











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



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.



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



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



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



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



Gerard

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



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.



Shutola Trycen

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



**Bell Baal** 

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

## Academic City of Lumiest



Rami Ryuuoh

Actually the Lightning Dragon King, but she's too busy enjoying her school life as a trendy gal. BFF's with Ri-chan (Rion).



Dorothy

Rion's roommate. The type of girl who seems perpetually flustered. Has a peculiar personality, but it's just a mask. Revealed to be Dorothiara, one of the Divine Pillars.

## Ten Authorities



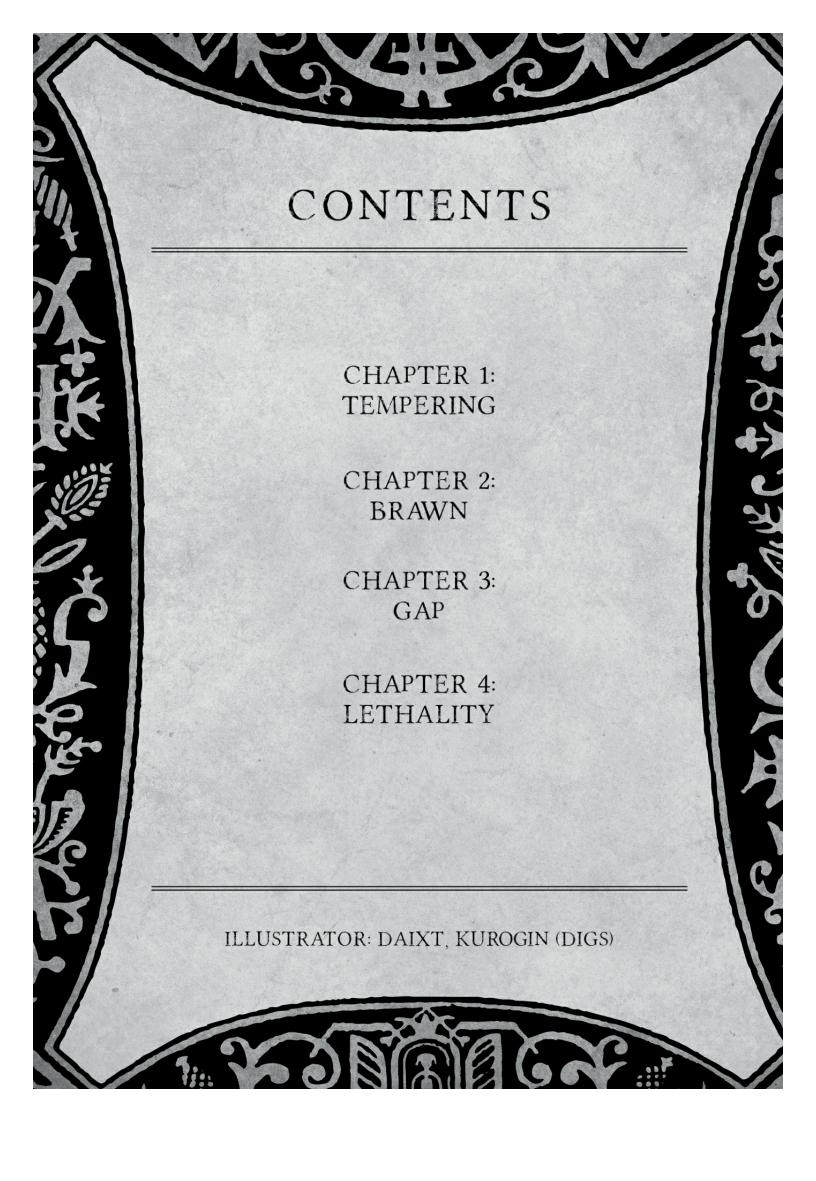
Ridman (Hard)

A member of the Ten Authorities with the "Unbreakable" Authority. Loses to Kelvin and is made into his Follower. Currently a sphere of metal.



Eld Aste

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



# **Chapter 1: Tempering**

Having manifested his Authority, a pair of wings unfolded out of his back. They were white, despite the fact that he was a fallen angel. Actually, rather than wings, they were more like a mass of particles. The trees, flowers, grass, rocks, and even the earth itself were being broken down into pure energy and stored in his wings.

"Smiths who have reached the realm of the divine no longer care to choose the place, materials, or even tools. They are able to always create the best arms and armor no matter the situation. But my smithy happens to be somewhat dangerous. Anything without a will, or more importantly, anything weak, will be dismantled. This is my Authority: Tempering!" Baldogg boasted.

"Mm-hmm, it looks like I can expect a little entertainment from this?" Serge muttered. "Well, words alone mean nothing, anyway!"

On the other side, Serge morphed her Holy Sword Will into its club form, Holy Club Nyoibou, twirling it around in place of her warm-up exercises. The weapon was long, seemingly around two meters, but she was spinning it with incredible speed, making the club invisible to the naked eye. It wasn't even at the level of leaving behind afterimages. The club had quite literally become invisible.

"Hmph, pretty interesting trick," said Baldogg. "But do you really think that'll be enough to beat me?"

"I wonder," replied Serge. "Well, I guess it depends on how hard you fight?"

A portion of the particles of Baldogg's wings gathered in his hand, instantly forming a bow. Furthermore, various swords and spears were formed in the air around him. It was as though the very air surrounding him was a forge.

"Scatter and vanish." Baldogg pointed the bow in his hands at Serge, and the weapons around him locked on to his target as well. The next instant, they all flew at her, as if having been flung.

Each impact came with an explosion powerful enough to change the landscape. Of course they did, since each weapon was powerful enough to be Rank S. Merely throwing them produced enough destructive might to easily produce such casualties.

"I can't measure how much confidence you have in your strength, but don't you think it was careless not to move at all, even in the face of all those explosions? No matter how fast you swing your weapon, it's impossible to sweep away all of mine. They're absolutely stronger than yours—the stuff of myths."

In front of Baldogg were a multitude of craters, each with a weapon in the center, stuck into the earth. Unfortunately, these craters were also thick with black smoke, so it was impossible to see through them. But given all the explosions, even on the off chance his enemy survived all that, his mass of weapons was powerful enough to be Rank S and had vicious skills to match. Baldogg was sure that the battle was won, convinced that no human could do anything against him.

Which...well, set up a flag, in a certain sense. He was better at it than Serge already.

"Whoa there, how am I alive? Was I lucky? Or does my opponent just have no control at all?" Serge taunted him. "Either way, you should aim better. There wasn't even any need for me to dodge."

"Huh?" Baldogg responded angrily after a moment. Suddenly, a fierce wind whipped up, blowing away all the smoke. It looked like Serge had done this from within by spinning her club. And as her flippant attitude indicated, she was totally fine—completely untouched, in fact.

The weapons Baldogg had thrown had definitely managed to create several large craters, destroying their surroundings. There was no doubt about that. However, that was all. The weapons he was so proud of, which he had unleashed at Serge, had all gone off in wild directions. It was as if they'd purposefully avoided her, as only the area she was standing on was safe from the destruction.

What?! She's completely unhurt?! That's impossible! The arrow I just shot is

supposed to chase its target to the ends of the universe! And it's unthinkable for all the weapons to have missed her when she didn't move at all! There's no way they'd scatter so conveniently like that! Baldogg screamed internally.

The things he trusted most in this world were the weapons made by his own hand. His trust in them was equal to his adoration of the wicked god, Addams, whom he worshipped as the one and only god. And that was exactly why he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Even if his target was the strongest obstacle in this world that could oppose them, he could never have imagined his weapons would throw up an error against a mere human.

I'm a maiden, in the end; I don't want to get my hair dirty. I'm glad I went with Nyoibou, since I was able to drive away all that smoke and dust, Serge thought.

While Baldogg was flabbergasted, she simply continued to spin her club. She was maintaining the invisibility of her weapon, though it was creating an eerie, alien sound as it sliced through the air.

So...mm-hmm, mm-hmm, judging from that elated, smug face he was making until just a moment ago, he's got no detection skills to speak of? Serge pondered her observations. Actually, it doesn't seem like he knows all that much about me. Awww, that's so sad for him. So he really came to fight me all ignorant like that. That would've been huge points in his favor if only he'd been a cute girl. But for him to be a man... I'm so unlucky!

Serge was exasperatingly narcissistic. However, she *had* started to think about her next move. Her enemy had shown a disappointingly wide opening. She wasn't such a bleeding heart that she'd let such a chance pass her by.

## Kaboom!

The sound of a scathing blunt blow came from Baldogg's cheek. An even more severe sense of pain came afterward. Though he'd given her an opening, for a moment, Baldogg didn't understand what had attacked him. Still, he immediately understood after looking at Serge. She was holding a club that had extended to an impossible length.

By continuing the high-speed rotation that made the weapon invisible, and furthermore having it extend with good timing, she had been able to land a beautiful hit on his face. Although the logic of it was simple, it was a godly move

that likely only she could pull off.

But Serge reacted like she'd hit a target in a shooting game at a fair, saying, "Oooh, I hit it!"

"You falsified your weapon?!" Baldogg shouted accusingly.

"What do you mean, falsified? It's Nyoibou. Of course it extends," Serge replied. "Well, I guess I did hit you pretty hard, so I should praise you for not having your head fly off, though, you did lose your glasses."

Baldogg let out a strangled noise as veins popped out on his face in anger. He was in a pose one step away from falling flat after being hit that hard, with one hand on the ground to help stabilize him. He slammed the ground with that hand, turning the entire area into energy that enveloped his body, transforming him.

He took a couple deep, deliberate breaths. "Fine, I will acknowledge you as an enemy and finish you with all my might."

Baldogg stood up, now clad in a gaudy full set of armor. It shone so bright it was impossible to believe that it used to be dirt, and it emanated a force that unconsciously pressured those who looked upon the wearer to prostrate themselves. That was likely some sort of ability of the armor itself, but the one who was currently looking at it only thought that the wearer seemed kind of arrogant.

"What, you weren't being serious?! Wow, I'm shocked! You have no sense of danger!" Serge feigned surprise.

"Stop your drivel!" Baldogg shouted.

Serge's obvious playacting had exhausted Baldogg's store of patience. He could no longer find it in himself to show any mercy, so he started to bring out materials that had been in Storage since the age of the gods. He created and deployed numerous "mythical" weapons, each of which was the equal of Melfina's Holy Lance Answerer.

"Wow, now *that's* a spectacle!" Serge exclaimed. "Then let me get in on this too! Holy Sword Willjillion!"

As if competing with Baldogg's mass of weapons, Serge deployed even more copies of Holy Sword Willjillion. This face-off of massed weapons, just one set of which could warp space-time, made it seem like the end of the world was coming.

The host of Holy Sword Willjillions clashed with that of the mythical weapons. The damage done whenever blades clashed was beyond words. No matter which side won, this entire area would be turned into a wasteland.

In the midst of such a disastrous conflict, Serge had morphed the Will in her hand into its bow form, Holy Bow Artemis. Of course, Baldogg had a bow in his hands as well, which meant the next moment was filled with an intense exchange of shots. But neither side managed to land an effective hit on the other. Serge's arrows would strike Baldogg every time, but his armor made it so that he essentially took no damage. Given that a single arrow from Holy Bow Artemis could create a large crater in the ground, one could only imagine how absurd the defense value of the armor was. As things stood, not even hundreds of arrows could bring Baldogg down.

On the other hand, Baldogg's arrows had yet to land a single hit on Serge. Following the example set by the first attack, the world itself seemed to refuse to allow the bow to exhibit its power. This absurdity was approaching unfair, and it defied all logic. But no matter how much Baldogg wailed and complained, the arrows continued to seemingly dodge out of Serge's way. It also didn't seem like he'd be able to even graze his target, no matter how many hundreds of arrows he unleashed. Moreover, the factors that put them in a stalemate extended to the storm of weapons around them as well. The same story was playing out, where Baldogg's side wouldn't take damage even when hit and his attacks seemingly dodged of their own volition.

"Aha, that makes sense. Even if you're rotten, you still presided over smithing at one point. The specs of your weapons catalog—and that alone—is impressive," Serge admitted.

"I never expected you to be able to mess with my weapons this much. Even when facing other gods in the past, finding one as ridiculous as you was rare. You can be proud...but still!" Baldogg shouted. He shot an arrow, and at the same time, he glared at the Will in Serge's hands.

"I *thought* I recognized that weapon. It's one of my imitator's works!" he exclaimed.

"Hm? Imitator?" Serge seemed confused.

"Yes, exactly!" Baldogg agreed. "The ability to change shape freely into whatever the user wishes is exactly like Ridwan, which I made out of divine iron! I bet some god blindly imitated me after we were sealed away, and it looks like whoever it was didn't do a very good job! Compared to Ridwan, that's a total failure!"

"Hah! Hah." Serge laughed boldly, but she quieted down mid-laugh. Then, after a pause, she said, "I don't think I can let that one go."

Her voice was a mite lower, and the arrow she fired in retaliation hit Baldogg in the face. Unfortunately, his helmet seemed to absorb the blow, and the arrow fell powerlessly to the ground.

"Ha ha ha! You can try to intimidate me all you want, but the results are plain to see! My Ridwan is nothing like that defective piece of junk!" Baldogg boasted. "He surpasses the framework of simple weaponry or armor to have his own will! Having the unassailable toughness to not succumb to any attack is his pride! He can transform into a multitude of different things, regardless of the era! As a weapon...as a tool of war, the stuff he is made of is just different! It absolutely is!"

"Huh, I see. That's amazing," said Serge. "You might actually be the pinnacle of all smiths. But..." Serge rushed at her opponent, stepping on air and becoming as the wind itself.

Seeing that, Baldogg immediately moved to intercept with one of his weapons. However, it still didn't hit.

"As a weapon user, you're barely third-rate," she finished.

"Grk?!"

With lightning speed, Will changed from a bow to a large hammer. Now with Holy Hammer Mjolnir in hand, Serge swung at Baldogg with all her might. Not even the fallen angel's armor was able to absorb all of the force of that attack, and Baldogg was sent crashing back to the ground.

"Grkhh...heh heh...heh ha ha ha! I told you, it's meaningless!" he exclaimed. "No matter how much you transform it, that weapon won't—"

He was still essentially unhurt as he tried to stand up again. But before his mouth could spit his next words with his haughty, confident tone, Serge was already right next to him, making her next attack.

"Holy Katana Masamune," she declared.

Will's next change was used to make a series of drawing slashes at close range. These attacks, which brought to mind Survivor's secret technique, came like an avalanche, all accurately targeting the slight gaps in the joints of Baldogg's plate. Serge couldn't match Survivor in terms of her skill at this technique, but her incredibly high stats made up for the lack of skill, allowing her to make her attacks with nearly the same power and speed as her former comrade.

Baldogg let out a grunt. "It's useless! Totally useless! You don't learn, do you?! Not to mention, you were careless! You got too close!"

Serge made a surprised noise. Even after all that effort, her attacks had not penetrated Baldogg's armor. In fact, the recoil she felt from striking the protective gear actually hurt. It was an effect of Baldogg's Authority, Tempering. His ability to break down the substances around him extended to Serge as well. No matter how strong her protagonist buff from Absolute Gospel was, she couldn't dodge an ability that affected all the space around her through sheer luck.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to keep acting like a gentleman forever! Stop resisting and become the materials for one of my works!" Baldogg said.

In the blink of an eye, all of Serge's equipment was broken down. Her Heavenly Garment Mitos, God Hand Iero, and Eternal Boots Zage—all things lovingly used for many years by her and precious partners to her—were taken away. Only Will remained, still in Serge's hands.

"My Will isn't weak enough to be disassembled by you. Also, watch out for your head," she told him.

Holy Sword Will Durandal had flown up above Baldogg's head to deliver a surprise attack. Serge had amassed the Willjillions that had been warring in the air into one mass to make the giant sword that had just struck her opponent. Sparks flew from Baldogg's armor as the giant sword attempted to bisect him vertically. In the end, though, the armor held. She was just one step short of a decisive blow.

As for Baldogg, he'd lost sight of Serge, who had been right in front of him just a moment before. The instant his gaze had traveled elsewhere when he'd been hit by the surprise attack had been enough for her to disappear.

"Tch! So much useless struggling!" Baldogg scoffed with irritation. "Allow me to break this dull thing down first!"

He spread his white wings, the tips of which started to split into sharp needles. Then, the needles stabbed into the giant sword, acting like syringes that allowed Baldogg to start forcibly disassembling the weapon. At the same time, he made the mass of weapons, which was still in the air, rain down in a random pattern.

Even if he managed to see and target her, his attacks would just miss. So he opted to hit a wide area with a single attack. And even though he couldn't see her, he had no need to fear her attacks. He likely thought he'd be safe if he brought his weapons in close. It was obvious, and of course, Serge could read that intention as well.

"I knew it. You're far too easygoing and unsuited to the front lines of battle," she said. "You're prioritizing your urge to create over winning against me."

Baldogg let out a grunt. "So that's where you are!"

Responding to the voice coming from behind him, he reflexively launched a weapon he had on hand. However, when he turned around, Serge was nowhere to be seen.

"Euthanasia." Once again, Serge's voice could be heard coming from behind Baldogg. But this time, the voice was intoning a spell.

"This... It's?!" A coffin-shaped barrier formed around Baldogg. The giant sword his wings had stabbed into disappeared before he noticed, leaving only

him inside the barrier.

"Borrowing a move from someone who was once a comrade to defeat an enemy... Yeah, don't you think that's pretty protagonist-esque?" Serge asked.

No matter how many times he turned around or checked his surroundings, Baldogg couldn't find Serge anywhere. Even when he turned to face where her voice was coming from, it would instantly start coming from another angle.

"You fool! How can you talk about defeating me when you can't even produce any appreciable amount of damage?!" Baldogg shouted. "Ah, I see. I get what you're plotting now. Since you can't defeat me, you're going to seal me away instead! Heh heh, do you really think a barrier like this can hold me? Just you wait, I'll break this down in a—"

"God-Killing."

A mechanical whirring sound could be heard coming from behind Baldogg.

"Jeez, you went and ruined my best outfit. I'll have to hand out divine punishment on behalf of all womankind," Serge said.

The weapon was too *off* to be called a sword. It was composed of many tiny blades forming a serrated pattern. Such a blade was completely unique, impossible to find anywhere else. However, the standout feature was that the blade itself seemed to be spinning at hyperspeed. Tiny linked blades curved around the body of the sword and were spinning so fast as to become a single piece, giving off an overwhelming sense of presence, as though asserting that they were the true weapon. Furthermore, the part of the handle where a guard would normally be was where the mechanical sounds were coming from, and it was like the sword itself was trying to intimidate its surroundings. If Kelvin or Rion had heard this sound, they would have likened it to a motorcycle engine. To be fair, the engine part would have been correct.



Baldogg took a moment to process what he was seeing. "Hah! Is that supposed to be a chainsaw?"

"Oh?" Serge responded. "That's surprising. I didn't expect a god like you to recognize it. This is my super secret technique, a chainsaw type Will. Its name is Holy Murderer God-Killing."

Serge, with her Holy Sword Will in chainsaw mode, struck a pose like a killer in a horror movie. Unfortunately, thanks to Baldogg's Authority, she'd been stripped down to her underwear. Far from being intimidating, it actually made her look kind of like a pervert.

"Who're you calling a pervert?!" Serge shouted.

"Huh?" Baldogg seemed confused.

"You just thought that, I know you did!" Serge replied. "You're the pervert here, making a young maiden look like this! If I hadn't made a set of underwear with Will, I'd seriously be a streaker right now!"

Baldogg couldn't say anything in reply, as his mind had yet to catch up with the reason for Serge's sudden outburst. Still, Baldogg was the cause of Serge's current state of undress, so her treatment of him was understandable.

"I'll say this now, but I am absolutely not interested in seeing you naked," Baldogg clarified. "Your weapon that's been transformed into a chainsaw is more my speed."

"So you really are a pervert!" Serge shouted. "Your preference just solidifies that even more!"

"What?! Jeez, you're way better at running your mouth than anything else," Baldogg lamented. "You just don't know anything about me. You see, I—"

"I know," Serge said, interrupting him. "You're Baldogg Gettier, and you used to be the god of blacksmithing and creation, right? If I remember right, that giant flying stake is something you made. I think the name was...the Holy Stake?"

Baldogg let out a shocked but appreciative noise. "I'm shocked. How do you know that?"

"It's not like I wanted to learn that tidbit," said Serge. "I just have a friend who's really knowledgeable about the myths. I personally have no interest at all, but I asked about it in deference to her cuteness, and I ended up remembering what she said. I gotta say, being a natural genius has its downsides."

Baldogg paused for a moment before replying. "Then do you know about my numerous great works? If you do, you would know there's no way for you to break my armor with that piece of junk that can only transform, even if you give it a really impressive name."

"I wonder about that," said Serge. "Now then, this conversation's gone on too long, let's stop here. I've seen through your plan to buy time to break through the barrier, after all."

"Tch!" Baldogg had been having more trouble than expected trying to break through the barrier, so he couldn't help but click his tongue when he realized he'd been seen through. Also, he realized that it would basically be impossible for him to break out before Serge would attack him. He went with his backup plan, which was to use the weapons he'd deployed around the area to intercept his enemy.

"Whoa there, that was a pretty weak move from someone who was boasting so much about their armor," Serge commented. "You really don't want to get hit, huh? Do you not have any confidence you can withstand one? Not that I care either way!"

Serge took a step forward with her chainsaw at the ready. Baldogg launched all his weapons, but they flew off in wildly inaccurate directions thanks to Serge's luck. Now, there was no time to recall the weapons, and neither was there time to make new ones.

That was an empty threat. There's no way that fake would be able to trump one of my creations, he thought.

Serge took another step, then another. Every time she advanced, the sound of the weapon in her hands got louder. Finally, Baldogg started to sense something fearsome, something that couldn't be expressed with words. It was despair itself, much like what he'd been made to taste when they'd lost the

great war.

In the end, it's just a cheap knockoff. Not even fit to touch Ridwan's feet. It's a...knockoff... he tried to tell himself again.

Serge stopped right in front of her opponent and raised her arms up high. All that was left was to swing the chainsaw down. With no weapons on hand, Baldogg reflexively took a defensive stance. His eyes now betrayed clear fear, so it seemed he'd realized the inescapable fate he was facing.

And that was exactly why he had to shout. "You fool! How many times do I have to tell you, it won't work—"

Zwmm.

Serge's attack was near instantaneous. Could a slash with a chainsaw really be compared to one made with a blade? The answer to that was unclear, but either way, she only made a single swipe.

"You...fool..."

"You're talking about yourself, right?" Serge retorted.

Serge had released her casting of Euthanasia just before striking, so Baldogg was hit with a diagonal slash immediately after being freed. While he tried to defend against the attack, his body and armor were bisected in a flash. The part containing most of his upper torso slid off the other half, falling to the ground with a splat while blood sprayed everywhere. Following that, his other half crumpled to the ground as well. Then, the weapons that were trying to return to Baldogg's side lost what was driving them and fell as well.

"You're been saying that Will has no abilities other than changing form, right? You're wrong. Will is a Hero's partner and is capable of granting hope," Serge said. "While it can change into whatever form the wielder wants, with more trust it can become hundreds, or even thousands of blades. When you become besties with it like me, you can even change its properties. Take God-Killing, for example. It's super effective against the divine! It's completely harmless to everyone else, but it will for sure kill gods! Now that I said it out loud, I realize it basically has the opposite power of your armor."

Serge was looking down at Baldogg's body with a smile as she activated her

Analyze Eye. The armor Baldogg was wearing was a specialized piece of equipment that could only be worn by gods, and the greater the wearer's divinity, the higher its defense. With the armor on, Baldogg was essentially invincible, which made him even more susceptible to God-Killing's powers.

"You should've realized that the moment you were unable to break Will apart," Serge said. "Will has, well, a will. It isn't just something made by one of your imitators."

"Ah..." Baldogg, covered in his own blood, let out a faint noise.

"Hm? Are you going to argue? When you're like that? Or are you trying to leave behind last words?" Serge asked.

"I called you...a FOOOOOLLL!" Baldogg cried out.

At the same time, his weapons, which had been scattered throughout the area, started to shine brightly. The last choice he made was to erase all his creations—in other words, he was self-destructing.

Serge let out a noise of alarm. "Holy—"

Did he just not want to admit defeat? Or did he not want Serge to take his creations after his death? Either way, the fact that all of Baldogg's weapons came with a self-destruct function had to be the product of insanity.

## Ka...BOOOOOOOOOM!

The largest of explosions swallowed up the battlefield that had already been turned into a blasted hellscape and went on to further damage the area surrounding that as well. The ground, the trees, and Baldogg himself were all blown away.



The explosion, which bloomed suddenly in an unpopulated, remote area, formed a large crater that would later be called the Magic Crater. This large-scale change of terrain made the earth in the area brittle and prone to collapsing, and even now the crater's edges were crumbling, sending large chunks of earth and stone falling into the depths.

Crackle, crumble, rumble...

Suddenly, at the bottom of a hole that wild monsters wouldn't dare approach, a part of a pile of rocks started to move. Then, something poked its face out of a gap created in the movement of these rocks.

"Whew! I finally managed to get out. That was my first experience being buried alive. No wonder people don't like it." It was Serge, who was now wearing armor. She was repeatedly spitting as she crawled to the surface, which probably meant some dirt had gotten in her mouth. "Still, I never expected him to make all his weapons self-destruct. He's gotta be insane. Actually wait, is it just me or do people with glasses all tend to self-destruct? Maybe I'm just imagining things?"

Serge was feeling rather unhappy, but she'd still survived even after her enemy had self-destructed with the intention of taking her with him. She'd reacted to the emergency situation and transformed Will into Holy Armor Galahad, imbuing the armor with a resistance to explosions in order to weather the attack.

"Oh well, I guess I should just be happy I managed to finish him off right before putting up my defenses. It'd be a waste to lose such a huge sack of EXP to his own explosion. Oh man, it was really good that I made it! I'm so cute and outstanding!"

Surprisingly, Serge hadn't just survived the explosion, she'd even had the leeway to land a blow to finish off Baldogg. Which meant not only had she reacted to the sudden explosion, she had also managed to think about her experience points. As one might expect from the world's strongest Hero, she had managed to accomplish everything so cleverly that it was exasperating. Either way, it was something only she could pull off.

"Still, it looks like I have something to reflect on."

Serge had returned to being only in her underwear after releasing her weapon's transformation to Galahad, looking down at her left arm, which was no longer there. When she'd transformed Will into Holy Armor Galahad in order to defend against the explosion, one longsword had attacked her from a blind angle. Thanks to the brightness and noise of the explosion, Serge's eyes and ears weren't functioning as well as normal, so she was a moment late to pick up

on the attack. Though she'd managed to dodge the blade that was aiming for her heart by a hair's breadth, it changed direction to make a second attack on her, accurately piercing the joint of her left arm. What's more, it exploded right after. As a result, her arm had been destroyed from the elbow down, and her upper arm had also gotten caught up in the explosion and was half gone.

"It seems like my Absolute Gospel didn't work; maybe the weapon had some sort of ability to twist causality or fate? Hmm...I may have been conceited; I need to fix that. But as a girl, I want to heal this up quickly, so let's get to that. Uh...huh?"

Serge tried to heal her destroyed left arm with White Magic, but no matter how many times she cast the magic, there was no sign of her missing limb returning. It probably needn't be said, but her skill with magic was among the best in the world. It was basically impossible for her to fail at healing something. That meant the cause lay elsewhere.

"Urgk! Is this some sort of curse? If it is, it's powerful enough to stop my magic! Was that sword one of the cursed kind? How greedy can you get?!"

Serge looked down at her status, confirmed that she'd been cursed, and groaned. It seemed that not only was this curse the type that prevented healing, it was of the worst kind, since it also prevented its own cleansing. Serge spent a while lamenting the final parting gift she'd been given, but she needed to do something about the bleeding, so she stopped to wrap a bandage around it.

"This doesn't actually make the situation okay, but it should be fine for now. Oh man, to think that it can't be solved with cleansing magic. I'm seriously cooked. That glasses guy was pretty good, to have a secret final move like that. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to take several years to get used to this curse before using Sacred Bless to flip it. I'm so smart, I know Creator was doing some research into this field at one point. If things go well, I might get a regeneration-type blessing and get even stronger! Wow, this is totally a flag for a buff! Woohoo!"

In a sense, this might have actually been luckier for Serge. At least, that was how she chose to look at it. She was very positive about the whole thing, saying

things like, "And aren't one-armed swordspeople cool?"

It was doubtful whether or not she was actually reflecting on her mistake.

"Oh wait, the Holy Stake is gone. But it was right there just a moment ago! Did it have a function to automatically return upon the death of the Ten Authorities member using it? Jeez, they run away so fast."

Serge pouted and stomped on the ground as she looked up to the sky. Of course, she wasn't actually all that upset about it; she was just doing that for show.

"Still, he really did manage to create an amazing weapon right at the end. That glasses guy's skills at smithing really were divine, at least. Man, he was such a waste, in a lot of ways. He was really skilled, but in battle he wasn't much. It was like, what is a blacksmith even taking to the front lines for, anyway? Oh, wait...wasn't there another guy who can smith and is a backline fighter, but steps up front anyway because he goes berserk with his love of fighting?"

An image of a certain Grim Reaper with a wonderful smile on his face came to Serge's mind. She quickly discarded the thought, thinking that he was an exception even when gods were on the table.

"I guess it's no use thinking about these things for so long. Everyone'll get worried if I'm too late to return, so let's hurry back. Since the explosion basically blew everything away, this place doesn't need any cleaning. As for my clothes, I'll just change into a set of casual wear. Hmm, what should I do about the equipment that I lost? They were all Rank S, so they can't be replaced easily, but I really don't want to ask Philip for anything. What if I ask the princess from that water country instead? It's the only nation among the four great nations led by a woman, and Sylvia and her pals are there right now too! Hee hee, I can imagine it already!"

It seemed the giant crater hadn't even registered for her, as Serge immediately started preparing to go home, leaving the destruction as it was. Though she wouldn't beg the pope, Philip, for anything, even with her life on the line, she was totally fine with throwing the cleanup of this incident his way. It was a very Serge-like train of thought.

"Okay, I'm done changing into a frilly set of clothes! Man, it's hard to change with only one arm."

Having changed into attire she really liked, Serge was in a great mood. It seemed she was in the middle of a daydream about what she would do after this. Still, her actions and intentions differed.

No matter how I look at it, that glasses guy wasn't a fighter. But he was still able to put up a good fight against me, so this situation might be really serious, huh? Conversely, the fact that the enemy sent him alone to fight me says that they're pretty full of themselves. I wonder if that's true, though. I think it's a pretty sure bet that if an actually skilled member of the Ten Authorities comes next, things'll be pretty bad for me. Agh, I hate this. I'm not even Defender anymore, so why do I have to think about these things? Being kind and broadminded sure is a thankless role.

Serge tended to act rashly, but she was a veteran Hero, so she wasn't just talking out of hand. She was planning properly, thinking about how she should act for the sake of the future. Her true nature was that of a defender—Serge was thinking seriously about how to maintain this peace that she'd finally found.

"But I've got no choice but to do it. For all the beautiful girls throughout the world!"

She was being serious, no matter what her thoughts actually were.

# **Chapter 2: Brawn**

On the Western Continent lay the Goldian sanctuary: a secluded, remote hinterland with trees that seemed to be in autumn all year round, with scenery that could steal anyone's heart. But its biggest feature was the multiple rock spires that towered over the area, so tall it seemed like they were trying to pierce the heavens. They were almost mountains, reminiscent of the magnificence of China's Huangshan Mountains.

"Mm-hmm, I'll never get tired of this scenery. It cleanses my heart." Someone was enjoying the view on top of one such rock. It was Goldiana Prettiana, who had once come here to train, resulting in the creation of the Goldia style. She was with her sister disciple, Grostina Brujowana.

"It truly is superb! But I think you're even more beautiful, Prettia-chan! Both your heart and your body are so pure, they don't need cleansing!" Following them, Dahak had also come after leaving a letter explaining his absence to Kelvin and company. Though he'd basically forced himself upon them, he got along well with the two, so they said okay in the end.

"Oh my, what a passionate pickup line! I'm so jealous!" Grostina gushed.

"Stop teasing him, Gros," Goldiana chided her. "And Dahak-chan, while I'm happy you say that, I'm not as beautiful as I look. I'm just aiming for my ideal self, using the mistakes of my past as fuel. I am still only partway there, much like a hiker who's only started going up the foot of a mountain. I have yet to see the peak."

"Oh, wow!" Dahak exclaimed. "The loftiness of your heart has easily exceeded anything I could imagine, Prettia-chan! But if you get any more divine, you'll end up too bright for me to look at directly. That's not good, not good at all. But...but...cheering you on despite that is what a man would do! I'll witness your ascent with my own eyes, Prettia-chan!"

"Hee hee! Thank you," said Goldiana.

"Oh no, I'm going to be charmed by how straightforward and honest his youthfulness is!" Grostina exclaimed.

Put modestly, their conversation was straight out of hell. At least, by Gerard's standards.

"Now then...since we've arrived, let's start by visiting the dead. Will you come with us, Dahak-chan?" Goldiana asked.

"Of course! Wait...the dead?" Dahak couldn't help but ask.

"Yes," Goldiana answered. "My beloved."

That shocked Dahak to his core, as evidenced by the strangled noises he made. "Y-Your beloved?! N-No way! No way, no way... Were they your lover? Ohhhh nonono, no! Is Prettia-chan a widow?! No, wait...but...given her overflowing seductiveness, it makes sense...kind of? I don't know! Aaagghhhhh!"

The dragon sank into confusion as he took more mental damage than he'd ever had before. Put mildly, it was near fatal.

"Calm down, Dahak-chan," Grostina told him placatingly. "It's fine; my sister is not a widow. Of course, she's still single even now."

"Huh?"

"Sorry, I guess I worded that badly? The grave belongs to my master," Goldiana explained.

"O-Oh..."

The peak they were on had a small building that could just barely pass as a bedroom, as well as an area that looked like a training ground. Because the top of this spire was rather small, that was all that could be seen. The only other things present were some flowers and other plants that were blooming rather miraculously in the cracks in the rock face, and a modest and inconspicuous grave.

"We came essentially straight up to get here, after all. If we don't visit the grave, no one will. So hearing you say that you'd come with us made me very happy, Dahak-chan," Goldiana said.

"I-It's an honor to hear that! I'll clean the grave, Prettia-chan!" Dahak offered. "Please, let me do at least that much!"

"Oh my, but that would normally be the job of the sister disciple," Grostina interjected. "I won't give up that role, even to you, Dahak-chan!"

"Jeez, don't fight," said Goldiana. "Master is watching, so do it together like the friends you are. Of course, I'll be helping too!"

"I...I'll be working with Prettia-chan?!" Dahak shouted.

That was how all three of them ended up cleaning the grave...but the sight of three really burly people huddling so close together to clean a single grave was something anyone would hesitate to describe. At the very least, Gerard would have had his heart broken if he'd tried.

"Whew, it's finally clean. Thank you so much for taking care of the little flowers around it as well, Dahak-chan! To show my heartfelt gratitude... Mmmmwah!" Goldiana blew him a kiss.

"Grhaak! What a powerful blown kiss! Finally, I got one tooooo!" Dahak fell backward, intoxicated by the sudden rush of bliss. It was a kiss from the Goddess, so there was a chance it had some sort of blessing attached to it. Either way, Gerard would still have fainted from being hit by one.

Anyway, leaving that happy—or possibly distressing—experience aside, in the end, the grave of Goldiana's master had been cleaned. The pair of brawny broads' delicate yet powerful cleaning had the headstone shining like a mirror, and Dahak had made the surrounding plant life bloom vibrantly.

"Master is surely smiling up in heaven. Don't you think so, sister?" said Grostina.

"You're asking me, someone who's become the Goddess of Reincarnation?" Goldiana teased. "Master is very inquisitive, so I think he'd just be bored up in heaven. That's why I'm sure he's already been reborn in some other world and is aiming for the peak of martial arts there. He is the master I admire, after all." Her words were steeped in sentimentality, and she had a faraway look in her eyes.

"Hey, Gros...what kind of person was Prettia-chan's master?" Dahak

whispered.

"Oh? Are you interested? Such youthful energy!" Grostina whispered back.

"Stop teasing me!" Dahak complained, still in a whisper.

"Hee hee hee, sorry. But to tell you the truth, I never met him either. I say I'm her sister disciple, but by the time I started training, the grave already existed. I only heard about Master from my sister," Grostina quietly explained.

"Really?!" Dahak hissed.

"Really. According to her, he was very strong, but also kind, and a big dandy as well as a nice guy."

"So he was right in her strike zone! What is with all those compliments?! Is she a young maiden in love or what?!" Dahak couldn't help but shout. Their whispered conversation was completely gone now, as his voice seemed like it would carry to the other side of the mountains.

"I can hear you, Dahak-chan," said Goldiana.

Dahak tried to defend himself in a panic. "Ah! Um, no, I didn't mean anything by that!"

But Goldiana just looked up at the sky. "How unusual. We have a guest, you two."

"Huh? Ah!"

"Oh my, so big!" Grostina muttered.

Goldiana was looking up at a giant stake that had suddenly appeared overhead. From it, a very large man wearing a hood appeared, descending ostentatiously. There was no proof yet that he was a fallen angel, as no black wings or halo could be seen, but it was clear that his body had been trained to the extreme.

"I believe you are the false goddess, Goldiana Prettiana, and her Oracle, Grostina Brujowana, yes? My apologies for the sudden visit, but I would like to request a bout."

The words spoken by the large man were rather unexpected. He was

requesting a *bout*. Yes, a *bout*. Goldiana had guessed her life was being targeted because she was the Goddess of Reincarnation from the moment she'd seen the Holy Stake. However, she hadn't expected him to say that, so she was caught off guard.

"Did you say 'a bout'? What, are you a challenger aiming for the sign to my dojo?" she asked.

"It makes no difference how you choose to take it. I just wish to exchange blows with you. I expect that your strength, as one who was able to escape Gloria and Baldogg on Isla Heaven, will be a sight to behold."

"Hee hee! Thanks for the compliment," Goldiana said, remembering the faces of the Ten Authorities she had seen in the Chamber of Wisdom. She'd managed to commit their faces and standout features to memory in the little time she'd had.

There were only three people there whose faces I couldn't see, she thought. But I remember their builds. This one should be...

She ran through her recollection of their builds. Regarding those whose faces she couldn't see, one had been Ridwan Mahad with his iron mask, so this wasn't him. Another was a strange elderly person in a robe, which didn't fit the bill. And the last one was the hooded man in front of her—bingo.

"It seems like Baldogg holds a grudge against you, but I made sure my own interest in you took priority. I knew he wouldn't stand a chance against you if he was alone, after all," the man said.

"Oh me oh my, you sure rate me highly. I'm so happy. But! If you want to face me, you should at least show your face, don't you think?" Goldiana said.

"Oh, my apologies. I'm not used to showing myself," he said.

The large man nonchalantly took off his hood, revealing a frightening, bearded face. The style of his beard was reminiscent of a bear's fur, as was his long, gray hair. He seemed around the same age as Goldiana or maybe a little older. He had a sharp look in his eye as he looked straight at her, as though was sizing up prey.

"Allow me to introduce myself so you have a name to go along with the face. I

am one of the Ten Authorities, Hao Marr."

The words Hao spoke after revealing his face seemed to have a physical weight to them. His own presence might have been granting this effect, as the atmosphere around them seemed to become unbelievably heavy. Any normal person would have fainted.

"Oh no! You're such a wild man!" Grostina gushed. "Allow me to help you, sister—sister?"

Grostina was the one to first sense the change in Goldiana. Normally she was the type to face anyone, no matter the time, with an unyielding fighting spirit. However, right now she was trembling in both body and soul. It was as if she were seeing something unbelievable.

"No...way. Why... Why is Master here?!" Goldiana managed to squeeze out. But what she claimed to be happening seemed impossible.

"Hey, what're you saying, Prettia-chan?" Dahak asked. "Didn't your master die a long time ago? I mean, we just finished cleaning his grave!"

"Yes, he did. But... But... I could never forget his face, and I would never mistake that face for someone else. He is the spitting image of Master!"

"Whaaaat?!" Dahak exclaimed.

"Are you serious, sister?!" Grostina followed suit.

Their shouts overlapped, reaching far into the distance.

Wait, what the heck am I doing, getting shaken up too?! Dahak screamed to himself. It's times like this where I should be a rock for Prettia-chan!

Luckily, Hao was showing no signs of attacking just yet. Dahak regrouped and psyched himself up. He and Brujowana stepped to him in place of Goldiana, who was still flustered.

"Hey, you! You really Prettia-chan's master?" Dahak asked threateningly.

Hao took a moment to think before replying. "Let me be clear, I have no idea what you're talking about. As I just said, I am and have always been one of the Ten Authorities. I lived in a time far removed from this fellow you all seem to know. It is either a simple case of mistaken identity or we just look alike. False

goddess, your unrest is troubling for me. It will dull your fists."

Hao glared at Goldiana and crossed his arms. It seemed he wanted to fight her at her best.

"Heh! That was a pretty kind warning for someone who claims to want to revive the wicked god," said Dahak.

