, but it was clear she was against the ropes.

Jeez, this really isn't easy. I know I told Arbitrator I could handle four opponents as strong as Melfina simultaneously, but that was assuming Absolute Gospel would work! Ugh! The longer this goes on, the harder things will get! But no, I can do it if I try! I'm a big girl! Backed into a corner is when Heroes can really show their stuff!

"Will, it's time to go all out!" Serge shouted, stabbing the point of her sword into the ground.

An instant later, all four attackers leaped back as a large number of Holy

Swords rose from the ground. There were hundreds—no, thousands—of them. Possibly even more.

“It’s actually really tiring using Will like this, so I’m gonna finish things off—”

Rion interrupted. “Use Imitator, please.”

All the shadows in the space vibrated, then took shape. Serge, who had thousands of gleaming platinum swords at her command, found herself facing Rion, who had the same number of shadowy black swords at *her* command.

Imitator was the Unique Skill that Alex had obtained after Evolving into a Vanargand. It enabled him to copy anything reflected in shadow—not only its form, but also its characteristics. He was limited in that he could not copy something larger than the maximum volume of his own body and could only copy one thing at a time, even if he had volume left over. Also, he could only choose inorganic targets such as weapons and items.

When Alex and Rion were together, Rion could use weapons that Alex produced through this skill. This was one of the keys behind the move she had named Human-Wolf Union: Triple Wield, Kagerou Mode. However, being able to copy an ability didn’t mean she could use it well. If it was a weapon that came with an ability, the wielder of the original would naturally be much more proficient at using and applying it in different situations. Consequently, the skill was less of an ultimate attack for Rion as it was another option in her arsenal.

But when it came to Holy Sword Will, things were different. After all, Rion was already familiar with its properties and had already had time to visualize how she would use it.

“Are those...Holy Swords too? Black ones?”

“Fuu-chan, you said Holy Sword Will could take any form you want. If that’s the case, then I won’t lose. After all, I have twice the imagination of anyone else!”

“Oh? That’s an interesting claim. I’m not sure I get it, but that’s what you’re using to counter Will, right? Sure, I’ll bite. I’ll take anything you throw at me!”

The red and black swords protruding from the ground rose into the air in two swarms. The red ones turned their points towards Rion, Setsuna, Sylvia, and

Ema, while the black ones all turned towards Serge alone. Although the red ones were facing the same direction, they were split between four targets. As such, Rion's group had no choice but to put faith in each other and bank on all of them surviving the coming barrage.

Rion intended to end the fight with this exchange. In all likelihood, so did Serge.

"Go for it!!!" they cried in unison.

The Holy Swords of light and shadow lunged forward as if propelled by explosions behind their hilts. Thousands of blades met thousands more in one huge cacophony. When they clashed, one dispersed in particles of light as the other turned into a glob of shadow that fell to the ground. Their destructive power was equal, meaning it would be numbers that decided their victory—however, they were equal in this aspect too. New Holy Swords were made in quick succession and immediately fired off. Rion focused on imagining her swords being sharper and more powerful as Serge wished for the same. Neither side was able to gain any ground.

However, there was one aspect in which the two differed. Namely, the presence of allies. Serge was unleashing flying slashes similar to Agito in an effort to keep Setsuna, Ema, and Sylvia at bay. In short, she was trying to attack and defend at the same time. It beggared belief that she managed it all while being hampered by her debuffs.

The younger Hero was faring much better in this regard.

"Rion-san!" Ema shouted. "We'll protect you, so focus on attacking!"

"Mm." Sylvia agreed. "We'll be your shield."

All three stood protectively before Rion, with Ema and Sylvia at the front and Setsuna halfway between.

"Setsuna-chan, you can pull off *that* move, right?!" Nito asked.

"Where am I going to use it if not here?!" Setsuna shot back. "Quickdraw: Starling!"