"I did not warn her out of kindness," replied Hao. "I have recognized the false goddess as someone strong, and so I must face her at her best and claim victory."

"Tch! You're just bluffing!" Dahak shouted. He was irritated, seeing Hao so composed and unmoving no matter what was said to him.

This cheeky bastard thinks like my bro, Kelvin! I can't allow that! Dahak thought. He's totally up on his high horse just because he's pretty hot for his age! But he's absolutely playing with Prettia-chan's heart; it's plain for anyone to see! I'll never forgive him! And all this just because of a one-off miracle where he looks like her master!

Obviously, his irritation was at its limit. Not only did it seem the man was imitating Kelvin, whom Dahak respected, but he also seemed to be hitting on Goldiana, whom Dahak loved. While all of those reasons were just excuses, the dragon was still on the verge of snapping.

"Can you fight, sister?" Grostina asked.

After a moment, Goldiana replied, "Yes, I'm fine now. I was just a little shaken, since he so closely resembles the reason I started walking down this path in the first place."

Having gotten over her initial shock, she regained her original demeanor as both the Peach Ogre and Goddess of Reincarnation.

"You said your name is Hao-chan, right? I accept," Goldiana stated.

"Good. As you are now, I believe I can go all out," Hao replied. "My thanks."

"Hee hee! I'm just too good a woman, being thanked by my enemy!" Goldiana exclaimed. "So, what do you want to do? Should we start now?"

"No, this place is too cramped. Also, it would not survive if we were to fight.

Let us change venues."

"Oh? Then may I pick the arena? I know just the place."

"I'll leave it to you."

"Mm-hmm, good answer! Follow me!" With that, Goldiana jumped off of the mountainous rock, falling down below.

"Hmph." Hao jumped after her.

The two were moving at a speed far faster than normal falling speed, and they disappeared from Dahak's sight in the blink of an eye. It took a moment for him to react.

He started with a gasp before saying, "H-Hey, let's chase after them! Hurry up, we need to back up Prettia-chan!"

"Hmmm..." Grostina seemed conflicted. "I agree that we should follow them, but I don't think we should butt in on her fight."

"Huuuh?! Why not?!"

"Calm down, Dahak-chan. Sister plans to fight that older gentleman seriously. If we were to interfere carelessly, it's very likely we'd just get in her way. In fact, I'd bet on it," Grostina said.

"And I asked you to explain why we would!" Dahak exclaimed.

"Try imagining Kelvin in her place," Grostina suggested. "Two evenly matched people, brought together by fate, about to have a serious battle to the death. Do you think you'd be able to intrude on their little world?"

"Oh, well..."

She was right, Kelvin would surely desire a supreme battle against someone he was evenly matched with. Dahak understood that, but the words Grostina used, "their little world," stopped him from admitting it. He didn't want to get in Goldiana's way, but he didn't want to leave them alone either. These two conflicting desires clashed—Dahak was at war with himself.

"Aaagghhhh!" he screamed. "Anyway, we should still catch up to them! I'll think about what to do after we get there! Okay, that should settle things! Let's

go, Gros!"

"Sure. I love this very fresh take of yours!"

With the end goal put on hold, Dahak and Grostina gave chase.



"Sorry to keep you waiting, and welcome!" Goldiana said.

"Hm... A good choice," said Hao.

Goldiana had chosen the spot she'd once battled her mentor to test her full mastery of the arts in. It was a wide-open area in the middle of a red-leafed forest. The sight of the red and yellow leaves continuously falling was striking, and there were enough on the ground to carpet it, making walking in the area feel rather unique. Unfortunately, the reason they had come was to fight, so there was no time to enjoy the scenery.

"This place is full of memories for me, you see," Goldiana explained. "This is the place that made me Goldiana and set me off on the path of martial arts. Well actually, this is where I killed my teacher during my mastery test. My master, whose face is the same as yours."

"I told you, I am not him. No, wait. I suppose that was your declaration that you won't take it easy on me even if we have the same face," Hao said. "Hm, then I will say no more about it. We can fight without holding back here; that is all I have to say."

He stripped his upper torso bare, revealing his highly trained body, which seemed like it had been plucked out of the heavens. He was as large as Goldiana, and he was also fit, with an uncountable number of scars. How many trials had he overcome to gain a physique like that? Goldiana couldn't help but wonder, even though she was about to fight the man.

"My, what a nice body!" she exclaimed. "I can't help but stare. Allow me to change as well. Pretty Dress Change!"

Her strange shout was followed by her entire body becoming a shining pink. The background was then replaced by a sparkling fluorescent blend of color as she started to dance, her form changing as she did so. This mysterious light

made it so that only her silhouette was visible, and for some reason, pop music was playing in Hao's head. Of course, it was just an auditory illusion.

"Whew, my transformation is finished," said Goldiana. "This is the battle uniform of the Goldia style!"

Out of the pink light, she emerged wearing pink body tights. Indeed, it was the same type of clothing Grostina had worn at the exhibition match. It seemed Hao had not expected this, as he was shocked speechless.

After a while, he choked out, "The world sure is big. To think there was such a strange set of equipment. Right, this will be fun."

As it turned out, he wasn't shocked—he was impressed.

"Hao-chan, if I win this bout, would you tell me what you're hiding?" Goldiana asked. "I want to know about the Ten Authorities, what you're planning to do, and...let's see... I feel like you're hiding something about my master as well. Tell me everything."

"Ah, a wager. That's quite a lot to ask, though," Hao said, clearly considering the proposal. "Fine. If you win, ask me anything you wish. I will answer it all. I don't even mind if you kill me afterward. But if I win...I will take everything of yours. Do you accept?"

"Oh my, what a proposal," Goldiana gushed.

"Hm? Ah, I suppose you could take my words that way," said Hao. "Don't worry, I did not mean it in a lewd manner."

No matter how Goldiana reacted, Hao showed no sign of being shaken or disturbed. It was a mystery how Goldiana looked to him, but it was certain that he had unbreakable mental strength and wouldn't be surprised by just anything. If it had been Gerard—actually, that type of hypothetical probably isn't necessary anymore. The two were ready to exchange blows at any time.

"Oh don't mind me, it was just a little joke," said Goldiana. "Well, essentially we'll be betting everything, including our lives, right?"

"The exchange of lives is unavoidable for those who seek to perfect the art of combat," said Hao.

After this exchange of words, a silence fell over the two for a while. They both took combat stances and spent some time staring at each other. Any exchange between two practitioners who've reached a certain threshold would be incomprehensible to the average person. During this silence, it might have looked like they were just staring at each other, but in truth, they were both reading hundreds or even thousands of moves ahead. If either of them made even a single mistake during this reading, it would be fatal. These tactics were on a whole other level.

The silence continued, and the air around them became heavy like lead. Several seconds passed with both of them under the weight of it. Then the turning point happened in a flash, and they moved on to the next stage. At the exact same time, they broke their stances.

"Heh heh! Hee hee hee hee... I can't believe this. As things stand, we'll get nowhere," Goldiana said.

"Heh! How delightful. To think you would be this good," said Hao.

They were both sweating heavily, as if they'd actually been fighting. Physically, they were still unhurt, but they were both breathing heavily as well. It was as if they'd been fighting for hours.

"I have a proposal. I'm considering revealing my hidden hand... What do you think?" asked Goldiana.

"Very well. I will also manifest my Authority. Show me your true form," Hao replied.

As if they'd arranged it beforehand, both had come to the same conclusion. Once they agreed, Goldiana struck a very *unique* pose, while Hao gathered his energy. The atmosphere between them was now completely different, and the rise in fighting spirit from both of them was clear.

"Pretty Mode Change!" Goldiana shouted.

"I hereby manifest my Authority," Hao intoned.

Riding the wave of fighting spirit, Goldiana unleashed a huge, pink heart, while Hao released a pure, unrefined aura. A typhoon of wind suddenly appeared, caused by these auras, strong enough to mow down the surrounding

trees.

Dahak and Grostina, who had just arrived, were easily pushed back.

"What? What happened?!" Dahak shouted.

"These powerful auras are being released by them," said Grostina. "Hee hee hee! So she's finally going to show it."

"Huh?! What is she going to do?!"

"My sister has continued to train every day in order to become a splendid Goddess of Reincarnation. Thanks to that, she's achieved a new form, which she is now going to unveil!" replied Grostina.

"A new...form?!" Dahak sounded shocked. "I don't know what that means, but I know we need to see it! We're going to use all our power to get in, Gros! Use your life as fuel! Onward!"

"All right!"

Dahak tended to act with his heart rather than his head, and he took Grostina along with him. But the two gods they were heading for had already revealed their true forms.

"Rose Ishtar Mode Lucifer, also known as One-Winged Goldiaaa!" Goldiana shouted.

"My Authority is Brawn! My divine territory is that of martial arts! Show me you can surpass meee!" Hao shouted in turn.

Overflowing with love and fighting spirit, the two opposites of the martial world faced off against each other—then the two gods clashed, and the world shook.



Dahak and Grostina continued to the eye of the storm. There must have been a fierce fight occurring at the center, as they were faced with overwhelming pressure and unending shock waves. It was similar to the violent winds unleashed by the battleship *Elpis*. Even if Dahak had changed into his dragon form, it would have been impossible for him to fly inside the storm. That was why they had no choice but to plod forward, step-by-step. Dahak anchored

himself by growing plant roots at his feet, while Grostina encased the soles of her feet in a sticky poison.

"Huh?" Dahak let out.

"Mm-hmm?" Grostina reacted as well.

All of a sudden, everything standing in their way disappeared. Had they entered the eye of the storm? No, because there wasn't actually a typhoon. The site of the fight between Goldiana and the man from the Ten Authorities actually affected the surroundings in such a way that the conditions got more extreme the closer one got to the center. So why had the pressure and shock waves suddenly disappeared? The answer was simple: the fight that had been causing all of it had just ended.



"Prettia-chan!" Dahak shouted.

"Ah! Wait, Dahak-chan! I'm going too!" shouted Grostina.

The change in conditions made Dahak pause for a moment, but he quickly ran forward. He needed to see if the person he loved—rather, the *Goddess* he loved—had won and if she was okay.

Grostina felt the same way. She followed after Dahak, and they hurried to their destination. The Goldian sanctuary had regained its quiet, as if the storm from before had all been a lie. There was no wind at all, and the birds and bugs were completely silent. It was so quiet, it was almost unbelievable that they were outside. While that might normally be calming, at the moment it was terribly disconcerting, causing worry and panic to stir in Dahak's heart.

Then, the two arrived at their destination, and Dahak let out a strangled gasp. "It can't be!"

"Sister!" Grostina screamed.

The sight that greeted them was something unbelievable. At least, they didn't want to believe it. They had definitely come upon Goldiana and Hao of the Ten Authorities, but there was a clear difference in their conditions. One had lost their left arm from the shoulder down and was standing upright, covered in blood. It was Hao, and although he was breathing heavily and clearly badly hurt, he was still conscious and standing. He was also holding a pink wing, which had clearly been torn off, in his right hand. The wing was disintegrating and would completely disappear in less than a minute.

Meanwhile, the other combatant, Goldiana, was no longer in Rose Ishtar mode and was lying on the ground. An immense amount of blood pooled around her, so large it looked like a regular puddle at first. Even a layman would be able to see she was at death's door. It was ghastly.

"You may have been in a demigod state, but I'm still surprised you managed to take my left arm," Hao said. "It was a good fight, much like the ones I had during that great war. I will give you this arm. Take it."

He looked down upon Goldiana, smiling as if satisfied. The left arm Hao claimed to be giving her was, of course, already severed, but for some reason it

wasn't bleeding.

Grostina realized something and was shocked. *I can't even! How do you use your muscles like that?!* 

The muscles near Hao's severed stump were unnaturally contracted, forcefully constricting the blood flow to the severed area. He'd used his muscles to physically close off the wound, preventing himself from bleeding out. Unfortunately, such an impossible feat had been managed by the enemy.

"You bastaaard! Don't think I'll let you leave here alive!" Dahak shouted, completely ignoring all of that. Had he even noticed?

"The pair from before, huh?" Hao said after taking a moment to recognize them. "You two certainly howl like mongrels."

Dahak grunted threateningly.

"Though you are immature, you're still a king of dragons, no?" said Hao. "It's clear that any confrontation between us would not even result in a proper fight, and yet you brazenly insist on antagonizing me head-on without even trying a surprise attack. I know I've lost my left arm, but it would be easy for me to defeat the both of you. This may seem like a once-in-a-lifetime chance for you to beat me, but in truth, it would just be an elaborate suicide. I will not shame you for it. Just leave."

"Yooouuuu!" Dahak shouted through gritted teeth.

"Calm down, Dahak-chan," Grostina cut in, desperately holding back the dragon, who seemed ready to leap forward at any moment. She shared his feelings, but she was still calm. Hao was badly injured and missing an arm, but he was still far, far stronger than they were. It was gut-twistingly frustrating, but she was calm enough to recognize the difference in their abilities.

Judging from the fact that he isn't regenerating his lost arm, maybe he doesn't have any healing powers? Grostina thought. But he was strong enough to defeat the Goddess alone, so he's definitely in a place neither of us can reach in terms of power. Even if we were to bring out all of our strength and attack with perfect teamwork...

If they were to prioritize safety, it would be best to stay quiet and withdraw.

However, with the Goddess he loved lying in front of him, Dahak would never allow that.

Given how my friend is acting, maybe I should just resolve myself to follow his lead? Scalespread Dance!

While Dahak whooped and howled, Grostina started to concoct a special poison. She manifested the wings of Violet Fairy Second Edition on a small scale —so they were impossible to see from the front—allowing her to secretly spread the scales.

"Would anyone leave just because you told them to?! Huh?! A man would take on all challengers head-on! Isn't that why you came here?!" Dahak yelled.

"I came because I was interested in the one who is at my feet," Hao answered. "The one with a will of steel, who trained her body to the extreme. Not only that, but she was quick-witted and boasted skills worthy of the highest praise. She knew love and used it as a primer to surpass her own limits. A chance to exchange blows with a practitioner of her skill comes maybe once in a hundred—nay, a thousand years."

"Shut it! Don't talk like you know Prettia-chan! I've known that shit since forever! Knowing love? Then I'll inherit that love! I'll kill the shit outta you, save Prettia-chan, and reach our happily ever after!"

"Heh!" Hao scoffed. "Your spirit is good, but you are still immature. Just having a resilient spirit will not suddenly make you stronger. I'll say this once more: leave. And come face me once you've become truly strong—"

"I said, SHUT UUUUPPPPP!" Dahak howled.

He finally managed to wrest himself free of Grostina and charged forward. The instant he could, he encased himself in plants while using Crossbreeding to grow a horde of carnivorous plants all around Hao. The rage of the Dragon King that presided over the earth was communicated through those plants, who were all in a berserk state.

"Jeez, you're such a handful!" Grostina shouted. "Hrngh! Fairy Angel!"

She'd been preparing for battle, so she quickly moved to support Dahak. The poison scales that had been spread through the area encircled Hao like an

angel's halo and started to slowly shrink. This combined with Dahak's carnivorous plants to corner Hao. It was a splendid show of teamwork that no one would think was off-the-cuff, but even so...

"You fools are mistaking foolhardiness for bravery," declared Hao.

After creating those carnivorous plants, Dahak burrowed into the ground. The plants covering him acted like sturdy armor, and with it, he would engage his enemy in close combat. At least, that was what his feint threatened to do, but it was just a decoy. The Earth Dragon King used his power to skillfully manipulate the plants, making it seem like he was still inside them. As for Dahak himself, he went around to Hao's blind spot while underground, where he planned to hide among the carnivorous flora to attack. Dahak tended to act according to his emotions, but now that Goldiana had fallen and needed him, he started to use cunning in order to win. He'd grown quite a bit.

On top of that, Grostina, who was looking over the battlefield from a small distance away, wasn't just spreading deadly poison everywhere. She'd instantly seen through the intentions of her friend and had deployed her poison to support his plan. In addition, she created several human-shaped masses of poison—an attack called Poisoner Doll—to act as extra decoys, having them hide in the shadows of the plants. These Poisoner Dolls would explode when touched, dealing physical damage and spreading a paralytic poison to the one who set it off. If Hao were to carelessly try to fight them in melee, such an attempt would end in disaster.

Grostina used her poison to spur on the chaos of the fight in an attempt to shave away at Hao's concentration as much as possible. Of course, as a successor to the Goldia style, she also expected to fight in close quarters.

Once I get behind him, Gros will be in a perfect position to pincer! Dahak observed. Prettia-chan's life is on the line! We need to raise our chances of winning as much as possible!

Whew, I almost got tricked too, and I'm his friend, thought Grostina. I won't let Dahak-chan's cunning in this eleventh hour go to waste!

In their hearts, they understood each other. They had already finished taking a formation that would maximize any advantage they could gain through

tactics, so all that was left was to defeat Hao.

Meanwhile, Hao took no actions—it didn't even look like he'd bother taking a stance. He simply stood there, observing his surroundings. At first glance, it might have seemed like he wasn't resisting, but Dahak and Grostina had no intention of showing mercy. Their first wave consisted of the carnivorous plants. Following that, the second wave was deadly poison.

These attacks crashed against Hao, who responded with brutal attacks that could kill even Rank S monsters instantly without a problem. He quite literally had no openings to take advantage of. All those other than Goldiana, who was lying at his feet, were no different from small bugs. He mowed them all down, leaving only barren land behind.

At least, that was what would have happened if it hadn't been Hao who was standing there. It happened in just an instant. He suddenly accelerated, without needing any sort of preparatory stance, reaching top speed right away. Being able to do so made it seem like he was a figure out of some sort of fantasy epic, since such a thing was impossible in real life. It could even be called a technique straight out of a dream. Or maybe, it was just the result of someone who'd perfected the martial arts. At any rate, Hao managed it, all while standing upright and acting like the result was never in question.

What reason is there to be surprised? Hao thought. He was a god of martial arts, a god of battle, so this feat wasn't even a special skill or hidden technique to him. It was just a normal action. He ran normally, pried open a wall easily, and dealt with Dahak, who was hiding behind him, right away. That was all.

"Gah?!" Dahak cried.

"I see your plan was to act as if you were enraged and send out a decoy. Then, you would circle around to my blind spot and wait for your opportunity. You did put in some effort," Hao commented. Having completely ignored the moving plant armor and reaching Dahak in the blink of an eye, he swung his right arm so fast that the dragon couldn't even see it happen. And since the young Earth Dragon King couldn't see it, he had no idea what that right arm had done to him.

The only thing Dahak knew was that all the carnivorous plants that should

have been close to him had been annihilated, the wall of deadly poison had been swept away, and he could no longer move. He realized that he couldn't put any strength into his legs and couldn't stay standing. He fell to his knees before collapsing on his face.

"Dahak-chan!" Grostina shouted.

"Do you really have the time to be worried for your friend?" Hao asked.

Grostina let out a wordless scream, by the end of which Hao was already right in front of her. He hadn't been tricked by her Poisoner Dolls, just as he hadn't fallen for Dahak's plant armor. The surprise lasted only a moment, as Hao swung his remaining arm just like he'd done with Dahak. Grostina was unable to react to this attack, and the result was the same. They lost completely to Hao, even with his handicap of having only one arm.

"I've hit your pressure points," Hao explained. "It works on anything that has human form, even dragons while they are disguised as one. Such an attack will not kill you, but you will spend around three days unable to move or speak."

Dahak grunted and let out desperate noises as he tried as hard as he could to move, but Hao's words proved correct: he couldn't even speak. As things stood, he could just barely take shallow breaths.

"I approve of the effort you put in, using ingenuity to cover up your immaturity," Hao remarked. "But that will not be enough. Also, you made a mistake in assessing what you needed to do. I am rather sensitive toward presences, you see, so I can easily discern the difference between a fake and the real thing. Oh? I don't sense Baldogg and Ridwan anymore... This... Hm, so they failed. But this is good news. At the very least, the world still has opponents who can amuse me. Heh heh!"

Hao let out a faint laugh. Unlike how he had spoken to Dahak and Grostina, his voice was now filled with joy. It seemed he no longer held any interest in them, since it didn't look like he was going to bother finishing them off.

"Oh, my apologies. Let us get back on topic," he suddenly continued. "With your bodies, you should be able to survive without food or water for a few days. Whatever you do after that is up to you. You can allow your hearts to break or burn with a desire for vengeance. You are free. Of course, if you come face me

again in the same state, I will not hesitate to kill you next time."

They could hear footsteps. Dahak immediately realized that Hao had walked over to Goldiana. He wanted to shout for him to wait, but his body wouldn't respond. He couldn't even shift to glare up at the man.

"Oho, so the false goddess is still alive. What admirable vitality," Hao muttered.

Dahak again tried to shout, but it only came out as strained grunts and noises.

"Hmph, worry not," Hao said. "I will not kill this one. She is still growing, so it would be a waste. I am simply going to take her back to our base, since I still need to fulfill the bare minimum of my mission. Well, to be fair...I cannot guarantee what Eld will do afterward. If you want her to survive, I would suggest hurrying—both to train yourselves and to rescue her."

With that, Hao deftly used his remaining arm to lift up Goldiana's huge body before kicking off thin air and returning to the Holy Stake. His refined movements were in no way those of a wounded person's. Not that Dahak and Grostina could even see that.

Dammit! Damn it allIII! Dahak screamed mentally. All this happened because I'm so weak! Urrrgggkkkhhh!

Strangely enough, though he could neither speak nor move, he could still cry. He lamented his own powerlessness and wallowed in regret. Dahak's heart had been thoroughly crushed—but whether that heart would snap in two, never to be whole again, or be reborn stronger than ever like metal beaten and worked in a forge, was up to him.

Big bro Kelvin managed to save Sister Mel even after being driven to the depths of despair, he thought. And Sister Mel never stopped placing unbreakable trust in him too. So this time, it's Prettia-chan's and my turn. We should be able to do it too. I'll never give up on Prettia-chan, even after this kidnapping! I will put my life on the line and save her! I'm sure she believes in me and is waiting for me to come for her! I'll become Prettia-chan's knight in place of Gerard!

Indeed, he imagined becoming Goldiana's knight. The metal of his heart might

come back even mightier than anyone could imagine.



Vmmm... Vmmm...

What's this? I think I'm hearing something loud and far away.

"Get ahold of yourself, sister disciple! And don't you die either, guy in the work clothes! Show your guts! Your...guts!"

I can hear a really unwelcome voice. But...it's familiar somehow. Where do I know it from?

"Gah! So not even my muscle massage can wake them up! Hey, me! Are you putting your back into it?! Are you really giving it your all?!"

What the hell is a muscle massage? Is that supposed to be adjacent to a heart massage? Come on...

"Hmph! Hrrrnnnghhh! Pharmacist's Pot should be working, but we'll just have to see what happens! Roar, oh head muscle of mine!"

Ah, I see. I must have gone to sleep at some point. Actually, ow! My entire body hurts! Why?!

"Still, I should praise the strength of their bodies. It's amazing they haven't broken after all this! Hah haaa! What wonderful muscles! Let me at them!"

I need to wake up soon. I'm worried about Prettia-chan...and Gros...

"Hmmm, then I suppose I have to go for my last resort: shock therapy through artificial respiration!"

"Wait, hey! Don't do thaaat!"

"Oh, you're so bold, Oddradd-chan!"

Dahak finally awakened to a cloudless blue sky. He bolted up with extreme force and looked over at Grostina, who had woken up at the same time. There was another acquaintance present as well.

"Yo, you're finally awake! As always, no matter where you are, nothing beats some snappy banter! It's exactly like Master Kelvin said!" It was Oddradd, who had learned the Goldia style and fought in the exhibition match alongside

Grostina.

"You idiot! Who'd spout that stupid shit as a joke?!" Dahak yelled. "You were threatening my virtue!"

"Oh! Really? Sorry about that, man!"

"Oh my, does that mean you're a little green boy who still has his cherry?" Grostina chimed in.

"Shut up!" shouted Dahak. The Earth Dragon King who wanted to be a knight was fully red in the face. "Anyway, why are you here in the Goldian sanctuary, Oddradd?!"

"Hey, you're obviously trying to change the subject! Don't do that!" Oddradd retorted loudly. "Well, I guess it's fine! I returned to Pub and my friends, but I had this, like, uneasiness in my chest, you know? If I had to put it like Master Goldiana, my sixth sense was acting up. Anyway, that's why I came here! And when I arrived, I was super surprised! I saw both my sister's disciple and you with your work clothes fallen on the ground!"

"Don't reference my clothes like that, man. Just call me Dahak," the dragon said tiredly. "Like, haven't we seen each other multiple times with big bro Kelvin?"

"Hm, have we?" Oddradd had to think. "I was so preoccupied with training, I didn't have room for anything else! It's very possible I just forgot!"

"You can't forget things like that! We've talked more than once!"

"Now, now, calm down," Grostina interjected placatingly. "That was impressive. Thanks to your muscle massage, Oddradd-chan, we're already able to move again."

"Ah...well, yeah. I should thank you for that. Thanks," said Dahak.

"Sure thing. You're welcome! Hah haaa!" Oddradd shouted.

Dahak and Grostina stood up as he laughed, checking the states of their bodies. They were sore, as if all their muscles had been forcefully loosened, but other than that there were no problems.

"How long have we been out?" Dahak asked.

"Hmm, according to my watch, an entire day," Grostina answered.

"Damn! It's been too long! But it's still much better than the three days he told us it'd take," said Dahak.

"Hm? Judging from the situation, it sounds like you fought someone here?" Oddradd commented. "But I can't see Master Goldiana anywhere."

"You can have your explanation later," said Dahak. "First I need to send a telepathic message to big bro Kelvin. I don't know why, but when I couldn't move, I couldn't do any telepathy either. I can only hope I can connect now..."

With that, Dahak bent his knees a little and put his hands next to them. He then curved his back to go along with his stoop, forming a bow much like a yakuza greeting. Once that was done, he turned on his telepathy. It seemed this was how Dahak liked to carry out his telepathic conversations with those he considered above him.

::Sorry to interrupt you during such a busy time, big bro Kelvin! This is your first underling, Dahak!:: That was his opening message.

Kelvin replied;::O-Oh, hey. That was sudden, Dahak. Didn't you chase after Prettia-chan? Ange told me that Oddradd went after you, so did you meet up with him?::

::Yep! We totally did! More importantly, big bro, something terrible happened!::

::Something terrible? What?::

::Prettia-chan... She was kidnapped, like a princess!::

::Uh...what?::

Kelvin gave a rather foolish response. He likely hadn't expected that. But pretty much no one would have been able to understand Dahak's message. Only Sera, with her sharp intuition, might have been able to pull off that feat. So Dahak had to elaborate.

::He used violence to take Prettia-chan, because she's the prettiest woman in the world!::

::Uh...::

Dahak wasn't saying anything wrong, but he wasn't getting the details of the situation through at all. Most likely, Kelvin was operating under at least a small misunderstanding at the moment.

::I'm so frustrated, bro! I lost to basically the worst person to ever exist!::

::Okay, I get it, so just calm down and start from the beginning.::

Kelvin valiantly tried to parse what Dahak was telling him, but it was just too hard. Dahak's explanations, given while he was so hot in the head, had a lot of bias and personal interpretations thrown in.

After slowly chewing through everything, Kelvin finally started to understand what had happened. Doing this was more tiring than he'd expected, so he couldn't help but sigh once he understood.

::Okay, I think I get it. Still, someone was able to beat Prettia-chan one-on-one, and it was this Hao person from the Ten Authorities, huh? And if you and Grostina double-teamed him and didn't even stand a chance, he must be the real thing. This sounds like it'll be a lot of trouble.::

Because this was happening over the Network, Dahak couldn't see Kelvin's expression. Even so, as first underling, he could easily imagine the usual look on Kelvin's face.

::Sorry to have to tell you this when you're so happy, but...I want to be the one to beat him.::

::You, Dahak? I know painfully well—I mean, so well I could die—how good giant killing feels and that you want to do it, but...Prettia-chan's life is on the line this time. Even if we come up with a plan that involves training you, there's not really enough time.::

::I know. This is just a bit of selfishness from me, and I won't complain if you take him, bro. Still, if I don't declare my determination here and now, I won't be able to forgive myself...or, how should I put this?::

Dahak trailed off into silence. He felt pathetic and frustrated, and he wanted to get stronger. It wasn't easy for him to voice his feelings, and he was clenching his fist so hard he was drawing blood. That showed his feelings far more powerfully than his words.

After a while, Kelvin gave his reply. ;::I understand. Then do as you please. Also, if your determination is the real thing, I can help think of a way to strengthen you in a short time. You can at least let me do that much as your big brother, can't you?::

Dahak let out a wordless noise full of emotion over the Network. ;::B-Bro!::

He bowed even lower while maintaining the basic shape of his pose. It was his way of expressing his gratitude and also a way to prevent Grostina and Oddradd from seeing how he had teared up. Of course, they'd figured that out regardless.

::We should meet up somewhere to figure out our next steps. I've got some news too, after all,:: Kelvin told him.

::Right on! Let's do that!::

Kelvin and his friends had started moving to save the captured princess—or rather, the captured Goldiana.

## **Chapter 3: Gap**

The Great Cathedral of Deramis, located in the Holy Empire of Deramis, was where the Oracle, Colette, went to give her daily prayers. Today, many worshippers had visited the cathedral as well. The title of Goddess of Reincarnation should have changed hands, but the succession was being plagued by problems large and small. The object of faith was shifting from the old Goddess to the new, so it was actually strange for such a transition to be smooth. Still, even now that Goldiana had taken over from Melfina, not much had changed in Deramis.

"I don't think gods are something that should be forced upon people. I'm sure reforms for the future take place little by little, and is there really a need to hurry? That's the reason we're split, and I feel it's just nonsense. What's more important is to slowly nurture the culture. Allowing people to freely establish their own faith would make me happiest. They say a girl's charm is infinite in its variety, as is a boy's! I'm greedy, so I want to enjoy all sorts of things!"

That was what Goldiana had said during one of many meetings between Deramis and Goldia. It perfectly expressed everything behind Goldiana's policy of accepting all people without trying to forcefully change their faith.

"Free faith, huh?"

Evening had fallen, and now the area was closed to anyone not affiliated with the church, which meant the worshippers had disappeared. In this quiet, empty space, the Oracle of Deramis, Colette Deramilius, muttered to herself. She had her eyes closed and hands clasped together, maintaining an elegant praying pose. Anyone would have thought so if they saw her. In fact, they might have even thought she seemed divine.

Recently, Colette had been very busy. After the turmoil caused by the Black Goddess, she'd traveled all over, facilitating the succession of the Goddess of Reincarnation, when suddenly the Ten Authorities had shown themselves, among other problems. Even her daily prayer to Melfina had to be crammed

into her limited free time and was just barely surviving in her schedule. All this activity had tired her out in both body and mind, and of course, she'd built up a lot of stress.

To Colette, in her current state, praying like this in what time she had was the perfect way to soothe herself. First, she started off by giving thanks that the people were able to live in peace again today while picturing Melfina in her head. That alone was able to relieve a lot of stress, but Colette's prayer had only just begun.

As the smartest person in Deramis, the image of Melfina she re-created in her mind was essentially no different from the real thing. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, this imaginary former Goddess looked just like the real thing, and she shone divinely down upon Colette today as well within the Oracle's mind.

Able to see Melfina like that, almost all of Colette's exhaustion was blown away. However, she still did not stop. Next, she exercised her gray matter to recreate Melfina's scent, which was an easy task when paired with her keen sense of smell. Colette's was, in fact, the keenest in the world. While worshipping the imaginary Melfina's countenance, Colette sniffed up as much of her godly scent as possible, enjoying it. Now, she was invincible. The stress and exhaustion that had built up throughout the day was banished into the distance, reassuring her that she'd be able to work at full capacity tomorrow as well. It was the birth of a rather warped perpetual motion machine.

Well, anyway...one might start to wonder what kind of prayer she was offering, but all that was just the initial stages. After fully enjoying the nearly real image, complete with perfect visuals and smells, Colette moved to the main part of her prayer. Her mind and body were fulfilled, and she became a true, pure saint. As mentioned before, anyone passing by would have been impressed by her beauty, bordering on godliness. She wouldn't have been able to remain the Oracle of Deramis if she were merely aroused and panting lewdly all the time.

"My thanks to Goldiana-sama as well. If not for someone as free and flexible as your personage becoming the next Goddess of Reincarnation, Deramis would not have been able to maintain its peace. Surely, the people would have broken

up into factions, which would have invited chaos into their hearts," she said, praying aloud.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar female voice interrupted her prayer from behind. "Don't tell me you're going to say that you acknowledge Goldiana as the new Goddess. There's no way."

Colette was disgruntled for a moment but quickly recovered to respond by saying, "Are you a worshipper? My apologies, but the Great Cathedral is closed to the public at this time. Please leave."

"That's too bad. I wanted to look at your pure form some more, Colette, the saint with the most faith in the world..." Suddenly, a mass of darkness manifested, and from it, a single girl appeared, her long, golden hair waving as she moved. "But I've got no obligation to obey you, Colette-sama. I'm not a genuine worshipper, after all."

After a moment of thought, Colette replied, "Then who are you?"

"Ah, yes, this is our first time meeting, isn't it? My name is Luquille, and I love Melfina-sama more than you do. But at the same time, I am a heretic who despises her."

It was Luquille, the worst fanatic, who had appeared before Colette. She elegantly lowered her head in a polite bow, but her eyes were muddied and impure. Colette rose from her prayer and faced off against this newcomer. These two fanatics, who should never have been allowed to meet, had, of all things, done so in a holy sanctuary.

"This place is one of the most important and secure in Deramis. How did you get in?" Colette asked.

"Is that supposed to be a joke? No matter how strong the security here is by human standards, it essentially doesn't exist to me. I didn't even have to make the guards faint, much less kill them. I suppose it would be easier for you to understand if you were to imagine me as the object of our mutual worship, Melfina-sama, or possibly even that human named Kelvin. That man would find this level of security easy, wouldn't he?"



"You...might be right about that," Colette admitted.

"I'm glad you understand," said Luquille, smiling, though it didn't reach her eyes.

"So, what do you want?" Colette asked. "This time for prayer is precious to me. I'd appreciate it if you made this quick."

"You're no fun. I'm so sad," Luquille playfully lamented. "Well, to be fair, I also want to finish this quickly, so I'm fine with that. Colette-sama...are you satisfied with the way the world is right now?"

"The way the world...is?" Colette repeated questioningly. "What're you talking about?"

"There's no need to play dumb," said Luquille. "Melfina-sama, whom we both worship, has stepped down to be replaced by some ridiculous being like Goldiana. As the Oracle of Deramis, nay, as someone who believes in Melfina-sama, are you really going to allow this to happen? On the surface, the church of Rinne has not changed. However, that all depends on how Goldiana treats you. If she wanted to, she could even do evil in Melfina's name. You realize that, don't you?"

Colette hesitated, but she had to admit the other woman had a point. "You might be right about that."

"Right?!" Luquille shouted. "With such a possibility existing, don't you think it's our duty to guide our goddess back to the position she is supposed to be in?! You agree with me, don't you? You have to! After all, the Goddess of Reincarnation is Melfina-sama. She is the one and only symbol of hope! Everything comes from her, whether that be justice or injustice, love or hate!!!"

With that, Luquille made a grand gesture, spreading her arms wide. The darkness she brought with her seemed to respond to her emotions, growing larger at the same time.

After some thought, Colette said, "I see. In other words, you would like me to work with you. Is that it?"

"It's great that you're so good on the uptake," said Luquille. "So, what do you

think? Though there is a difference in purity, you are someone who has faith, like me. I believe that, Colette-sama, truly. Take my hand, and together, let us guide Melfina-sama—"

"I refuse," Colette interrupted. "Because that is just your personal desire and not the world Melfina-sama herself wishes for."

Colette's answer was immediate. There wasn't even a hint of hesitation as she refused the invitation. This seemed to catch Luquille off guard, as she went silent for a moment.

"So that is your answer, Colette-sama? Ah, that makes me so sad!" she lamented. "You were the only person in the entire world who had a chance of understanding me! That means, I—"

"'Will have to kill you; I'm so sad.' Was that what you were about to say, Luquille?" came another voice.



"You're quite energetic and proactive, aren't you? We just met in Leigant yesterday. No, I guess you were forced to do this. After all, even if you managed to steal a giant stake, it'd be hard to stand against the Ten Authorities, right?" The voice that had cut Luquille off came from a familiar man. He emerged from behind the altar and stood next to Colette.

"This is a surprise, Kelvin," said Luquille. "How did you know I'd be here?" Indeed, the man was Kelvin, who should have been in Leigant.

"The actions you took were more extreme than those of the Ten Authorities, in a sense," Kelvin explained. "I couldn't sleep well unless I tried to predict what you'd do and cut you off."

"I see. You worked with Melfina-sama to predict my next move and hurried here from the Western Continent...is that right?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, basically. Though in our case, we have the use of teleportation gates, so it was actually pretty easy."

There was a small lie within Kelvin's answer. The reason he had known Luquille would come here wasn't because he'd worked with Melfina to predict

her movements, but because they'd used Paul's Unique Skill to accurately monitor what she was doing.

"Luquille's marker is going toward Deramis at an amazing speed!" was the message that Paul had sent Kelvin, so he had acted quickly. Once Kelvin got permission to use Leigant's teleportation gate, he had headed her off, getting to Deramis first. After that, and some time spent dealing with Colette coughing up blood from the joy of his surprise visit, he'd explained the situation to her.

Then, Kelvin'd had her cast Oasis on the cathedral before hiding and watching. With Oasis completely erasing his presence, not even Luquille could sense him.

"Heh...hee hee...heh heh heh! So Melfina-sama thought of me and hit the nail right on the head!" Luquille exclaimed. "Ah, what should I do?! My body is filled with the love of my Goddess!"

Wow, there certainly is no beating her in that regard... Kelvin thought. As a result of his lie, Luquille was overjoyed. Naturally, Kelvin hated that, and Colette seemed rather jealous. Never mind, there's no way that would happen. Right now, Colette was a true and pure saint. And more than that, Kelvin had told her the truth.

"Gah! I'm so jealous!" Of course...even true and pure saints had times when they let out their true emotions. Even if she knew it was a lie, just imagining it being true distressed Colette. "Ahem!" She cleared her throat. "Kelvin-sama, is she the fallen angel you spoke of?"

"Yeah, that's Luquille, the fallen angel who lived on Isla Heaven. She went missing when they evacuated, but she actually has ties to the Ten Authorities behind the scenes. Just recently, she betrayed the Ten Authorities while still opposing us."

"How should I put it... That's excessively bold," said Colette.

"I will take that as a compliment," Luquille replied. "I am only truly on Melfina-sama's side, after all. Actually, if I may...where is Melfina-sama?" Luquille twirled her head, looking around to try and spot her beloved goddess.

Colette followed suit by searching behind the altar as well.

"Come on, Colette, you should know this..." Kelvin sighed. "If Melfina was around, neither of you would have been able to engage in a proper conversation, so she's not here. Instead—"

"Instead, your big sis Ange is heeere!" Ange, wearing her cat-eared hood, appeared behind Luquille, cutting off her escape route. It seemed she had also been stealthily waiting. She had a poisoned dagger and Carnage in hand, and although she was smiling, it was clear she was ready to fight.

"Tch!" Luquille clicked her tongue loudly in response. Whether she was admonishing herself for allowing someone to get behind her or expressing disappointment because the one she truly wanted to see wasn't here, the click of her tongue reverberated loudly through the Great Cathedral.

Once she heard that, Ange started pouting.

"My apologies, I couldn't stop myself from letting out how I really felt," said Luquille. "So, what are you going to do? Judging from the fact that you cut off my avenue of retreat, you aren't planning on allowing me to leave, are you? Should we fight? Right here, in the middle of the Great Cathedral, the pride of Deramis?"

"That's a very enticing proposal, but there's no need to jump to conclusions," said Kelvin. "Neither of us looks like we're here to fight, do we?"

He smiled and pointed at himself. From any angle, he looked like he was spoiling for a fight, but it was still a smile. At the same time, Ange gave a cute smile from her position behind Luquille. The poisoned dagger in her hand gave the obvious message that she was ready to go, but as one might expect from an honest-to-goodness assassin, her smile was perfectly normal. Seeing the other two, Colette read the room and smiled as well. It was the maximum-effort saint's smile that she reserved for Melfina and Kelvin.

"No no, this is entirely unnatural... What is up with that creepy smile?" Luquille asked Kelvin.

"Creepy? That's rude of you. Come on, at least understand that we don't mean you any harm," said Kelvin. "We'll even call what you just tried to do to Colette an 'attempt' and water under the bridge. Though...we won't be so lenient next time, got it?"

The moment after Kelvin said that, a Grim Reaper-like murderous intent emanated from his entire body. At the same time, he fixed Luquille with a sharp stare that could cut steel. However...

"Oh my, so there'll be a next time?" Luquille asked. "How easygoing you are! I might yawn." The worst of fanatics didn't flinch. She emitted her own sinister murderous intent, responding with those clouded eyes of hers.

In the end, this became a sort of indirect battle, a clash of pure pressure and intimidation that started to have inconvenient effects on the Great Cathedral.

"Just to tell you, Kelvin-kun, if you keep going, Pope Philip's going to have some complaints," Ange noted.