Countless slashes imbued with Iron Cutting Authority shot towards Serge's

Holy Swords every time Setsuna's sword left its scabbard. Each time it happened, Nito advised Setsuna on how she could improve her technique, and she put it into practice. Her mastery over this secret art of Wild Beast Style was growing in leaps and bounds.

"Betel!"

"Frenzied Blizzard!"

Ema's greatsword expanded to three times its normal size, serving as a giant shield that radiated searing heat as Sylvia's Rank S Blue Magic spell generated a gale filled with steel-hard icicles that not only knocked the Holy Swords off their trajectory but also assaulted Serge directly.

Thanks to her allies' efforts, Rion didn't have to worry about protecting herself and could focus solely on creating black Holy Swords. This proved enough to tip the scales.

"Ugh!"

Serge gritted her teeth as one of Rion's swords slipped through her defenses and pierced her foot. In light of how heavily she was relying on her swordsmanship, this was a terrible time to lose a pivot foot. With her rhythm interrupted, the rest of her defense quickly collapsed. Black Holy Swords began piercing her body one after the other, staining her cape red.

Naturally, Rion wouldn't let such an opportunity go. The Beast King had taught her better than that.

::Alex!::

::Arf!::

A copy of Gerard's greatsword bearing the crest of a wolf appeared within the shower of black Holy Swords. Rion's mental image of the most powerful sword ever was tied to Gerard, her swordsmanship teacher, and she poured every drop of imagined power she could into this one blade.

Fuu-chan, you really are strong. I hope you have fun with Kel-nii next.

Without warning, the greatsword shot forward, smashing through all the Holy Swords in its way and making a beeline for Serge. The last remaining Aegis

moved automatically in an attempt to stop the attack, sensing that it could prove fatal for Serge.

“Quickdraw: Swallow.”

It was too late. Setsuna’s slash bisected the shield, reducing it to particles of light that faded away. Serge had truly lost all means of protecting herself.

Shnk.

“Gee, I’m actually going to die? What a disappointing Hero I make. Oh well, at least I managed to buy some time. I suppose this means I failed...to uphold my name...as Protector.”

With her heart pierced by a greatsword, Serge’s left hand let go of Will as blood spilled from her mouth. The sword fell point-first and turned into light that faded away. The thousands of blades in the air also disappeared in the blink of an eye. In all likelihood, the one in her right hand was the main body and the rest were mere copies.

As one last protest, the ancient Hero raised her freed left hand, mumbling, “Disaster Ray.” However, Sylvia already knew how to deal with the laser beam. She simply stepped up and waited for Double Magic Armor to activate.

When the blinding light faded away, Serge’s body was gone. She had most definitely gotten out by resurrecting herself using A New Journey. Rion’s group kept their guard up, but Serge did not reappear.

The long fight was over. It was the current age of Heroes that the goddess of victory had smiled on.



“Did...we do it?” Rion asked warily.

“Rion-chan, you know saying that is going to jinx it!” Setsuna protested. “I suppose we already know she’s still alive somewhere, though...”

Once Rion’s group was sure that Serge was truly gone, they rejoined Philip and the rest of the ancient heroes. The female versions of themselves that they had been fighting had disappeared along with Serge.

Sai looked downcast. “In the end, we never did manage to help with the fight.

We're truly sorry."

Philip waved a hand dismissively, chuckling. "There was no helping it considering who we were up against. We were equally matched—maybe even outmatched. I'm pretty satisfied that we managed to keep our copies occupied."

"Pope Philip, you ought to be more prudent with your words."

"Oh, you're just too stiff, Sai."

"By the way, Philip," Sorondil interrupted, "do you have any interest in cross-dressing? I think I might have discovered something about myself."

A "Huh?!" that sounded like a frog being squashed came from multiple directions at the same time.

Rion laughed awkwardly. "Aha ha. In any case, I'm glad everyone made it. We *are* pretty beat up, though."

She looked around at her companions. Unfortunately, the group had failed to deflect all of the Holy Swords that Serge had thrown their way. Ema, who had been standing up front as a shield, had been stabbed twice. Despite Sylvia's efforts to reduce the momentum of the blades, Ema's wounds were painful to look at, and no one else was entirely unhurt either.