"Whoops, you're right! Hey, come on, I told you we're not here to fight!" Kelvin exclaimed. "Don't tempt me with that face of yours! Are you trying to honey trap me or something?!"

A beat of silence followed before Luquille turned to Colette. "Colette-sama, you should choose your servants more carefully."

"Kelvin-sama got truly angry for my sake!" Colette shouted excitedly. "I want to jump into this ocean of love and drown in it! Right now! I want to burrow deep into this love, so deep it shakes the very foundations of this Great Cathedral! But... But this is not the time for that! If Kelvin-sama can fight his desires, then so can I! As the pressure mounts, so does his scent, inviting me further into depravity... But I will not lose to that... Huff, huff! Oh, excuse me. I'm busy right now, so please don't talk to me."

"What?" Luquille sounded dumbfounded. "Melfina-sama aside, why are you fawning over this man? I thought you were a kindred spirit! What is this disgraceful behavior? Would you like to die right now? I can help you."

"I told you to stop tempting me with that murderous intent," said Kelvin. "I'm at my limit here. Seriously, I'm about to smile."

"And I said not to fight! Everyone, calm dooowwwn!" Ange shouted.

Everyone's egos were so strong, there was no way they would ever sync up and stay on topic. In fact, they were one step away from a serious fight.

"Calm down." Suddenly, a voice that didn't belong to anyone in the group reverberated through the air.



Three new figures had entered the Great Cathedral. Their clacking footsteps naturally attracted the gazes of everyone present.

"Have you cooled your heads a little?" one of them spoke.

"This is surprising. I never would have expected you to be in a place like this...Dorothiara," said Luquille.

Indeed, the voice belonged to Dorothiara—or rather, Dorothy, who should have stayed in Lumiest. She had the book from Trycen that she had used during the exhibition match and a large staff in her other hand. Clearly, she was fully prepared for combat. Behind her, Rion and Bell stood in their combat gear as well, making this an exhibition match all-star team.

A combo of Heroic Recollection and Royal Decree, I see, Kelvin thought. It won't work on us because of Mel's ring, but...I wonder how Luquille fared. It'd be nice if she calmed down as Dorothy commanded.

He turned to regard Luquille cautiously. Because her emotions spiked and dipped ferociously, it was hard to accurately discern what was going on in her heart from her outer state. Even if she looked calm on the outside, it was impossible to tell whether or not her emotions would explode in the next few seconds, causing her to do something truly unpredictable. She was somewhat similar to Colette, but in Luquille's case, the chance was much higher that it would all lead in a bad direction, which made handling her all the more difficult.

Meanwhile, Colette gave Kelvin a thumbs-up to tell him that she was calm. However, she was bleeding from one nostril, probably because Rion had shown up. To be honest, it was impossible to tell whether or not she was truly calm.

"This concerns one of my brethren, after all. Your name is Luquille-san, I believe?" Dorothy asked to confirm. "It seems you've captured Wyldgroh in Leigant. What do you plan to do with him?"

"And what will you do after hearing the answer?" Luquille asked back. "Will you become my enemy, just like this Oracle of Deramis here?"

"Hey, I told you, listen when people talk," interjected Kelvin. "We came to suggest that we cooperate."

"You want...a partnership?" Luquille asked. From the fact that she hadn't immediately blown up, it seemed that Royal Decree was working.

Now that he had figured that out, Kelvin finally got to the main subject. "Right now, we have the Ten Authorities who stole Isla Heaven from the angels, people like us from the surface who side with the Goddess of Reincarnation Goldiana and oppose them, and you, acting as an enemy to both sides. To be fair, we've only just started this conflict, and I don't know if it's their pride or whatever, but it seems like the Ten Authorities only aim for the strongest of us. To us, though, it's a small mercy."

"It's like they're you, Kelvin-kun!" Ange said.

"He's probably the only one who thinks it's good that he's more likely to be attacked too," Bell commented.

"Stop teasing me," said Kelvin.

"Sure thing!" Ange replied.

"I wasn't teasing," said Bell.

While Ange snapped off a smart salute, Bell averted her gaze and seemed rather unhappy.

Kelvin shook his head, giving up and clearing his throat. He decided to continue on like nothing had happened. "As I said before, it's lucky because there won't be much damage to the general populace. But as things stand, the situation is bad. Since we don't know where the enemy's base is, they can come attack us, but we can't do the same to them. That means that at best, we can only wait for them and turn the tables. We're basically just sitting ducks."

The home that the Ten Authorities had stolen, Isla Heaven, was a floating continent that continuously moved all around the world. It was protected by a large barrier, and unless someone on the inside changed something, it was essentially impossible to get inside. If not for Melfina the fallen angel working out a plan to do so, she wouldn't have been able to bypass that barrier either. Furthermore, the barrier had an overblown stealth effect, meaning not even

Sera or Ange, with their detection skills, could find it.

One way of solving this problem was to have Paul make contact with one of the Ten Authorities using his Unique Skill before purposefully letting that member go, following them to find the location of their base. This was something Kelvin had considered, but it wasn't very realistic. They had no idea when the Ten Authorities would next attack, so they would have to rely on a miracle to have Paul near the person who was targeted. On top of that, the Ten Authorities had someone powerful enough to beat Goldiana. Relying on Paul in this case would be incredibly unfair. The next idea was to have Sera use her Blood Dominion to control a member of the Ten Authorities and have them spill the location of Isla Heaven, but that still meant she had to be in the right place at the right time. And because Hard, whom they'd captured, had completely lost his consciousness, Sera's ability didn't work on him.

"As long as we know where Isla Heaven is, I'll be able to do something about the barrier with my Boreas Death Scythe. But the problem is, we can't find the location," Kelvin explained.

After a moment, Luquille responded. "I see. So, you want me to find the location of Isla Heaven?"

Indeed, the most realistic option was to have Luquille become an ally and find Isla Heaven for them.

"But isn't that just wishful thinking on your part?" said Luquille. "As you said, Isla Heaven is a floating continent that moves while hidden from view. It's moving even as we speak. Why would I know where it is when I'm currently the enemy of the Ten Authorities?"

"Ha ha! I know you're not nearly haphazard enough to betray the Ten Authorities without a plan, Luquille!" Kelvin replied. "It's because you're their enemy that you've left behind a way to enter Isla Heaven, am I right?"

She hesitated a moment before replying, "Assuming such a way exists, what would I stand to gain from telling you about it?"

"What? Isn't that obvious? We're going to fight the Ten Authorities, trying to crush each other without any effort on your part. You'll profit from our loss and can fight whoever is left. If you want, I can even help you with your quest to use

the Divine Pillars—"

"Kelvin," Dorothy cut in, glaring at him. Although she didn't say anything more, the silent pressure she was emanating was prodigious.

It didn't take long for Kelvin to apologize. "Sorry, that was the wrong thing to say. As long as it doesn't offend Dorothy, I won't get in your way, Luquille. In fact, I may even help you...maybe."

This time, Dorothy didn't say anything. It seemed his new offer was acceptable.

"What's more," Kelvin continued, "if you help us, Luquille, one of your enemies will be destroyed without any effort on your part, and the other will be heavily exhausted. As for the Divine Pillars, it really depends on your plans for them, but as long as Dorothy allows it, you'll be able to continue in relative safety. That would be what you gain. Meanwhile, we'll be able to raid the Ten Authorities, fight them, and maybe even fight you afterward! Oh...and we'll save Goldiana!"

That last one seemed like an afterthought to Kelvin, as if he'd just remembered it. Colette sounded impressed when she said, "As expected, Kelvin-sama!" But the others, with Bell as the prime example, were simply exasperated by the battle junkie's usual antics.

"Of course, we can also mutually gain from the exchange of information. That's definitely a possibility," Kelvin added. "So, how about it? I believe we're offering quite a lot, but if you say it's still not enough, then there's room to negotiate—"

"The unification and complete apotheosis of the Divine Pillars," said Luquille, cutting Kelvin off.

He took a while to process that. "What?"

Luquille's sudden, inscrutable reply was confusing, and he was struggling to process what she meant.

"It's what I am attempting to use the Divine Pillars for," Luquille explained. "I both love and hate Melfina-sama, but I am also a believer in Elearis-sama. I will use the Divine Pillars created by Elearis-sama to once again make Melfina-sama

the Goddess. Don't you think that would be wonderful?"



"Complete apotheosis? So you want to maximize the strength of a single Divine Pillar? Which means you'll be massacring all the other Divine Pillars?" Dorothy asked to confirm. Her eyes shone with clear hostility, and her voice was thorny. It seemed like one wrong move and she would immediately attack.

"No one said that, Dorothiara. You should listen until the end when an angel speaks," Luquille replied.

Dorothy silently seethed.

"Wait! Wait, Thee-chan. Don't start forming your magic all silent like that!" Rion cried out.

"Please step aside, Rion-san," said Dorothy. "You're throwing off my aim."

Skipping ahead of the retort that Dorothy needed to stop talking if she wouldn't listen, Dorothy was already ready to attack. It was good that Rion immediately got in between them, but if she hadn't been around, battle would surely have been unavoidable.

I expected Luquille's belligerence, but I didn't think about how Dorothy tends to lose sight of everything else when it comes to her Divine Pillar kin. Jeez, you really have to handle her with kid gloves, she's so dangerous.

Those were the thoughts of the biggest battle fanatic of all, culminating in a self-deprecating joke before the conversation was steered back on topic.

"Just to confirm, but you know that the fewer Divine Pillars there are, the more the surviving ones get powered up, right?" Luquille asked.

After a pause, Kelvin answered, "Yeah. A lot happened, so now there are only four Divine Pillars left including Dorothy here. Even alone, they're near the strength of a Rank S adventurer. I'm saying this as someone who experienced that strength firsthand, so there's no doubt about it."

The first Divine Pillar they had fought back in Parth, Divine Wolf Galonzolf, was around the time of Kelvin's Rank S promotion ceremony. Kelvin himself hadn't fought in that battle; the beast had been defeated by a party of his

friends, including Sera and Rion. Their enemy had been strong enough that they'd barely won, according to the information on the Network. At the time, Kelvin and the gang had been around level 100, which meant Divine Wolf Galonzolf would have been somewhat higher than that.

"Hey, Dorothy, what's your level right now?" Kelvin asked.

"What? Why do I have to tell you, Kelvin Celsius?" she replied caustically.

"What is it, Thee-chan?" Rion asked.

"I'm level 166, Rion-san," Dorothy answered right away.

Kelvin said nothing, struck dumb by her treatment of him. Unlike when he had asked, Dorothy had answered immediately and honestly when Rion asked. It was like night and day.

"W-Well, it's not confirmed, but for every Divine Pillar defeated, it feels like the others go up about ten levels," said Kelvin. "So, what about it? Even if you defeat all but one, it'll only be around level 200. True, that might be strong enough to fight the Ten Authorities, but to be honest, that's not really what you'd call incredibly powerful—"

"You're wrong." Luquille cut him off. "In the first place, Divine Pillars getting stronger when the others are defeated is essentially just an alternative emergency measure."

Kelvin looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that there is another, proper way to strengthen them," she clarified. "And that is the unification of the Divine Pillars—or more precisely, a fusion of them."

"A fusion?! You mean the superalloy kind?!" Kelvin and Rion exclaimed at once, their eyes sparkling in clear interest. In their minds, they may or may not have been imagining the Divine Pillars transforming to create the separate parts of a giant robot.

"What in the world could you even be imagining?" Luquille asked. "Judging from your reactions, it seems you really didn't know about it. Well, that's understandable. This is only known to a few angels, the higher-ranking ones,

like the leaders or me. We were the only ones Elearis-sama told. I believe not even the current Oracle of Deramis or Melfina-sama knows."

"What?!" Kelvin exclaimed. "Melfina aside, you mean Colette doesn't know either?!" He had stopped holding back his words, likely because he was so excited. This difference in treatment was a sign that he trusted her, but still, it was very pronounced.

Colette paused to think, and after a moment, she confirmed it. "You're right, I've never heard of something like that. But if such a method really exists..."

"Indeed, it would be extremely dangerous," Luquille finished. "While strengthening the Divine Pillars by killing the others is a matter of addition, strengthening them through fusion would be a matter of multiplication. It would be nearly enough for them to rival the Goddess of Reincarnation, never mind a Rank S adventurer. In short, that method would be like having a god descend upon the world without any restrictions. That's why there was nothing placed on the surface to inform anyone of this. Elearis-sama chose to mention it only to the small number of people she truly trusted."

"Aha...what a magnificent story," Ange said in a singsong tone. "This is the first time I've heard of this too, and I'm really well-informed. But shouldn't Melsan know about it? I know what Kelvin-kun said, but she was an amazing enough angel to be chosen as the next generation's Goddess of Reincarnation, right?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, that's true," Kelvin said. He'd regained some sanity after Ange spoke.

"Hey, you with the cat ears," said Luquille, "you've got good sense, to be praising Melfina-sama during her time as an angel as well. You're right, she was a high-ranking angel, so she would have been informed by Elearis through a revelation. However, one can only receive such a revelation in the Chamber of Wisdom in Isla Heaven. Back then, Melfina-sama had left Isla Heaven due to boredom, so she wouldn't have heard of any such revelation."

"Ah, well, that's...yeah..." It reminded Kelvin of the time they'd spent traveling together in their past lives. It seemed that was when the divine revelation would have decided to show itself.

"That's enough of this talk," said Dorothy. "In the first place, what do you mean by 'fusion'? Are you seriously going to try and combine all of us together physically?"

"What?" Luquille asked. "Oh, no, we're actually going to fuse."

"Huh?" This time, it was Dorothy's turn to feel lost, as Luquille's unexpected answer had left her speechless. It was totally unclear what she was imagining, but she was red from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"What exactly are you picturing?" asked Luquille. "Please, be at ease, everyone. I'm sure what I'm talking about is very different from what Dorothiara is imagining. You're so perverted."

"I—I'm *not* perverted!" Dorothy shouted.



"Sure, sure, just calm down. How about using Royal Decree on yourself?" Kelvin suggested.

"I am calm!" Dorothy shouted again.

After she'd had her fill of teasing Dorothy, Luquille returned to the main topic. "Fusion, or System 17-Divine Authority, is, in short, a combining of the soul. If the Hero dies and there is no other way to stave off the threat, this world's laws will automatically activate that measure. But when the Divine Pillars became bugged and Elearis-sama was dragged from her position, all that was erased from public knowledge."

"When you say 'public,' you mean it didn't disappear entirely?" Kelvin asked.

"Indeed," Luquille confirmed. "After all, there are always loopholes. Elearis-sama's abdication was sudden, and combined with the sloppy succession of the Goddess of Reincarnation, that function of the system was left over in a limited state. Although it's no longer possible for it to kick in automatically, activating it manually is still an option."

"Manually?" Kelvin wondered aloud. "Uhhh, what does that mean, exactly?"

"Gather all the berserk Divine Pillars alive in one place and then place the main pillar in the center," explained Luquille. "If this was happening in auto mode, the world itself would gather them without anyone's input, but unfortunately, that function has disappeared. There's no choice but to restrain them and forcefully bring them to one place. However, this manual method can be used without needing to wait for a world-ending threat, so on that point, it is convenient."

"That was a much more meatheaded method than I was imagining. This world clearly has no crisis management skills whatsoever..." Kelvin remarked, exasperated. But internally, he couldn't help but wonder if this was something DarkMel had done specifically for his enjoyment. In his mind, that was a serious possibility.

"After that, as long as an angel with the right qualifications enters a code, the system will boot up. The main body will not only inherit the others' strength and abilities, it will also become a true deity."

"Huh?! What did you say?!" Kelvin was unable to believe this bit of good news, so he assumed he'd been struck by a sudden bout of deafness. Reflexively, he asked her to repeat her sentence. The thought of the main body inheriting not only the others' strength but also their abilities was a very attractive point to him.



"And so, we formed a temporary alliance with Luquille."

"Yeah, okay, wait a second, dearest brother. I feel like you skipped a lot in this explanation," said Shutola.

After returning from Deramis, we met up with everyone else at our inn in Pub. Then, once I finished explaining what had happened over there, for some reason, child Shutola stopped me during my conclusion. What is up with her?

She said nothing, simply fixing me with a glare.

"O-Okay, I get it. It was just a small joke. Come on, don't look at me like that."

Her glare was actually more cute than scary, but still, the look of envy Gerard was giving me was very heavy.

"I was on board with Luquille's suggestion, but Dorothy protested vehemently. She was all, 'If we can't separate again after fusing, then it's the same as killing all the other Divine Pillars! And don't think I'd listen to you, Luquille, even after fusing! Or are you actually hiding some other secret about us that would allow you to steal our will as well?!"

"Hm, well, isn't that a pretty sound argument?" Gerard said. "Looking at it from Dorothy's perspective, I understand that it wasn't a proposal she could so easily agree to. And I don't think she would change her mind, even if you agreed to it, my liege."

"Hey, come on, I put a lot of thought into it beforehand, you know?"

"Let's set aside Kelvin for now. Even if we dig into his actions, I'm pretty sure we'll just get the answers we all expect," said Sera.

Don't you think your treatment of me is just awful, Sera? Gerard?

"Well, as for what Dorothy did, in the end she reluctantly agreed."

"What? She did?"

"Yeah. Well, to be fair, it was more like Luquille eliminated all her other options."

Every argument that passed through Dorothy's lips had been countered by Luquille. With Dorothy as the main figure in this fusion, the other Divine Pillars that had gone berserk—or in other words, lost their souls and sense of selves—would be calmed by the human reason that Dorothy possessed. That meant setting the impaired Divine Pillars free. Also, Luquille had declared that she had no way to control Dorothy. Ange, with her excellent eye for lies, and Bell, with her Sera-level intuition, assured the rest of us that Luquille wasn't lying. So why was Luquille trying to strengthen Dorothy even if the power wouldn't be hers to control?

"There is someone within the Ten Authorities who has the Authority of Control. Divine Pillars in their berserk state, with their hazy egos, are easy prey to her ability—as is anyone without a strong sense of self. In the worst case, this entire system, Divine Pillars included, could become hers to use. Not even I would stand a chance if I had to face both the Ten Authorities and a Divine Pillar that had finished apotheosis. So it's necessary to have Dorothiara, the only one who still has her consciousness, absorb the rest of the Divine Pillars now while I have the chance. Once we do that, at the very least, Dorothiara will not be on the side of the Ten Authorities."

Luquille had claimed that as long as Dorothy wasn't on the Ten Authorities' side, she didn't care who Dorothy stood with. She had then asked Dorothy herself if she wouldn't prefer that her kin be used properly instead of through a foul method like mind control. Dorothy, the only Divine Pillar blessed with humanity, could never stay silent as her comrades and precious friends were being harmed. It seemed Luquille knew this and figured that she would surely make the choice to gain power with this method to use it for those she held dear. And most likely, she was correct.

On top of that, it was certain that the Ten Authorities viewed the Divine Pillars as a threat, even without them fusing. Right now, the fallen angels were prioritizing the elimination of the most powerful people on the surface, but eventually, they would start making moves to either destroy or control the

Divine Pillars. In fact, Luquille revealed to us that Ridwan *had* been tasked with the destruction of Leigant's Divine Pillar, as well as the murder of Mel and me, when he'd shown up. That was why Dorothy had agreed to fuse with the other Divine Pillars, even though she was still hostile to Luquille.

"Whoa, what a nasty method she used," said Sera. "Dorothy basically didn't have a choice at all."

"I told you that Luquille eliminated all her other options, didn't I? Well, because of that, Dorothy is totally set against her. She was totally putting out a feeling like Luquille would be next once the Ten Authorities were taken care of."

"Hm? But then wouldn't that just be a loss for Luquille? Like, in the end, she's still Dorothy's enemy anyway," Sera replied.

"She may be thinking that we would align ourselves with Dorothy in her complete form to finally fight evenly with the Ten Authorities. Either way, we can't underestimate either of them," Efil said as she put her fingers to her chin in a thinking pose, her other hand stroking her pregnant belly.

Okay, but either way, you're not allowed to fight, Efil.

"I'm having Dorothy wait at the academy along with Rion and the others. Somehow, it seems like all our power is gathering at Lumiest, and it seems like even the Ten Authorities can't treat Dorothy carelessly."

"But we don't have time to be too leisurely about things," said Gerard. "My liege, did you extract any other information from Luquille?"

"Yeah, I had her tell me a lot, since we were creating an alliance and all. First, I asked about the abilities of the other members of the Ten Authorities."

"Ah, you mean even more details on that Control person or whatever?" Gerard confirmed.

"Indeed. Still, it's not complete. I'll post everything on the Network."

## Rem Teargate:

A Goddess of Control that holds a very high rank even among the other gods. She looks young and has a timid personality, but she was the wicked god's confidante during the age he was still active.

**Authority: Control** 

An ability that allows her to completely control beings that are empty vessels, or those with a faint sense of self. She can affect wild monsters, unconscious people, or even objects like equipment and dolls. There are essentially no restrictions as long as the target is within range. The range of her power and her limit on how many she can control is unknown, but according to legends passed down among the angels, she once took to the battlefield with tens of thousands under her control. Currently, in her artificial body, her power seems a far cry from what it was in her heyday, but ultimately, that may just be wishful thinking.

## Hao Marr:

He is rather young compared to the other members of the Ten Authorities but is satisfied with his position as a god of martial arts and war. His strength in melee combat is most likely the highest in the group. However, he is only interested in powerful enemies and will only ever move as he pleases.

Authority: Brawn

An ability that allows him to control his own muscles as he pleases. Because he already has a very muscular body, the change when he manifests his Authority is hard to notice; he doesn't change that much.

"What? That's all?!" Sera exclaimed as she checked the Network. She was so loud, it was almost refreshing, since her retort was well-founded. "I mean, there're obviously ten members of the Ten Authorities, right?! So why do we only have information on two?! Also, while there's a good amount of information on the Control fallen angel, there's basically nothing on this Brawn guy! Controlling his muscles?! What does that even mean?!"

"Either the Ten Authorities never really trusted Luquille or she didn't reveal her entire hand. I've compiled their names and appearances separately, so please confirm that as well. There's also Hard, whom I tamed, and the other one Serge already defeated on her own. Uhh...I think his Authority was...Tempering? They're noted as well." Sera sighed. "So basically the remaining six are still a total mystery..."

"Yeah, the rest are a surprise to enjoy later."

"You're the only one who'd enjoy something like that, Kelvin. As the one in charge of intelligence, your big sister Ange here would rather have total control over the information war." With that, Ange flashed a brilliant smile.

Yes, I know. You want to say that it won't be funny if we end up losing because of my tastes and hobbies, right? That's what your smile means? I get it, so please stop already.

"Can I ask you to take care of it, Shutola?"

"Okay! I'll go ahead and research the war between the gods," Shutola agreed. "We might get some new hints!"

"Thanks. Ah, should we have Mel help you? She used to be the Goddess of Reincarnation, kind of, so maybe her knowledge would be useful?"

"This isn't a boast, honey, but I'm not the type of woman to be caught up with the past," said Mel. "In other words...I'm terrible with history!"

It turned out that Mel would be the one to declare herself useless as she scarfed down a mountain of rice balls.

Yeah...she probably really will be useless. Sadly, it doesn't look like she's lying about that. There's no need for me to even ask Sera or Ange.

"Uh, er...what if we ask Sister Ellen in Deramis? She was the Goddess of Reincarnation two generations ago, so I'm she'll be able to help."

"Your big sis Ange here will help too, since I'm the one who brought it up," said Ange. "I can't let myself lose to Shutola-chan in matters of collecting information, after all!"

In the end, we didn't have to rely on Mel, since Shutola and Ange were just so darned dependable.



Leaving Mel, who was entranced by her rice balls, aside for now, we regrouped and got back on subject.

"As for Hao, I think it'd be best to ask Dahak, since he actually fought the man. Dahak, is there anything you'd like to add about Hao's strength or his Authority?"

"Sure thing." Dahak stepped up. "I don't know about that muscle stuff, but it really felt like his stats were in a whole other dimension. Also, more than anything, his attacks were really bad. I couldn't see what he was doing. Still, I could tell that he was completely neutralizing all the plants I grew and the poison spread by Gros. He's not someone you can deal with through simple power. Judging from his way of speaking and his style of fighting bare-handed, it was probably something to do with the Pugilism skill, but to be honest, I can't be sure. Oh! Also, he poked something he called a...pressure point? It left Gros and me unable to move. And his intuition is stupid sharp! Like, sister Sera levels of sharp."

"Hm? Was that you making fun of me?" Sera asked.

"Oh no, no, no!" Dahak backpedaled. "I was just making a comparison! Anyway! He has absurd speed, skills that seem to be able to force his way through anything no matter what, and intuition so sharp he can basically see the future! It's frustrating, but he was able to defeat Prettia-chan, so there's no doubt that he's the strongest in melee combat. Ah, but Prettia-chan didn't totally lose, she *did* manage to take his left arm! It was actually pretty even, I swear!"

Hmm, given how passionately Dahak is making excuses, if he's right, Hao is certainly a powerful enemy. His strength goes without saying, but considering his actions so far, he's the seeker type who does nothing but pursue pure strength. In other words, he's similar to me. They say birds of a feather flock together, so maybe I'll get a chance to exchange blows with him too.

"I'm glad you seem to be having fun, big bro Kelvin, but I'm going to be the one taking down Hao, got it? That's the one thing I will not budge on," Dahak declared.

Whoops, seems like my emotions were showing on my face again. Still, Dahak is really raring to go. Well, that's exactly why I came up with that short-term super training menu, but...is it about time for his teacher to come? Okay, good.

Looks like the teacher's here.

"Sorry, sorry. It comes with the job. You get it, right?"

"Jeez, your bad habit's— Ah," Dahak let out.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. This has nothing to do with the fight, I think, but I just remembered something..."

"If something's bothering you, then don't hold back. Let it all out, like I do with my expression. It might serve as a hint."

"Right..." Dahak seemed unconvinced. "Uh, that Hao guy, he was really good-looking."

"Uh...what?"

I couldn't believe what I thought I'd heard. I mean, I had told him to let it out, no matter what it was, but I couldn't understand why he was bringing that up all of a sudden. It was even more inexplicable than my expression.

Dahak elaborated. "No, he's not just any hot guy. He was so hot he, like, had this aura. He was as hot as Prettia-chan."

"Huh, I see..."

To Dahak, Goldiana looked like she was constantly surrounded by some sort of shining nimbus. Now, at this belated stage, I found myself wondering how the world looked through his eyes.

But...I guess that means Hao has enough power to emit such an aura...right? If I were to borrow Dahak's words, his power rivals Prettia-chan's, I guess. Yeah...he really is powerful.

"It's already humiliating that he looks like that, but apparently that Hao guy's face during the battle was weird," Dahak said.

"What do you mean by that? You just said that he was as hot as Prettia-chan—doesn't that make him an almost otherworldly beauty? That would make his face a far cry from weird."

Hao, a seeker, wouldn't be like Clive, whom I had once fought, with his

remade face from reincarnation. Clive's face had this unnaturalness about it, as if it were artificial.

"No, but that's what's weird," said Dahak. "Once, in battle, he instantly got way more good-looking, as if he were polishing his appearance. Maybe that was him using his Authority and transforming? I don't really get the point of it, though."

"More...good-looking? Uh, so basically, from your perspective, Dahak, he got way cooler?"

"That's exactly it! Like, in an instant! And then, the next instant, he was back to normal!"

"But...you said you weren't able to see him. How do you know what he looked like?"

"That's... Well, I guess I would have to say it's the light. As I said, a truly beautiful person shines, and an intense light was coming off Hao's face. Prettiachan's glow is powerful and kind, but he was just *bright*. Or should I say, he was shining like crazy. With how bright he was shining, even if I couldn't see him exactly, I could at least tell where he was. Even when Prettia-chan was fighting with Hao, the light that was coming from ahead of us was crazy!"

I had no words; I was too busy trying to translate what Dahak said. If I remembered correctly, to him, coolness was a person's physical power. That was why Dahak saw Goldiana as a world-class beauty and had fallen head over heels for her. He'd given Gerard, Sera, and Grostina compliments before too, calling them things like "handsome" and "beautiful." It seemed safe to assume that one's looks had no bearing on his opinion in that regard.

Anyway, given that, Hao instantly becoming better-looking meant his muscles had grown instantaneously. In short, Hao had used his Authority against Goldiana, increasing his own power. The change in power that we couldn't perceive had been unveiled thanks to Dahak's unique eyes. Most likely, Hao's Authority wasn't something that was always on, but was applied strategically at points of impact. Maybe his increase in strength also meant an increase in agility.

"I guess it's like a composite Herculean Strength and Acute Reflexes, but

stronger and applied instantaneously."

Of course, I didn't think for a moment that Hao had shown all his strength, but we had at least found a clue about his Authority. I never would have expected Dahak's unique senses to give us a barometer of Hao's abilities.

"Nice point of view, Dahak. I knew you'd show up when it comes to Prettiachan."

"Huh? Really?" Dahak sounded surprised. "I don't really get it, but you know me so well, big bro!"

"It would be best not to spoil Dahak too much, Master. He'll get full of himself again," said Mdo.

"Y-Yeah...I'b worried about dat too..." added Boga.

"Ah, you guys! Stop doing that!" Dahak complained.

Mdo was enjoying some sweets next to Mel, and Boga was enjoying a rice ball that was small for his size.

"Now, now, calm down, Dahak. I believe I understand your resolve the best. You're ready to complete any training as long as it's to save Prettia-chan, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! I'll be the one to finish Hao! In order to do that, I, Dahak, will do anything!"

Good, I got him to say he'd do anything. He totally said it. I've got good hearing, and as long as I'm not extremely excited, there's no way I'd mistake it.

"Well, then, Teacher, it's your time to shine!"

"Huh? Teacher?" Dahak asked, dumbfounded.

Responding to my shout, the sliding screen door to the room was opened somewhat forcefully. Indeed, I had called on the perfect instructor to help train Dahak.

"Yo, Kelvin! You're going to introduce me to a good man, aren't you?! Ha, you're such a *bad* man! But don't worry, you're good to me!" the teacher exclaimed.

"Yes, I did say that. Actually, I gotta say, thanks for coming on such short notice, Bakke."

"Big bro...this woman, isn't she the Rank S adventurer called Leopardess?" Dahak asked, pointing at Bakke. His expression was stiffening more and more as time went on.

Come on, now, don't tense up like that. The only thing you should be stiffening is your resolve.

"Hm...mm-hmm?" Meanwhile, Bakke caught on that the one I wanted to introduce to her was Dahak, so she gave him a thorough once-over.

"I see. You're a new Dragon King, aren't you? The Earth Dragon King?" she said.

"Yeah... What's wrong with that?" the dragon replied apprehensively.

Having finished circling around and observing him, Bakke once again looked at him straight-on. She stared steadily at him, like he was prey. "Ha ha! Man, I was really thoughtless, wasn't I?" said Bakke. "Now that I think about it, I've never had a dragon! Of course, in *that* sense. Wild dragons are really unpleasant, but... Yeah...yeah! I think I can have some fun with this boy. His face is good. In fact, he's exactly my type. As a mother of two, I can't allow myself to say I hate something without having tried it before. This is a good chance."

"Big bro...I don't understand what she's saying," said Dahak.

"Hm? Ah, well, you want to train like your life depends on it, don't you?"

Dahak was trembling, but I declared the start of his training anyway.



Dahak jumped out of the window, with Bakke following close behind. We were on the top floor of the inn, and since we were in town, there were other people around, so it wasn't good to stand out so much.

"Wait up!" Bakke shouted. "I will personally teach you the ins and outs of love!"

"Graaah!" Dahak screamed. "That's not what I want to learn, and what you know is just unhealthy! I'll never let you take care of me, even if I die!"

"What's this?!" Bakke shouted back. "I dragged myself all the way here for you, so how long are you going to remain a child?! Adult love has both a public and a private side! If you're a true man, you should just prepare yourself!"

"I'm not going to be deceived by such shallow words!" Dahak protested. "My heart belongs to Prettia-chan alone! I'll never cheat on heeerrr!"

While watching the two of them from the window as they disappeared into the distance, I also listened to their reverberating conversation. Rather, I would have heard it even if I wasn't trying, given how loud they were being. They stood out a lot since they were in the sky above the city too, so I could see the director coming to complain to us later on.

"My liege..." Gerard started. "Don't you think you're being too cruel to him? Dahak is going to get eaten, you know?"

"And seriously, is that really going to be training for him? He's just desperately running away from Bakke," Sera noted.

"It will. Among all the Rank S adventurers I know, Bakke is the most wild and powerful. Dahak is too honest at his roots, so this will be a good shot in the arm for him. Also, Bakke knows a lot about how dragons fight."

"Now that you mention it, she unveiled a form I'd never seen before during the exhibition match. Maybe that could be a good reference for Mdofarak and Boga too?" Sera suggested.

"I refuse." Both dragons immediately declined. It seemed they really disliked her.

"Well, I admit it's a pretty drastic measure. It's a type of training even I would have hesitated to implement if the person wasn't as resolved as Dahak."

"Training that even Kelvin-kun doesn't want to do... What exactly—" Sera started, but was interrupted.

"Hm, and with how you dangled that reward right in front of her, Bakke's motivation will be high as well. I think we can expect good results. Mgmg." Even though Mel was an angel, she was talking like this was someone else's problem. She was much more interested in the food she was eating.

Still...

"You seem really at ease, Mel."

"Oh, no, I'm not even a little bit at ease," she answered. "And it's because I'm this way that I need to eat while I can. I need to prepare for the fight that's coming. Om nom."

Though her excuse sounded reasonable, the eating noises she was making after every line were completely ruining the effect.

"Ah, yeah...let's just leave Dahak to Bakke. Next, let's talk about the Divine Pillars we promised to capture when we allied with Luquille. Currently, there are four pillars left in this world, but... Shutola, do you know any details about them?"

"To start, there's the Divine Bird Wyldgroh, whom Luquille has already captured," answered Shutola. "Followed by Dorothy, who's waiting for us in Lumiest—or should I say, Dorothiara. In addition, Divine Spirit Deatotal is in Deramis, and Toraj has Divine Whale Zeval lurking in the depths of a dungeon. Am I correct, dearest brother?"

"You are exactly. As expected."

"Heh heh!" Shutola puffed herself up proudly.

"Oho ho ho! Shutola's so smart! The smartest in the world!" Gerard gushed. His expression was very relaxed, all smiles as he praised her. Everything he was saying was true, but with how young Shutola looked at the moment, it only seemed like a grandpa fawning over his grandchild.

"Ignoring Gerald for now, are we going to be capturing the one in Deramis or Toraj?" Sera asked.

"Oh no, I'm planning to ask the locals to do that for us. Honestly, with how powerful the Divine Pillars are right now, there's no need for us to gather together to face them."

"Is that so? Well, we're just capturing them instead of putting them down, after all. I guess I understand why you don't want to go over there yourself," said Sera.

"By the way, Master, who are these locals who are helping us?" Efil asked.

"I've asked Sylvia and Ema, who just so happen to be temporary generals in Toraj right now, to handle Divine Whale Zeval. Those two will definitely be able to handle it. As for Divine Spirit Deatotal in Deramis...well, judging from the name, it doesn't have a physical form, so I was thinking of asking Serge since she's good at magic—but apparently she's gone off on some journey somewhere after the last battle, and no one knows where she is."

"Uh...isn't that pretty bad?" Efil asked. "Serge-sama is strong enough to be targeted right away by the Ten Authorities, so I believe it would be quite dangerous for her to act alone."

Yeah, Efil's worries are well-founded. But...I mean, it's Serge. The only thing I can imagine is her coming out of it all unscathed somehow.

"For now, let's just assume that Serge has her own plan going on and focus on what we need to be doing. So, returning to the subject, I'm thinking of letting Touya and the others take care of Deatotal."

"The Heroes of Deramis?"

"Indeed. They've gotten a lot stronger, both mentally and physically. If they manage their usual teamwork, they should be plenty strong enough to capture the Divine Pillar."

"Hee hee! So it was worth training them back in Deramis!" Sera said, puffing out her chest proudly for some reason.

Ah, right. They participated in that death match Sera held in the Catacombs of the Heroic Spirits, didn't they? They have it so good, with teachers everywhere around them. Well, in the worst case, I can have Estoria, who's been assigned to guard the orphanage, help. It'll work out in the end. In fact, I'll make it work out.

"Hm, since we'll be leaving the capture of the Divine Pillars to others...what will we be doing, my liege?" Gerard asked. "It sounds like we have nothing to do. Will we be training until the time comes, like Dahak?"

"No. Training isn't a bad idea, but if that's all we do, we won't be able to respond as well when we need to. There's something else for us to take care of."

"What is it?" everyone else asked at once, their heads tilting in puzzlement.

I reached into Clotho's Storage and took out a certain magic item. "We're going to intercept them—or rather, prepare to intercept them perfectly. If they're going to come riding in on stakes, then we'll fight fire with fire."

I'd taken out a stake the size of my palm with ancient script written on it. At first glance, it was a far cry from the giant flying stakes. In truth, I couldn't make something that advanced. But it all depended on how the item was used. There were plenty of ways to get around my limitations.

"Hm? This looks familiar..." Sera said.

"Ah! Is that one of Creator's Magic Stakes? The ones he made for Tristan?!" Ange exclaimed.

"Magic Stakes? Ahhh! I remember now!" Sera also cried. After hearing what Ange said, Sera rapped her fist against her palm. It seemed everyone now remembered them.

"That's right. This is able to create a Summoner's magic sphere of influence around it. Tristan used it during the war with Trycen."

It was rather nostalgic now, but back during the war, Tristan had managed to lead us around by the nose with stakes just like the one I was holding planted around the battlefield. Once the trick was discovered, it was easily dealt with, just like any minor trick, but it was terribly effective, as was any trick originating from Jildora. This item should have been something Tristan would have given an arm and a leg for, given how small his sphere of magic influence was. Of course, in my case, it wasn't all that necessary, so when I'd retrieved them, they'd sat in Storage, essentially useless. But now it was finally time for them to see the light of day.

"Our enemies have attempted to reap lives to sate their own greed and are villains who've abducted the girl Dahak is in love with. There are eight more of them, and they're all strong. So strong I'm fed up just thinking about them. And it would be a complete waste to allow them to be taken by Serge or someone else— Ahem! And they pose a threat to others, which I cannot stand. That's why I'm thinking we use these stakes to give them a grand welcome. We will be the ones to do this!" I clenched my fist and declared this loudly and forcefully.

Heh, nailed it. I nailed it so hard.

"Did you just try to gloss over your slipup, Master?" Mdo asked.

"Unfortunately, he did," said Ange.

"He did, even though there was no point to it," Sera added.

"He wasn't hiding it at all, but he rephrased it anyway," Gerard agreed.

"Om nom nom snarf nom," went Mel.

That's weird. I totally nailed the speech, but all my friends are fixated on this supposed slipup of mine.



A certain figure was bound at the center of the Chamber of Wisdom, located in Isla Heaven, which was under the control of the Ten Authorities. This figure's name was Goldiana Prettiana. She was confirmed to be the next Goddess of Reincarnation, and she was bound by several rings of light in front of a cross. She seemed to be unconscious, as her thick eyelids showed no signs of movement. However, for some reason, she was still in a pose that looked like she was holding herself in her own arms.

"Hey, Hao...what is the meaning of this?" Cheruvim asked as he furrowed his brows. He was looking right at Goldiana.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that," replied Hao. "As you can see, I have captured the false goddess, Goldiana."

"I can see that. But...why did you seal her in that pose? It's just painful to look at."

"Well you shouldn't be asking me that," said Hao. "I simply captured Goldiana and brought her here. Someone else handled the sealing."



Cheruvim said nothing as he glared at his surroundings. Because his bangs were long, he could only see out of one eye, but even though his eyesight was halved, the intimidating aura he was putting out was not.

"Uh, um...I was the one that did it..." Seemingly unable to take the pressure, one of the fallen angels timidly raised her hand. She had long, blonde hair like Gloria and was wearing a bishop's hat and white priestess robes with gold trim. It was clear from the timbre of her voice that she was terribly nervous. Up until now, she'd kept her mouth firmly shut, refusing to say anything without being prompted, so she must have thought she had to come forward now before things got worse.

"Isabel, huh? Right, your skill with barriers is head and shoulders above the rest of us," Cheruvim said approvingly. "It's probably strong enough that this false goddess won't be able to get out of it, then. But still, why did you seal her in that pose? Her expression is weird too; it's truly infuriating."

"I really couldn't say... Um, she was normal when Hao-san brought her in, but after I sealed her, she changed to that pose before I knew it..."

The Ten Authorities member named Isabel did not actually know why Goldiana had adopted that pose, so she had no choice but to answer truthfully.

"Let it be, Cheruvim. Given Isabel's personality, I can't believe she would do something like this knowing she'd be forced to lie about it later. You should know that," said Hao.

"Hmph, of course she wouldn't!" Cheruvim scoffed. "But I'm still angry. How could our sworn enemy be adopting such a stupid pose? It's like she's making fun of us!"

"Kah hah! It seems our subleader is quite incensed!" Hazama said mirthfully. "But rather than that stupid pose, I'm more surprised that the false goddess managed to take one of Hao's arms. Tell me, Hao, was this one really that strong?"

Hazama turned the part that seemed to be his head toward Hao, whose left arm hadn't been healed and was still missing. That was why it attracted the Ten Authorities' attention.