Ema winced. "Ow...are all Apostles so absurdly powerful? I'm not sure I can survive another encounter."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," Survivor said reassuringly. "Protector's strength is the most absurd among the Apostles. To be honest, this old man didn't think we would actually win. I guess you never really know what will happen in the future. Setsuna-chan seems to have become interested in Wild Beast Style too, so I for one am pretty happy with the outcome!"

Setsuna glared at him. "Nito-san, not a peep from you."

"More importantly, can anyone here use White Magic?" Sylvia asked anxiously. "Please heal Ema."

"Oh, I've got this." Philip raised a hand. "Being healed directly by the pope of Deramis is a huge honor that very few can experience, you know? Or at least,

that's what some would say. Ha ha ha."

Sai looked at him askance. "Pope Philip..."

"I know, I know. I'll get around to healing everyone. Line up! Don't worry. I'll heal you so perfectly, not even scars will remain!"

The pope held a hand over Ema's wounds and began casting a spell. A bright yet gentle light quickly sealed the opening as all other injuries on her body disappeared at the same time.

Ema caught her breath and looked at Sylvia. "Didn't you also take Serge's kick? Are you okay?"

"It hurt but I have Auto Heal. There's not even a scratch on me right now."

"You say that like nothing happened, but just seeing it happen almost made my heart stop!"

"Mm, I'll be more careful."

Apparently everyone had at least the energy to chat despite their wounds. Rion heaved a sigh of relief, but she couldn't fully relax as a nagging thought at the back of her mind insisted she had forgotten about someone. *Who could it be?*

"Ah. Where's Colette?" The last time Rion had seen her, she'd been on all fours on the ground after guiding Setsuna's group there. The Oracle with quivering limbs like a baby deer was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh, she seemed to disappear halfway through the fight..." Sylvia's voice trailed off.

Rion paled. "You don't think Fuu-chan, uh, kidnapped her, right?"

"What?!" Ema gasped. "Isn't she a Hero? She'd take hostages?!"

Sai frowned. "I can't let that slide. Serge is too kindhearted to perform such a despicable act. There must be a mistake."

"Hold on," Philip spoke up. "Didn't she attempt to kidnap my illegitimate daughter in the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits?"

"*You* hold on," Sorondil interrupted. "Philip, what is this about you having an

illegitimate child?”

“That’s...not important right now,” Ragat chided him.

As everyone started making a ruckus, Rion attempted to calmly analyze the situation. The Beast King had also taught her that being flustered at a time like this was the most ineffective response.

Hmm...Fuu-chan might be a Hero, but back in Japan, that term referred to a whole variety of personalities and characters. I know they were merely fictional, but we had dark heroes too. If Fuu-chan really had no choice, she probably wouldn’t hesitate to take a hostage. I think I would too if it was for Kel-nii’s sake. That said, I didn’t notice Fuu-chan doing anything else during the fight. Does this mean she has a fourth Unique Skill?

Rion was considering all possibilities based on her observations of the battle and the current situation. The truth, however, was a lot simpler than expected.

“Please remain calm, everyone. I am here!”

To everyone’s surprise, the girl they were looking for announced herself. And yet, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Huh? Where are you?” Rion looked around, bewildered.

“I’m here. Behind the temple.” The Oracle’s head poked out. She had been hiding the whole time.

“Colette! Gosh, you made me worry!”

“My apologies, Rion-sama. I am sorry to everyone else as well. I was keeping myself concealed so as to not get in the way.”

“We called for you a few times, though. Um, were you in the middle of something back there?”

“Uh, how should I put it? When I, uh, use too much MP at once, there is a bit of a recoil, and, uh...”

A few of those present caught on to the reason behind Colette’s flustered response and firmly made up their minds to never look behind the temple.

“Uh, that’s right! Your strategy was really helpful in the fight with Fuu-chan

just now! Thank you very much!” Rion said, attempting to change the subject. Her consideration nearly gave Colette a nosebleed again, but the Oracle managed to control herself somehow.

“I am unworthy of such praise! I merely contributed in the only way I knew how. I was hiding ever since the fighting began.”

Ever since Serge’s attempt to kidnap Sister Atra, Colette had anticipated the possibility that she might be targeted next. If the condition for being a sheath for Holy Lance Eclipse was having the blood of Deramis, there was no one more suitable. Pope Philip also fulfilled the condition, but Serge would never approach him of her own accord, so Colette knew she could summarily dismiss all concerns for her father. Sure enough, during the fight just now, Serge had gone to the trouble of sending proxies to fight the ancient heroes so that she wouldn’t have to.

“Hm? Colette, were you thinking something rude about me, your beloved father, just now?”

“Your Holiness, please consult your own conscience. Ahem, excuse me.”

Ema looked around. “I can hardly believe that all the most important members of Deramis are gathered here. It is a bold move, if nothing else. This arrangement will not affect your home country?”

“To be honest, as we currently do not know the whereabouts of the remaining Apostles, staying by Kelvin-sama’s side is likely far safer than staying home,” Colette replied. “I highly doubt there is anyone more reliable in the world than those present here. Currently, the previous Light Dragon King, Murmur-sama, is protecting Deramis, so it is in good hands. If push comes to shove, we can also seek aid from the Water Dragon King in Toraj.”

Survivor sighed. “Those are some real big names you’re dropping there. This old man has had enough of dragons. I would prefer being anywhere else.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Nito-san?” Setsuna asked.

The game of tag, where he was constantly on a razor’s edge between life and death, flashed through Nito’s mind. It was only his projected form that had died, but he had been beside himself with consternation the whole time.

“Okay, I’m done healing everyone!” Philip announced. “Now everyone should be back in top condition!”

“Which means it’s time for the real fight,” Ema murmured.

Sylvia nodded. “Mother might be inside.”

The two turned to look at the temple, their eyes filled with expectation. Presumably, Kelvin and Melfina were already fighting inside, and their opponent was Iris Deramilius, also known as Arbitrator.

“Huh?” Rion tilted her head like a little bird, looking bewildered.

Setsuna, who was standing next to her, asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I was trying to tell Kel-nii that we’re heading to him, but I can’t connect to the Network. This is weird. It’s never happened before.”

“Uh-oh.”

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 11: The Horn Sounds in the Abyss*. It's Doufu Mayoi here, the author who's dealing with the usual bustle that comes with a new year. Thank you so much to all the readers who are still following this series as it moves from web novel to print. Your purchase means the world to me.

Let's get right into it. Did you notice anything when checking out the illustration on the cover of this volume? Something about it is different from all the ones before it! That's right, Kelvin's not on it! Up till now, no matter who was being portrayed at the forefront, Kelvin was in the back somewhere, posing as best he could. Now, however, a successor has taken his place! I suppose this, too, is a sign of time passing. Either that, or Serge just didn't want him there. But since it's Rion, I'm sure Kelvin gladly yielded his place. Just what will happen for the next volume? Oh dear, what a pity—time's up.

In regard to the actual production of this volume of *Black Summoner*, I want to express my thanks to Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama for creating such a radiant depiction of the two Heroes, my proofreaders, and of course, once more, all my dear readers.

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

Bonus Short Stories

Good Food Is Life

The demons of Abyssland considered fighting to be the most important thing in life, and they therefore had a tendency to disdain all other endeavors. This included cooking, which put Viktor, who had the Cooking skill, in a tiny minority. Almost all those who made food in Doktoría, the country ruled by King Galia Kudo, did so without possessing the relevant skill.

At the moment, Melfina, who was acknowledged by all as the person in this world most passionate about food—*eating* food, that is—and Colette, who was acknowledged by all as the person most passionate about worshipping Melfina, were strolling around the capital of Doktoría. They had certain goals in mind: Melfina wanted to experience the culinary culture of Abyssland and satisfy herself by filling her stomach, while Colette wanted to watch Melfina being satisfied. In short, they were going to do what they usually did, just in Abyssland.