"We were essentially even; the fight could have gone either way," answered Hao. "She was able to fight that well with me in close combat, even after I manifested my Authority. If she isn't considered a powerful foe, then I don't know who is."

"Uh, um, what will you do about your arm?" Isabel asked. "If you just want to regrow it, I could do that..."

"No need. I gave my lost arm to the false goddess."

"Oho, she was powerful enough to make you do that?" Hazama remarked.

"She was worthy of her surface title of Peach Ogre. The way she fought was certainly fierce like one," said Hao.

Twitch.

"Uh, hm?" Isabel let out.

"What's wrong, Isabel?" Hao asked.

"O-Oh, nothing. I just thought the false goddess moved a little... Sorry, I was probably imagining things," replied Isabel. She turned to look at Goldiana once more, but the goddess was still in the strange pose from before and showed no signs of moving.

"Hm..." Hao murmured.

"Khah hah hah! Still, the people of this world sure are entertaining," said Hazama. "Even though we are inhabiting artificial bodies, whose abilities far exceed the limits of those on the surface, Hao faced a hard fight, Baldogg was defeated, and Ridwan was taken as a Follower by our enemy! Where else would such an interesting turn of events happen? Nowhere, I say! Khah hah hah hah hah!"

"Hazama, you're being really optimistic..." Isabel muttered.

"Indeed, this is no time to be laughing. It is a real problem that out of all the Ten Authorities who descended to the surface, more than half failed in their mission. In the name of our lord, Addams, we cannot allow any more failure. In the first place, we cannot allow ourselves to fall behind those inferior beings," said Cheruvim.

"Then what do we do? These artificial bodies are more annoying than expected. We can only exhibit our full might for a short time. Not only that, but only a portion of us can be outside of Isla Heaven at once, and to top it all off, even the time we have to operate on the surface is limited. We're totally bound," Hao replied.

"Only three people can be outside of Isla Heaven at once...right?" Isabel confirmed hesitantly. "And the time we can act on the ground and exhibit our full powers differs, but it's not enough for anyone..."

"That Luquille woman probably placed this restriction on our bodies because she knew she'd betray us," Cheruvim said.

"Which means there's a possibility she will tell those on the surface of our bodies' limitations. How troublesome..." Hao muttered.

"Having one of our Holy Stakes stolen was pretty damaging as well. Those are necessary for us to revive our lord, and because Baldogg, who created them, was killed, we won't be able to make more." Cheruvim added.

The Ten Authorities were subordinates of the wicked god Addams, who once held absolute power and was able to split the divine realm in two. But in their artificial bodies, it seemed they were subject to a great many limitations. Aside from Hazama, who was still laughing from earlier, all the Ten Authorities were fed up with the situation.

"Don't just sit there, Eld, say something. The plan that failed was yours in the first place, and it's why we're in this situation. Use Luquille? Hah! Instead we let Ridwan and a Holy Stake get taken! How do you plan on taking responsibility?" Cheruvim asked.

Eld didn't respond right away. Then he said, "It's fine to be ambitious, Cheruvim, but now is not the time to be trying to climb. Nor is it the time to be arguing about responsibility."

"What?"

"The strong survive, and the weak are weeded out. That is the way of the world," declared Eld. "And this time, Ridwan and Baldogg were proven to be the latter, that is all. As followers of Addams's teachings, I believe none of you have

any objection to that?"

Cheruvim sucked in a breath, shocked and offended. "You!" He stood up from the machine he was using as a chair to face Eld. He was letting out clear murderous intent, more than enough to disturb Rem the crybaby and the delicate Isabel.

"Kah hah! Fighting over the top spot of the Ten Authorities now, of all times? Splendid! Absolutely splendid! The amusement never stops!" Hazama exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha...Hazama, you're being way too optimistic!" Hao laughed.

"Wh-What should we do?!" Isabel was flustered and fumbling over her words. "Sh-Should I lock them up for now?!"

"Big s— Isabel, please stop saying things that'll only spread conflict. Eld...you need to elaborate more." Gloria's dignified voice rang through the Chamber of Wisdom as it was descending into chaos.

This was met with a click of a tongue and an audible scoff, but it was unclear who did what. At any rate, it put an end to the swirling murderous intent filling the room.

"That's right, I did forget to say something," Eld announced. "Ridwan's and Baldogg's souls fulfilled two of the six sacrifices we needed to revive Addams. That's why their sacrifices weren't in vain. Especially Ridwan's soul, because it is filling the Holy Stake that Luquille stole. Even if it is out of our hands, when the time comes it will surely fulfill its role. Cheruvim...it's fine to feel despair over the loss of our comrades, but our enemies are only the false goddess and her adherents. Surely it isn't too late to settle things with me after everything is over? Now that we have captured the false goddess Goldiana, we only need three more sacrifices. We should focus our efforts on securing those sacrifices instead of fighting among ourselves."

After a tense moment, Cheruvim replied, "Fine. But don't you dare forget what you just said." The murderous intent in his eyes was still aimed squarely at Eld.



"Mm, perfect," said Sylvia.

Sylvia's sudden utterance made Ema look up from the map she was using to check their position, and she made a confused noise. "What's that, Sylvia?"

They were currently in the ocean bordering Toraj—deep, deep in it. They were so deep that the light of the sun didn't reach them. It was an area ruled by darkness where people should not be. Besides the problem of not being able to breathe, they were also being subjected to heavy pressure from all the water above them, which meant it normally would have been impossible to even get down there.

So how had Sylvia and Ema done it? First, they had long since surpassed the specs of a normal human, and second, they had prepared by casting a spell to adapt their bodies to the water. Sylvia had cast the Rank A Blue Magic spell Dafroth on herself and Ema. It was a stronger, deep-sea version of the Rank C Blue Magic spell Froth. It caused a giant bubble to envelop the target, keeping water away from the target and protecting it from the effects of the pressure. This was used in combination with Ema's Unique Skill, Chains of the Shunned, allowing even Sylvia, who was barely affected by magic, to receive the effect.

"I discovered an unknown foodstuff. It looks delicious," Sylvia answered.

"Uh...isn't that a starfish?" Ema replied.

The two were enjoying a deep-sea stroll with their pseudo-diving suits and relying on Ema's Lambent, a Rank E Red Magic spell, for sight. Of course, they hadn't come all this way to have fun. In fact, this place was absolutely terrible for having fun, since it was rampant with creepy monsters that had never been seen before and had terrible visibility to boot. The only person who would want to come to a place like this would be a certain battle junkie.

Ema sighed. "I was happy to accept a special quest from Kelvin-san, but I didn't think we'd be sent so far. This is said to be a mythical dungeon in the depths of the ocean, but for some reason Tsubaki-sama had a map to it, and what's more, she happily let us borrow it. Maybe we should've thought about this quest a little more before taking it."

"Mm, we've had a lot of time off recently, so this is a good chance for us to sharpen our senses," said Sylvia. "Also, the rewards were generous."

"You definitely decided entirely based on those rewards, didn't you?" Ema retorted. "A full-course meal with unlimited extra helpings cooked by Efil-san, wasn't it? The reward money is impressive too, but you're definitely more interested in the food. I agree, it's an attractive reward, but...Sylvia, let go of that starfish already."

Sylvia let out a shocked noise.

"Come on, don't give me that surprised look," Ema said. "If you're going to bring something back, at least make it something shaped like a fish. Uh, actually, never mind. Even if we roast anything you bring back whole, I don't think we'd be able to eat it..."

Ema thought better after looking at the deep-sea fish swimming around them and attempted to convince Sylvia to give up on the idea.

"Too bad..." Sylvia lamented.

"Cheer up. We'll be getting a full meal from Efil-san if we manage to complete this, right? We don't have time to be sad."

"Mm, you're right."

Sylvia then let the starfish go, her mind apparently filled with thoughts of the food to come. She was now drooling, but that was the price of moving things along.

"So...do you have business with us or something?" Ema asked.

Now that she'd solved one problem, she turned around to face the person who was suddenly standing—or rather, swimming—behind them.

"Hm? Serge?" said Sylvia.

The former Hero was behind them. She was in a swimsuit for some reason, complete with headwear that seemed like a pair of goggles. Also, she'd apparently sucked in all the air she could before diving, since her cheeks were puffed out as far as they could go. The way she looked seemed very incongruous with the setting, given that they were in the depths of the ocean.

"Oh, well, a lot happened, and Tsubaki-chan sent me to help you two! I wanted to get closer to both of you anyway, so I totally thought this was the

perfect chance, y'know? I came in a big hurry!" Since she was diving and couldn't talk, she used White Magic to write letters of light in the water. Impressively, her magic handwriting in the water was quite pretty. She even managed to add in a heart at the end.

"You came— Wait, what happened to your arm? Wait, no, first let's make it so you can talk normally." There were so many things to react to that Ema had trouble choosing what to do first. "Sylvia, cast Dafroth on Serge-san."

Sylvia did as Ema said and cast the spell to envelop Serge in a bubble. Now that Serge was safely (questionably) in a bubble and able to breathe, she could talk as well.

"Phhwhaaahh!" She let out the breath she was holding. "Oh man, being able to breathe is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Another ten or twenty minutes and I might have drowned! Ha ha ha."

"Don't laugh. What the heck are your lungs made of?" Ema had to ask. "More importantly, it's amazing how you got all the way here so lightly equipped. If you were normal, you'd have succumbed to the pressure and died, you know?"

"I mean, I can't help it. I'm Serge Flore, after all. I'm not the type to die from something as weak as pressure from water! But jokes aside, this swimsuit has a secret to it. That's why I was able to get this deep in the ocean safely, though I still held my breath like normal!"

"Uhhh..."

Serge's swimsuit and goggles were actually her Holy Sword Will in a transformed state. Ema was fed up with how it was "anything goes" when it came to Serge, but Sylvia oohed and aahed with sparkling eyes.

"Well, jokes aside, I was telling the truth when I said I came to help. I don't know if Kelvin told you, but I kind of messed up in my fight against one of the Ten Authorities, and all my equipment broke. So I came to ask Tsubaki if Toraj had any good blacksmiths, or if she could actually just gift me some good gear, and then she told me about you two."

"I see, so that's why you came to help... Um, and your arm...did that happen in the earlier fight too?" Ema asked.

"Correctamundo! A lot happened, and I can't regrow my arm. I'm currently in the middle of trying to tame this curse!" Serge boasted.

"I...see?" Ema clearly didn't see.

"Doesn't the salt water hurt?" Sylvia asked.

"Wow! You're worried about me, Sylvia?! I'm so happy!" Serge gushed. "But I'm totally fine. I may act like this, but I'm still history's strongest Hero. I can deal with the wound myself, somehow! After all, I'm great at magic too!"

"Wooow," Sylvia said flatly. She followed up with some impressed clapping. It was a very pure and innocent reaction.

That seemed to shoot Serge through the heart, as she started squirming with her hand on her head.

"Serge-san," Ema said shortly.

"Ah, right. Sorry, Ema-chan. I got a little too caught up. But really, you don't need to worry about my arm. I'm going to have Tsubaki-chan get me a prosthetic once we're done here. And I don't think it'll hold us back while we're exploring, so you can feel free to trust and rely on me...to a reasonable degree."

"Well, if you're going to go that far, then I guess it's okay. Are you fine with this, Sylvia?" Ema asked.

"Mm, I don't mind. I believe Serge can use White Magic, so I think she'll make the capture a lot easier."

"Okay! You can count on me!" Serge exclaimed. "I'll do my best for your sake, Sylvia-chan! Of course, for you too, Ema-chan!"

Serge drew herself so close to Sylvia that their bubbles were touching. She was so forceful about it that Ema, who had just started to relax, felt her wariness shoot back up.

"Serge-san," she warned her.

"Sorry! Now, now, no need to make such a scary face," Serge said coyly. "We've fought together and 'loved' together, haven't we?"

"We have not!" Ema cried.

"Mm, found the dungeon," said Sylvia. "Ema, I'll be going first."

"Oh, wait! Sylvia?!" Ema cried again. "Don't just go off on your own!"

"She's right. It's dangerous, you know?" Serge agreed in a singsong tone. "That's why I'm coming with you! Wait for me, Sylvia-chaaan!"

"You wait tooooo!" Ema shouted.

Though it was the depths of the ocean, the area was extremely lively.

A few hours later, the three had captured Divine Whale Zeval and safely brought it back to Toraj.



There were several plains within Deramis's territory. Since the climate was nice and temperate, most of its plains were quite pastoral. However, there was one exception. This nameless plain was closed off to all civilians, and only adventurers over a certain rank with some connections were allowed to enter. It wasn't as if it were home to vicious monsters, nor had some terrible tragedy occurred there. Oracles of the past had gotten an ominous feeling about the place, that was all. However, they had all said the same thing, and that was reason enough.

"The word of the Oracles was sufficient, huh? Now then, I wonder what's hiding in this place," a single good-looking man said as he stepped onto this plain that was barred to outsiders. Behind him, several equally good-looking women followed.

"Don't just go off on your own, Touya! We don't know what'll happen here, so be more careful!" Setsuna shouted.

"Aha ha, my bad, Setsuna," he apologized. "It's been so long since we've had an adventure, I just got too excited."

"Now, now, Setsuna. You should calm down too. Kanzaki-kun's feelings are understandable in this case," Nana said, trying to calm the other two down.

"Those who let their guard down like that will die. This otherworld is a harsh place," said Miyabi.

Their names were Kanzaki Touya, Shiga Setsuna, Mizuoka Nana, and Kuromiya

Miyabi. These four were hailed as Heroes of Deramis and loved by all the world —though at this point, such introductions are probably unnecessary. It was just the usual group, after all.

Kelvin had defeated the Demon Lord as well as the Black Goddess, and as a result, the Heroes' mission had been completed. After that, they had returned home to Japan. Everything had been settled for them, including excuses for their long absence, and there were a lot of things they needed to do, including reunite with their families. In the end, Touya and the rest's disappearance had been explained away as them studying abroad, so it didn't cause much chaos. Things were only able to go so smoothly because of the trust all four of them had built with the people back home. Of course, the Goddess, Goldiana, had also helped.

"Don't say such scary things, Miyabi," said Touya. "You really didn't have to go that far, I haven't let my guard down or anything. Before I'm a Hero, I'm just a human. I'm not great enough to be arrogant."

"Kanzaki-kun!" Nana exclaimed, impressed.

"Good, as long as you understand. I refuse to die until I get my payback against that Grim Reaper," Miyabi declared.

Setsuna sighed. "Touya aside, you're really holding a grudge, huh, Miyabi?"

"Ka... Kanzaki-paisen!"

"Nana, how long are you going to just stand there, impressed? Wait, did you just say 'paisen'?" Setsuna asked and turned around, sensing something wrong with this new term.

"I'm so jealous, Kanzaki-paisen! You get to be in a party full of cute girls! It's awesome! The world is so unfair!"

Setsuna paused for a moment in disbelief. "What are you doing, Serge-san?"

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

"Oh?"

From out of seemingly nowhere, the ancient Hero, Serge, had joined them. It

was only after Setsuna said something that the other Heroes noticed she was there.

"Ah, so you finally noticed me? I've been tailing you for quite a while now, you know? Jeez, you're so slow to react, Setsuna!" Serge exclaimed.

"Um, following us so boldly just had me troubled as to how to react. Wait, what happened to your arm?!" Setsuna exclaimed.

Serge had given Setsuna a light hug as she talked, and the sensation made it clear to Setsuna that one of the ancient Hero's arms was a prosthetic. Serge laughed, commenting on how this was happening *again* before explaining what had happened. Apparently, after she'd finished helping out in Toraj, she had obtained her prosthetic and made great haste this way.

"You're busier than you look," Miyabi commented.

"Um, did you really have that hard of a time, Serge-san?" Nana asked. "How strong *are* these Ten Authorities?!"

"Mmm, from what I heard from Ellen, they're basically a group of cheaters that used to be gods, so they should all be pretty strong, right? The glasses guy that I fought seemed like he had more of a support job than a combat one too."

"That means they're even stronger than we thought! Kelvin-san told us to leave that side to him, so it really felt like things were going as usual, but...I guess the situation is worse than expected," said Setsuna.

"It's fine, Setsuna," said Touya. "Master Kelvin is trustworthy. If he says to leave it to him, then we should trust his words! Isn't that right, Serge-san?" Touya went right up to her.

"Yeah, you're right, but I'd prefer you didn't get so close to me, Kanzakipaisen," Serge replied. "I mean, like, you might end up activating your lucky pervert skill. It seems my luck might end up working against me too."

"A-Ah, right. Excuse me!" Touya exclaimed.

"It's fine as long as you understand!" said Serge. "I'm totally fine if Setsuna, Miyabi, or Nana want to get close to me, okay? In fact, please, come right in!"

"Ha ha ha..." Setsuna and Nana gave wry chuckles as they took a step back.

"It looks like losing an arm and having it replaced by a prosthetic didn't change you. That's sort of a relief, though," said Setsuna. "By the way, did the material I gave you before come in handy? I have no idea what you would have used it for."

"What material, Setsuna-chan?" Nana asked.

"She wanted to know the inner workings of a chainsaw, so she asked me about it before we returned to Japan," Setsuna explained. "I handed over some documents I found on the net when we came back."

As a reward for being Heroes, Setsuna and the others had gained permission to periodically travel between Japan and this world. However, because the difference in technological development between the two worlds was so large, it was basically forbidden to bring anything that could cause a revolution. The reason she had been able to bring the chainsaw documents despite that was because Serge, a previous Hero, had requested it. It had been done on condition that the documents would be perused under Goldiana's supervision and then disposed of on the spot.

"For a chainsaw? Uh...you mean the thing that cuts trees? But aren't you able to cut trees in half with a single swing of your Holy Sword Willjillion already?" Nana asked.

"Heh heh, well yeah!" Serge puffed up. "As Nana said, doing so would be super easy for me. But as a Hero, don't you always want to try to upgrade yourself? The documents I got...well, they helped drive my imagination."

"I...see?" Though they acted like they understood, Setsuna and Nana didn't seem to actually understand.

"If you'll take advice from a senior in Heroing, I think you should be more flexible in the way you use your Will, Kanzaki-paisen," said Serge.

"More...flexible?" Touya parroted back, confused.

"Um, I know it's a bit late to point this out, but why are you calling Touya that?" Setsuna asked. "You're many years our senior, Serge-san, so..."

"Oh don't sweat the small stuff." Serge brushed the question off. "I go with the flow, so reasons don't matter to me! Anyway, getting back on topic, the more the Hero wishes for it, the more Will will respond to the hopes of its partner. Take Rion-chan for example. Even though she doesn't have a Will, she's doing stuff like triple-wielding, isn't she? So don't you think stopping at dual-wielding is such a waste?"

"I see. So basically, you want me to stop being limited by common sense," said Touya. "That was very enlightening! May I please call you Master Serge?!"

"I refuse with all I have!" Serge said bluntly. "Also, we've spent a long time chatting, so I think it's about time for us to get back to capturing the Divine Pillar."

With that, she dodged around Touya so he wouldn't get too close before walking ahead. She wanted to avoid a lucky pervert event no matter what.

"You're going to help us, Serge-san?" Setsuna asked.

"Yeah, as thanks for the documents you gave me," Serge answered. "I want to test out this prosthetic, anyway. But I'm just your backup. The main stars of this fight will still be you guys, okay?"

"Thank you. That is still very reassuring," said Setsuna.

"But I feel like things are going too smoothly. I'm worried about an inevitable betrayal," said Miyabi.

"That's rude, Miyabi-chan!" Nana shouted.

"Ha ha, you're so distrustful, Miyabi!" Serge said. "Don't worry, I would never do anything to hurt you g—"

"Master Serge!" Touya interrupted her, yelling. "Thank you for your instruction and your encouragement! I would like to stay near you, Master Serge, to absorb all your teachings! Yes, right next to you!"

"Uhhh...but you know, I might make a mistake and end up erasing you from this world, Kanzaki-paisen," Serge said offhandedly. "Your position is basically a delicious paradise to me, after all."

"Th-That doesn't sound like a joke, Serge-san..." Setsuna muttered.

Then, Setsuna and the others went through the plains, searching for the invisible Divine Pillar before participating in a blazingly intense fight. Though it

was hard fought, they successfully captured Divine Spirit Deatotal.



Holy Stakes: the giant arks shaped like stakes owned by the Ten Authorities. Baldogg, the God of Blacksmithing, made six of them toward the end of the mythical war. They were spotted several times during the war, but even after it ended, their purpose was still shrouded in mystery. Even when the gods tried to search for these stakes after the wicked god Addams was defeated, they didn't manage to find any.

"That's what the books left in Isla Heaven say, anyway. No wonder we haven't found them. They were kept safe in Baldogg's Storage even after he was sealed." The one who spoke to herself, in the central division of the Holy Stake she'd stolen from Ridwan, was of course, Luquille. The ship was completely empty of all life except for her and Divine Bird Wyldgroh. Since it was so empty, the ship was very quiet.

Having formed an alliance with Kelvin, she moved her Holy Stake to the site of Kelvin's final battle with DarkMel, the central ocean. She would not attract attention in this area, and being here would allow her to react flexibly, no matter what happened. It was the perfect place for Luquille to observe the world. Of course, Kelvin and his allies also knew that she was on standby over the central ocean, so once they captured the remaining Divine Pillars she was after, they would bring the pillars to her.

"Huh, really? So does that mean being in one is, like, a historic achievement?" A voice responded to Luquille's private musings.

She hadn't expected that, so it took a small moment before she replied, "And you are?"

"Sup! I'm the courier!" It was Serge. She sat down on a chair without giving Luquille a chance to refuse.

Luquille didn't respond at first. True, the Divine Pillars were supposed to be delivered to her. However, she had never been told that the courier would be Serge. In short, this was a completely unforeseen situation, and chances were high that Serge wasn't a courier, just an intruder.

Having come to that conclusion, Luquille adopted a very clearly displeased expression, glaring at Serge. She got ready for combat, a black flame appearing at her fingertip. "Strange. The Holy Stake should have been equipped with a stealth function, I never expected an intruder to come in. Now then, where is the pest in front of me from?"

"Aw, come on, there's no way a girl as devastatingly cute as me could be a pest!" said Serge. "Oh, Luquille-san, could it be that you need some medicine for your eyes?"

"Very well, a holy war it is," declared Luquille. "This will be perfect as a warmup for the main battle."

"Whoa there, you really do have a short fuse!" Serge exclaimed. "You've got it all wrong, I really am just a courier! Like I said, I was asked to bring the Divine Pillars to you. But seriously, where's the delivery entrance? Deatotal's fine, but Zeval is stupid huge and won't fit, you realize? I left it outside, so can you help me get it in?"

Luquille said nothing as she looked into Serge's eyes, analyzing her and ascertaining whether she was telling the truth. In the end, it didn't seem like she was lying. Apparently, she really was here as a courier.

After that pause, Luquille finally spoke up. "My apologies. I never would have dreamed that a previous Hero would deliver them to me personally. It is an honor to meet you, truly."

"Whoa, that's some answer given what just happened. I'm not one to talk, but that's as impressive as it is deplorable."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. So, you've brought the Divine Pillars, have you? Please wait a moment. Once I confirm this, I will have them brought into the Holy Stake."

She turned to something that seemed like a control panel and operated it deftly, causing a series of mechanical clanking and rumbling sounds to come from outside the room.

"Huh, I heard you stole this from the Ten Authorities, and you can already use it that well?" Serge asked, impressed.

"I can. I'm especially good at analyzing things, you see. Ridwan once did this in front of me, so it was easy to re-create. Thank you for waiting. The Divine Spirit and Divine Whale you brought are genuine. Honestly, I cannot hide my shock that you managed to capture them in such a short time."

"Really? From what I can see, you would have been more than enough to get them yourself, even alone," said Serge.

"I am happy to hear that, even if it is only flattery. Well, it is possible, though."

The mechanical sounds stopped. Most likely, the Divine Pillars had been brought in.

"I see! So when're you gonna do this fusion thing? There's no shot my capture spell will break, but if you wait too long, it'll take a toll on my MP reserves. I'd just appreciate you hurrying as much as possible," Serge said in a lilting, playful tone.

Luquille thought for a moment before replying. "Have you contacted Kelvin?" "Of course! Way long ago."

"Then we can start as soon as Dorothiara arrives," answered Luquille. Then, seeming to have thought of something, she asked, "What are you plotting?" She had her doubts. Serge had been grinning this whole time, which was very suspicious to her. She hadn't lied about being a courier, but it felt like she had another reason for doing this.

"I'm not really plotting anything?" Serge answered in the tone of a question. "But I wanted to try sparring against this completed Divine Pillar. I want to see for myself if it's really on the level of the gods. I mean, wouldn't you want to test the strength of a newly born deity? I figured it would be the perfect chance!"

Luquille didn't reply right away. "Are you suicidal?"

"Of course not! My future is filled with hope," she answered.

That got Luquille to think for a moment. "Then are you also a battle junkie?"

"No, no, please don't lump me in with Kelvin. I'm pretty normal other than my orientation, you know? Although...it's true that anyone you'd compare me to is

a far cry from normal!"

Luquille didn't say anything immediately. She saw that Serge wasn't lying. Finally, she had run out of explanations for Serge's thought process.

"Then why do you want to do this?" she asked. "You may be *the* Serge Flore, but even you don't stand a chance against a complete god. That should be clear looking at the previous battle with the black Melfina-sama."

"Hee hee! You're really going to ask that *now*?" Serge giggled. "Today, I'm a courier, but I usually go by 'Defender.' Don't you think it's normal for someone like that to want to obtain strength to protect her loved ones?"

"Loved ones?" Luquille parroted.

"Yes, loved ones. Just a little while ago, I was the strongest in the world and could defend them from anyone, but recently the power balance of this place has gone all wonky. Or should I say, the inflation's gone crazy? I want to be able to protect my loved ones despite that. In order to make that a sure thing, I need absolute strength, you feel me? So I want to fight this perfect Divine Pillar to test my mettle, basically. To check how much stronger I need to get. It's not like I want it to be a fight to the death or anything." Since her goal wasn't the fight itself, she was very different from Kelvin the battle junkie—the fight was just a means to an end.

Luquille thought it over. "So you say you want to be strong enough to compete against gods? This might not mean much coming from me, but you're quite insane."

"Thank you for the compliment; it makes me so happy. After all, as long as there are cute girls around me, I will never run out of energy. That Dorothy is a really strong girl disguised as a timid, small animal type, isn't she? Mmm, I'm looking forward to meeting her! If she's stronger than me, that would be pretty exciting in and of itself. In fact, if I were to push her down despite that, it might open some new *doors* for me. Jeez, what're you making me say! I knew it; if I want to train, I need to do it under the best conditions for me!"

Luquille had no response to that. It sounded like Serge was saying that she was just starting to grow, and there were no doubts in her mind whatsoever. Where had all the talk about her loved ones gone? Meanwhile, Luquille was

plagued by worry over whether or not it would be okay to let Serge meet Dorothiara. She felt the previous Hero might be a bad influence on the budding Divine Pillar.

"Ah, I'm also here to be your watcher," Serge added. "Hm? Now that I look closer, Luquille-san...you're really pretty! I'm totally fine with beautiful girls too, by the way! Wanna enjoy some tea with me until Dorothy-chan arrives?!"

Once again, Luquille didn't reply. She was overcome with the premonition that Serge would be a really bad influence.



"Huh? The remaining Divine Pillars have been collected? Already?" Dorothy said, somewhat surprised, sitting in her dorm Volcann room in the Academic City of Lumiest. She was on her bed while her roommate, Rion, sat beside her. Across from them were the dorm head, Arche, and Sera, wearing clothes that seemed like they belonged to someone of a high class.

"That's right. Surprising, isn't it?" Sera replied. "Even I thought it'd take a little longer. I heard that Serge helped, but it still seems really fast, doesn't it? I'm impressed!"

Sera had come to Lumiest with Art's permission to install the Magic Stakes and act as an intermediary. Currently, she was updating Dorothy and the others on the progress of the plan to fuse the Divine Pillars.

"As was the case with your trip to Deramis a little while ago, Principal Art has already approved your absence from school and given you permission to use the teleportation gate," said Arche. "If you wanted to, you could even leave the academy right now. Ah, but make sure to pour yourselves into your studies after you come back to make up for your absence! It wouldn't be funny if you failed to earn enough credits and had to repeat a year, okay? Personally, it would get a sort of chuckle from me if you were to drop out to save the world, but... Ahem! It'll be fine. I believe that Dorothy-san is powerful enough to easily rewind time far enough if that ever happens! After all, she rose like a phoenix from her average grades to claim one of the top spots in the whole academy! Oh man, I'm so proud! Mm-hmm, mm-hmm!"

"Um...why are you acting so elated, Instructor Arche?" one of the girls asked.

After the exhibition match, Dorothy had lost any reason she had to hold back in school to hide her identity, so she started giving her schoolwork everything she had alongside Rion and the others. As a result, her physical scores rose to be right behind Rion's and Rami's in the dorm rankings, while her written test scores saw her rise to third in the entire class. In other words, her grades were approaching Bell's and Graham's. While her physical abilities were certainly tremendous, her academic ability—which had proven to be among the top three in the school—was an extraordinary discovery for dorm Volcann, which made Arche *very* happy.

Though she was still under watch, all of Dorothy's toxicity and malice in both her personality and Unique Skill had been purified by Rion as they lived their school lives together. At first, she'd been hounded by a mysterious curse that made her want to kill Kelvin, but now that curse had been rendered powerless. It had been exposed that she had been putting on an act, and while the other students in the dorm were somewhat surprised by her showing in the exhibition match, in the end they had all interpreted it as a good thing.

They said things like "Did you decide to change your image? I like it!" or "I was surprised, but you're still just as kind as before," or "You're wonderful like this too, Dorothy. Now come, let's get married!" Only a small part of the student body rejected Dorothy outright; most of them got along with her just fine.

"I'm just happy that Dorothy-san is seriously applying herself to her studies," Arche answered. "There's been a lot of sad news lately, after all, like Instructor Horace's dignified retirement. Good grief, it's all been such a big fuss!"

"Not to mention that following that, Marle's dorm head was changed. There's been a lot of change at this academy," Rion said.

"Yeah, it was awful!" Arche exclaimed. "But the academy has people who are really good at manipulating information, like Instructor Milky and Catria. We also have Instructor Boyle, who honestly has a pointless amount of connections, so it really feels like everything just worked out! Oh man, it really seemed like hard going for a while, though!"

"You made it sound really pleasant, but you just exposed the dark underbelly of this academy, didn't you? And the way you talked about it, it sounds like you

didn't actually do anything," said Sera.

"I mean, you're right. I didn't," said Arche matter-of-factly, sounding confused about what Sera was implying. "Since we're essentially a country unto ourselves, there's a lot going on in secret, and I really didn't do anything. I'm not sure I should be so frank with you, Sera-san, since you're basically Rionsan's guardian, but they say that having everyone in their right place is best! I mainly act on the front lines, which means I do physical work! If you try to get someone as rough as me to do such complicated work, you'll end up causing a disaster!"

Arche's declaration was filled to the brim with confidence.

"Um...sounds tough. Hey, why don't I pitch in as a teacher here?" Sera suggested. "You're short on hands and you need to clean up after all the people who left, right? I'm as smart as Bell, and I'm great at teaching others!" Sera was serious when she said she was great at teaching others; it seemed she wasn't actually trying to lie.

"Really now? That's a wonderful suggestion!" exclaimed Arche. "It's definitely worth bringing up to the principal!"

"You shouldn't be so hasty, Instructor Arche. And you, Sera-nee, you can't do that," said Rion. "Kel-nii stopped you, didn't he?"

Sera clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Tch! I know already. I just wanted to try suggesting it. Boo! Boo for not letting me do this!"

Sera started pouting after receiving Rion's scolding. The way things were going, it looked like Rion was actually the guardian here, and Dorothy had to hide her smile.

"Getting back on topic, Thee-chan's going to become a complete Divine Pillar through that fusion thing, right? Will she be okay?" asked Rion.

"Thank you for worrying about me, Rion-san, truly," said Dorothy. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried, but...even so, I'm sure I'll be fine. I may not be very reliable as I am, but I want to bring my brethren together as one and become strong enough to stand beside you with pride."

"Thee-chan..." Rion breathed.

"Then I'll be sure to bury those fallen angels who are trying to use me and harm my brethren, and the others. I'll maul them all to pieces!" Dorothy exclaimed.

"Thee-chan!" Rion was shocked.

When she had first heard about fusion from Luquille, Dorothy had only been half convinced. But strangely, her instincts as a Divine Pillar were giving her a confidence that was near certainty. She clenched her fist, burning with her desire to put down her enemies.

"Hmm, it's good that you're so motivated, but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't use such strong language in front of me. It's a lot of work to pretend I didn't hear anything as your instructor," said Arche.

"You have a point, but are you sure you want to make it after saying all that stuff about the academy's underbelly?" Dorothy asked.

"Urgk! You hit me where it hurts!" Arche exclaimed. "Dorothy-san, I'm happy that you started to give this your all, but you've become more aggressive in doing so, I can see it. It's making your teacher a little sad. But...this side of you is good too! Being energetic is the most important thing while you're young, and being a little naughty will be good for you later on! Being able to see this new side of you, Dorothy, has brought this up from even into the realm of great profit!"

"That's right! Profit!" Sera echoed.

Meanwhile, both of the students remained silent. For some reason, Arche and Sera had completed that little bit of friendly hyping with a high five. As for Rion and Dorothy, they were feeling a little left out.

"I've already hustled all the way here, so let's leave right away!" Sera exclaimed. "Are you ready, Dorothy?"

"No, I haven't made any preparations to leave. I just heard about all this, after all..." Dorothy answered. "But I've already made my decision. If I won't need any of my belongings, we can go right away."

"Nice answer!" Sera cried. "Oh, just in case, would it be okay to have Rion come with us as an escort? Or not?"

"The principal gave permission for Rion-san to leave too," said Arche. "We'll take care of the paperwork, so just do what's most convenient for you."

"Oh, you're certainly well prepared, aren't you?" Sera commented. "Are you sure it's okay to give us all this special treatment?"

"Oh no, this isn't special treatment. It was all done properly within the rules," said Arche. "Many of Lumiest's students are heirs and heiresses with high social status, so it's not unusual for people to have to temporarily leave the academy for personal reasons. Basically, it's always been possible to do this. Rion-san and Dorothy-san are very well-behaved, and their grades are at the very top of their year, so they've earned a lot of trust from us. I had to give those warnings earlier given my position, but they're not even close to missing enough credits to have to redo a year, so leaving for a few days should be no problem."

"Ah, I see. That makes sen—" Sera rapped her fist into her other hand, having understood Arche's explanation. Right as she did so, someone burst through the door.

"I-It's terrible, Arche-san! S-Something's come! It's heeere!"

The one who ended up tumbling into the room was the person who held the title of Human Measuring Instrument: Catria.

## Thud!

Catria tumbled inside, her momentum carrying her until she hit her head on the corner of a chest and cried out in pain. The impact made a pretty big noise, and Catria immediately brought her hands up to her head.

"Are you okay?!" Rion exclaimed.

"That was a good sound," Sera commented.

"Indeed, a very good sound!" Arche agreed.

Rion had immediately run toward Catria, while Sera and Arche stood back and calmly assessed the situation. Dorothy, meanwhile, sighed and wondered what they were even doing. At any rate, whatever happened had Catria in a terrible panic. It seemed like an emergency, but it was impossible to be sure.

"Owwie... Wait, now's not the time for that! Arche-san, it's terrible!" Catria

exclaimed. "Aghaghaghaghaghghagh!"

For a moment, Catria seemed to come to her senses, but then she caught sight of Sera, who was standing next to Arche, and once again descended into confusion. Apparently, seeing the latent strength Sera naturally emitted was too much stimulation for her, the Human Measuring Instrument.

Before, when she'd guided Kelvin and his group, she'd prepared herself for his arrival, so she'd managed to keep her cool somewhat. As for Rion and the other students who were exceptional, she had managed to become used to them over the time they'd spent at the academy, and had gotten to the point where she could nervously exchange greetings through chattering teeth. However, her chance meeting with Sera just now had been absolutely unexpected, and she was strong enough to make Catria foam at the mouth. To Catria, whose detection skills were actually *too* sensitive, Sera's existence was simply toxic. As a result...

"If- Whoogh..."

"Catria-saaan?!" Rion cried out.

She showed the whites of her eyes as she fainted on the spot.

"Hey, it feels like she fainted as soon as she became aware of me. What's that supposed to mean?" Sera complained.

"Uh...it seems you were too stimulating for her, Sera-san," Arche explained. "So, this is what they call an adult's charm!"

"Oh...adult? Heh heh, then I guess there's nothing to be done, huh?" Sera said proudly. "Mm...mm-hmm, after all, my adult charm was the culprit!"

With no context, Catria's actions seemed extremely rude, but Arche's instantaneous backup had Sera feeling very good about herself instead. Still, the situation remained at a standstill.

"F-For now, I'll have her drink Mel-nee's recovery potion... How do you feel?" Rion asked.

"Gulp, gulp... Haaah?! Wh-Where am I?!" Catria exclaimed.

"Ah, she woke up," said Dorothy and Arche in unison.

Mel's potion had done the trick, reviving Catria. At the same time, Sera had come to realize the dangers of her own "charm," so she hid herself in a corner of the room.

"Are you okay, Catria? As soon as you tumbled into the room, you hit your head on the corner of the chest and fainted," said Arche.

"R-Really? I-I'm so sorry! So sorry!" Catria shouted apologetically. "I showed you something so sha— Bwagh!"

"More importantly, you were really pale and panicky when you came in. What's wrong? Did the principal break out his gold outfit again?" Arche asked.

"No, that's not it! Not even I'd make a big deal of such a mundane occurrence!" Catria shouted.

"Mundane?" Sera muttered.

Rion laughed nervously as Dorothy pinched her brow with her right hand, wondering why all of the powerful people in Lumiest were weirdos, regardless of whether they were staff or student. It seemed to her that the only decent person within this group was her friend, Rion. But, unfortunately, that observation didn't only apply to Lumiest. It applied to the entire world.

"So, in the end, what happened?" Arche asked.

"S-Something's coming! Something big is approaching Lumiest!" Catria shouted.

"Big?"

"Something?"

Catria's words were indecipherable, and the group all exchanged looks.

"Uh, that's not enough to get us to understand you. Do you mean that a large monster has shown itself or something of that nature?" Dorothy asked.

"N-No, no, not at all!" Catria said. "If it was just a large monster, we'd have Arche-san or the principal kill it! Uh...how should I put it? It's as if something so incredibly huge I can't actually see it well is moving toward us. Something with an equally incredible presence! Even though it's not clear what it is, it's too big to hide, and hazy. It's the first time I've ever encountered something as

incomprehensible as this. It feels really bad! And I can feel some hostility too!"

"Uh...uhhh?" Arche let out.

Meanwhile, Sera and Rion stayed silent. Catria's words were as indecipherable as ever, which only confused Arche further. But something came to mind for Sera and Rion.

::Is she talking about the Holy Stake that Luquille-san stole, Sera-nee? The description fits. It's just a very big stake-shaped ship, and doesn't it have a stealth ability?:: Rion asked.

When the alliance had been formed, Luquille had shared what she knew about the Holy Stake's functions. One of those was the stealth function that Rion had just mentioned.

::Yes, a next-dimension level of stealth that can evade even my detection skills and intuition. It seemed like it would be fun, so I asked Luquille to show me the Holy Stake before she moved it to the central ocean...and I really was unable to find it with its stealth function on. It's Ange levels of troublesome. And to be honest, even though she's saying it's coming, I still have yet to sense anything!:: Sera replied.

::Yeah. That's why Kel-nii is setting Magic Stakes all over the world, so that we'll be able to intercept the enemy no matter where they show up. Um...I feel like I should check, just in case. Does this mean that Catria-san can see through the Holy Stake's stealth?:: Rion asked.

::From what she's saying, it doesn't seem like she can completely see through it. She just kind of senses its presence. It looks like she's actually afraid, so she probably can actually feel our enemy's murderous intent. Wow, she really deserves her title. If she's that sensitive, it makes sense she's so nervous and timid. Still, I wonder if this is the first time I've met someone even more sensitive in that sense than me and my family. This is a really rare experience!:: Sera replied.

::Now's not the time to be impressed, Sera-nee. Hm, let's see...:: Rion replied.

She took out her sketchbook and started to draw something. Within a couple seconds, she'd finished an illustration of a Holy Stake so perfect it was like a

picture. She'd even diligently included a note of its length on the side of the illustration, as well as a human for size comparison so that it was possible to tell how absolutely gigantic it was.

"Catria-san, is that big thing you're talking about shaped like this?" Rion asked.

"Huh? Ah... Ahhh! Yes, that's it!" Catria exclaimed. "Now that you mention it, I think it's shaped exactly like that! The haziness is gone now! Totally gone!"

"Ohhh!" Arche and Sera were once again surprised that she really could detect the object. Without missing a beat, Sera leaned forward.

"Hey, hey, that big thing...do you know how long it'll take for it to reach Lumiest?!" Sera asked.

"Pyaaagh?! Aguh... Aguhguhguhguhguh!" Catria shouted unintelligibly. The moment Sera came sliding out from where she'd been hiding herself, her presence started to affect Catria again.