“Melf— Ahem. Mel-sama, that restaurant has clearly been around for a long time!”

“Its appearance does indeed raise one’s expectations. Let us give it a try.”

The goddess and Oracle strode in with no hesitation.

“Hey, welc— Huh? Human-types?”

“Chef, serve us the most delicious dish in this establishment.”

The more a demon looked like a human, the higher their status was, and it was really only royalty and the highest tier demons who looked fully human. As such, they were extremely rare. This was common sense in Abyssland. Consequently, the master of this restaurant was very much misunderstanding what was happening.

Wh-Wh-Why are such important people in my store? Am... Am I being tested

right now?!

Exactly what the chef was thinking was obvious from how flustered he looked.

“I don’t know if this matches your palates, but...uh, here you go, m’ladies.”

“I see; you have simply grilled this meat. That’s fair; I do think cooking methods that aim to make the most of an ingredient’s natural deliciousness have their place too. With that said...*om nom nom*. Another serving please.”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

“Good food is life!”

After eating ten servings, Melfina left the restaurant and headed to another one.

“Grilled meat again, I see. If possible, I’d have appreciated some seasoning. However, this *is* a different meat from before, so I shall overlook it. *Om nom nom*. Another serving, please.”

“A-At once, my lady!”

“Good food is life!”

Several hours passed with Melfina and Colette hitting stores one after another.

“And once again, it is meat. What’s more, this is our fourth time having this meat. Oh well, I have this special sauce made by Efil to go with it, so I can still enjoy it. *Om nom nom*. Another serving, please.”

“Uh, a moment, please!”

“Dude, you see that woman? Not only is she clearly someone important, she’s got an appetite to match!”

“Man, it makes *my* stomach feel heavy just watching her. Which country do you think she’s from?”

“You two haven’t heard? She’s famous for visiting restaurants that are in a slump and ordering so much they run out of stock. Because of that, she’s being called the savior of the industry. Fortune visits the places she drops by and they see a huge boom in business.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! Uh, what do you think? Should I try praying to her?”

Mel’s reputation among the demons was sharply rising.

“Good food is life!”

“Uh, and who’s the silver-haired woman at her side? She’s holding a poster with words written in a language I don’t recognize.”

“Oh, her? Honestly, no idea.”

Colette’s reputation among the demons was, in contrast, fast becoming “the weird one that nobody understood.”

No Bond Like Sisterhood

Bell didn’t believe in the phrase “today’s enemy is tomorrow’s ally.” Therefore, she had never imagined she would find herself in that very situation. This story is from when she was living in Grebarelka after having left the Apostles of Elearis.

“Phew. Another day of papa’s noisiness over.”

“Bell, are you going to take a bath now? As they say, there’s no bond like sisterhood, so let’s go in together! Your big sister will scrub your back for you! Oh, when we get in, make sure you sit deep enough so the water goes to your shoulders and count to at least thirty, okay? And also...”

This was the first new constant in Bell’s everyday life: whenever she was about to enter the bath in the castle, Sera would show up without fail, towel in hand. Sera’s unnecessarily sharp intuition was proving itself useful even for things like this—in fact, it could even be said that this was exactly the kind of thing that she wanted her intuition to kick in for. As a result, she hadn’t missed a single opportunity to date.

“Phew. Another day of Sebasdel being gross over.”

“Bell, are you going to sleep now? As they say, there’s no bond like sisterhood, so let’s sleep together! Your big sister will teach you a secret to getting a good night’s sleep! Ta-da! The answer is a cup of hot milk and some stretching! Now you can sleep soundly till morning!”

This was the second new constant in Bell's everyday life: just when she was about to sleep, Sera would show up without fail, her personal pillow and two cups of hot milk in hand. Even though the exact time Bell slept differed each day, Sera would always open the door to her room exactly when she was about to get into bed. Needless to say, the milk was always the perfect temperature.

"Phew. Another day of sister Sera sticking close over. Uh...do you want to go for a walk, sister Sera? Since you're here, we might as well, right?"

"What? How'd you know I was going to call out to you?"

"Of course I know. I have good intuition too, and we spend so much time together everyday. So, walk or no walk?"

"Oh, Bell! And of course, that's a yes!"

This was the third new constant in Bell's everyday life: whenever the two sisters were at the same location, they were almost always together. The older sister seemed free-spirited and the younger sister seemed to have a bad attitude, but at the end of the day, it turns out they practically shared the same wavelength.

"By the way, Bell, are you sure you have your handkerchief with you? You know you shouldn't follow strangers, right? Here, hold hands with me. Oh, that's right. If we're going out, we need to dress you up! We should ask Efil to make you a nice casual outfit. Come on, let's go!"

On very, very rare occasions, Bell felt somewhat disgruntled. Even so, these two sisters got along very well.

The Apostles' Pajama Party

This is a story of three girls, which happened at an unspecified time at an unspecified location. They were gathered on the roof of a temple with a wavering appearance—much like a mirage—which was located within a pure white space that seemed to stretch indefinitely into the distance.

"And so, I announce the start of the first ever Apostles girls' night!"

"Whooooo!"

“The...what?”

The one who loudly announced the start of this strange event was the Fourth Seat of the Apostles, “Protector” Serge Flore. The one who cheered her on with matching enthusiasm was the Eight Seat, “Assassin” Ange. The last person, the Sixth Seat, otherwise known as “Condemner” Bell Baal, had her lips pursed in a disgruntled expression.

“C’mon, Condemner! Be more excited!” Ange said teasingly.

“About what?” Bell gave her a look. “What is this anyway?”

Ange shrugged. “Well, how do I put it? Protector said she got so bored, she was going crazy and the only way to relieve her stress was to spend quality time with other girls. So, she gathered us to have a pajama party where we have fun chatting with each other.”

“Now you’ve *really* lost me!”

As it turned out, Bell hadn’t been told ahead of time what she was showing up for.

“Before we do anything, you two, change into these outfits I prepared for you!” Serge handed each of the other girls a package.

“What is it?” Bell frowned.

“Pajamas!”

“I’m leaving.”

“Now, now, now!”

Serge caught Bell’s arm, forcing her to stay. The moment Serge decided to do something, no matter how ridiculous the idea, she would become dead serious about carrying it out. Bell, who understood this, gave in and very, very, veeeery reluctantly decided to play along.

“Why do I have to change into pajamas in our organization’s headquarters?” she sighed.

Ange tapped her arm excitedly. “Condemner, look, look! My pajamas have a hood with cat ears attached!”

Unlike Bell, despite being a fellow victim of Serge's whim, Ange seemed thrilled about what they were doing. Failing to find an appropriate reply, Bell wordlessly obliged Serge's request and announced moodily, "I'm done changing,"

"So cute!" Ange and Serge exclaimed in unison.

"Tch." Clicking her tongue was the only thing Bell, who was now sporting a very pink set of pajamas, could do.

Serge nodded appreciatively. "Good, you two are now wearing the appropriate attire for our ritual. It's time for the next step!"

"It's a ritual?" Ange chuckled. "Okay, what do you want us to do now?"

"We'll lie on our bellies on our beds!" Serge grinned. "We can't *not* do this!"

Bell grumbled, "Another incomprehensible request. In the first place, there are no beds here. You know this; this is the roof of the temple where you're sitting all year round."

"Tsk, ts, ts, you're underestimating me. Who am I? I'm Serge Flore! As a Hero, it is my job to go above and beyond what people normally think is possible. Holy Sword Will, give me three beds and three sets of the ultimate bedding!"

When the Hero waved her hand, three copies of her weapon appeared. With little explosions that came across as unnecessarily dramatic flairs, the swords turned into beds.