"Calm down, Catria," said Arche. "This is Sera-san, DarkMel-san's guardian. She's also Bell-san's elder sister. She's not scary. Not scary at all!"

"I-Is she really?!" Catria shouted. "I-I'm so sorry for the rudeness I— Bwagh?!"

"It looks like you're still confused, weirdly enough... So, do you think you'll be able to answer my question?" Sera asked.

"R-Right! Uh...um...it's really fast, but it's still going slow enough to not affect its surroundings. Most likely, it'll still take another ten or twenty minutes or so..." Catria replied.

"I see. By the way, can you tell how strong the people inside are? Use me as a basis," said Sera. "Also, if possible, I'd like to know how many are inside."

Catria took a moment to concentrate on what she was feeling. "One person...around as scary as you, I think? I-I'm sorry, I can only give a rough approximation..."

Sera nodded, satisfied. That answer was enough.



With Catria's help, Sera came to know about the approach of a Holy Stake, so she immediately started talking through the Network. Of course, she was contacting Kelvin.

::Kelviiin! It looks like an enemy's come to Lumiest! But we don't need backup; we'll be enough to handle things!:: she informed him.

::That's way too lighthearted! You're treating this so lightly I'm stunned!:: came Kelvin's reply.

The connection was made quickly, starting the comedy routine of the married couple—though some fairly serious information sharing was done as well.

::I see. The one who guided us to Art when we first came to the academy to do paperwork did all that? Yeah, I remember her. She did indeed seem really flustered when father-in-law and I saw her. Hm, so she's that skilled? Wait, I'm really interested in this information, but before that, what do you mean you don't need backup? We've already got permission from Art. Once you set the Magic Stake, I can come right away using Summoning, you know?:: Kelvin reminded her.

::I know. But according to Catria, the enemy is alone. And it's not that martial artist that beat Goldiana.:: Sera told her spouse-to-be.

::Hm? Why do you think so? I get the alone thing, but Catria couldn't tell who was inside, right?:: Kelvin asked.

::Catria said the one that's approaching is about as scary as me. The martial artist that beat Goldiana sounds way stronger, so that's why I'm pretty sure the one that's coming is a completely different member of the Ten Authorities. Plus, despite everything, he's still a martial artist, so I'm sure he wouldn't attack a place of learning!:: Sera declared.



::Uh, I'm pretty sure martial artists all differ in that regard. Anyway, is that coming from your intuition?:: Kelvin asked.

## ::Yup! My intuition!::

She seemed so confident that Kelvin gave a small chuckle, even though he'd been so worried up until then. ::Heh... Ha ha! I see. If that's what your intuition is telling you, then so be it. I get it, I'll leave it to you. Well, now that I think about it, even if I don't use Summoning, you have Rion, Alex, and even Bell with you over there. DarkMel has a battle-specialized Clotho too, and Art's there—Wait, is that place actually *too* stacked with firepower?:: Kelvin wondered.

::There's no question that it is. In fact, I'm worried about everywhere else given how many people are here. I'll make sure Dorothy gets to her destination safely, so don't worry and wait for my good news!:: Sera declared.

::Yeah, I'm relying on you. At the moment, no other members of the Ten Authorities have shown themselves, but if something happens, I'll fight with all I've got. You can relax and collect some achievements.:: he replied.

:: I will. I trust you. Okay, I should get going.::

After the connection was cut off, Sera felt fulfilled and satisfied. She made eye contact with Rion and shared that they would be taking care of things.

"Oho? Did you just use telepathy through the Summoning skill? It feels like your mental state changed in an instant," said Arche.

"Huh, you can tell?" Sera said, impressed. "Telepathy happens really fast, so most people can't."

"Well, I wouldn't have if I hadn't known about it beforehand," said Arche.

"Plus, there's this feeling of romance in the air, which, combined with your expression that seems to have condensed the wide range of emotions to just joy, made me arrive at that conclusion. I mean, come on, I work as an instructor here. Even if I'm not as good as Catria, I'm still pretty sensitive to this sort of stuff."

"Hm...I guess that makes sense," Sera replied. She nodded and abruptly started to change on the spot. It looked like she was donning her combat gear,

Queen's Terror.

"Wait, HUUUHHH?!" Catria shouted.

"Oh my, you're so sexy, Sera-san," Arche commented. "Man, adult charm really goes crazy. I'm so embarrassed, I can't stop staring."

"I mean, it's not like I'm losing anything by letting you see," said Sera. "By the way, Arche, can I borrow this?" She finished changing quickly. Once she did, she picked up Catria, who'd covered her eyes in an attempt to not see Sera's naked form, in a princess carry.

"Hwhah?" Catria let out, shocked. She was small and lighter than the average girl, so it wasn't that hard to lift her up. However, since the action was so smooth and natural, Catria herself was unable to keep up with the reality of the situation. Also, because this was the first time she'd ever been picked up this way in her life, the shock was more profound than most would experience. What's more, she was now in very close contact with Sera, whom she saw as a grave threat. All these shocking things compounded, making her mind go blank.

"You want to borrow Catria?" Arche confirmed. "Right. Well, as long as you return her by the due date, there shouldn't be a problem with that. Of course, you'll do so with her intact, right?"

"Hwhuh?" Catria cried once more.

"Deal!" Sera declared. "Now then, Catria, we're going to go defend Lumiest, so I need you to help us find the enemy! You can feel their presence, which means you should know where they are, right?"

"Hwwwaaaggghhh?!" Catria screamed. She finally started to understand the situation she was in, and she couldn't help but let out quite a unique wail. The group had expected her to do that, so they had already covered their ears.

Sera was an exception, as her hands were full. "Urrghh...my ears are ringing..." she complained. "That scream hurt. Rion, can I leave Dorothy to you?"

"Yep! I'll contact Bell-chan through Clotho too!"

"Please do that. Bell will probably arrive at the best course of action even if

we don't say anything to her, though."

"Um..." Dorothy reservedly raised her hand as she got up from the bed. "I don't like the idea of just being protected, so I'd like to help if possible."

"Huh? You?" Sera questioned. "Hmmm, I get how you feel, but it'd be awful if you came to battle and something happened to you. Ah, that's right!" She rapped her fist against her hand. "Try using the spell you used during the exhibition match on me!" Sera suggested excitedly. "That one that whirled around and went shpang!"

"Whirled around?" Dorothy repeated questioningly. "Ah, you mean Vivre? Of course I don't mind doing that for you, but...though this spell does let you move twice as fast while it's in effect, it makes you age twice as fast too. I wouldn't recommend using it."

"What? Then wouldn't Kelvin's Sonic Acceleration be better in every way?" Sera asked. "That one doubles your agility stat too, but it has no downsides."

"That's because the type of magic is fundamentally different..." Dorothy trailed off as she started to explain, wondering how to word it. "My Time Magic is, as it implies, magic that manipulates time. You can fast forward to go faster, but that works by speeding up your own personal time."

"Mm-hmm, which means I'd get hungry twice as fast too?" Sera mused.

"Yes, exactly," Dorothy confirmed.

In her heart, Sera immediately thought that Mel's compatibility with this spell was devastatingly bad.

"In exchange, though, there are some advantages," said Dorothy. "By fast forwarding and ending the effect early, it's possible to rapidly change the tempo of your movements. The target of the spell is able to control its effects at will. Do you remember seeing me suddenly accelerate and decelerate during the exhibition match? It's useful for giving the enemy the wrong idea about your top speed and using that for a surprise attack. And while you aren't fast forwarding, you won't be using up the spell's effect time and can save on MP as well. To be fair, that also means you'd need to be fairly used to controlling the spell."

"Huh, when you put it like that, it does sound fun," said Sera. "Sonic Acceleration just goes until its effect runs out, after all. Okay, I've decided! I'll get used to it on the way there, so use that Time Magic on me!"

"Aren't you deciding too easily?" Dorothy couldn't help but ask. "I'm stunned that you're being so cavalier about it."

In the end, Sera got her way, and Vivre was cast on her.

"Ohhh! This is a new feeling," said Sera. "Rather than me getting faster, it feels more like everything else suddenly moves slower."

"It doubles the speed of your thoughts as well, after all," explained Dorothy. "But it also places a much bigger strain on your body, so please don't use it for too long at once."

"Got it! Then I'll get used to this and head straight to the enemy!" Sera declared. She jumped out of the window, looking like a child about to play.

"HAAAALLP MEEEEEEEE!" Catria screamed.

Her voice could be heard after a delay for the sound to travel as Sera disappeared into the distance. Would she really be returned in one piece after everything was said and done?

"I'll just note that Catria is being lent out at the moment... There," said Arche.

"Um, Instructor Arche, what is that?" Rion asked.

"A form for lending that I took from the library. These things have to be kept track of!"

Neither student had a response to that.



Inside the Holy Stake that was approaching Lumiest while under stealth was a single member of the Ten Authorities. Her name was Gloria Rozess, the other member who had chased after Goldiana along with Baldogg. She was a fallen angel with distinctive blonde hair, blue eyes, and military-style clothing. She paid close attention to a monitor display that was currently showing her target, and the look on her face suggested that she was deep in thought.

"Baldogg's dead, Ridwan's turned coat, Eld is acting really obstinate, and Cheruvim has gone off the rails... Ever since we awoke in this world, the order among the Ten Authorities has been deteriorating. Even though our strength has deteriorated from the time when we were gods, would our group really go this crazy because of that? The only thing that's gone well so far has been the capture of that false goddess, Goldiana. That achievement sounds good if we frame it in terms of filling up slots for sacrifice, but as things stand, more than half of our currently filled slots are fallen members of the Ten Authorities. We've been given Authorities, so we're like limbs to Addams. Does Eld not realize that we shouldn't be so easily made into sacrifices? Truthfully, that's why he almost ended up fighting with Cheruvim. It's true that they never really got along, but what would fighting at this time even accomplish? It's so foolish. No, wait, should I assume that these artificial bodies we're using have some sort of bug in them that we aren't aware of? But it doesn't seem like my body is affected by anything like that. Or maybe I'm just being made to think that? Damn! This body was prepared by Luquille, after all, I can't trust it."

Gloria prattled on to herself at a rapid pace, her torrent of words showing no signs of ending or even slowing down. That just went to show how many questions and doubts she had. She continued to mutter to herself. It seemed she was hounded by a distrustful personality, and she was unable to trust even her own heart.

"Everyone else is just as bad. Big sis Isabel is acting even more timid and anxious than usual, while Rem won't stop crying. Hazama is also being too optimistic, while Hao is forging ahead with his self-righteous attitude. Patrick is just spending all his time playing around and won't even bother weighing in on anything. He'd even be able to make Ridwan answer with just a touch, that idiot!"

Also, she was slipping in complaints between her doubts.

"The only decent one was Baldogg, and it seems even he had rather peculiar tastes. Gah, so impure! I knew it, I'm the only trustworthy one around here. Still, it hurts that I can't even fully trust myself. After all, that event shook me, and I ended up cheering on something impure, of all things— Hm?"



Suddenly, Gloria's gaze was drawn to a different monitor. This one was displaying the outside of the Holy Stake. And it looked like something red moving at high speed had been captured for an instant on the screen.

"That's surprising. That girl is clearly coming toward this Holy Stake. I couldn't tell through the screen, but from her characteristics, that's probably Bell Baal. She's staying in Lumiest and apparently has an abnormally sharp intuition. I suppose it isn't unnatural for her to be coming here, having discovered the Holy Stake...but something feels off. Like, I'm missing something huge. What is this feeling in my chest?"

Gloria brought her hand up to her chest and thought as hard as she could. She was sure that the answer was right there.

"It looked like she was carrying something too. A weapon, maybe? According to our info, Bell Baal should mainly fight by kicking. I haven't heard anything about her using a weapon that's as big as a person. Wait, there's nothing more dangerous than accepting all the information those fallen angels on the surface tout as truth. After all, some of that information was provided by Luquille. Right, it's a trick. That's definitely something she'd do. So I need to confirm these facts myself."

Gloria had already assumed that the approaching figure was an enemy, so she left the Holy Stake and descended to the surface to protect her transport. The moment she touched down in the wasteland, the girl she imagined was an enemy appeared before her.

"Oh, so you came down before I could mount an attack. You sure saved me a lot of effort!" Sera exclaimed.

"That's my line," said Gloria. "I didn't think you would go out of your way to leave Lumiest and make contact with me alone."

"Agagagagagah!" Catria let out an incoherent noise.

"Really? Then you should be thankful to me!" Sera said. "Also, your equipment's pretty cool, you've got good sense! I think we'd get along!"

"You've got a much more honest personality than I was imagining, Bell Baal. But your equipment also keeps order. I like it. I will praise you for that, if nothing else," said Gloria.

"Agagagagagagagah!"

"Heh heh, I know, right!" Sera exclaimed. "But I'm Sera Baal."

"Huh?" Gloria reacted oafishly.

"Agagagagagagagah!"

"What? You said you're Sera... Actually, first, what are you holding?" Gloria couldn't help but ask. "Is that some sort of secret weapon to distract me?"

"That's rude! She's not some secret weapon! She's a convenient and talented person!" Sera said defensively.

For the past while, Catria's mind had either frozen or crashed, as she was being held by Sera. But now that she was sandwiched in between two great threats, it was a lot more understandable. Not that coming here was something Catria had ever consented to.

"But now that I've reached my destination, I guess there's no reason to force her to come along anymore," said Sera. "Can you get back on your own, Catria? You won't get lost, will you?"

"I-I'll go back! I can get back on my own!!!" Catria exclaimed desperately.

"That's great to hear," said Sera. "Then be careful on your way home! Don't trip on anything, okay?"

"R... Retreat! Retre— Ow! I-I'm fine! Just concentrate on whatever you're doing. Bye!" Catria shouted her farewell. She'd started running back to the academy as soon as Sera had let her down. Naturally, she immediately fell over, but she also immediately got back up before disappearing at a fearsome speed.

"Huh, she's got some good legs on her," Sera commented. "I guess Catria's got some good basic stats on top of her excellent detection abilities. So, I'm not sure I should be pointing this out, but are you sure it was okay to just let her get away like that? She might spread information about you, you know?"

"It's my apology for mistaking your identity," said Gloria. "To think that I would be the one to make a faux pas. I have no excuses! I'm sure this is not enough to earn forgiveness, but I will graciously allow her to escape."

"Hm? I mean, it's not like I was really bothered by it or anything," Sera said. "Also, Bell and I are twins. I'm sure this kind of thing happens all the time to twins; no need to worry about it!"

"Thank you for saying that," Gloria replied. "I know that I am still immature, but I swear I will improve."

Sera gave her opponent a thumbs-up in an attempt to cheer her up as Gloria gave a deep bow of apology. For just a moment, a nice, peaceful air pervaded the area. However...that lasted only an instant.

"To add to that, I also promise to destroy you completely," said Gloria. "You are as strong as Bell, so you are powerful enough to be considered one of our targets. My apologies, but I will not be letting you go."

"My, what nice murderous intent," said Sera. "It's heavy and sharp, just what Kelvin likes! I might get jealous!"

Once again, the two met eyes, but now those eyes were filled with intent to defeat the other. The peaceful air dissipated, replaced by a suffocating pressure that filled the entire wasteland.

As Sera and Gloria faced off, things truly kicked into gear when weapons of scarlet and light were deployed around them.

"Nightmare Ball," Sera declared.

"Cross-Magazine Belt," Gloria called.

The weapons Sera had created were condensed scarlet balls of her own blood. It was a new move that was basically a swarm version of her Blood Ball. These floating blood-colored balls numbered in the thousands, an incomparable number to what she had shown during the Beast King Festival. All of these spheres had been imbued with her Blood Dominion skill, and an order from her would turn all of them into weapons, so they were truly nightmares to her enemies.

Meanwhile, Gloria had created swarms of crosses of light that seemed to sync up with her arms. These were lined up in neat rows like on an ammo belt, embodying the order and discipline Gloria so prized. Every movement of her arms was traced and followed by these lines of crosses.

"Do we need a signal to start?" Sera asked.

"Only if you want one," replied Gloria.

"Is that so? Then..." Sera paused.

"I will provide you with logical salvation!" Gloria declared.

"I'm gonna capture you!" Sera exclaimed at the same time.

That was their signal to start, and at that instant, both sides went on the attack. The nightmare balls morphed to form spears, while the crosses shot out like machine gun bullets in the direction Gloria's arm was pointing, flying toward their target in droves.

The two offensive whirlwinds clashed, eliciting a great noise and shock wave that spread throughout the wasteland, pulverizing exposed rock and anything else in its way. The spears and bullets the two had unleashed seemed to have homing functions, since instead of flying in a straight line, they all took complicated trajectories. Some went for their targets, while others were diverted to intercept the incoming attacks. This exchange of attack and defense occurred over the entire area of the wasteland, much like a clash between armies.

Both combatants let out grunts of effort as the conflict continued. But now, in the midst of this terrible battlefield, the two had come into close contact with each other. Actually, they hadn't just come close, they'd engaged in melee combat. Sera enveloped only her right arm in Blood Scrimmage, while Gloria wrapped her right arm's Cross-Magazine Belt around her entire limb. The grotesque, blood-colored arm and the cross-covered, brightly shining arm were each swung in an attempt to decimate their enemy.

This resulted in shock waves and loud clashing noises that were enough to erase all other sounds of battle. The moment the two arms made contact, the countless crosses attached to Gloria's arm exploded all at once. This indiscriminate burst of crosses, done at super short range, affected both Sera, her enemy, and Gloria herself.

"Grk?!" Sera just barely managed to prevent damage to her vital points, but several crosses stabbed into her body, even piercing clear through it in some

places. Sera, unable to withstand the onslaught, backed off a bit. At the same time, she extracted a cross from her body. "I see... I thought you were making a suicide attack, but apparently I was wrong."

Sera was heavily wounded all over, while Gloria, who had been even closer to the explosion and should have thus been more heavily affected, was for some reason unhurt. That was when the clash between the spears and the bullets ended, which concluded in crosses stabbed into the ground all over the area, as well as many puddles of blood scattered around the same area.

"Self-destruction is something those on the verge of losing do out of desperation," said Gloria. "And it is far from logical. Of course, I won't be explaining anything more to you."

"Yeah, the way you won't leak your secrets so easily is also to Kelvin's taste. But...are you sure you're okay with bathing in so much of my blood?" Sera asked.

"What?"

Part of Gloria's right arm and the crosses on it were drenched in an abundant amount of fresh blood. This had happened when she'd made contact with Sera's Blood Scrimmage, and the substance was stuck solid to her arm. It seemed like Gloria had yet to learn how terrible it was to touch Sera's blood.

"It looks like neither of us are willing to expose our secrets. End yourself," Sera commanded with a wink.

Gloria let out a shocked noise as in that instant, the crosses covered in blood flew at her face, with her right arm following suit. This situation, in which she was attacking herself, might have seemed like a joke, but Gloria was experiencing it as she took the first explosions caused by the crosses. She did, however, manage to narrowly stop her fist with her other hand.

Huh. I know I hit her this time, but she's unhurt, thought Sera. It looks like the impacts still affected her, though!

The moment the crosses hit Gloria's face, Sera activated the Vivre cast on her by Dorothy, experiencing the perceived slowing down of time through her doubled movement. She used this to observe the hit closely, anticipating that Gloria was countering the damage with some application of White Magic. Seeing her stop her own fist, it was possible to deduce that normal physical attacks would work.

"Grk!" Gloria grunted.

While she'd managed to negate the damage from the crosses, as Sera had noted, she hadn't been able to prevent the impacts. She was also in a terribly unstable state, since her upper torso had been rocked back a little when she'd caught her right fist with her left. That led to a very big gap in her defenses, and there was no way Sera would let such a thing escape her.

Currently, the area was rife with scattered crosses that had been soaked in blood, and Sera had shown that she could extract MP from these lumps of magic.

"Crucifixion!" she shouted.

Under the influence of Vivre, a deadly blow came with great speed—a blood-colored inverted cross traveling along the same arc that a punch would take. The more blood was shed, the more powerful this attack became, and it sailed straight for Gloria's open left flank.

"Kr...hak!" she grunted, pained.

Sera's attack stained Gloria's clothes with blood, all while dealing massive damage to Gloria herself. But Gloria wouldn't allow the fight to be one-sided.

"Don't you dare underestimate meeeeee!" she shouted. The cross ammo belt on Gloria's left arm started slamming into her out-of-control right arm, resulting in an explosion twice as big as before, with crosses bursting out in all directions. This happened almost immediately after she had been hit by Sera's Crucifixion.

Sera's sharp instincts allowed her to reactivate Vivre in time to attempt to pull back, but because the explosion was twice as large, she couldn't completely avoid the blow. The cross bullets flew in all directions, gouging chunks out of the wasteland and creating a large cloud of dust as well as a deafening noise. It was impossible to tell what had happened to the two combatants, as the cloud was blocking the view. Then, a strong gust that just happened to blow past wiped it away, exposing the battlefield to the sunlight. This revealed Gloria,

casting a spell on her left flank with her right arm covered in blood. Meanwhile, Sera could be seen extracting crosses from her body. Both sides had taken some distance from each other and were observing their opponent.

"Benediction Cure, Curse Cure, Hospitable Nursing... Gah! It's not a status condition or a curse, but my wound still won't close! How troublesome!" Gloria cursed.

"Owww... Jeez, you're the troublesome one!" Sera complained. "I hate how you're so much tougher than I expected. I was trying to open up a hole straight through your gut; I never thought I'd be the one filled with holes instead. At least my blow seems to have resounded all the way into your core. You look pretty unsteady on your feet, there."

"I'll return those words right back to you," said Gloria. "With how much you're bleeding, it's obvious you're barely standing. You may have the ability to control your blood, but I don't think that allows you to stop all the bleeding my attacks have caused."

Silence descended, both sides refusing to talk further. Apparently both Sera and Gloria weren't healing as well as they'd hoped. Should they continue to fight and turn this into a war of attrition, they both knew that they wouldn't come out fine even if they did win. So their next course of action was...

"I hereby manifest my Authority!" Gloria declared.

"Blood Scrimmage, full deployment! And Crimson Astraea as well!" Sera shouted.

An all-out, no-holds-barred, decisive exchange.



Sera wore crimson armor modeled after a demon while emitting an overwhelming crimson aura. Her form, exuding strength and elegance much like a Demon Lord, was fitting for someone who would make everyone prostrate themselves in awe. If her father saw this, he'd faint from joy, and if her father's close aide saw this, he'd burst into tears of joy as well. But the one currently facing Sera was someone who was emitting pressure just as heavy or possibly even heavier than her.

Gloria, having manifested her Authority, now looked like the poster child for fallen angels. Above her head was a dully glowing jet-black halo, while similarly colored wings grew from her back. As if demonstrating how important she was, her massive wings were well decorated. Her halo was also twisted to form some crosses, and she looked much more like a fallen angel than Ridwan and Baldogg.

But she was also surrounded by countless jet-black inverted crosses that rotated around her in a circle. These were quite a bit bigger than the crosses she'd been using before manifesting her authority; each one was about as tall as a person. These crosses looked exactly like a holy cross but were dyed black and turned upside down with an eye added to the center. Honestly, they were just to Sera's tastes.

Neither side spoke as the black fallen angel and the crimson demon faced off. These two were incompatible both historically and mythologically, but now they'd met in this wasteland. Even though they'd just started fighting, everything living in the area ran as far away as they could out of fear. Not only that, but the radius of things that were running was still getting bigger. All the wild animals in the country the wasteland belonged to sensed the danger and ran as if it were a natural disaster, starting a great migration outside the country. Most likely, the country's leadership and Adventurer's Guild were in an uproar right about now.

All this was happening before they even started their all-out fight, so they were likely to affect the entire continent once they actually started exchanging blows.

Hmm...the design appeals to my heart more than I thought it would... Wait, that's not it! Uhhh...no matter how much I harden my blood with Bloodbending and supplement that with Auto Healing, my wounds aren't closing up. Do those crosses have some sort of anti-healing effect? Or maybe they're super effective against demons? That's annoying, Sera thought.

So I can't get rid of this disgusting blood even after manifesting my Authority. I hate the idea of constraining myself, but I have no choice other than to use the Vice Bandage spell to neutralize my right arm. It'll limit my left flank some as well, but that won't be a problem if I float, thought Gloria.

Either way, I can't afford to get hit by more of those crosses. They're huge now, after all! They'll seriously open up a huge hole in me if they hit! And on top of that, she's got, like, a Dragon King's blessing or something that makes magic not work on her! Even Efil takes a minuscule amount of damage when hit with fire... Wait, did she? Well, anyway, being completely immune to something isn't fair! Super unfair! Sera concluded.

Either way, I can't afford to be covered in any more of her blood. I'm pretty sure her ability is to control her own blood and brainwash anyone it gets onto. Even her ability disrupts discipline and order! Despite Evolving and becoming more powerful, a demon is still a demon in the end. As foul as can be, thought Gloria, utterly appalled.

Whether or not they were aware of the effect they were having on their surroundings, they were each more concerned with their own condition and their enemy's powers. Even if they were able to bring things to a decisive clash, it wasn't as if the wounds they'd suffered thus far would magically disappear. Which meant they needed to calmly assess their own conditions, surmise their enemy's powers, and think of a way to counter those powers.

Gluglug. "Mmm, I'd love to be able to borrow Mel's Hearty Eating skill like Kelvin can," Sera said.

"Vice Bandage," intoned Gloria.

Sera downed half of a Mel-stamped potion while Gloria created a sort of jetblack bandage using magic, which she then used to bind her right arm, which was covered in blood. While this period might have seemed like a temporary ceasefire, neither of them ever looked away from their opponent. Their gazes sent a message that said if either of them showed even the slightest opening, the other would crush them with it.

"Whew, this should replenish some of my blood. Okay, let's go for the last round, shall we?" Sera proposed.

"Do you really think you need to ask?"

"You've got a point!"

Sera charged forward like an arrow. She wasn't using Vivre, but she still

managed to reach her top speed in an instant, showing how amazing her acceleration was. She was fast enough to close the distance between them in the blink of an eye—or at least, she should have been.

What?! I'm not getting closer to her at all?!

Sera was surprised. No matter how much she ran, she didn't seem like she was getting any closer. It wasn't as though Gloria was retreating as she moved —Gloria hadn't taken a single step.

This is...

Sera instantly realized that she wasn't actually moving based on how her surroundings remained unchanged no matter how much she ran. But she didn't know whether it was because she was being instantly teleported back or running through some sort of special barrier that had been deployed. What she did know was that it was extremely dangerous to allow it to continue.

"Then I'll just be a good girl and fall back!" she exclaimed.

She'd decided to walk back everything and spend her efforts on analyzing the situation, so she tried to temporarily retreat. Unfortunately, that didn't work either. She'd jumped back, intending to more than double the distance between them, but her position still didn't change.

"It's useless," said Gloria. "Now that I've manifested my Authority, you can no longer approach me or run."

Gloria pointed her left hand at Sera, and one of the black crosses that was circling around her shifted, pointing in the same direction as her hand. Sera's intuition told her that this heralded something incredibly dangerous as her detection skills sounded alarms in her head.

"Crosspile Alter," said Gloria.

Sera couldn't even tell when the black cross had been launched. By the time she noticed, it was already right in front of her eyes, flying at extreme speed at her face. It probably hadn't simply flown so fast she couldn't detect it. If anything, it felt more like the cross had teleported. As things stood, it would split her head open. In fact, the tip of the cross was already touching the area between her eyebrows.

"Whoaaarrghhh!"

Sera reacted, twisting her body and escaping the cross by a hair's breadth, though it still split open one of her cheeks. It was a drastic resort where she had to look with her eyes and rely on her reflexes to dodge. Activating Vivre beforehand had worked to her advantage. It combined with Sera's naturally strong intuition to allow her to barely escape with her life.

While she was still under the effects of Vivre, Sera shot out a Blood Ball as a counter. What's more, she'd added Crimson Astraea's aura to the Blood Ball. She figured that with the effect of Blood Dominion allowing it to penetrate anything, including barriers, it would be able to neutralize Gloria's absurd Authority.

Unfortunately, she was wrong. For some reason, the Blood Ball instantly lost all momentum and fell to the ground. Her counter had failed; neither Sera nor her attacks could reach Gloria.

Gloria sucked in a shocked breath. Seeing her enemy dodge her attack and still have the ability to counter surprised her greatly. The counter might have failed, but it still dealt a psychological blow.

"You keep surprising me," Gloria said. "To think that you would avoid my Authority when seeing it for the first time. What kind of trick did you pull?"

"I didn't pull any trick. If anything, I'd say it was the power of friendship," Sera answered.

"I see," Gloria replied after a disgruntled pause. "You've got a mouth on you, but you're not all talk."

"Oh no, I was telling you the truth."

During this short conversation, Sera had poured the rest of the potion she'd half drunk before onto her cheek with her tail. The mysterious Mel-stamped liquid made contact with her blood, causing the amount of liquid to mysteriously increase.

"Bloody Reaper's Tail!"



Gloria's Authority, Gap, allowed her to manipulate the distance between her and a target. "Manipulating" in this case meant lengthening or shortening. In extreme cases, she could use this power to conceptually create an infinite amount of distance between her and her target, or make it so there was no space at all between them. Sera had been selected as Gloria's target when she'd manifested her Authority, and since then Sera had been unable to get any closer or farther. None of her attacks could reach Gloria for the same reason. And while Sera was in this awful situation, Gloria was able to launch her longrange attacks point-blank.

Not only was her enemy unable to close in or attack, but Gloria could make one-sided attacks because she could remain absolutely safe while doing so. At first glance, this Authority would seem invincible in combat. However, it naturally had its weaknesses.

One of them was that the target always had to be within sight. In situations where Gloria was facing off against someone in the open or the target had already been selected, this condition wasn't that hard to fulfill. But the Authority was awfully weak when it came to unexpected situations, such as if the enemy were to make a surprise attack from a blind angle or move at a speed faster than she could detect. The moment she lost sight of her target, her Authority lost its effect.

In order to prevent that from happening, Gloria had a certain countermeasure in place: the black crosses she had circling around her. These were her weapons, her shields, and her eyes all at the same time. Essentially, they were security cameras. These crosses faced every angle, giving her 360-degree real-time vision.

"Then how about this?!" Sera shouted.

That was why she easily noticed the instant Sera attacked with her monstrous tail. While Gloria herself kept her attention on Sera, the crosses paid attention to the giant tail of water. The Bloody Reaper's Mare swept sideways but suddenly lost all momentum, becoming nothing more than red liquid and splashing to the ground.

"Did you think you could hit me as long as you made the attack bigger?"

Gloria questioned. "That thinking is a bit too simplistic!"

Ignoring her words, Sera had already moved on to her next plan of action. She started running in circles, careful not to change her distance from Gloria.

I know the effect range of this weird power thanks to Bloody Reaper's Mare! Sera thought. In short, the ability affects a sphere around her and not just where she's facing! The place where Bloody Reaper's Mare turned back into bloody water marks the limit of its range. Presumably, only I and my attacks are under the effect of this ability. And if I try to escape from this area of effect, I'll be put right back into its range. But, paradoxically, as long as I'm within range, I can move freely! And as expected, as long as I maintain my distance from her, I can move! Okay, so for now, I'm at least able to move around, though it's limited!

Sera's attack had been a test, trying to understand Gloria's power. She had hit the nail right on the head, and her expression was quite smug.

"Hmph, you may be able to move around a little now, but your situation hasn't changed," said Gloria. "Your attacks will still not reach me, yet I can still attack you!"

Sera was continuing to move at high speeds, but she was clearly visible to Gloria and her black cross eyes. So the effect of Gloria's Authority was still active. And no matter how fast Sera got, it would be impossible for her to completely evade an attack made from point-blank range. Gloria once again pointed her left hand at Sera, and a black cross tried to pierce the demon.

"Crosspile Alter! Your luck won't continue forev—" Gloria's shout was cut off as she was forced to make a shocked grunt.

"Sorry, but I'm going to borrow that stylish black cross that you used to cut my cheek open earlier," said Sera.

The cross that had just been fired was suddenly blocked by another one being used as a shield. The cross must have been very tough, since even when taking on another of its kind, it didn't break. In fact, it continued to follow Sera as she ran laps around Gloria, providing cover.

That's from the Crosspile Alter I fired first! Gloria thought.

The first cross had Sera's blood on it and had come under her control due to

Blood Dominion—in other words, she'd stolen it.

"Heh heh!" Sera chuckled. "It looks like your attacks that reach me instantly are meaningless with something in the way! I'll gladly take this means of defense!"

"Yooouuu!" Gloria roared.

Gloria was assaulted by a feeling of irritation. Her Authority was powerful, but it could only manipulate the distance between her and a target she could see. In other words, the cross that was able to shield her enemy invalidated her instantaneous attacks.

There was also another reason for Gloria's feelings of impatience: the second weakness of her Authority. Actually, it could be considered a weakness of all the Ten Authorities. There was a limit to how much their power could be used. The Ten Authorities were inhabiting artificial bodies to act in the mortal world, which were fitted with the hidden skill Divine Binding. Their bodies were limited in what they could do outside of Isla Heaven, and they couldn't make full use of their Authorities unless they were actively manifesting those Authorities. Also, there were limits on their ability to manifest the Authorities, and so on and so forth. While their stats hadn't been weakened, they were limited in all sorts of other ways.

I was actually planning to bury her with the first attack and offer her up as a sacrifice, thought Gloria, but now I can't afford to be reckless with my ability!

No matter how many times Crosspile Alter was fired at Sera, the attacks were blocked by the one she'd stolen. As things stood, Gloria wouldn't be attacked, but neither could she put Sera down. In fact, because there was a limit on how much she could use her Authority, she was the one who would find herself at a disadvantage the longer they continued to fight. It was clear to anyone that Sera would have the overwhelming advantage if Gap was to be released and Sera was allowed to get close with her Blood Dominion. Of course, Gloria was part of this "anyone."

"Gah! Heaven's Army!" Gloria cried out.

Sera grunted in effort. Unable to take full advantage of her Authority, Gloria had attempted to flush her out with White Magic. A horde of brightly shining

soldiers that looked like angels appeared along the path Sera was orbiting. She was likely hoping that they would be able to make the cross shift even a small distance from Sera.

It doesn't need corpses as a medium like the Black Magic spell Hades's Army? Hm, that's so convenient. But... Sera glanced at the soldiers standing in her way and closed her eyes for a moment. Then her eyes snapped open, and the red aura of her Crimson Astraea spread out all at once, swarming the soldiers like carnivorous beasts that had found their prey.

"I'm not a huge fan of their design!" Sera exclaimed. "I'll be borrowing these after adjusting them to my liking!"

"Wha?!" Gloria let out.

The soldiers, having been enveloped in the red aura, eventually lost their luster as their bodies were dyed crimson. Now they were bloody angels that had fallen under the control of their empress. This was the birth of what Sera called Heaven's Sanguine Army.

"What do you think? Don't they look so cool you just want to decorate your room with them?"

"What poor taste!" Gloria cried.

"Heh heh! Isn't it just? Compliment me more!" Sera said proudly. "Now then, it's about time to put an end to things. I'll be seeing how much you can withstand from the sidelines!"

From behind her shield, Sera sent orders to Heaven's Sanguine Army, as well as everything in the area that had mixed with or touched her blood. They were all to rush at Gloria.

Crimson attacks came at Gloria from every direction. All of these had Sera's blood on them, and even just a graze would turn into a fatal blow because of Blood Dominion. She couldn't afford to be hit by them. The eyes on her black crosses applied the effect of her Authority on all those attacks within sight, creating enough distance that they would never reach her. She had no other way to make it so these attacks wouldn't hit.

Snap! Crack, snap, snap.

Unfortunately, the Divine Binding on her artificial body wouldn't allow such wanton use of her Authority. After only a few seconds of neutralizing attacks, the pitch-black halo above her head and the wings on her back audibly broke and crumbled away. At the same time, she lost the effect of Gap, which she was using to manipulate distance, and the invincible, insurmountable distance that was between her and certain doom was nullified. Since the black crosses were from a spell, those did not disappear.

"Ah, this might be the perfect chance to double down to make sure to finish this," said Sera. She'd sensed the opportunity and immediately stepped out from behind the cross she was using as a shield. If she'd been a few seconds earlier, she would have been exposed to point-blank attacks, but there was no need to worry about that now. What was more, Sera's omnidirectional attacks were continuing, so Gloria didn't have the leeway to go on the offensive.

"Dammit! Cross Fortress!" Gloria shouted.

The swarm of black crosses, the only option left to her, gathered around to protect their owner. They overlapped each other, forming a spherical, solid-black barrier between her and the attacks. Since this was a mass of crosses, it looked like a rather warped grave. Given how tough one was when used as a shield, the defensive formation was very strong. It might have been stronger than Kelvin's Rank S Green spell Adamantine Fortress. No matter how powerful Sera was, if she tried to bust through those defenses head-on, it was easy to see that she'd have a hard time.

Of course, that was assuming she went at it head-on.

"What do you think hardening your defenses will even accomplish at this point?" Sera asked.

She was a little exasperated at the sight. As she'd said before, every one of her attacks had her blood attached to it. No matter how powerful the defense was, once she ordered it to get out of the way using Blood Dominion, it would collapse in an instant. As all this was happening, Sera's attacks were just about to make contact with the mass of crosses.

Judging from the situation and what my intuition is telling me, she can no longer use that absurd power, Sera told herself. Did she go on the defensive

because she has no other cards to play? If so, I can only say that it was a foolish move. But is that really the case?

That question came unbidden to Sera's mind. And right afterward, it happened.

"Guardian Gaze!" Gloria shouted.

Sera sucked in a surprised breath. All the eyes on this impregnable, concentrated mass of crosses were facing outward, and they fired off heat beams. It was hard to tell how many beams were being fired at once, but brightness begat more brightness, and lines of heat crossed with other lines to form something even more threatening before flying out once again. In the end, Gloria's attack filled the space and continued to do so until she ran out of MP.

If she couldn't run, she just had to eliminate everything that threatened her. Her final decision was to eliminate everything other than her with overwhelming firepower. The reason she'd gathered her crosses together and allowed her enemy to come so close was to entice her within range. Then, the heat beams would evaporate everything in the vicinity, destroying it thoroughly. With that done, Sera's blood wouldn't mean anything, as it would be gone as soon as the beam touched the liquid. In fact, to back this up, all the attacks that came at Gloria had been rendered into nothingness.

"Cross Release!" Gloria intoned.

Right after the storm of beams that had burned the entire field faded away, Gloria had her black crosses spread outward. Essentially, she was shooting a Crosspile Alter in every direction all at once. She did this because she judged that if Sera had survived the beams earlier, the fortress of black crosses would no longer be needed. In fact, it would be a liability that could be used by the enemy. If these attacks hit Sera, that would be great, but she wasn't the type to have such illogical hopes.

"I'm sure that you still haven't disappeared despite all this, right?!" Gloria shouted.

"You're right, but just barely!" Sera responded. She threw her cross shield, which was on the verge of collapse, aside and faced off against Gloria, who revealed herself from inside her undone defensive formation.

It seemed like Sera had used her black cross as a shield to survive the heat beams, but she was still hurt by the attack, covered in burns. Meanwhile, Gloria was already out of MP, and the only thing she could fight with now was her fists. Even so, her eyes were lively, and her clenched fist was filled with power.

"This is it!" Gloria shouted.

"This is the end!" Sera yelled.

The punches both sides unleashed passed by each other, landing on each other's faces as if sucked right into their targets.



"Haaghh, I'm so tired! That was really close!" Sera shouted from her position in the middle of a burnt wasteland. She was lying spread-eagle on the ground, and beside her was Gloria, who had fallen in a similar position, only she was unconscious and wouldn't shout out like Sera did. "Agh, jeez. That last punch made my cheek hurt so much!" Sera complained. "And it's hard to even stand because I lost so much blood. Won't someone come and heal me? Like, some first-rate White Magic user who just happens to be passing by or something like that?"

"As if such a convenient coincidence would ever happen. We wouldn't be able to rest easy if we didn't actively keep people away from a battlefield like this," a voice replied to Sera's grumblings.

Sera knew who the voice belonged to immediately. "Oh, you came, Bell? You should have come out and helped me instead of hiding, then. That way I wouldn't have had to bleed so much."

Bell had come up to Sera's side. She was still in her uniform, but she was at least wearing her greaves on her legs. "You say that, but if I actually tried to help, you wouldn't have liked it, right, sister Sera?" Bell said.

"Ohhh! As expected of the sister I'm so proud of! You know me so well."

"Heh heh, well, of course I'd know stuff like this about the big sister I'm so proud of— Wait, no..." Bell interrupted herself. She then took out some MP potions from Storage through the mini Clotho she was borrowing from Kelvin. "Unfortunately, I'm not good at healing magic either. And there won't be any

White Magic users passing by so conveniently, so why don't you have that fallen angel drink this and heal you herself? She's got White Magic strong enough to go this crazy, so I'm sure she's able to heal just as well."

"Ah, yeah, that is an option! You're so smart, Bell!" Sera exclaimed in a proud, singsong tone. "Let's go fishing or something together next time!"

Bell sighed. "Why would you invite me out to play now, of all times? Jeez, you're so airheaded at the weirdest times, sister Sera. So, when are we going?" Bell was surprisingly into it.