"What...is this?" Bell looked taken aback.

Ange's eyes were also wide as saucers. "Protector, did you just...turn your sword into beds?"

"Bingo!" Serge snapped a finger and grinned. "What's more, Will isn't just assuming the shape. This bedding is more comfortable and warmer than literally anything that exists in this world. Well, what're you waiting for? Get in, you two! What have you got to lose? C'mon! C'mon!"

"H-Hold on a..."

Bell was forced to oblige, once again very reluctantly, while Ange dove into

her bed of her own accord. When Serge confirmed they had both assumed the proper pose, she burrowed under her own cover.

“Oh wow, I actually like this. It’s so warm...”

“Assassin, get a hold of yourself. Don’t forget you’re a professional operative.”

“You say that, Condemner, but now you can’t get out of your bed either, can you?”

“Only because Protector will force me back in if I do. I’m just playing along so this farce can be over as soon as possible.”

“Gosh, you’re such a tsundere, Condemner!”

“Protector, why is it that that word annoys me even though I don’t know what it means?!”

It was anybody’s guess whether Serge was doing it on purpose, but she was pressing all of Bell’s buttons.

“Now, now, now, calm down, both of you,” Ange said calmly. “We’re here to have a fun chat, right?”

“Oh, you’re right!” Serge looked around with bright eyes. “Let’s start by talking about our love experiences!”

“Right off the bat?!” Ange exclaimed. “We’re already doing the topic that people normally slowly build up to?!”

“I’m leaving,” Bell declared.

“Oh no you aren’t!” the other two cried in unison.

Bell desperately attempted to get out of bed, but her companions held her fast. In the end, she was forced to stay till the very end of the pajama party.

The Childhood Album of Gustav’s Beloved Daughters

“Fool shon, you get it? You— I asked, you get it? Do you get just how cute and beautiful Sera and Bell are?!”

“I get it, sir. I get it, so how about taking it easy on the bottle a little? Drinking too much isn’t good for your health.”

“You idjit! How dare you act like you know everything about Sera and Bell?! You— You’re a billion yearsh too early!”

“That may be so, but that’s no reason to strangle my n— My neck, sir, my NNNGGGGGG!”

The Celebration of Sera and Bell for No Particular Reason dinner feast was in full swing. This was especially obvious at Kelvin’s and Gustav’s seats, where various aspects of the situation were heating up in a physical way that could not be more plain to see.

“Hmph! I knew this would happen, so I brought this to— Right, to give you shome educashon!”

“*Huff, huff...* And this is, uh...an album?”

“Indeed! We used a, uh, a recording magic tool to presherve Sera’s and Bell’s dazzling childhood in this...book! My wife and I poured our hearts into all these picturesh! You’re the first person who’s ever sheen it beside us. This is speshal! Ex-shep-shon! Be thankful!”

“Oh, that definitely sounds like something I want to see! You mean to say that album has pictures of them when they were children?!”

“You shure catch on fast despite being a fool. This album has pictures of them going all the way back to when they were babies. You want to shee?”

“Yes, please! It would be an incredible honor! We must see this!”

Just as Gustav was about to open the thick volume in his hand, however, two demon sisters rushed over with great speed, shouting in unison, “HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!” Of course, it was Sera and Bell.

“Papa! What do you think you’re showing that man?! Have you gone senile? Have you gone stupid?” Bell exclaimed.

“That’sh right!” Gustav grinned goofily. “Your papa is shtupid for his beloved daughtersh!”

“More importantly, father, give us the album!” Sera demanded. “My intuition

tells me we need to confiscate it! Father, I can't get close because I would smell the alcohol on your breath. So, throw it over! Come on, pass it here!"

Gustav shook his head as if trying to clear his head. "Uh...pass?"

"You're playing catch with your daughter!" Sera replied, lifting her hands. "Come on, right here!"

"Oh, playing catch? Mh-hm, papa will throw this album!" Despite supposedly being thoroughly sloshed, Gustav made a throw so clean and so easy to catch it was as if he was sober.