At any rate, Sera adopted her suggestion and immediately applied her blood to Gloria's head before having her recover her MP with the potion. Then, Sera gave her an order through Blood Dominion to heal Sera. As Bell expected, Gloria knew healing magic, and the wounds inflicted by the crosses were finally healed.

On top of that, Gloria was even able to repair Queen's Terror, Sera's clothing, which had been damaged during the battle. Sera had ordered her to do so partly as a joke, expecting nothing to come of it, but then Gloria had taken out a repair kit from somewhere and done so with very skilled movements.

"Her girl power's surprisingly high!" Sera exclaimed in shock.

"Why did you make her do that too?" Bell muttered in exasperation.

"I mean, it was supposed to be a joke. I didn't expect her to actually do it. Um..."

Though Gloria's repair job couldn't restore the equipment's abilities to their original strength, at least the outfit no longer looked broken.

"Whoa, it's totally fixed..." Sera muttered in astonishment.



"Come on, don't just stand there in awe," Bell sighed. "Ah, right, why not have her bind herself with her magic while you're at it? I'm sure she'll be fine as long as she's under your control, but it looked like she had a weird power, so better safe than sorry."

"Oh, Bell, you're so merciless even though you're my sister!" Sera gushed.

Gloria ended up with a pitch-black bandage wrapped haphazardly all around her. She looked a lot like a mummy now.

"Ah, that reminds me, where's the Holy Stake?!" Sera suddenly raised her voice. She then turned around and around, scanning the skies.

"It was gone by the time I came," answered Bell. "Actually, with the Holy Stake's stealth capabilities, we wouldn't be able to find it even if it was still here. Defender—Serge—found that the stake disappeared at some point when she defeated one of the Ten Authorities, so the same thing probably happened here."

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"That means it ran away?"

"Yes."

"Awww, I was careless!"
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Sera was back to normal after receiving Gloria's healing, so she started throwing a tantrum that shook the ground around her. The wild animals in this area had been returning now that the fight was over, but the shaking scared them off again.

"Calm down," said Bell. "This was destined to happen the moment you allowed Catria to return to the academy."

"Urgk...I shouldn't have let her leave. I should've tied her up and forced her to watch this fight from special ringside seats."

"Mm, quite the fiendish line from my own sister," said Bell. "Even if by some miracle Catria wasn't hit by a stray attack from the battle, the fight itself would have been so stimulating she would have died from shock."

"Ah, I guess she wouldn't have been able to locate the Holy Stake like that, huh?" Sera said. "So it would have been too difficult to capture both either way.

Too bad!"

"Let's just be happy you managed to capture an important source of information alive," Bell countered. "No matter how much willpower she has, she'll spill everything in her current state. Oh, let me carry her back. I can't let you carry her after you did all that hard fighting."

"Huh? You really don't mind? Oh, that reminds me. I guess it's a little too late to be pointing this out, but are you okay? Did you get the academy's permission to come all the way out here?"

"Art will do something about that. He's the principal, after all," answered Bell. "I've got the dorm head, Boyle, under my thumb already, so there's nothing for you to be worried about, sister Sera." With that, she picked up the tied-up Gloria.

"Really? Hm...then I'll take you up on your offer!" said Sera. "We need to carry her to...let's see... We can't bring her to Lumiest, and I don't feel like it's right to bring her to our base in Pub. Uh...I wonder what we should do!"

"You can use telepathy, can't you, sister Sera?" Bell suggested helpfully. "Why not ask Kelvin?"

"Oh, I can rely on Kelvin?" Sera asked. "I know you don't like him, so I wasn't expecting you to give the okay."

"I-It's not like I actually hate him or anything," Bell sputtered. "I mean, it's true that it feels like he took you from me, and I'll always resent him for that, but in the end he feels a lot like papa does to me. He's going to be your husband, so I approve of him, at least, you know? Please don't tease me so much." Bell reddened slightly as she averted her gaze.

"Hee hee!" Sera giggled. "Sorry. I'm happy to hear you say that so honestly, Bell! Right, you should say something at our ceremony! Tell everyone how you approve of Kelvin like you just told me!"

"Never. I want to celebrate your happiness, sister Sera, but I absolutely refuse to say that to his face." She looked truly serious. It seemed she really did hate the idea, as the slight redness in her cheeks had disappeared completely.

"Jeez, you really resemble our father in the weirdest ways," Sera said,

seeming to deflate. "But asking Kelvin does seem like the best choice. I'll go talk to him. You wait here."

"Sure, sure. Take your time."

Sera immediately sent a telepathic message to Kelvin. She happily reported that she had encountered a member of the Ten Authorities, intercepted her, and captured her. Her tone was terribly bright, and she was putting out an aura that screamed "Praise me!" at full force.

::So basically, I did a great thing! I wish I could've shown you how heroic I was, Kelvin! I swear, I was amazing! Hey, Kelvin, are you listening to me?!::

::Yeah, I'm listening. It's amazing that you managed to defeat and capture one of the Ten Authorities alive. I was just thinking that I should learn from your example. You seriously blow my mind!:: Kelvin replied.

::Heh heh! Don't I just?! Praise me more!::

Sera was very happy. This exchange repeated several more times, and once Sera was satisfied, she finally decided to move on to the main subject.

::Whew, I'm totally satisfied!::

::I...see. That's good to hear. So, you wanted to ask what to do with the Ten Authorities girl you captured? I'd like to keep her securely confined beneath our estate, but that wouldn't be very convenient while we're staying on the Western Continent,:: Kelvin mused.

::Mm-hmm...so what should we do, then?:: Sera asked.

::We should rely on Director Shin and the Adventurer's Guild headquarters. I'll let her know what's happening and have her prepare a safe place to stash the prisoner.::

::Oh, that was a pretty fast decision.::

::Well, we've got a lot going on on our end too. Also, I knew you'd come out on top and capture your attacker alive.::

Sera made a pleased noise through the Network. ;::W-Well, of course! I'm a great woman on par with Goldiana, after all! Of course I'd meet your expectations, Kelvin! Now and forever!::

At this point, her satisfaction gauge had burst past its limits. At the same time, Bell, who was watching from the sidelines, was jealous seeing how excited Sera was getting. She decided that the next time she saw Kelvin, she'd kick him.

::Ha ha, I can see you're doing great. But why not say that you're *better* than Goldiana?:: Kelvin asked.

::Huh? Oh, well, you see...yeah... I mean, it's the truth, and even if I say I'm on par, to be honest, I can't actually be sure...hrmnyurrmmnrr... Agh, never mind! Anyway, I'm about the same as Goldiana! Get it?!:: Sera concluded.

::Um, okay, sure? I don't really get it, but I understand. Whoa!::

In the middle of their conversation, Kelvin let out a sound that seemed incongruous with the subject at hand. Sera tilted her head, puzzled but assuming that something must have happened on the other end.

::Are you doing something over there, Kelvin? Are you busy right now?::

::Huh? Me? Ah, well, technically, yeah, I am busy. Right now, I—::

## **Chapter 4: Lethality**

The Ten Authorities showed up just as I was Summoned.

Using the Magic Stakes that we'd set up all over the place, I managed to come all the way to the central ocean where Luquille was waiting in her Holy Stake. As for how I'd managed to do that, I'd made use of the reflection of Summoning that Tristan showed me to re-create Gerard's Reflective Dreadnought. I practiced it a lot in the neighborhood where we were staying, but I still wasn't quite used to the feeling of being transported. Even over telepathy, I let out a weird noise, causing Sera to give a weird reaction. *Oops*.

But I'd succeeded in being Summoned. As planned, I was now over the central ocean. The weather was good, and the waters were calm. I suppose you could call it fishing weather? If Sera were to see this scene, she'd surely immediately invite me to go fishing. She's with Bell right now, so maybe Bell would come along too? No...surely not.

::Wait, the Ten Authorities? Didn't you just say that there haven't been any new sightings of them?!:: Sera questioned frantically.

Sorry, bad timing. The info came in right afterward. So we're fighting them right now, I told her through the Network.

::Hey, wait, then now's not the time to be having a leisurely chat! I'm ending this now! Concentrate on the fight, Kelvin! And win a victory to match with me! Got it?!:: Sera demanded.

Of course I do. I intended to do that from the start. Later, I replied.

::Yeah, later! Fight hard!:: Sera said encouragingly.

The telepathic connection cut out, and now I was hearing the refreshing sound of the ocean's salty breeze. At the same time, a man descended in front of me. A Holy Stake that was not Luquille's was already above our heads.

The man had black hair and evil-looking black eyes. He was also wearing a robe that was black at its base. I felt a sort of kinship or closeness with him for

his looks, his equipment, and his general color scheme.

I stared at the Ten Authorities member as he stared back at me. We spent a couple seconds with our eyes locked—rather, it was more like a glare—but we were also trying to discern each other's true form. For now, though, nothing was coming of this staring contest. I wanted to get to blows as fast as possible, so I decided to introduce myself. I'd do so politely, like a gentlemanly battle junkie.

"Now then, I wonder why you've come all this way? There's a mountain of questions I'd like to ask, but before that, introductions need to happen."

"Hmph, how strange. Up until just now, I felt no presences at all, and then you appeared instantly and out of nowhere," the man answered.

Both of us silently exchanged hard stares for a long moment. Then, at the same time:

"I'm Kelvin. Kelvin Celsius. You're one of the Ten Authorities, aren't you? Fight me."

"My name is Cheruvim Ripita. So, you're Kelvin? This is perfect. I have a suggestion for you."

Once again, we spent a long moment exchanging silent, hard stares. We'd spoken at the same time twice now, and a very awkward mood was setting in.

Come on, there's no need to match my timing that well just because I feel a sense of kinship with you. I mean, our names are even similar. And now look, it's hard for both of us to speak.

"Ah, uh...if you know my name, does that mean I'm pretty famous among the Ten Authorities?"

This time, both of us knew we could not afford to speak simultaneously again, so I was a little cautious as I spoke.

Good, we didn't talk over each other this time. Why do I have to be so careful now, of all times?

Cheruvim coughed to clear his throat. "Your faction managed to subjugate Ridwan and kill Baldogg. It'd be stranger if you *didn't* become the subject of

rumors, no? But for you to ask for battle immediately upon meeting... You're as crazed for combat as the rumors say."

Somehow, I felt like he was watching out for the same things I was. *No, I'm* sure I'm just imagining it. Probably.

"I admit I'm a battle junkie, but Ridwan aside, Baldogg was killed by someone else... Well, we're friends, so I guess it's pretty much the same. Still, if the high-and-mighty Ten Authorities have my name rattling around inside their heads, there's no greater honor. Anyway, you said you had a suggestion for me, someone standing in your way? If the suggestion is for a fight, I'm all for it."

"You keep going on and on about that... No, I guess it's fine," said Cheruvim, thinking better of it. "My suggestion isn't all that different from what you're thinking. Kelvin...would you defeat the leader of the Ten Authorities, Eld, with me?"

"What?"

The suggestion went above and beyond my expectations, and I couldn't help but make a hysterical noise in response. It seemed to be happening a lot lately. Still, I really hadn't expected that. I thought back to my conversation with Luquille, remembering that Eld was the top dog of the Ten Authorities and the wicked god's right hand.

That would make him Cheruvim's superior. And he wants to take down Eld? Why? Did they have a falling out?

"Heh! I can tell what you're thinking," said Cheruvim. "Why do this when I'm one of the Ten Authorities, right?"

I paused, disgruntled that I'd been read. "That's about right. Honestly, I don't get what your intentions are. We just met. Why are you proposing this to me?"

"I don't have the leeway to be choosy," said Cheruvim. "There are very few people I can guarantee have the strength to fight alongside me. Actually, I should put this the opposite way. Even though we're using artificial bodies, the fact that you can actually fight against a member of the Ten Authorities makes you quite a ridiculous being for this world..."

"Really? The world's pretty huge. I wouldn't be surprised to find there are

people who can fight gods in it."

Ignoring the world I was previously in, I had won against DarkMel in this world, and there was Goldiana, who'd become the Goddess of Reincarnation as a human, as well as Serge, history's greatest and freest Hero. And that was only a sample of the many other monsters like us. I didn't think it was particularly strange that we could be a match for the Ten Authorities.

This time, it was Cheruvim's turn to pause in thought. "Is that so? Heh! If you think so, Kelvin, then you might be more similar to us than most. You have a discerning eye. So, what do you think? Once we succeed in putting Eld down, I would be happy to welcome you as a new member of the Ten Authorities."

"Why would that happen? If you want to recruit me, you should give me a more enticing proposal. The Ten Authorities are trying to revive the wicked god. Becoming one of you is *not* an incentive."

"Oh? I see, so you're saying that you cannot completely approve of us without understanding the truth of this world first. Then I suppose I have no other choice. I will tell you the truth of this world!" Cheruvim declared.

Ah, this is going to be long, I immediately thought. Even though I'd come all this way to fight one of the Ten Authorities, for some reason I was now being lectured on some sort of truth of the world. This is wrong! This isn't what I wanted! I don't really want to have an exchange of so-called noble ideas.

"Let's start with...right. Why our god, Addams, opposed the false deity who currently rules this world. I will tell you this carefully and thoroughly. This is something you should put your all toward understanding, so listen well!"

This really is going to be interminably long... He's definitely much more caring and helpful than he looks. But he's hopeless at reading people, or rather, it seems like he's the type that can't read the room. Will he fight with me once he's satisfied explaining things? I'll definitely remember the info he's giving me, but I'm worried about what'll happen after. Maybe I should think of a reason to start fighting now, while I have the chance. Actually...don't the artificial bodies the Ten Authorities are using have limitations outside of Isla Heaven? I'm remembering this way too late, but is it really okay for this guy to be taking so long on this lecture?

"The great war happened long ago. Indeed, so long ago that it's immeasurable by your human standards—"

Oh no. Okay, let's summarize things in the interest of saving time.

A long, long time ago, the gods split into two factions and warred, probably because they wanted to go in different directions. The faction currently managing this world was the head god's faction. Meanwhile, those who followed the wicked god Addams and his Ten Authorities had been imprisoned. Sera's, my father-in-law's, and Victor's demon ancestors had been part of this camp.

Anyway, the reason this war had started was the policy the gods were using to manage the worlds under them. The head god's faction wanted to keep the strength of the world under a certain threshold. Essentially, no individual would be given abnormal strength, and they would get rid of those with remarkable power, like the Hero and Demon Lord. They thought that though there could be some differences in individual physical stats, all life in the world should have about average abilities. This was a measure to prevent worlds under their management from being pointlessly destroyed and to prevent the lives under their management from becoming a threat to the gods. If I had to say, they basically wanted to make things like Earth.

Meanwhile, the wicked god's side wanted the gods to stop managing worlds altogether, allowing the strong to live as they were, while the weak would be weeded out under this set of rules. They thought there was no need to put shackles on those who could evolve, and if the mortals bared their fangs at the gods and managed to win, that would also be part of the laws of nature—they'd made peace with that possibility. The wicked god reached out for comrades, preaching that being able to learn and grow freely and possibly take control of life was what had made them into gods.

Eventually, the head god's and wicked god's factions clashed, resulting in the great war of myth. In the end, the head god won, and the leader of the enemy faction, the wicked god, would forever be sealed away, while his subordinates, the Ten Authorities, had their bodies destroyed and their mindless souls imprisoned in a different dimension. All the other followers' races were deemed demons and shut away in Abyssland—that was apparently the order of things.

Up until this point, I could understand pretty much everything. But still, I was confused. Our world did, in fact, have Heroes and Demon Lords, and didn't seem to have a limit on strength. It honestly resembled more like what the wicked god wanted...

Ah, I see. That's why Cheruvim also thought it was weird.

"Now do you understand why I was confused?" Cheruvim asked. "That's right. Despite being under the control of that false deity, the ones living in this world don't seem to be under any sort of limitation. This seems like the world we imagined."

Now I understood why he thought this world was a contradiction. I definitely understood, but personally, my only thought was, so what? After all, I wasn't really interested in philosophical matters like what the world should be like.

Ah, I mean, I guess it does matter, but no matter what, my desire for combat gets ahead of me, and my ability to actually make decisions becomes a lot messier. I guess I should act like an intelligent battle junkie and use Parallel Processing to think things through in my own way. Not that I'm going to tell Cheruvim that.

If Cheruvim was right, these people's ideal world had only been realized here. This was the world the wicked god was imprisoned in, so his influence over eons must have created Demon Lords and made monsters more vicious. Heroes were summoned to resolve these issues, and even if the Black Grimoire had been purifying the wicked god's influence, I was pretty sure that the gods would face a lot of inconvenience if the people here stayed weak. After all, even the Hero had a limit on what actions they could take, and if there was no Hero, wouldn't those in control be in a bind? I figured that although the Hero was active in this world, the people here would have their limits lifted so they would be able to resist to some extent. At the moment, this was all just conjecture, but the world I was on before reincarnating, Earth, was exactly as Cheruvim described, so I thought it was appropriate to assume other worlds were the same.

"If the world is to your liking, then why kick up a fuss? The gods might have changed their minds while you were imprisoned in another dimension, don't you think? So there's really no reason to antagonize them. No, wait... I wouldn't

want that. Never mind! Fight as much as you want. Fight me too!"

"You... Have you ever been told you can't read the room?" Cheruvim asked.

You're one to talk! I am currently reading the room and waiting to fight you, you know!

"You certainly have a point, Kelvin," he continued. "But what Addams and we Ten Authorities are aiming for is not something so small. We aren't satisfied with just this world. We wish to free all the worlds under the yoke of those false deities!"

"Right, of course you do. So to sum up, you're okay with keeping this world we live in as is, but you still want to revive the wicked god and bring the fight to the gods on other worlds. Am I correct?"

"Your choice of words is inappropriate in some places, but in general, yes. So? If you participate in this noble undertaking, things will definitely turn out the way you like. Not only that, but even though they are false, you will be fighting the gods who once defeated us—which is to say, they will all be the powerful enemies you so love. I would even be open to welcoming the false goddess Goldiana, whom we currently have captive, as a new member of the Ten Authorities depending on your answer. She is the one who is maintaining this world in its current state, after all. She seems close to our ideals."

Ah, he's misunderstanding that point, but in a way that's good for me. Well, it's convenient, and the goal guiding their actions makes sense from the perspective of the Ten Authorities, but...my all-important first question still hasn't been answered.

"I see. So, returning to my first question: how does this all lead to you wanting to defeat your leader, Eld? You trying to rise to the top or something? Hunt big game, maybe?"

"Rise to the top? Hah! As if I would ever take action for such shallow reasons," scoffed Cheruvim. "I don't want to be the leader. But I believe Eld has made a breach of faith."

Breach of faith? Which means he betrayed you? Oh, come on, Luquille just betrayed you too; your organization's in tatters! Are you Ten Authorities really

doing okay? You won't just collapse out of nowhere, will you?

"I know what you're thinking, Kelvin," said Cheruvim. "Just because I rise in rebellion doesn't mean the other Ten Authorities will follow me, right?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah..." Now that he mentioned it, I needed to worry about that too. I was planning to fight no matter what happened, so I didn't think it was a problem.

"Because we extol true freedom, attempting to wrest power by force is a natural act. No matter how sneakily it is done, such a thing is not an excuse for losing," said Cheruvim.

"Even if you collude with outsiders?"

"Even so, yes."

I sighed. "You're really about survival of the fittest to the core, huh?"

So, they're like the divine version of Gaun. If they think anything goes, they'd appeal more to Leonhart than me.

"But as I said before, I am not looking for authority. You've fought us several times now, Kelvin, so allow me to ask you something," Cheruvim went on.

"Er, I only fought you guys once before...but what is it?"

"I'm sure you already know this, but in our attacks, we have lost comrades named Ridwan and Baldogg. Furthermore, in this round, another member of the Ten Authorities has been dispatched. Given that we are not getting any communication from her Holy Stake, I believe it's safe to say something has happened to her."

He's talking about the Ten Authorities member who just attacked Lumiest, which Sera told me about over the Network. She's tied up right now, so of course she isn't communicating.

"Have you not noticed something from all the actions we've taken up until now?" Cheruvim asked.

I gave it a moment's thought before replying. "Do you mean how you always take action alone? I did think that it was arrogant of you to be doing that after losing twice, despite the limitations on your artificial bodies and the fact that

you were efficiently invading a wide area... That's about all, though."

Even the Apostles led by Arbitrator—Iris—had always acted in at least two-man cells when trying to contact us. When we'd made contact in Trycen during the Demon Lord incident, it had been Jildora, Tristan, and Ange. When I'd been attacked in Gaun, it was Ange, Bell, and I'd heard old man Nito had been on a delaying action. In Deramis, while trying to rescue sister Atra, we'd faced Estoria and Serge. Even when we'd gone to receive Fromme's blessing in the Valley of Crazed Whirlwinds, Riold and Mao had come as a set. No matter when, the Apostles made sure to have the advantage in terms of strength so that they could be supported by each other.

Compared to the Apostles, the Ten Authorities were honestly...well, I could only describe them as ill-prepared. While the first time was understandable given how confident they were in their power, they were still taking individual action even after two out of the three people they'd dispatched had failed.

"Exactly. While we Ten Authorities have strength as our greatest policy, it's not as if we don't learn anything from failure. After all, bravery and recklessness are two different things. But Eld's orders have not changed from the beginning," Cheruvim explained.

I thought about that for a moment but still resorted to questioning him. "Meaning?"

"Eld has some other goal. Something that differs from what the rest of us want. You know what I'm saying, don't you? Eld does not deserve to stand above us. He's changed from how he was when he was praised as the right hand of Addams. Either that, or he's been this way from the beginning. That's why we must eliminate him."

"Hmmm, I see, I see... So, is this Eld guy strong? Strong enough for a member of the Ten Authorities like yourself to ask for help?"

"Of course he is. Eld's the leader of the Ten Authorities, at least for now. Also, there are ranks within our organization. If Eld is the leader, then I am strong enough to be his substitute. Below us are the high-ranked gods Hazama and Rem. Of course, some are exceptions to this rule, like Hao...but anyway, he is not someone I can let my guard down against. He cannot be compared to the

ones you defeated, Baldogg and Ridwan."

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, riiiiiight... So you really are strong, Cheruvim!

I understood his intentions. I understood them well. His desire to go assaulting other worlds aside, I wasn't against fighting the leader of the Ten Authorities with him. It would reveal the location of their base, Isla Heaven, and I'd be able to check the info I got from Luquille. There was a possibility that the invitation was a trap, so I needed to be careful about that, but...how should I put it? I didn't believe that he was lying. At any rate, I could just confirm things with Sera and the others to see the truth. So, taking all that into account, there were a lot of merits to cooperating with him. There were, but...

"So, that means you're strong too, right, Cheruvim?"

He seemed confused. "I just said that, didn't I?"

"Then why don't you let me confirm it? Fighting gods on other worlds and entering the Ten Authorities—all of that is very appealing to me. But let's say we cooperate and win against Eld. Even though you didn't do this because you wanted power, you'd end up being at the top by default, wouldn't you?"

Cheruvim didn't answer right away. "Indeed. There might be some debate among the other members of the Ten Authorities, but that would most likely be the case. What of it?"

"I'm just worried. What would happen if my future boss is weaker than me, you know?"

This time, Cheruvim paused for a different reason. "Oh?" He radiated a small amount of murderous intent.

Ah, it's a murky black. I like it.

"I want to experience your strength for myself. Come on, it's fine, isn't it? Wouldn't fighting someone like me be like taking candy from a baby for the second-strongest member?"

"Heh! You say it like it's so simple. Unfortunately, I am not suited to holding back. If you want to test me, it will be the last thing you ever do. You'll die, get it?"

As if turning on a faucet, he released his murderous intent full force, and it felt good. At the same time, the corners of my mouth tilted up into a smile.

I mean, come on. Heh heh...he's more than I expected.

"Well, how should I say it? You don't need to worry about something like that. I mean, do you really think a man who would immediately die fighting you would be of any help against Eld, who's stronger? Let's ignore whatever record for defeating Ten Authorities you think I have; confirming each other's strength for ourselves is the best and most realistic way to do this. For both of us."

"Heh...heh heh! I see... That makes sense." Cheruvim cackled harshly. "So that's why you wanted to fight me all this time, Kelvin? I thought you were just a simple battle-crazed idiot, but you have quite the clever side. I like you."

I was shocked, so I didn't reply right away. "Yeah, that's been my aim from the start."

I didn't lie, okay? I didn't.

"Then allow me to grant your desire."

"I'm glad you're on board. Ah, right. Since we're finally going to fight, why don't we make a game of it? Let's see...how about making it so the loser has to follow one order from the winner? That's simple and easy to understand, right? If you win, you can make me accept your proposal, or even finish me off if you don't like my mettle. If you want, we can put it in writing."

Cheruvim gave it some thought before replying. "There's no need. Such boorish things won't be necessary at the end of this battle. In the first place, even without the concept of a 'game,' the victor always has a right of control over the loser. That is the natural way of things."

"Ha ha! It's great how quickly stuff gets settled with you!"

With my Black Staff on my shoulder, I put some distance between us. At the same time, he also moved backward.

Good. He's naturally taking a fair distance without needing any discussion beforehand. It looks like he can read the room when it comes to stuff like this, despite how devastatingly bad at it he was before.

"This was settled faster than expected. Let's start before your body reaches its limit. Are you ready?"

"Of course. I shall measure you, ascertain your strength, and make you submit, Kelvin! Yes, I, Cheruvim Ripita will do so, as the old ruler of the underworld called a God of Death!"

"Oh, even better. So this is what it's like to introduce yourself on the battlefield. Then, ahem...I am the Rank S adventurer, Grim Reaper Kelvin Celsius! Though I may be lacking, I will resist as hard as I can while having fun!"

I released my fighting spirit, my magic, all the pressure I had within me. The ocean and clouds around me rippled away, creating rough waters, but I was concentrated solely on Cheruvim.

"Boreas Death Scythe!"

"Abestag!"

My first move was, naturally, my trusty partner: the large scythe. It integrated seamlessly into my hand and increased my thirst for battle. As soon as that ran through my mind, Cheruvim also summoned a large scythe. It was endlessly black and resembled the pitch-black magic DarkMel had once used.

I know I shouldn't be thinking this during a battle, but can two combat styles really resemble each other this much? I mean, isn't his title basically the same as mine too?

"And now we're in an accidental scythe fight. Still, that's pretty new... I like it!"

"That is a good weapon; it's seen a lot of use. But mine is more dangerous, you know?" Cheruvim said.

"Hrph!" Both of us grunted in effort as we attacked at the same time. His pitch-black scythe and my scythe of violent wind clashed head-on.

Both of us made somewhat shocked noises when that happened. As soon as the two weapons touched, mine vanished, while his was sliced clean in two. Should I have been happy about this turn of events? Unlike the fight with Ridwan—er, Hard—my attacks worked on my opponent. However, I didn't get

off unscathed either. Some effect I didn't really understand made my scythe disappear. Actually, it was more like all the magic I was using for the scythe had disappeared in an instant. The blast wave from the attacks split the water below and sky above, and those aftereffects remained, so did it only affect magic?

Ha ha, what a stupid question! This is great!

"It's so fun fighting a powerful enemy for the first time! Is it magic absorption or some sort of magic nullification effect?!"

"Hmph, to think you could cut my Abestag," Cheruvim said. "Your power is simple, but that is exactly why it is so vicious!"

I once again deployed my scythe and attacked. Since our weapons broke every time they clashed, it became a match of who could reform their scythe faster than the other and who could swing faster than the other. It seemed my opponent had also mastered handling a scythe, as this brute-force clash was even. After clashing and having our weapons destroyed around twenty times, we finally took some distance, as if we had bounced off the clash.

"Hurricane Ripper!"

Every second taken to back up was a waste. I had filled the time chanting a Rank S Green Magic spell, Hurricane Ripper, creating several hurricanes in the ocean. These torrents of wind sucked up the water below as they spun around the area, serving as both a means of attack and a solid wall. It even served as a smoke screen, so it was a very useful spell. What's more, these hurricanes could combine and separate, making them adaptable to many situations.

Now then, how do I attack from here—

"Jibril," said Cheruvim.

Right after I completed my spell, he sent out a jet-black circular wave that spread out all around him, much like a halo. The movement was like the ripples created by a droplet falling into the water's surface, and it spread horizontally with terrific speed. This jet-black wave was both fast and thin like paper, but it was only spreading horizontally, so it was easy for me to dodge. Still, it would have been really bad if it touched me. My detection skills were sounding alarm bells in my head, telling me to never touch it, no matter what.

I dodged the incoming wave of black. As I just said, this in itself was easy. However, that wasn't true for my Hurricane Ripper spell, which was still active in the area as well. Like a proper wall, the hurricanes stretched from the water's surface high into the sky. There was no way for the wave to miss.

The hurricane that was closest was hit by the black wave. All the magic in it was immediately sucked out and disappeared. Just like what had happened to my scythe when it had touched Cheruvim's. As this was happening, the black wave continued to hit the other hurricanes one after the other, making each one vanish. Normally, they would be the ones hitting things, but this situation was so *amusing* that it made me want to crack a joke.

"Unfortunately, jokes aren't meant to be made in quick succession!"

I controlled the Hurricane Rippers that were still active, making them avoid the wave's path. They split into upper and lower halves. The parts that were connected to the ocean stayed as they were, while the magical whirling air above was free to move around.

"Oho, so you can split those large hurricanes in two. How skillful," Cheruvim commented.

"I don't hate idle chatter during a fight, but right now I prefer we focus on combat."

"Oh, don't be like that. Despite how I look, I'm quite talkative," said Cheruvim.

"Aha, is that so?!"

I put together the five hurricanes I'd split up, creating a sort of pinwheel formation. Each corner was already spinning, but now I rotated the entire formation and launched it forward.

"Windmill!"

The attack would pulverize everything in its path. It was basically a giant shredder—no, a mining drill. Since the damage to my surroundings would be terrible if we were over land, this was one of the spells I could only use when over water. However, to my opponent, such a dangerous spell was...

"Abestag," said Cheruvim.

...completely nullified by a single slash of his scythe.

I love this. My blood is boiling!

"Hup!"

"I see, so that spell was just a smoke screen!" Cheruvim exclaimed.

I hid in the shadow of Windmill and approached him. As soon as he nullified my wall, I swung my scythe. It was an attack aiming for the small opening created when he'd intercepted my spell. Of course, there was no way he'd be taken by this extremely standard opener, and he easily evaded the attack despite being off-balance from his swipe. It wasn't just his mysterious power or his mastery of his scythe, it seemed he was also skilled in martial arts.

"Oh, come on! I'm not one to talk, but your MP's endless!"

"I'm the one who's surprised. Are you really human, Kelvin? How can you cast spells of that scale in such quick succession?"

After slashing with my scythe, having it break, and reforming it, we had a chat. Fighting with a powerful enemy was very involved. I couldn't help but feel I'd lose track of time.

"Hwup!"

I got a bad feeling, so after dodging his scythe, I dove straight downward. Right after I did, something returned from behind where I'd been just a moment before. It was the black ring that I'd thought had spread far off into the distance.

"Seriously?! It's a boomerang?!"

"It's a spell. Wouldn't it be dull if I just threw it and that was all?" Cheruvim replied.

As if punctuating his point, the ring that had returned shifted and spun in all directions at dizzying speeds. I see. So he can make the ring move like that on top of deploying it outward.

"Ah, right. Since I have the chance, allow me to warn you," Cheruvim said. "My Authority is 'Lethality.' All my attacks will cause instant death to anything they touch. Do be careful."

"Well, thanks for that!"

He explained his power to me, since the moment I touched something, I'd be dead, whether I knew or not.

Lethality... I guess it means contact itself results in instant death? It's as practical and nasty as DarkMel's ability to lower stats at a touch. Uh...hm? Instant death? The only thing I confirmed was that it made magic disappear.

"You're wondering why my attacks erased your magic if my power is instant death, aren't you, Kelvin?! I'll tell you, so listen well while we fight!" Cheruvim cried.

"Aw, whaaat..."

This new way of explaining things caused me to make an absolutely foolish expression despite being in the middle of a fight I'd been looking forward to so much.

I mean, of course I'll fight. We're right in the middle of breaking our weapons on each other and exchanging super fierce spells, after all. The way this happened aside, I'm satisfied with the contents of the fight. But somehow, something still feels off...

"Lethality is the most sinister of powers that brings irrational death to all life! While this of course affects living beings, it is also possible to make the magic you launch die! That is why your spells have been disappearing!" he shouted.

"Which means you don't just reduce HP to zero, you do that to MP too?!"

"You're quick on the uptake, as expected of the man I set my eyes on!"

"Well, thanks again for the compliment!"

"I'm feeling it now! Since you're the one I'm facing, I'll tell you, but I have yet to manifest my Authority in full! Do you understand what that means?" he asked.

"That the power of an Authority is not this weak! Plus, you're saying that you haven't gotten serious yet! I'd be happy if I'm right!"

"You are! But I won't be manifesting it for a fight of this level! Why? Because you haven't gotten serious yet either, Kelvin!"

While his tendency to talk too much was a sticking point, his strength and ability were truly troublesome. I'd gladly continue fighting honorably like this, but the big picture was that if it touched me even once, I'd be dead. Plus, his artificial body had limitations, so I couldn't afford to draw the fight out on a whim.

"Glory Sanctuary!"

"I was wondering what you would do, but this is nothing! Kshasra!"

I tried restraining him with Glory Sanctuary, but his body suddenly burst with a multitude of black blades, which pierced the barrier's rings and broke it. It was probably a Black Magic spell that he'd imbued with his Authority.

So he can do things like father-in-law too, huh? I'd be fine fighting using weapons with reach like a large scythe, but if he tried to fight me at even closer range, such as hand-to-hand combat, I'd be cooked.

"Whew..."

I watched as the black blades returned inside his body and let out a small breath. I had a swarm of Obsidian Edge blades around me that I'd created during the fight, and they were all pointed at Cheruvim. But I was sure that even if I launched them right now, nothing would come of it.

"What's wrong? Are you tired already?" he asked.

"Nope. I was just thinking it was about time we stopped holding back and clashed for real. Your artificial body has a time limit, doesn't it? I don't want to have this fight end because we hit the deadline. Also, Cheruvim, I want to see your true strength with my own eyes."

He thought for a moment. "Which means...you're also ready to go all out?"

"That too, but I'll be using my true abilities as a Summoner as well."

"Summoner? Ah, I see. That's what you mean. But, Kelvin, don't you think it's a foolish move to throw numbers at me? It's true that you'll create more chances to attack, but you'll also be exposing your friends to danger at the same time. You'd be able to heal something like loss of limb or holes in the body with your White Magic, but...once they're dead, they'll return to

nothingness. No common ability will return the dead to life. Or what, are you claiming to have that sort of power?"

"Nope. I don't have something that amazing, though I've seen it happen."

"What?"

Of course, that ability was now lost due to Estoria withdrawing from the Apostles. The plan I was thinking of wasn't for the worst-case scenario. I had no intention of letting the worst happen in the first place.

"Come, Hard."

A black sphere came to my side. I'd Summoned my Follower, Hard.

Cheruvim sucked in a breath. "You..."

"This one's your natural enemy, isn't it? Am I wrong?"

"Natural enemy? I'm a little surprised you brought out Ridwan, but what made you think that?" Cheruvim asked. "Ridwan is of a much, much lower rank than I am and weak enough to be defeated by you. Why would he be my natural enemy?"

Unlike before, Cheruvim's expression now betrayed clear displeasure. That was understandable, given how much he cared for his comrades. After all, it looked to me like he was more angry that I'd brought out my new Follower, who used to be Ridwan, than the fact that I had pointed out it was his natural enemy.

"No need to be so angry. I might start to think I hit the nail on the head, Cheruvim."

"You jest!"

I was happy either way. It would all end up making this fight even more heated.

"Judging from our conversation so far, you know that Ridwan became my Follower. It's not like I'm trying to get back at you, but I wonder how you'll react, having to fight your former comrade—"

"Are you asking if I'll be able to use my Authority? What a stupid question,"

scoffed Cheruvim as he cut me off. "The answer is obvious, and the question totally meaningless. Kelvin, it seems I overestimated you. Fine...if you really want to see it, I'll show you. The true strength of my Authority, that is."

"So you finally feel like doing it, huh? Then please crush me with that socalled true power of yours. That Lethality you're so proud of."

"There's no need for words now. I hereby manifest my Authority."

"Hard...Astaroth Form," I said in turn.



Kelvin and Cheruvim were both shining with a strange black light. They were over the ocean, which meant no obstacles were in anyone's way, so the light was both creepy and ephemeral. Normally, unnatural phenomena would never happen, but today, over this ocean, two very strange and very unnatural things had appeared. All marine life and migratory birds had already fled during the battle, so the only one to witness this was Luquille up in her Holy Stake—but the black light was visible to many on far-off shores.

This otherworldly and unreal sight coming from the direction of a different continent convinced witnesses that the end of the world was coming. Every time people talked of what they had seen thereafter, they were laughed at and told it had been a dream. But no matter what anyone said, those people insisted that it was not a dream. They would continuously insist that if it had been a dream, they would have forgotten such nonsense already.

At any rate, let's get back to the battle. The first one to show himself from within his light was Cheruvim, having finished manifesting his Authority. His black robe was now open, revealing his chest. His body was now completely covered in an etched jet-black crest. He had great, curved horns on his head that resembled a ram's, as well as pitch-black skeletal wings coming out of his back that looked like they'd been carbonized. In fact, it wouldn't be far off to say that he looked like a demon. The only thing marking him as a fallen angel was the jet-black halo over his head. The strangeness of his form really stood out.

Kelvin, who would face off against this angel-demon hybrid, eventually emerged from his black light as well. Unlike Cheruvim, who had almost taken

off his robe and was revealing more, Kelvin's robe—Astarte's Embrace—now had another mantle over it, complete with a hood that was over his head. He was still black all over, but for decoration, he had worn and abraded patches, which made it look quite battered. It was a condition one would never see if Efil had been maintaining the clothes. However, this look made him seem so much more like a *Grim Reaper*, and he was now overflowing with an unfathomable creepiness.

"You...are now wearing Ridwan?" Cheruvim had to ask.

"I knew you'd figure it out with a glance. It can transform into anything, and the more specific my orders are, the more accurate its transformations. It's not even limited to metals, just like Ridwan was much more of a fluid than a metal. It can even turn into fabrics like this mantle I have on now. My little sister talks a lot about her human-wolf union technique, so I guess this is kind of like a union of body and soul? So, what do you think? Does it suit me? This is a devilish design that Sera thought up. You're looking more like a demon too, so I wonder if there's some part of this that resonates with you."

"Certainly, your sense of aesthetics is praiseworthy, but...you dressed up with Ridwan. Do you really think such a thing would allow you to oppose me, with my Authority manifested?" Cheruvim asked.

"If I wasn't planning to at least try, I would never have come here in the first place. More importantly, we're pressed for time. Let me enjoy your strength for as long as possible!"

Cheruvim made a surprised noise as Kelvin charged straight at him, large scythe in hand. This straightforward rush was far too reckless for someone who knew the danger of Lethality, which was why Cheruvim was so surprised.

"Have you gone insane?! Azem!" he exclaimed. Cheruvim launched the sharp feathers of his bone wings. They traveled quickly, locking on to Kelvin. In the air, the feathers split, increasing their numbers almost as if they'd multiplied.

"Boreas Death Scythe Triple!" Kelvin magnified the size of his scythe, seemingly to oppose the feathers, before unhesitatingly swinging it.

The large slash soon hit the majority of the bone feathers, which were bisected while the scythe disappeared. Or that was what would have happened

if the fight had been the same as before...but it wasn't.

"Falua!" Cheruvim shouted. Right after his bone feathers were bisected, more bones grew from those cut surfaces at a remarkable speed. These great feathers, now more numerous and threatening than before, showed their newfound viciousness clearly. The overwhelming number of them combined with their travel speed wouldn't have given Kelvin the chance to reform his scythe. So was this battle Cheruvim's win?

Things weren't that simple.

"Oh, these are definitely worth cutting!"

Cheruvim sucked in a surprised breath as he realized Kelvin's scythe hadn't disappeared, and was in fact about to unleash a follow-up attack. There was no sign of the scythe disappearing despite Lethality being imbued in the feathers.

What?! Why?! Wait, this complicated flow of magic power... He's coated it with several castings of the same Rank S spell, so as soon as one disappears, he can bring out the next?! This is in a whole other dimension than his massive amount of magic and his wit. Just how much of his life has he given to battle? Does he only ever think about fighting?! Cheruvim thought.

Indeed, Kelvin did not use his Unique Skill, Magic Overclock, to enhance his spell. Instead, he contained several copies of the spell within one. No matter how many were peeled away, the next one would appear from inside like a matryoshka doll. It meant that at the very least, he would be able to continue attacking for a few minutes straight. Cheruvim had realized this in an instant with his incredible observational powers, but that didn't tell him how many more scythes lay within. The only thing he could do was attack as much as possible, shaving away at them forcefully.

But this last remaining method was not a simple thing to do. At this time, Kelvin had Sonic Acceleration Dual, Triple, and Quadruple cast on himself, and was adjusting which one was active from moment to moment to charge in. In essence, his speed changed frighteningly every time, and it was very hard to get the measure of him. In truth, his speed was actually much more troublesome than Sera using Vivre. And even if Cheruvim tried to get away, Kelvin was much faster, so he had no choice but to try to intercept.