"All right, we got the album!"

"Nice catch, sister Sera!"

"Bell, we need to hide this now!"

"I know the perfect place!"

After catching the album, the sisters rushed off as quickly as they had shown up.

"Uh, what just happened, sir?"

"Zzzzzzzz."

"Wait— Sir, you're crushing me!"

Kelvin was broken out of his daze when Gustav, who had expended every drop of strength he had with the throw just now, blacked out and collapsed right on top of him.

The Softest Cheeks of All

One night, Kelvin and Rion entered the bath together, as they always did. After washing up, the siblings soaked themselves in the warm water. As they were getting a well-deserved rest and having a lighthearted chat about how it had been a hectic day once again, Kelvin suddenly brought up a particular topic.

"Oh, you know? The other day, Sera and Mel touched Bell's cheek and were like, 'It's Rion-tier!' I wonder just how soft it is."

“Kel-nii, can you not squeeze my cheeks while saying that? Aha ha! You’re tickling me!”

“However, sister dear, this is a grave situation. Sera and Mel are claiming that there is someone else with cheeks as soft as yours, which I consider the softest in the entire world bar none. Do you see how this calls for a showdown?”

“A showdown? You sure are blowing it out of proportion. In the first place, can you even touch Bell-chan’s cheek?”

“Not in a million years. The instant I do, father-in-law will punch me to let me know he’s expelling me from his family.”

“Whoa, what a serious face. But if that’s the case, you have no choice but to ask Sera-nee and Mel-nee, right?”

“You’re right. That’s why I’ll be hosting a cheek softness competition here...in my imagination!”

“What?! That sounds fun! Do it, do it! I wanna know how it turns out!”

This conversation dearly needed someone to put the breaks on it, but unfortunately, these two siblings were basically sharing the same brain cell.

“First up is the original squishy, she who would never yield the seat of being the squishiest of squishies! Entry number one is—*drrrrrrrrr*—Rion! Oh yes, we just have to do this announcer-style!”

::Grandpa Gerard thinks so too!::

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

The siblings thought they had just received a telepathic message, but they decided they had probably imagined it. They moved on.

“But, Kel-nii...honestly, I don’t think there’s anything different about my cheeks.”

“Nuh-uh, no matter what you say, the fact that your cheeks are soft is an established fact in my mind. It’s basically carved in stone. You have no choice but to accept it.”

Kelvin gave Rion his most serious look. This was the face he made when he was one hundred percent confident in what he was saying and nothing would ever change his mind.

“Okaaay, if you say so. Who’s next, then?”

“It only makes sense to introduce this person next! Entry number two, the dark horse of the competition! Is it a given that all little sisters have soft cheeks?! It’s none other than—*drrrrrrrr*—Bell!”

“All that about little sisters aside, it does make sense to name her next. Since we were talking about her in the first place.”

“It *would* render everything I said prior irrelevant if I mentioned someone else, true.”

The Celsius siblings were fully on the same page.

“That’s about everyone I can think of to enter the competition. Can you think of anyone else?”

“Hmm... Oh! I think I do. Lemme try the announcer thing you did.”

“Really? Sure, go ahead.”

“Entry number three, you gotta be kidding me, Kel-nii! How can you forget your very first partner?! Let alone just the cheeks, its entire body is squishy! The very first and the ultimate squishy contestant, it’s—*drrrrrrrrrr*—Clotho!”

Kelvin gasped in shock as his imagined competition to decide the softest one of all was thrown into turmoil. Needless to say, this debate continued for quite some time afterwards. In the end, the siblings both got dizzy from staying too long in the bath.

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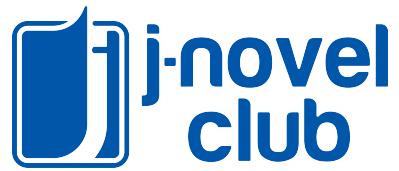
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Black Summoner: Volume 11

by Doufu Mayoi

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