"Hey, looks like we're both in sure-hit range," said Kelvin.

Actually, it seemed Cheruvim didn't even have the time left for that.



Kelvin managed to make it into close range of Cheruvim, so now the two were in a situation where they'd definitely hit with whatever attack they tried. Kelvin had his large scythe at the ready, about to unleash a blow. Meanwhile, Cheruvim had his scythe up in an intercepting stance. He could have reformed his bone feathers and attacked with those again, but the scythe in his hands would likely be faster.

Hey, we've come this far, right? You know what's next, don't you? This is the part where if you don't kill me, you die. You get it, right? Kelvin wondered hopefully.

Heh hah hah! This is interesting! He really managed to push me this far! Fine, your resolve is worthy of praise. I accept your challenge! Cheruvim thought.

The two were staring each other down from up close, and that was enough to give them an idea of what their opponent was thinking. Both sides came out with a move intended to kill their opponent—moves that completely disregarded offense, as they were prepared to lose the battle to win the war.

## Zzwwwm.

Both Kelvin and Cheruvim let out grunts of effort as their scythes hit their targets. Kelvin's Boreas Death Scythe was swung for a diagonal cut, and its ability to slice through anything saw Cheruvim's left arm severed before the blade bit into the fallen angel's torso as well. With his left arm gone and his torso separated into upper and lower halves, Cheruvim started bleeding copiously. But even then, the god of death laughed and gave a Kelvin-like smile from blood-drenched lips. After all, his attack had struck as well.

Cheruvim's Abestag, a blade of instant death, had been swung in a way that would gore its target from the bottom. It had bitten deep into Kelvin's body, and of course, the Authority of Lethality was applied, activating the absurd condition of death upon contact—or it should have. Despite having been hit, the Grim Reaper laughed. He was smiling his usual smile, despite having been

touched by the instant death weapon. Indeed, he was very much alive.

"Kshassalb!" Cheruvim cried.

Right after unleashing his first attack, despite being in two pieces, Cheruvim launched a spell. A giant sword shot out of the center of his chest, blowing Kelvin away rather than piercing him. This Lethality attack also hit Kelvin—or it should have, but Kelvin suddenly put on the brakes in the air before directing his warped smile back at Cheruvim.

"Guh hah hah! You're quite cautious despite acting so confident in your Authority. Or should I say that flexibility is as expected?! I got beaten to the punch on the follow-up attack! But if I had to say, I'm glad you lived!" Kelvin ran his mouth excitedly as he blasted his opponent with a giant laser.

"I don't care what you think. But why are you still alive?" Cheruvim questioned. "That's all I want to know. Ah, it seems this spell doesn't have some weird trick to it." He cut through the laser with his scythe, making the whole thing disappear.

"Yeah, not even a magic tank like me can throw something like that out over and over without a break!" Kelvin confirmed. "But you're really something! You've got guts! I'm amazed you're still alive after being cut in half!"

He chugged an MP recovery potion using the Hearty Eating skill he had borrowed from Mel as he tried to close in once again. He'd refreshed his scythe and orbiting swords and was clearly overflowing with more murderous intent than before. Also, the edges of his mouth were tilted up more than ever.

"Don't underestimate my Auto Healing skill!" Cheruvim shouted. "I can heal from something like this in seconds. But, I see...so that's how it is..."

He'd been attacking Kelvin with his bone wings as Kelvin came in all while regrowing his missing lower half and left arm in that free moment. But he couldn't regenerate the equipment he'd lost, so between his upper half that had always been naked and his newly regenerated lower half...he was almost completely naked. Not that anyone here cared, though, so it was only a minor detail.

"Whoa, amazing! What are you, a planarian?!" Kelvin shouted.

"You're only saying that; your body is still maintaining its combat state," noted Cheruvim. "My word, you're as big a fool as the rumors say."

In the midst of this all-out fight that included the physical, the magical, and skills both unique and standard, Cheruvim deployed multitudes of his black ring, Jibril, at the tips of his wings and slammed Kelvin with all of them. Kelvin intercepted them, but they rippled outward at random angles. There was such a dense concentration of them that there was no room to dodge, so Kelvin took the hit in full.

"And yet, my Authority does not work this time either, I see," said Cheruvim.

"Yeah, isn't it great?!" exclaimed Kelvin.

Their exchange of attacks had yet to stop, as did their conversation.

"Our fight thus far has made things clear. At the same time, I've calmed down. You have my thanks," said Cheruvim.

"Huh? What's clear? You gotta tell me or I won't know! Come on, say it, you're supposed to be talkative, aren't you?" Kelvin taunted him.

"I am referring to the meaning of your words when you said Ridwan was my natural enemy," answered Cheruvim. "Ridwan's Authority is Unbreakable, which means his body is invincible and will not be affected by any attack or spell. However, that alone would not be enough to neutralize my Authority."

"Yeah, you're right! If that was all, I wouldn't be able to be this careless!" Kelvin exclaimed.

The Authority of Lethality was a power that brought death to anything it touched, and was a preposterously strong ability. However, Kelvin figured that it had to have some conditions and restrictions to exhibit that effect. And so, over the course of the fight, he had worked to uncover two of those restrictions. One was that Lethality could only be applied to slashing, piercing, and other attacks that caused physical damage. The other was that the target had to have self-awareness as a living thing, or at least something akin to a soul.

In order to test his theories, Kelvin had implanted pieces of Hard that were only as big as a bullet into the hurricanes. Of course, he couldn't afford for things to go wrong, so he'd Summoned Hard to where Colette was in Deramis

once to have her apply Arcadia to it. The result was that Hard didn't die when making contact with Jibril, and Kelvin had also discovered that the rippling rings were spinning rapidly like a saw. That meant both of his hypotheses were correct.

That was why he'd donned Hard. Astaroth Form solidified his defenses through his familiar's Authority, making for the ultimate method for allowing him to resist Lethality. Hard had no ego, so Lethality wouldn't apply to it even if it was used as a shield, and Unbreakable made it impervious to physical and magical damage. Most likely, no better countermeasure existed. To take it a step further, it was the ultimate meta move.

"I see. So you realized that Ridwan's soul was offered to the Holy Stake and presumed that such a thing was the weakness of my Authority. My word, to think that such a weakness that not even I knew about would be discovered in a situation like this..." Cheruvim swept an attack aside and stuck out one of his arms. It was a pose that signaled a pause.

"What're you doing?" Kelvin asked.

"Unfortunately, we're out of time. I thought I'd be able to kill you about ten times over within the time limit, but I was utterly surprised on that front. Indeed, I admit it. Your strength is far greater than I expected. It's my loss."

Cheruvim's horns and wings cracked audibly. Before long, they'd completely crumbled away, and he'd returned to the form he'd been in before manifesting his Authority. Of course, his equipment didn't regenerate, and he was still naked.

"Jeez, being gracious has its downsides too, I see. I'll get indigestion if you don't resist to the bitter end, I swear. Did you change your mind or something? Can't we fight some more?" Kelvin asked.

"I have not changed my mind. I will not. Any more and this battle really will become one in which we kill each other. If that happens, no matter who wins, that person will not be unscathed either. I must avoid that at all costs as long as Eld still stands. Also, I know how crazed you are about fighting. Even if I didn't request it, you'd try to fight Eld anyway, wouldn't you?" Cheruvim said.

Kelvin was hesitant to reply. "Well, when you put it like that, yeah. But are

you sure you're okay with this? Losing means becoming my subordinate, you know?"

"I don't mind. I just have to raise the flag of rebellion after all this is over."

"Hey, you're being too honest there. You should at least try to hide that."

"There's no need for that. And we're talking about you, a battle junkie. I'm sure you'd be overjoyed by my rebellion and look forward to the battle, wouldn't you?" Cheruvim replied.

After a moment, Kelvin said, "Well, yeah, I would, maybe?"

"Then I fail to see the problem. This situation is good for both of us, no?"

Kelvin gave it some thought. "You're right about that!"

With that, he'd managed to claim victory. But he couldn't help but feel like he'd been taken advantage of.



"I believe the deal was that the winner could do what they wanted with the loser, right? In other words, I have the ability to order you around not just once, but as much as I want."

Having realized that it would be difficult to keep up the fight, I'd decided to quickly wrap things up. Yeah, there was no choice. I *had* to reluctantly put an end to this...

"We took care of this before we fought. Gods do not go back on their word," stated Cheruvim.

"Sure, but it was only a verbal promise. So here."

"Hm?"

"Stay still for a moment. This takes a little time."

"Hrm..."

I pointed at Cheruvim's heart—and his head as well, just in case—and cast a spell. It wouldn't work if the subject didn't stay still for a while, so it was quite inconvenient.

After a time... "Okay, you're good to go."

"Finally," said Cheruvim. "So what did you do?"

"Ah, I just cast Heart Calm... I guess you wouldn't recognize it from the name. Uh, it's basically a time bomb in your heart and head!"

"Seriously? What are you doing, acting so cheerful?" Cheruvim said accusingly. His retort was well-founded.

"Just like you, I've calmed down now that the battle is over. There's no way I could let someone with such a dangerous ability roam free on just a verbal promise. I could make you my Follower using Summoning like I did with Ridwan, but unfortunately I don't have any more slots, which is why I chose this option."

"I see. So your foolishness does have limits."

"Of course it does. Ah, by the way, the spell makes it so if you try to use your Authority on or otherwise harm anyone besides me, your heart and brain will be sliced to pieces. I'd tell you to be careful, but I know you're good for it."

"It's not good at all... No, wait. Are you exempt from this?" Cheruvim asked.

"Huh? What're you saying? Why wouldn't I be? My head is constantly being hunted by my own friends, even in my sleep. I've been put in a joint lock in bed and almost died before. And every time we drink, I'm betting my life! To tell you the truth, I've nearly died countless times, so having one more person after me won't make much of a difference."

Cheruvim seemed shocked into silence for a moment. "What kind of life do you lead?"

"One with a head fetishist, someone with terrible sleeping habits, and a terrible drunk."

The fallen angel's expression only got more and more puzzled.

Come on, I just told the truth. Isn't this all normal? It's...normal, right?

"Okay, I understand. You are constantly on the battlefield. That makes a lot of sense," said Cheruvim.

That confused me a bit. "I don't really get it, but I am glad that you do. Let's

go back to your Holy Stake and recover your Authority. Honestly, Hard only has a few minutes left on its Authority too. You might have just needed to hang in there a little more."

"Hmph, I told you I will not fall for that. But I didn't know that you knew the Holy Stake had that sort of function. I suppose you got that from Luquille?"

The Ten Authorities were under a lot of restrictions, but the Holy Stakes they rode were able to partially mitigate those limitations. Specifically, they could refill the time limit on their activities and Authorities outside of Isla Heaven. This was just conjecture, but I figured that the Holy Stake could imitate being in Isla Heaven by remaining still for a period of time. Of course, that didn't allow them to spoof the limit on how many people could be active outside of Isla Heaven.

"Something like that. Actually, how would I have been able to refresh Unbreakable if I didn't know that?"

"Heh heh! You're right about that. Seizing my Holy Stake already, huh? Don't worry, I haven't given it the order to return," said Cheruvim.

I looked up to see that he was telling the truth: his Holy Stake was still there. It seemed it wouldn't automatically engage stealth mode and run, despite what had happened to Sera and Serge. According to them, the stakes seriously disappeared at some mysterious point in time. I was a little relieved.

"No, let's meet up with Luquille in her Holy Stake first. I'm sure both of you have things you want to say or find out, right? I'm going to watch what happens with some tea in hand. Ah, of course, if you try to do anything weird to Luquille \_\_"

"The time bomb will go off, right?" Cheruvim answered, cutting me off. "My word, you've got some *taste*."

"I'm the winner, at least in form, after all. Okay, it's about time to go. Oh, but before that, uh..."

I looked Cheruvim over and realized something important. I had my Clotho clone pull something out and thrust it at him.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Wear this first. Yeah..."

He said nothing in reply. Even though we were going to see *Luquille*, she was still a woman. There was no way I could expose her to a stark-naked Cheruvim, so I'd given him some random clothes and underwear.



After Cheruvim got changed, we entered Luquille's Holy Stake. Although I'd visited several times since forming our alliance, it now struck me that this place was much more scientific than magical. Rather, it was futuristic. If I had to liken it to something, it would be like the ark that Jildora had made. Maybe the system of power it drew from was the same? Unfortunately, Serge had killed the person who'd made this. I couldn't help but sympathize with Cheruvim on that point. It was a waste.

"By the way, how many Holy Stakes are there in total?"

"Six," he answered. "Luquille stole one, and there's the one I brought, so there are four remaining in Isla Heaven."

"There are *six* of these huge things? I don't get why you'd let such an awesome inventor out on the front lines..."

"That is why I took action."

While we chatted lightheartedly, we reached the central section of Luquille's Holy Stake. This place is seriously huge, though it's still better than the ark.

"So, you're here, perverts," said Luquille.

"Ah, you really were watching with the Holy Stake's cameras, huh? Hey, wait, why did you include me in that? I'm totally unrelated."

Right from the start, we were showered with abuse. While Cheruvim, who was the one who was actually naked, had no ground to stand on, for some reason I was lumped in with him. Of course, I strenuously objected. After all, I hadn't done anything to earn her ire.

"Indeed. I am no pervert, though I can understand how Kelvin could be considered one since he has nothing but fighting on his mind," said Cheruvim.

"Hey, it's the opposite, isn't it?! If I hadn't pointed it out, you'd have stayed naked!"

"From my perspective, both of you are definitely perverts," said Luquille. "Anyway...let's end this stupid conversation here. Cheruvim Ripita, I have heard the entirety of your conversation with Kelvin. Are you really going to bring Eld down?"

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't have allowed him to apply his strange magic and come all this way, would I? The very fact that I am here should be a huge boon for you people. Or...have you really not noticed?"

Both Luquille and I reacted with audible confusion, tilting our heads to further reinforce that impression.

"Then I will explain," said Cheruvim. "Listen well with open hearts! Ignoring Baldogg, who was killed, as long as we are captured alive, the limitations on our artificial bodies are maintained. There's me, Gloria, and Ridwan, whom Kelvin made into a Follower. This meets the maximum of three people who can operate outside of Isla Heaven. Do you understand now? Indeed, it means the Ten Authorities can no longer leave Isla Heaven!"

According to Cheruvim, as long as he didn't return to Isla Heaven, the other Ten Authorities couldn't leave. Of course, that was conditional on the Ten Authorities member that Sera had captured remaining imprisoned, but...even so, it was certain that they were in a disadvantageous situation. No matter how powerful they were, they would be incarcerated inside Isla Heaven.

"While it's great that we won't take any more damage, I kind of feel disappointed knowing they won't be coming to attack..."

"Hey, why the weird face? Isn't this situation entirely beneficial to all of you?" Cheruvim asked.

"It's because he's a pervert. A severe one," Luquille answered.

I told you I'm not a pervert!

"I understand, so let's think positively. The enemy will no longer attack. Also, with Cheruvim's information, we'll know where Isla Heaven is, despite its location having been wrapped in mystery this whole time. In essence, we're no longer on the defensive. It's finally our turn to attack. Am I right?" I asked.

"That has nothing to do with being positive; it's what I've been saying this

entire time," he replied.

"I knew it, he's a pervert. A huge pervert," said Luquille.

Hah! Hah! Oh Luquille-kun, do you want to fight? I won't snap, but I'm going to start wanting to battle you.

"Actually, you two seem to have really hit it off. Aren't you supposed to be enemies?" I asked.

"Our positions make us enemies, but our goals are the same. Yes, this is all to defeat Eld and allow me to steer the Ten Authorities in the right direction. The position of 'god' will cease to be, and this world will achieve true freedom!" Cheruvim declared.

"That's right. This is all to make the leader of the Ten Authorities, Eld, know the greatness of Melfina and lead this world down the only correct route: restoring Melfina-sama as the Goddess of Reincarnation, allowing us to worship and revere her!" Luquille exclaimed at the same time.

Then, the two turned to each other and, still in unison, said, "What?"

They had finally realized how different their stances were. Right after they stated their opinions simultaneously, sparks started to fly between them. I could feel the nice murderous intent prickling my skin.

"Luquille, didn't you realize Eld was about to betray you? Isn't that why you left the Ten Authorities' side?" Cheruvim asked.

"I should be the one asking you questions. Didn't you resort to betrayal because you realized how wonderful Melfina-sama is?" she responded.

"What kind of idiocy are you spouting? You just claimed you heard our entire conversation, and now I have to wonder if those ears of yours are just for decoration! If this is a joke, I don't mind forgiving you, even if it isn't funny."

"You don't seem like the honest type. Wouldn't anyone assume you were just giving a reasonable excuse to leave the Ten Authorities?" Luquille countered. "Or, what, were you actually serious? Did your brain rot inside your head? Or has it become boiled mush?"

Ah, the murderous intent is turning serious. I should stop them soon or the

Holy Stake will be in danger.

"Yeah, uh, wait a second. I'll call Mel over so we can sort this out, since she's heavily involved," I interjected.

"Huh?" Luquille responded.

::Huh?:: Mel reacted through the Network.

Coincidentally, Luquille's voice overlapped with Mel's message. It seemed neither side had expected that. And so...there: Summon.

"Honey...why am I here?" asked Mel.

"Because you need to be. Also, you can't avoid Luquille forever, you know?"

Mel had been Summoned with a *very* overfilled bowl of rice in her hands. She had several grains stuck to her cheek as well. Clearly, she was in the middle of a meal. Actually, it was rarer for her not to be having a meal, so it probably shouldn't have been a surprise. This was par for the course.

"Fwaaaagghhhh! It's M-M-Melfina-sama?! No way, you can't just suddenly appear! My heart isn't readyyyyyy!" Luquille shouted.

Both Cheruvim and I reacted with noises of surprise. Just as I was realizing this was Mel's normal state, Luquille had given a loud scream and dashed off at full speed to hide.

*Uh...huh?* For some reason, she was acting crazier than usual. I mean, I knew she was the negative type of zealot, but was she really the type to act like this? I remembered her being able to talk to Melfina normally...

"Uh...Luquille? Er, what's wrong? Weren't you the type to be more aggressive toward Mel?"

"I-It's all resolve and mental preparation! Before, I had time to resolve myself and mentally prepare with detailed and thorough image training, which was why I was able to move things forward so well! In fact, Kelvin, you're being way too irreverent, Summoning Melfina out of nowhere! I'll kill you, you know?! I'll make you understand how big a crime this is!" Luquille screamed.

"Honey...given how Luquille is acting, can I just go home already?" Mel asked. "As you can see, I'm still eating. Please put me back. Right now. Hurry."



"Wait, don't try to run. Hey, are you really going to leave me here alone after someone just leveled a death threat against me? She's a nasty one, but she's still one of your believers. If you're really a goddess you should help me deal with them."

"In your case, that threat would only make you happy," Mel insisted. "Also, that's *former* goddess. I'm not one anymore."

Oh no, she's being affected by this mood and seriously wants to go home. And you know, even I have the right to choose my partners. While I'd normally be happy, there's something off about Luquille, or...how should I put it?

"My word, is everyone here a pervert? How deplorable and distressing," said Cheruvim.

"You're one to talk!" I cried.



"So, what did you want to discuss? I'm busy, so please make it quick," said Luquille.

We'd taken a break and Luquille had regained her calm, allowing her to throw that dissatisfied line my way. It seemed she'd completed her so-called resolve and mental preparation regimen.

"I just wanted to get all our goals organized and out in the open. Just to confirm: you want to have Mel—I mean, Melfina—returned to being the Goddess of Reincarnation. In order to do that, you used the bodies of the angel leaders as artificial bodies for the Ten Authorities so you could gain their consent. In short, you need to show them your strength. Am I correct?"

"You've missed the most important part," replied Luquille. "On top of that, I need to make all the Ten Authorities realize how wonderful Melfina-sama is. Missionary work requires a good foundation, after all. If I'm able to convert the Ten Authorities, who have committed sins in the past, faith in Melfina-sama would climb astronomically—"

"Okay, I get it! I get it already, so please stop. Anyway, Cheruvim wants to defeat and depose the Ten Authorities' leader, Eld, so he can return the group

to their proper state. Then, he'll free the world according to the teachings of the wicked god. Uh...and he'll defeat all the gods, turning all the other worlds into uncontrolled lands, am I right?"

"Indeed," confirmed Cheruvim. "Well, now defeating Kelvin has been added to that. Still, the first priority is eliminating Eld. On that point, I don't object."

"Wait. I cannot approve of diminishing the numbers of the Ten Authorities further. While Melfina-sama can be restored as the Goddess of Reincarnation with a simple majority rule by the leaders, doing so would lessen the number of her believers afterward," argued Luquille. "It will impede the missionary work of all of you as leaders of the true Rinne faith."

"I already said I have no intention of becoming the Goddess again," said Mel. "I managed to happily retire, so now I'm going to concentrate on the all-important task of raising children! Nom nom!"

"Heh! So says your goddess," mocked Cheruvim. "It seems your goal has been doomed from the start!"

"No, this is not a problem," said Luquille. "After all, I plan to make Melfinasama understand along with the Ten Authorities! A true believer must be able to fight through the pain in their heart to correct the object of their worship!"

I had no words in response. Instead, I truly felt that I wanted to hurry up and battle her to finish this.



Starting a battle right here and now was appealing, but doing so would limit our options in the future. We finally managed to bag two Holy Stakes, so we couldn't allow Luquille and Cheruvim to clash before we started our final fight against the Ten Authorities. In fact, I was planning to devour both of them when the time was right, so I'd prefer if they didn't exhaust themselves needlessly.

"Okay, okay, will you two just let it go? Now's not the time to exhaust ourselves; you two are smart enough to get that, right?"

"Of course I am. And why are you speaking like you're better than us? Learn some shame," Luquille said caustically.

"Your comment was constructive, but this woman's ideals are too dangerous," said Cheruvim. "I would not put it past her to betray us as soon as we achieve our noble goal. It would be better to deal with her right now."

"You guys...why are you being so belligerent? Luquille, if you're going to say that, then you should show a good example as a model believer. And Cheruvim, even if you think that, as you are right now, you won't be able to start anything with anyone other than me."

"Grrr..." Both of them grumbled in unison. But they seemed to reluctantly accept my advice and backed down.

Jeez, these helpers are such a handful.

::That was some impressive mediation, honey. As your legal wife, I'm surprised,:: Mel told me.

Well, I spent so much time training the utter typhoon that is my disciples with all their...unique...personalities. I must've learned something, I replied telepathically.

Luquille and Cheruvim had insane, destructive ideals, but even so, they could be reasoned with. After all, they weren't actually making a move even though they were fine with verbally sparring. So all I had to do was lead them in a more convenient direction. I would take us down the path of a more fun series of events. Slowly, carefully, and surely.

"Let's wrap things up. Dealing with the leader of the Ten Authorities aside, we all agree on leaving the rest of the Ten Authorities alive, right?"

"Yes. They are a precious source of votes, as well as candidates to lead the true Rinne faith," answered Luquille.

"The others are just following our incompetent leader, Eld. There will be no problem as long as I become the head," answered Cheruvim.

"Then we're all in agreement. While we may fight with the Ten Authorities outside of Eld, we will not take their lives! However, this only goes as long as we can afford it. If we end up in trouble or without the leeway to care about such things, please accept that there may be no other choice."

"Well, that makes sense," Luquille agreed.

"Indeed. We all have some sort of Authority. I'm sure none of the fights will be easy," said Cheruvim.

Good. For now, they're in agreement.

"Then let's move on to Eld. I think we can decide what to do with him after we defeat him. It's possible that one of you may be knocked out and in no position to argue with the other like you're doing now. At that time, we'll decide with whoever's available. Or it's possible that a lucky lone survivor will take all the good parts. What do you think of that arrangement? Even though it's only temporary, it's much better than arguing among allies before the final fight, isn't it?"

"So you're willingly pushing the problems down the road? While I may need to entrust my back to you all, it seems I can't let my guard down," said Luquille.

"I don't mind. I don't believe she can defeat my comrades anyway," said Cheruvim.

"Whose side are you even on? Are you sure your brain is working properly?" Luquille asked incredulously.

"I am and have always been on the side of Addams," said Cheruvim.

"Okay, okay, stop this now. Jeez, you two'll argue any chance you get. You should learn from me and how rational I am."

The pair turned and silently fixed me with similarly incredulous stares.

Well now, it seems you two can agree with each other. You're both giving me that "What the heck is this guy talking about?" look. It's so harmonious! I'm a rational man, so I'll refrain from picking a fight today. But I definitely will later, mark my words!

"Now that we've established our goal, let's strengthen our plans. Cheruvim, there's something I want to ask you—"

"You want to know the abilities of the remaining Ten Authorities?" Cheruvim asked, cutting me off.

"About the abilities of the remaining Ten Authorities?" Luquille interrupted at

the same time.

I had to take a moment to collect myself after being so thoroughly cut off. "You two sure are quick on the uptake."

"We're about to go on the offense, so it's natural to assume you'd want information," said Cheruvim. "That makes the guess very easy. Also, I don't believe Luquille is very knowledgeable on the subject of our Authorities."

"Ah, you're right. The information she gave wasn't great..."

"Heh! Thought so," Cheruvim said smugly. "Maybe you should have gathered a little more information before leaving, hm?"

"It was the best time to leave with a Holy Stake," Luquille defended herself.

"It wouldn't have taken you people much longer to discover the limitations I put on your artificial bodies. It was obvious that staying any longer would have been futile."

Cheruvim was gloating while Luquille put on an unconcerned air. Most likely, she was engaging in an information war in areas I couldn't perceive. Still, I wasn't interested, so I decided to ignore that and move on.

"So, will you tell us about your comrades' Authorities?"

"Sure, I don't mind," said Cheruvim. "I have lost to you, so I don't have the right to refuse anyway. As for Luquille, well...it would be best if she were dead after everything is over, but I am fine with granting her this small mercy."

"That's very confident of you despite the fact that your side has already racked up four losses, you included," scoffed Luquille. "But your overconfidence is convenient for me, so I will accept what you say."

Cheruvim and I were speechless.

"Whew, I'm hungry..." muttered Mel.

Let's leave out the rest of Luquille and Cheruvim's argument. And let's feed Melfina some jerky while we're at it.

"Currently, I believe the one you must be most wary of is Rem, who has the Control Authority, which allows her to threaten the outside world even while remaining in Isla Heaven. Once the other Ten Authorities realize they can no

longer leave Isla Heaven, it's quite possible she will start using her powers," Cheruvim explained.

"Yeah. If I remember right, she can control targets like dolls?" Mel chimed in. In that sense, Rem was a lot like our Shutola.

"According to Luquille, the number she can control and the range of her ability is unknown. Do you have any details in that regard?" I asked.

"For numbers, several tens of thousands or more. Her range is at least everything within eyesight," answered Cheruvim.

"Uh...what?" both Luquille and I responded simultaneously.

"Nom nom! (The saltiness of this is perfect!)" Melfina commented through a full mouth.

The answer was far beyond our expectations, which made Luquille and I sync up. Melfina spoke up at the same time, but she was likely talking about something completely different, so I ignored her.

"Why are you so surprised? This is assuming she hasn't manifested her Authority. If she has, those Rem controls would be able to use their abilities in full. Also, her range would be... Well, she'd still be limited by her artificial body, but I believe she'd at least be able to put an entire continent under her control," said Cheruvim.

"Oh come on, that's way too big; the scale is absurd! Are you sure Rem isn't stronger than you?"

"Exactly! Are you sure you're not just a subleader in name only?!" Luquille shouted.

"Heh! So you can raise your voice," scoffed Cheruvim. "Certainly, in certain aspects, I don't match up well with Rem. If she were to use something with no soul in it—like a suit of armor, for example—that puppet would be able to evade my Lethality. But even if she gathers ten thousand suits of armor, they're just empty suits in the end. Rem herself has combat strength on par with Baldogg, which is the worst class among the Ten Authorities. In essence, all you have to do is ignore the rabble and prioritize finishing her off."

"That works in theory, but in reality, things won't be so simple," Luquille argued. "For example, what if Baldogg left behind a lot of equipment and Rem took control of it? The difference between ten thousand suits of regular armor and ten thousand suits of armor from the divine age of myths is like heaven and earth!"

"Exactly. Even though Cheruvim, who's a rank above me, is saying that, it's far too haphazard..."

"Yeah, I think so too— Huh?"

The voice I'd reflexively responded to was unfamiliar and youthful...and it had come from one of the Holy Stake's monitors.



Aside from a jerky-enamored Mel, we all turned to look at the monitor at the same time. There, a young, blonde girl with twintails was depicted.

I'd say she's about Shutola's age?

Of course, the fact that she was able to hijack the monitor to communicate with us said that she was older than she seemed.

"Tch! Rem," muttered Cheruvim.

"Rem? You mean the one we were just talking about?"

"Indeed. The woman who was a confidente of Addams and holds the alias of Goddess of Control. Don't be deceived by her looks and spineless personality; her powers are as I just told you and she shouldn't be underestimated. Yes, only her powers! They aren't to be underestimated!" Cheruvim repeated with a shout.

Is that supposed to be a charitable introduction? Is that him trying to read the room?

"Urgk... What he's saying is true... I can't deny it, but...hic..." came Rem's voice through the monitor.

Whoa, she just started crying!

"Come on, Cheruvim, that introduction is—"

"The worst. For you to be like this on top of being a pervert, I have no words," said Luquille.

"Why?!" Cheruvim cried out. "I just explained Rem's strengths and weaknesses in the most simplistic way possible!"

"That may be, but you've got to have, like, more tact."

"What purpose would something like that even serve in a situation like this?" Cheruvim asked.

Hm, it seems like it's useless to keep trying to reason with him.

Luquille sighed. "Let's just leave that insensitive fallen angel alone for now. So, what have you come here for? I don't believe there's any reason for you to show yourself like this if you just wanted to eavesdrop."

"Sniff, sniff... I came to warn you...about everything," answered Rem.

Being delivered a warning by someone who's crying is new. No, wait, I need to make sure not to say that or it'll look like I'm attacking her too.

"Giving a warning while crying is a new feat, Rem!" Cheruvim exclaimed.

"Higrk?!" Rem half hiccuped, half cried in response.

"Hey, Cheruvim...why don't you just be quiet for now, okay?"

"Hm? Why?"

"You're slowing this conversation down, and I just can't bear to watch. Please don't force me to talk about my conscience, jeez."

"Uh, hm?" Cheruvim seemed confused.

We finally managed to make Cheruvim back off from the monitor.

"Uhhh, so, what was it? Ah, right. You wanted to warn us. About what?"

"Oh, first, Eld has a message for you...about Cheruvim..." Rem began.

"About me?" Cheruvim asked.

Agh, and we just managed to get him to back off...

"He already predicted that Cheruvim would secede..." Rem explained. "He knew that Cheruvim would use the quirk of our artificial bodies to aim for the

position of head of the Ten Authorities. But we aren't particularly bothered. In fact, we think it's good that a source of discord has disappeared."

"Oh?" Cheruvim let out.

Ah, he's angry. He's totally angry; he's got veins popping up everywhere, this fallen angel.

"Hey, what do you mean you aren't particularly bothered? Even if you knew Cheruvim would rebel, that doesn't solve the limitations on your artificial bodies, does it? You should still be stuck on Isla Heaven. Or are you planning to use your Authority to invade? I'd welcome that too, by the—"

"Or we can just crash Isla Heaven into the ground," Rem interjected.

"Huh?" What did she just say?

"Isla Heaven is an aerial fortress the size of a continent. If it were to crash into the ground, the damage would be immeasurable. There would be no need for us to do anything," she continued.

"And you're saying that you would do something as stupid as sacrificing your base, the lifeline for your artificial bodies?"

"Eep!" Rem squeaked in response. "Uh...erm... I, of course, this is just an option for us. That's all it is... Urgk..."

"Uh...sorry."

Rem was in clear dismay, and I couldn't help but apologize. For some reason, it's really hard for me to deal with this girl. It just feels like I'm in the wrong no matter what I do.

"Um, also, Eld said this... Kelvin, who only has thoughts of fighting in his head, will definitely come to attack us in Isla Heaven soon. All we have to do is wait calmly as the superior beings. Our time is limited, but he says we'll wait for a reasonable period. He also says that you can have that loser there guide you..." Rem managed through frequent pauses and in spite of often trailing off.

"Huh."

"Oh?" Cheruvim gasped.

"Hm," said Luquille.

"Hey, that's weird! My jerky! It disappeared?" Mel cried.

Cheruvim, Luquille, and I each let out our own short reactions as the air was rapidly filled with a sense of tension, dropping the temperature all at once. Someone else present was doing something completely different, but the mood was definitely tense. It was.

"Is that really a warning and not an invitation?"

"I-It's both... Eld said you should understand that coming to us is an act of self-sacrifice, offering your souls to us," she answered.

The three of us who were actually paying attention fixed her with silent looks.

"Urgk...the way you're staring at me is scary..."

Okay, so it isn't an invitation at all. It's a letter of challenge or an invitation to a duel. Usually these sorts of obvious taunts are to be avoided. No matter how enticing they are, I shouldn't accept.

"Right, I understand what you're saying. So how long do we have? We'll prepare as much as we can before assaulting you, so I'd like to clarify that. Come on, don't hold back on me now, just tell me. Come on! Tell me! You gotta!"

"He *is* right." Luquille stepped in. "We must prepare properly to lead the Ten Authorities, who have been brought astray by the wicked god, back to the right and holy path. Hee hee! There's so much to do, isn't there? Don't worry, no need to fret. We won't do anything scary, you'll only become happier and happier."

"Rem, tell Eld to prepare his final words," said Cheruvim. "And depending on how things go, you'll need to do so too!"

Rem squealed. No matter what the enemy's plans were, regardless of whether the invitation was a trap, all we had to do was be prepared to smash through everything when we attacked. Luckily, it seemed my two allies were thinking the same thing. It was looking like we'd be able to get along until we beat Eld.

"Eld said that the time limit would be one month. Past that, we will once again go on the attack," said Rem.

"I see. One month, huh? Okay, I won't confirm that as the date, but I'll keep it in mind as a reference. Wait for us."

Rem groaned, and the monitor turned off with a snap as the connection was broken.

Rem was crying all the way to the end, wasn't she? Why was she the messenger?

"Hey...since they were able to hijack our communications, does that mean they have a way to control these Holy Stakes remotely?"

"That would be impossible. Holy Stakes can only be controlled from the inside. If you configure the autopilot, it's possible to have them automatically return to Isla Heaven, but that's something the pilot has to set up beforehand from inside. Baldogg set his to return, but as you can see, neither this one nor mine have done so," answered Cheruvim.

"It's one of the functions I thought up to try to find Isla Heaven," Luquille said. "If we use it, we'll be able to easily find the enemy base. However, it would mean trouble if they intercepted our communications. Cheruvim, can you turn the communication functions off?"

"Of course I can. I will make a special exception and do so myself. You should thank me," said Cheruvim.

"Just for today, I will. It's not like I know everything about these Holy Stakes, after all."

"Let's continue to be wary of Rem's Authority. I'd like to avoid allowing her to sneak onto our Holy Stakes and take control of them without us knowing. Oh, would it be all right for me to have Shutola and Colette investigate these Holy Stakes? There might be other hidden functions."

"I shall give you my permission," said Cheruvim.

It was like all our discord before Rem's message had been a lie. All of a sudden, we were cooperating smoothly. Our enemy was formidable, after all.



The goal of the Ten Authorities was obvious: the revival of the wicked god Addams. So what did they have to do to accomplish that? In the first place, where was this wicked god? The Evil Deity's Heart, which the Apostles had made their base, had nothing of the sort in it. But when Cheruvim was asked about it, he answered without hesitation.

"Addams is imprisoned in the world—the planet—itself."

"No, I get that. What I'm asking is where in this world specifically."

"Heh, and I told you. He is at the center of this world. In other words, he is deep inside it. Let's see, I suppose you'd find it easier to understand if I said he was in the planet's core?" Cheruvim answered.

"What? The core? You mean...deeper than the mantle, literally at the center of the planet?"

"What else could I mean? That's why we said that this planet was his prison."

"So you meant that literally... I thought it was more of, like, a magical barrier type of affair."

"Of course it is. He is inside a magical seal," Cheruvim explained.

"Really?"

"His heart was removed, and the core's heat is being used to deal constant damage to Addams so he doesn't regain his power. But I'm sure those false gods didn't think that would be enough. A large-scale spell was placed in the core to absorb his power as well, turning that power into nutrients for the planet. Of course, because Addams is so strong, I'm sure the power has had some negative effects."

Hm... Ah, I see. The negative effects come in the form of Demon Lords. I imagine it's like his bad nutrients pile up until it results in the birth of powerful and vicious monsters or Demon Lords, which have to be beaten by Heroes to be dispersed. And the Black Grimoire also does the same thing. No...wait, doesn't that mean if the wicked god gets revived, it'll end the cycle of Demon Lords?

"That's a good thing, but also kind of disappointing..."

"Heh! So you think that the revival of Addams is a good thing, but at the same time you're lamenting the resulting decrease in naturally occurring powerful enemies. That's so like you, Kelvin," said Cheruvim.

"Wait, how do you know so much just from that conversation? It's creepy how much you two understand each other. Yes, I'm definitely a little creeped out by you," Luquille said, directing a scathing look at us.

Heh! I want to tell her that she's one to talk.

"I know where Addams is now, but if he's sealed in such a place, it's impossible to free him, right? I mean, the moment his seal is undone, won't that put the entire planet in danger? We'd be extracting him from the center of the planet, wouldn't we?" I was imagining a terrible disaster happening the moment we managed to pull the wicked god back up to the surface.

"Do you really think we haven't considered that? During the great war, the late Baldogg created these six Holy Stakes. What do you think their true purpose is, Kelvin?" asked Cheruvim.

"Their true purpose? Isn't it something like being a large transport or acting like a mobile aerial fortress? I mean, it looks like you were going to use it to capture the Divine Pillars too."

"You're right, that is one of its functions. However, even though they underwent trial runs, these Holy Stakes never took part in the great war. Their existence had been kept as secret as possible from the false gods."

"What do you mean by that?"

"From the way this is going, it sounds like the Holy Stakes were built to go into action if anything were to happen to Addams. They're like a lifeboat, aren't they?" Luquille ventured.

"Oh? You may be insane, but it seems like your head still works, Luquille," Cheruvim replied.

According to him, the Holy Stakes' true purpose was, as their name implied, to pierce the ground. Six souls sealed within the Holy Stakes would punch into the surface of this world in places that were particularly filled with enemies. At least, in theory, though I had no idea of the details.

"The biggest problem is the souls we have to gather for the revival of Addams. These Holy Stakes need to be used in the same formation as the one praying within the seal. This needs to be of excellent quality. No matter how many inferior souls are gathered, they won't reach us."

"I see, so right now your current offered souls are that Bald-whatever guy and Hard. Which means...the cutoff line is around level 200?"

"Roughly, yes," he confirmed. "In order to cover all our bases, we've been prioritizing those over level 200."

Over level 200, huh? You might scour the entire world and not find people that strong. Even among Rank S adventurers, there's only me, Prettia-chan, Director Shin, and Art. Then there're my party members and the former Apostles starting with Serge. Then I guess my father-in-law rounds out those that fit, since he's been training hard every day for the sake of his beloved daughters and future grandchildren. Yeah, there aren't many of us. I feel a little sorry for that Baldwhatever guy who ended up going after Serge and dying. He should have come after me instead.

"Hm? You were hunting the Divine Pillars too, though. Was that also to use them as sacrifices?"

"Indeed. Unfortunately, there were too few people who fit our criteria. So we hit upon the idea of lowering the number of Divine Pillars to strengthen the remaining ones. After all, according to Isabel's and Baldogg's analyses, they have the property of getting stronger the fewer there are," answered Cheruvim.

"But you were betrayed by Luquille and failed at that too."

Cheruvim paused for a moment. "Well, yes, that is true."

"Hah! Well, I think you at least had a good idea, given that you looked at the Divine Pillars. But just watch. The Divine Pillars will exceed all your Ten Authorities' expectations," said Luquille. She seemed confident.

Ah, that reminds me, the remaining Divine Pillars have all been captured, haven't they? I thought it was weirdly fast, but I heard Serge was helping behind the scenes.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hey, Serge..."

"You rang?" a voice responded.

"Whoa!" Cheruvim and I reacted in unison. The voice had shouted loudly right next to our ears.

"Are you really grown men? You were way too surprised!" she exclaimed.

"Serge!"

"This is Serge?" Cheruvim asked incredulously.

So she's been hiding in the Holy Stake this whole time.

I gave her a glare, but Serge just smiled like a brat who'd succeeded at a prank. She even had a piece of jerky in her mouth. Wait, what? Jerky?

"Ahhh! That's the big piece I was saving for last! So you're the one who stole it, Serge Flore!" Mel yelled.

"Huh? I thought you got caught up in the jerky and ate it all, Mel."

"How rude! I'm the type to slowly savor everything right up to the end! I would never finish things without even noticing! Never!" Mel replied indignantly.

Um, really?

"Oh man, I was listening to Sylvia-chan talk about delicious jerky, so I ended up wanting to try some. I couldn't help but take a little. Whoopsie Daisy!" Serge said.

"How could you?! Even if you're a Hero, stealing is unforgivable! Grudges over food are serious!" Mel shouted.

"I said I'm sorry!" Serge replied teasingly. "I'll bring over some of Ellen's herring pie, so please forgive me?"

"Okay! I forgive you!" Mel declared.

My wife and the strongest Hero sealed the deal with a firm handshake. But the reason behind said shake was so trifling... Well, yeah.

"This is the goddess you worship, Luquille. You can see that, right?" asked Cheruvim. "Are you sure it's worth it?"

"Heh! A foolish question," Luquille replied. "It will be worth making you understand!"

Good...they've deepened their bonds of alliance further!



"Whoa...what is with this lineup?" Dorothy muttered.

"Huh, this has gotten pretty interesting!" Sera said.

"Wow, Flo-chan's here!" Rion exclaimed.

"Hey ho, Rion! You're cute today too! Wanna have some tea with me?" Serge asked.

A few hours had passed since the ruckus Serge had caused by stealing food. Sera, Rion, and Dorothy had now joined us in the Holy Stake. Dorothy was in her uniform and wielding a staff; it felt like she'd been brought here in whatever she happened to be wearing at the time. Meanwhile, Sera was carrying a girl who was cocooned in chains, looking like she'd just perpetrated a kidnapping.

"So you really did lose, Gloria," said Cheruvim.

"Don't worry, she's definitely alive!" Sera announced. "As you can see, I'm very skilled!"

"Uh, okay?"

Cheruvim's words confirmed who was inside the cocoon. I'd already figured it was her, though. While she wasn't answering right now since she was unconscious, I'd heard she'd attacked Lumiest. According to Sera, her ability had to do with manipulating distance.

Oh man, powerful people keep popping up one after the other. It's tough for me to have to screen my opponents. I guess this is a happy sort of pain?

"Oh, wait, where's Bell? I heard you'd be coming together. Is she still in Lumiest?"

"Erm...she said she'd return to Grelbarelka first to talk to our father. I mean, didn't you say that the Ten Authorities might go after him, Kel-nii?" Rion answered.

"Oh, right."

I'd disseminated the information I'd gotten from Cheruvim over the Follower Network. This information had been checked and confirmed by Sera using Blood Dominion on her prisoner. In the end, we'd found that Cheruvim hadn't lied. That girl...er, I think her name was Gloria? She'd ended up saying the same things.

Anyway, all this information had gotten to Bell since she had a Clotho clone as well. That was surely why she'd suddenly changed her plans, returning home with a warning instead.

Jeez, no matter what she says, she really does love her family.

"Hey, hey, is that cute girl with the chestnut hair the Divine Pillar Dorothychan?" Serge asked. "Mmm!"

"Uh, um...what?" Dorothy asked, confused.

Serge was circling around her like a satellite, staring intently like she was licking her all over. If she were a man, it would have been a dangerous action that would instantly have struck her out, but Serge seemed utterly serious.

"Brilliant!" she concluded. "So this is what they mean by a diamond in the rough! She'll definitely be worth polishing!"

"Oh, uh...thanks?" Dorothy replied, still confused.

"Leave Dorothy alone for the moment, Serge. You're totally acting like a suspicious person. Look, she's so confused."

"What?! That's such a rude thing to say to a pretty girl like me!" Serge protested.

"No matter how pretty you are, there's a standard of ethics you need to uphold. Come on, back off."

"Awww..." Serge sulked but reluctantly withdrew, sitting on some of the Holy Stakes instruments.

It's great that you're strong, but I wish you'd learn some common sense.

"Ahem! Welcome, Dorothiara. As promised, you will be joining with the other

Divine Pillars," said Luquille.

Cheruvim made a confused noise. "What is she talking about?"

"Oh, I'll explain it to you later, so just stay quiet for now."

"Mrrggh..."

Now it was Cheruvim's turn to take a warning. I might have just been imagining it, but I was feeling very busy.

"Right now, this Holy Stake is playing host to Divine Bird Wyldgroh, whom I captured, and Divine Spirit Deatotal and Divine Whale Zeval, captured by Serge over there," said Luquille.

"I caught them, yep!" Serge confirmed. "They're still alive, of course, so no need to worry!"

"Both you and that Hero are ridiculously strong, I see, to be able to so easily capture the Divine Pillars alive when there are only four of us now," said Dorothy.

"Thank you for the compliment," Luquille replied. "But let's hurry up. Once you finish any mental preparations you might need, we will immediately start the ritual. Are you okay with that?"

"I'd like to talk to the other Divine Pillars, if only for a little while," Dorothy requested.

"You want to talk?" Luquille asked. "Unlike you, the others are in a berserk state. I'm fairly certain they're in no condition to do any such thing."

"I'm sure you're right, but even if I can't talk to them, we should still be able to understand each other!" Dorothy asserted. To her, the Divine Pillars were both brethren and family. Her apparent desperation spoke of how much she wanted to meet them.

"Did you hear that, Luquille? The other Divine Pillars are restrained, aren't they? Despite them having gone berserk, I'm sure they won't cause any problems." Mel uttered that goddess-like line while scarfing down herring pie that had been stored inside Clotho.

"Well, if you say so, Melfina-sama," Luquille relented.

And so Dorothy came face-to-face with the other Divine Pillars.



"Sorry to keep you waiting. We can start the ritual now," said Dorothy.

Some time later, Dorothy returned with Rion, who'd followed her. It was only a feeling, but I felt like she'd shaken something off.

"Well then, let us start. This place is a little too cramped, so let's do the ritual outside," Luquille suggested.

"Understood. Let's go."

"Oh, there's no need for us to move. I'll be moving the room itself," Luquille clarified. She started to do something on a control panel.

I looked on curiously. Suddenly, something made a huge clanking noise. "Hey, is the room moving?"

"Wow, it's like we're in a huge elevator!" Rion exclaimed.

She was right. The room was moving upward like an elevator. Director Shin had an elevator at the guild headquarters since it was to her taste, but the scale of this one was totally different.

"Not just 'like,' we actually are moving up," Luquille replied. "We are going to the uppermost part of the Holy Stake— Ah, we're already there."

Our surroundings were instantly dyed blue. We'd reached an outdoor space where the sky was above us while the ocean was below, and it felt like we could see infinitely out into the distance. Given the shape of the Holy Stake, we must have been at the very top. The three Divine Pillars seemed to have been moved along with us, as they were suddenly nearby. They'd been struggling against their bonds ever since being captured, but now they were acting strangely calm.

"Please stand in the middle of those Divine Pillars, Dorothiara," Luquille requested. "Also, empty your heart as much as possible. This is a holy ritual to rebirth you as a deity, so you should strive to be as undistracted as possible."

"I know," Dorothy replied before turning to Rion. "Don't look so worried, Rion-san. Even if I fuse with the other Divine Pillars, I'll still be me." "Yeah! Do your best, Thee-chan!" Rion cheered.

Dorothy was already facing away, walking toward the center of the Divine Pillars as she heard that. And finally, the ritual to fuse them began. Luquille chanted in a strange language while Dorothy and the others stood still, their eyes closed. Clouds covered the sun, darkening our surroundings. I had no idea where they'd come from, but these were rain clouds gathering—and the blue sky was now gone, replaced by the first stirrings of a storm.

"This is getting bigger than I expected."

"What a coincidence, Kelvin. I was thinking the same thing," said Sera.

"Huh, would a single ritual really change this much?" Rion asked.

We were watching a ritual to birth a new, true deity. The moment lightning struck from above us, my interest was piqued as much as when I had faced off against DarkMel.



Just as lightning struck, Wyldgroh, Deatotal, and Zeval disappeared. Since it happened in just an instant, it seemed like they had simply ceased to exist. But that was disproven in the next instant when a peal of thunder resounded. The three Divine Pillars hadn't disappeared; they'd been absorbed into Dorothy, who was standing at the center.

"Thee-chan?" Rion ventured.

Dorothy was silent, having absorbed the other Divine Pillars, becoming whole. She looked exactly the same as before, with her uniform still intact. However, the aura surrounding her was totally different. She had an almost violent amount of sacredness to her, like the holiness you feel when inside a sanctuary or cathedral concentrated into the shape of a person.

So is she supposed to be holy ground personified or something?

At any rate, I didn't feel like I was looking at a person. Among all the gods I'd met until now, she was the most godly.

"I see, so this is our true power," Dorothy finally said.

"How strong you actually are is still up in the air, though. Either way, the ritual

is done," said Luquille. "I believe we succeeded, but do you feel anything amiss, Dorothiara?"

"No, not at all. It's like I've just awoken from a long slumber. My head is feeling strangely clear," Dorothy answered. "I actually feel much better, like I've shaken off all my doldrums. Also...I can feel my brethren inside me. It's warm and feels very nice."

"I see. Whether it be the power of your bonds or a desire for revenge that moves you, as long as it moves you in a positive direction, I welcome it," Luquille said before turning to me. "We have so many powerful people gathered. This is a rare chance. Would someone like to test Dorothiara's power?"

I let out a noise of shock and alarm. How could this be? What a wonderful, wonderful idea! A perfectly reasonable and fair excuse to fight a god-level Dorothy, still untouched and completely unknown to all?!

Heh hah hah! So she wants me to check her strength? Well, there's no way I can refuse. If I declined, I'd be a failure as a lover of battles!

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"I'II—"

"Haaah! I'll do it!"

"Grk?!"

"Kel-nii?!" Rion shouted.
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Serge had elbowed me from a blind angle, easily blowing me away.

"Waaaargh!"

"Kel-nii, are you okay?!" Rion asked.

Pain ran through my face. It ran circles. I was in so much pain I was writhing on the ground. There were stars in my eyes.

I mean, seriously?! She aimed for my jaw! I just barely managed to shift where she hit, but she was totally trying to knock me out!

"Sorry, Kelvin, but I have first dibs. Leave Dorothy-chan to me, and go take care of what you have to do. Come on, we're pressed for time, aren't we?"

Serge suggested.

"Yooouuu!" I stood up, still cradling my face, glaring at her. But she just whistled, showing off how uncaring she was.

"To be fair, she's not lying about there being a promise," said Luquille.

"What? Really?"

"I have nothing to gain by lying in this situation," said Luquille. "Dorothiara: Serge Flore, history's strongest Hero, is offering to cross blades with you. Do you accept?"

"Yes, she will probably be fine. I see no problems," replied Dorothy.

"Ooh, you sure can talk! I think I might go all out from the start, then?" Serge taunted.

"Hey, it's not decided yet wh—"

"Kelviiin, since you failed to step into the ring, why don't we just leave already? Serge is going to take over as their watchman, right? I don't like being cooped up in this place!" Sera complained.

"I agree. Now that the herring pie is gone, there is no food left to hope for here. Let's return right away and fill ourselves up for the final fight," Mel suggested.

I was quickly betrayed by my friends. Poor, pitiful me! But in a sense, it was the response I expected, as trustworthy and relieving as ever.

Gah! But next time... Next time for sure!

"Um...what should I do?" Rion asked. "If Thee-chan is staying here, I kind of want to stay too...what about you, Kel-nii?"

"Urgh, your kindness seeps right into my heart, Rion. Wait, that's not it. Now that I can't stop Dorothy from fighting Serge or take her place, I'm going to return."

"Huh? You're really going to leave? Without even watching my fight with Dorothy-chan?" Serge asked.

The very person who'd just told me to leave was totally contradicting herself.

Heh hah hah, if you're going to go through the trouble of looking disappointed on the outside, then let me be the one to fight her.

"The idea of observing is a little tempting, but it's pretty low priority in my book. If Rion's going to stay, she can share the contents of the battle anyway."

"Ah, is that so?" Serge said.

It is so. Well, there's also the fact that if I don't go, I'll end up making Mel and Sera unhappy.

"Okay, Kel-nii!" exclaimed Rion. "I'll do my best to give a good report!"

"Sure thing, I'll be counting on you! Oh, right. You're coming with us, Cheruvim. Get ready."

"Hm? Why?" Cheruvim asked.

"Why? You brought us another Holy Stake. We need a driver, don't we?"

"You're really planning to use me as a chauffeur?!" Cheruvim shouted.

"Sorry, but none of us are qualified. Also, even though we're allies, you're technically under my supervision. Not to mention, your cooperation is necessary to bring her to our side."

I nodded at the girl Sera was carrying—Gloria.

"I see. You may be right about that," admitted Cheruvim. "Very well, I will personally convince Gloria and bring her to our side! You can rest easy!"

"Yeah, I'll pray that I can from the bottom of my heart. Please pilot the Holy Stake safely, at the very least."

Well, no matter whose side she took, I'd already cast Heart Calm on Gloria, so it would probably be fine. I was reaching my limit on how many ongoing spells I could maintain, but I figured she would be aiming for my life forever once I told her that she needed to defeat me if she wanted the spell undone, just like I'd told Cheruvim.

Still, her Authority is Gap, which allows her to manipulate distance, huh? My Parallel Processing is running overtime trying to figure out how to beat her. It looks like I won't be able to sleep peacefully for a while.



"Okay then, Dorothy-chan, now that all those bothersome men are gone, let's enjoy our little rendezvous alone!" Serge suggested. "I'm super strong when I'm surrounded by girls, you know? After all, my motivation levels are totally different! Leagues different!"

"You look like you're having a lot of fun, huh? Also, I feel like I can see some rather reprehensible emotions peeking out, but...well, your proposal is still a good one, so I will take advantage of it," replied Dorothy.

"Hee hee! I'm so happy, being used by such a cute girl! Huh? You're still here, Kelvin? No matter how much you twiddle your thumbs and stare at me, this happiness is mine and mine alone."

Yeah...I don't think I'll be able to sleep for a while.



Kelvin and company boarded Cheruvim's Holy Stake and left the central ocean. Since they left using the stake's stealth feature, Serge couldn't see them off, but she didn't much care. Right now, what was important to her was concentrating on her battle with Dorothy.

"We're quite far away from the Holy Stake that Rion and Luquille-san are in, so let's start. Are you ready, Dorothiara-chan?" Serge asked. She was walking through the air using Sky Walk, glancing behind her as she did. Of course, she was looking at her opponent, Dorothy, who was floating in the air—much like someone would float in water—so her feet weren't anchored in the air. At the moment, it was unclear if she was using any of her powers.

"Don't worry about me. Are *you* ready to fight, Serge-san?" Dorothy asked. "This is just sparring, but you seem to be humming as you walk. You don't seem that focused to me."

"What?! Do I really seem that way?" Serge asked.

"Yes, very much so," Dorothy answered. "You've asked me for my favorite food, what I like to do in my free time, what kind of person is my type, etc., etc. It's all been truly worthless questions."

"Aha ha, it's because even walking with you is fun, Dorothy-chan," said Serge.

"Yes, if I had to say it, this is like a date—"

"I don't need to hear your wordplay," Dorothy interjected. "Rion-san is watching. I only pray you do not make a poor showing."

"Aha ha, I'm hoping for the same thing, you know? Rion is looking at me so passionately. I don't want to betray her expectations. After all, I'm the strongest Hero!"

It happened in an instant. Serge drew Holy Sword Will from its scabbard and changed it into a bow in the blink of an eye, shooting an arrow at Dorothy. The arrow launched by Artemis was a bright flash that went straight for Dorothy's head. However...

"Whoa, that's weird. Did you prepare yourself because I ambushed Kelvin earlier?" Serge asked.

"As a follow-up to the boring small talk from earlier, I should let you know that I happen to hate selfish people," Dorothy replied. The arrow hadn't hit her. It never even reached her. Flying nearly the speed of light, it had stopped just short of her for some reason.

"This is my new Time Magic spell, Toujours," Dorothy explained. "The Ten Authorities member Sera-san fought...if I remember right, her name was Gloria? She has an interesting Authority, which I hear allows her to manipulate distance to prevent attacks from reaching her. That gave me a hint, so I tried making a barrier of stagnant time around myself, and...hee hee, I managed to make a facsimile of her power."

The phenomenon that Gloria had created during her fight with Sera, which created infinite space that could never be crossed, had been re-created. This phenomenon, which Dorothy had just manifested, froze the timestream of anything that touched the barrier, forcing it to stop on the spot. Though the way she was accomplishing this was different from Gloria, the result was the same.

"With this, no matter how fast you attack, it will come to nothing," said Dorothy. "Of course, at my current level, I'll be able to see you now anyway." She bent a little bit to one side and snapped her fingers. When she did, the frozen arrow started moving again, but Dorothy was now out of the way, so it

passed by harmlessly.

"I heard something about this already, but you really do have some annoying magic," Serge commented. "You can also fast forward and slow time on top of stopping it, and maybe you can even skip through time as well? If you're even able to rewind time, I think I'll be done for!"

"Well, I wonder?" Dorothy said noncommittally. "I myself have no idea what I can do yet. Still, how strange. You don't seem like you're thinking that at all, despite having said it."

"Huh, wha?! Do I really look that way? Heh heh! I guess that makes me a little happy!" Serge said with a joyful lilt. "That's proof that my instincts have yet to give up!"

She was smiling as another Holy Sword Will split from Artemis and changed form. This time, it shifted into the anti-god final weapon that she'd used to kill Baldogg: Holy Murderer God-Killer. The chainsaw revved up loudly as Serge easily swung it in one hand.

That's... Rion thought. That combination... No way! Is she planning to shoot Holy Murderer God-Killer at her with Artemis?!

"That's scary. So much so that I intuitively feel that something terrible will happen to me if I even touch it," said Dorothy. "Most likely, it'll rip through the very idea of the Time Magic I've activated."

"Mmm, you've got really good eyes!" Serge complimented her. "They're so big and round and cute, but also very effective. Are you the best or what?! In truth, I don't even know what this can do to you! Look, it's not like I get much of a chance to try these things against gods, right? So since it's come up, I'm going to make maximum use of this opportunity to better understand things!"

"I see, then your goal in doing this was actually the same as me, Serge-san," said Dorothy. "Of course, I can still see your vulgar feelings poking out despite that."

"So you even found that out, huh?!" Serge exclaimed with a rather gleeful lilt. She shrugged, in a clear display of overacting. However, Dorothy ignored that in favor of enacting her next experiment.

#### Crack, crackle, crackle!

Something that clearly wasn't related to Time Magic happened then. The meat and bones of Dorothy's arms and legs swelled before a disconcerting propping sound could be heard, completing the change.

"Whew! I needed an entire second to change my own body," said Dorothy. "As things stand, this is unusable."

Her arms were now giant wings, while her legs had been replaced by bird legs ending in sharp talons. The staff she'd been holding was now being held by one of those legs like a prey animal.

"A transformation ability this time? Are you supposed to be, like, a harpy or something?" Serge asked.

"Well, something like that. This power was given to me by Wyldgroh. I'm able to transform my body now," Dorothy answered. After a moment, she continued. "Right..."

She flapped her wings, taking off at incredible speed. She was much faster than Serge's arrow, and she flew freely through the air. Both her basic stats and Flight skill had been boosted to unbelievable levels, and this showed it painfully well.

After flying around the area for the next ten to twenty seconds, Dorothy returned to her original spot. She'd done several acrobatic maneuvers like flips and loops, but she showed no sign of being out of breath or otherwise tired.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm embarrassed to say I have too many wasted movements," Dorothy reported.

"Man, but it felt like you were moving better than the Dragon Kings you find around here! Uh, is it possible you can use the powers of the other Divine Pillars too?" Serge asked.

"Seems like it," Dorothy agreed. "I have also absorbed Divine Whale Zeval, so I believe I should also have no issues in the water."

"Then you have Deatotal's powers too, huh?"

With that, Serge started to think back to when she had helped capture the

Divine Spirit. It was immune to simple physical attacks and even resisted light element magic. Remembering that, she broke out into a bit of a cold sweat.

"As expected, I'll need to train," said Dorothy. "As things stand, all these new powers are unpolished. The road to uncover their true worth will be long."

"Even though your powers seem so bugged and unfair?"

"It is *because* of that," answered Dorothy. "I don't want to admit it, but Kelvin taught me as much. No matter how vicious or dangerous the power or how high the stat, if its owner's skill or capacity does not match it, it is just a waste. That's why I'm going to polish myself: to be worthy of these powers and a true user."

"Yeah, that's good. I don't like that the one to teach you was Kelvin, but I like that way of thinking," said Serge. "Moving forward suits me more than standing still. I like this. I'll stay with you until the end. Not as a date, but as a deathmatch."

After that, the two carried out their match in silence, going at each other much like a real battle. They used all the time available to them, pouring all their effort into fighting except for when they needed to eat. In doing so, both sides polished their skills, gained new ideas, and fed their intuitions for battle as well as their hunger for victory—all so they could be the one laughing in the end.

#### **Afterword**

Thank you so much for buying *Black Summoner Volume 19: Authority Invasion*. This is Doufu Mayoi, the traitor who just switched from being a less-sugar-in-coffee person to no sugar. To everyone who picked up this book after reading the web novel, thank you for your continued patronage.

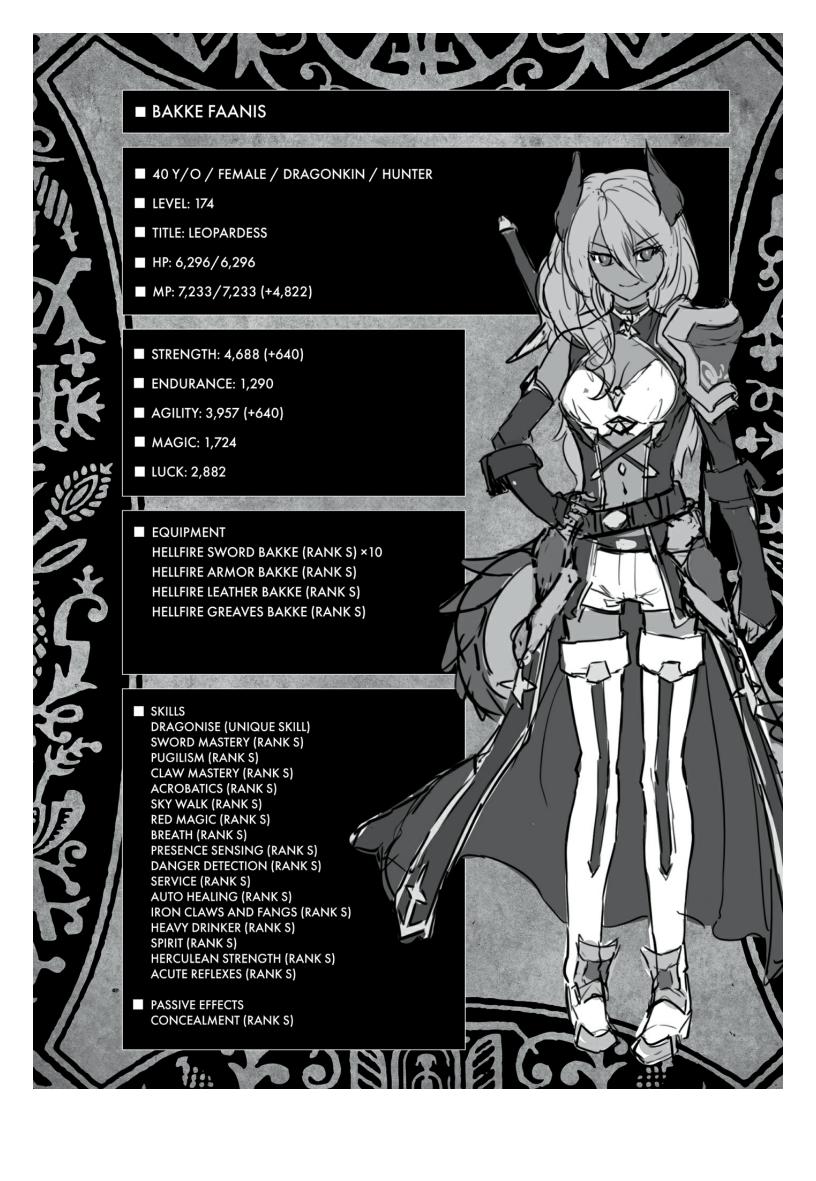
Spring is already upon us. Actually, by the time this goes on sale, spring will be well underway. It seems a lot of places are opening back up for flower viewing this year, so I believe for the first time in a long while, there will be many going out for flowers! Food! And alcohol! I haven't done those things in a long time either, so I'm tempted to go on a walk and look at the cherry blossoms.

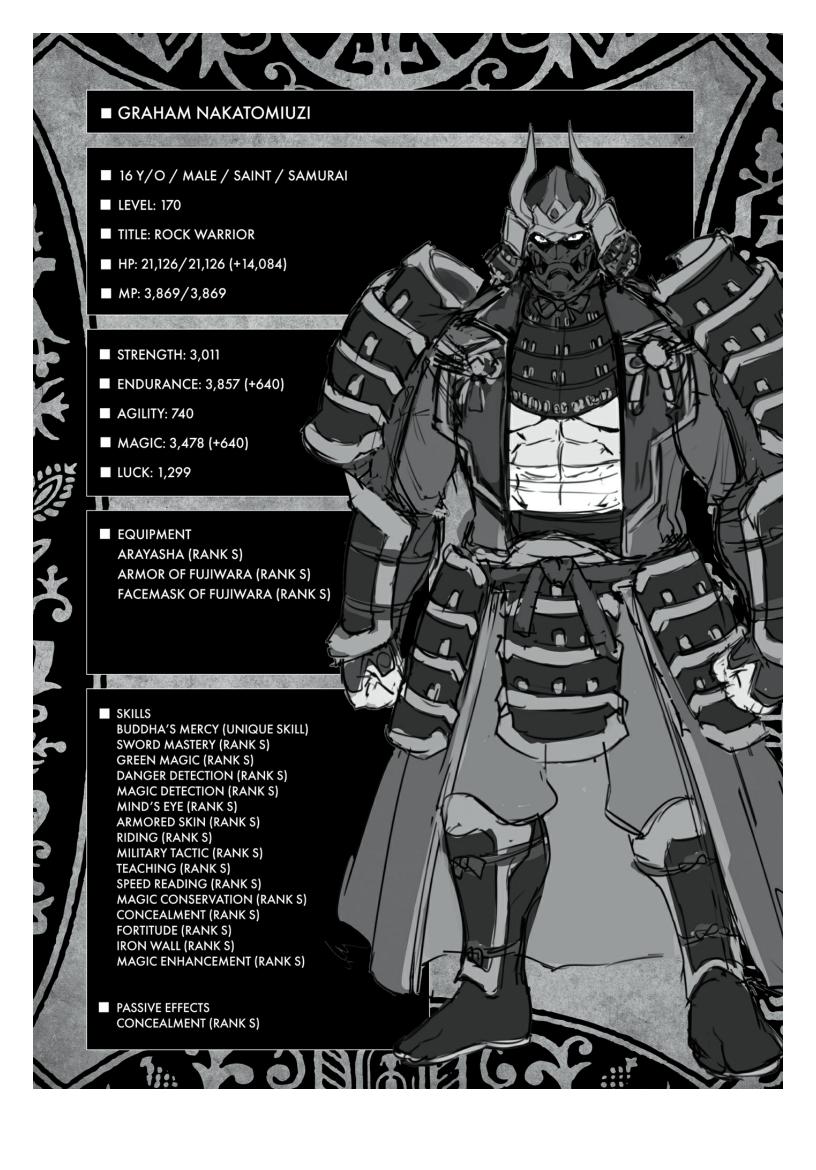
Ah, but I also heard that the pollen this year is also out in full force. It's the most pollen seen in the past decade, so I've heard things about this being a very scary year and that there won't be enough medicine to go around. I am not suffering from hay fever yet, but apparently it comes on very suddenly. Hm... Okay, let's watch the flowers from afar. Afar being my room!

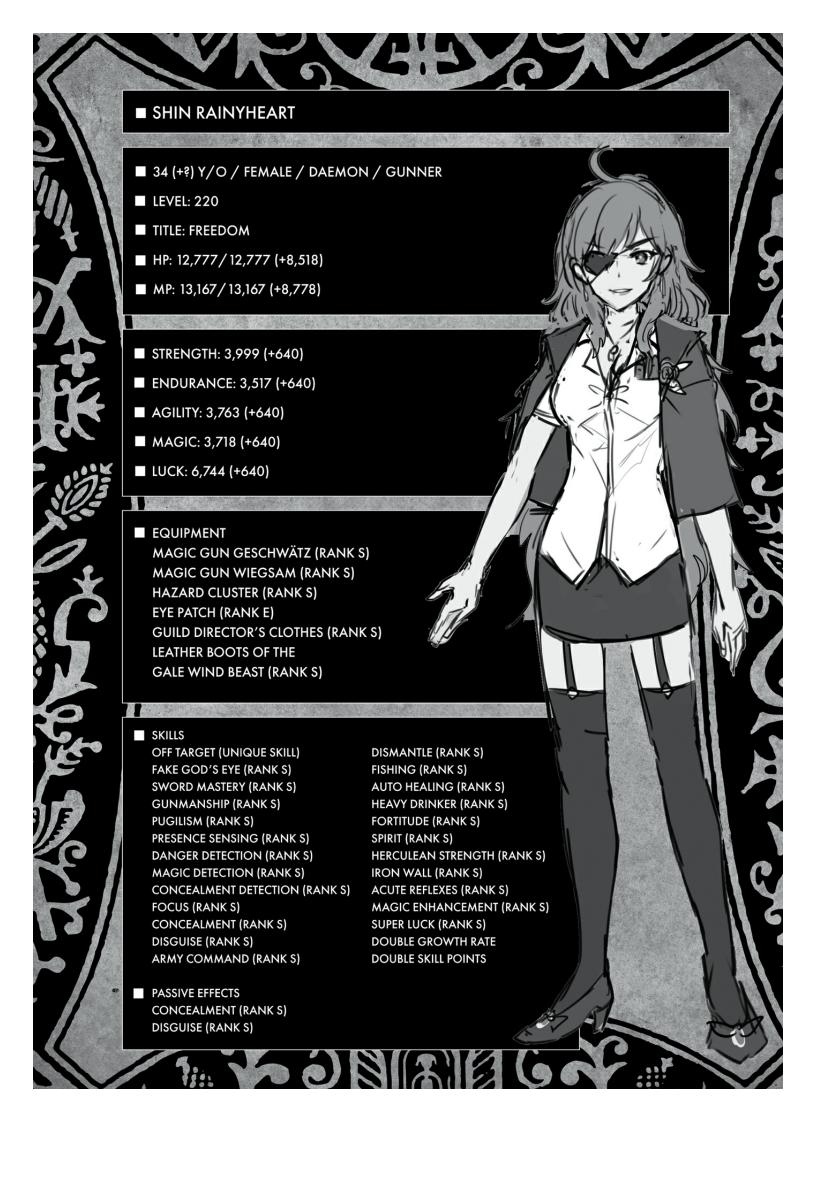
Anyway, it's starting to look like I haven't changed much from last year; I hate how much of an indoor person I am. Still, hay fever is seriously terrible. It's understandable to want to live in peace after getting through a harsh winter, right? I mean, come on, if I get hay fever, I won't be able to write as much. I'm sure that's not what you readers want, not to mention the backlog of games I want to play is getting pretty big! I knew it—in the end being indoors is the beall, end-all. I have arrived at the truth of the world.

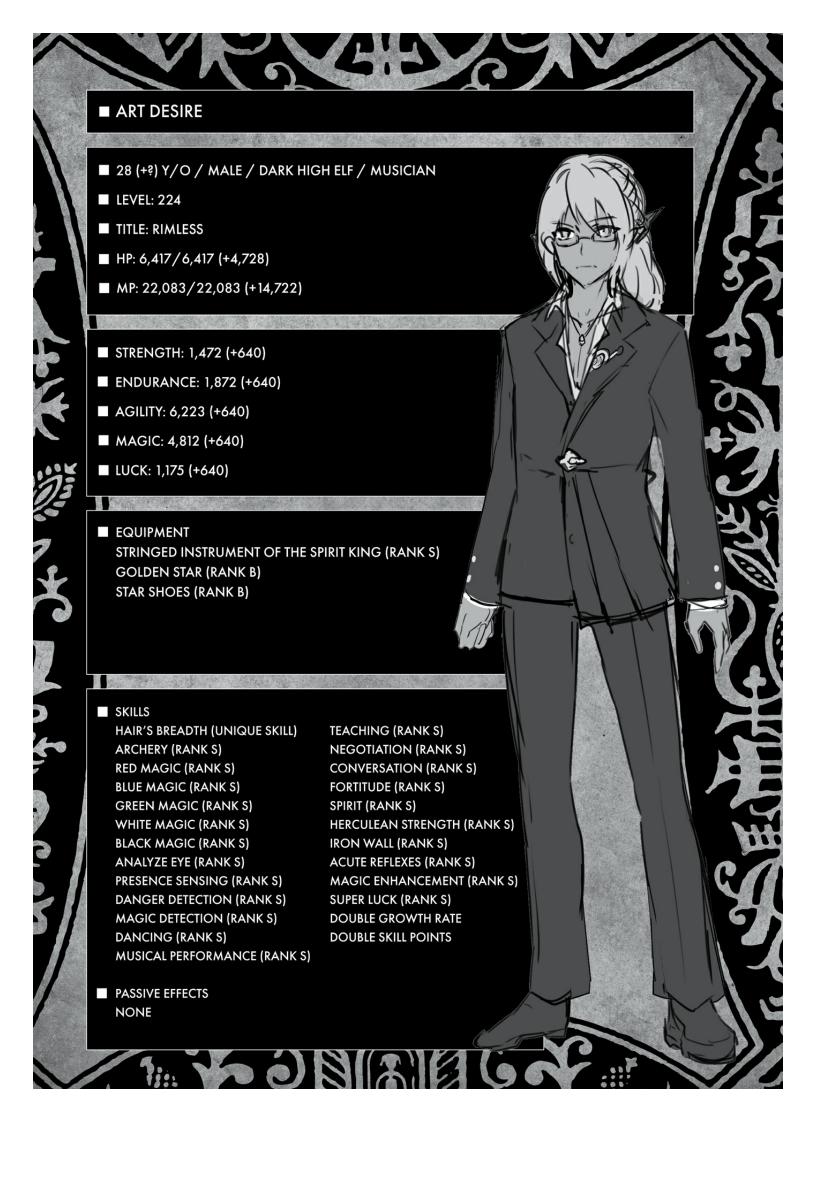
Finally, I'd like to express my thanks to those involved in the making of this volume of *Black Summoner*: my illustrators Kurogin-sama and DaiXt-sama, my proofreader, and I could never forget all you readers either.

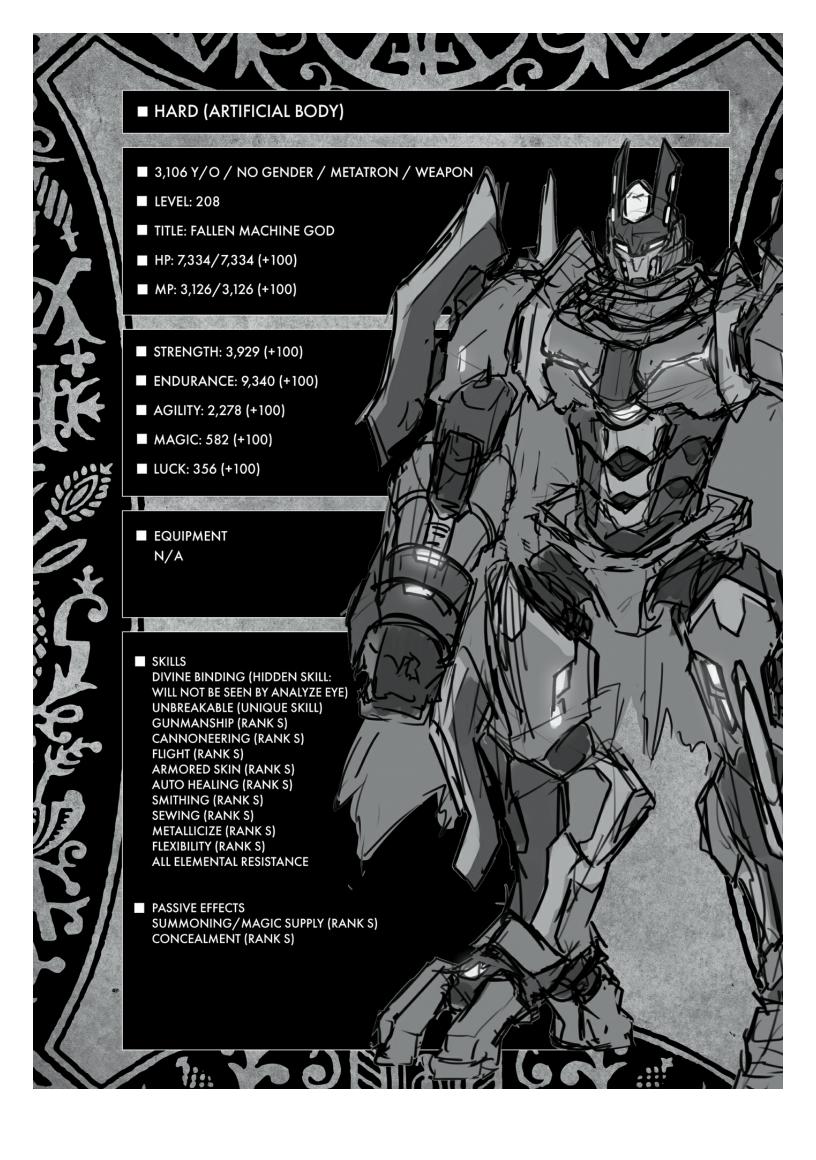
Well then, I'll be praying we meet in the next volume. Please continue reading Black Summoner!











#### **Bonus Short Stories**

## Sera's Skillful Telepathy

Recently, I'd been getting the feeling that Sera was sending a lot more telepathic messages. In fact, it wasn't just a feeling; she was definitely sending more.

::I just woke up... I'm so sleepy...:: she said one day.

It's already noon. Wake up already and wash your face, I replied through the Network.

::Okaaay...::

First was the usual wake-up message. That was already a habit, one she was sending automatically. It seemed she'd overslept that day, but when Sera woke up early, I would be woken up at the same time through telepathy.

::Ah, a black cat crossed my path. That's a good sign early in the morning!:: Sera announced later.

Huh? That's a good sign? I asked.

::Yeah, it's treated as a good thing in Abyssland.:: she explained.

Wow, really? Wait, no, it's past noon right now, I reminded her.

She also liked to send me telepathic messages about any slightly notable thing that happened to her. Yesterday, she told me that the laces on her boots had broken, and the day before that she'd reported that she had hiccuped a hundred times. These were the types of messages I got.

Okay...is it just me or has she been getting bad omens every day? I wondered privately.

::Kelviiin, I'm bored. What're you doing right now?::

I'm working underground in the golem room. Do you want to come by? I

asked.

::Sure!:: she answered.

She likes to send telepathic messages when she's bored too, huh? I thought. Whenever she did that, she tended to ask me my plans before showing up a couple seconds later.

::What's for dinner tonight?:: she asked.

Shouldn't you be asking Efil that? I replied.

::Awww, you don't know?::

Other than that...well, she tended to send me messages that should definitely have been sent to someone else. Food-related ones should have gone to Efil or Ruka, while difficult academic questions should have been sent to Shutola or Colette. I really wished she would spare me from these questions, especially in the latter case, since it only reinforced how useless and ignorant I was in those fields.

::-`ౖෆ(″'ల'″)ෆ(-:: Sera sent one day.

Oh come on, wait. How did you even send that?! Telepathy is supposed to be like a voice call, you know?! I retorted.

Finally, she was able to send ASCII emoticons. Since Sera was sending these, they were simply cute, but then the next day Gerard and Dahak started to send me some as well, seemingly having been taught how by her. I didn't mind them using these, but I wished they would at least send ones that matched their characters. Emoticons were double-edged swords for men.

So please, stop with the kissy faces. Just stop, I thought to myself.

::It's pretty hot today. Spring's come, hasn't it? Over.:: Sera said one day.

It took me a moment to respond. Huh? Oh, Sera? Why did you end your message like that?

::I wanted to show a different, unusual side of my charm!::

*I...see?* But I think the way you talk normally is the most attractive, I replied.

::R-Really? Heh heh... Yeah, you're right!::

Sometimes, she would start talking like a different person, confusing me. She had real talent for acting, so it would always end up confusing me for a moment.

:: I might be able to hook a big one, Kelvin!:: she sent me as she was fishing.

Oh? That's great news. That means we won't have to buy food for Mel today, I answered.

::Also, this thing's really strong! Probably Rank S!::

Okay, got it. I'm heading over there now so just wait a second!

::Whaaat?!::

I might have said a lot here, but communicating with someone you love is a good thing.

So wait for me, as yet unencountered Rank S monster! I thought. I want to hurry and fight you, my awaited Rank S monster! Fight hard until I get there! I'm rooting for you, Rank S monster!

### **How Dorothy Perceived Her Fusion**

"Hey, hey, Thee-chan, your face was really red just now! Did something happen? It's not a cold, is it?" Rion asked.

"Huh?!" Dorothy let out.

This happened right after System 17—the might of heaven—was explained to them. After agreeing to fuse with the other Divine Pillars, Dorothy was called out to by Rion, who was worried about her. Rion's question was asked purely out of goodwill, but it was a fatal verbal attack that would destroy Dorothy's dignity.

The cause of this was Luquille, who had teased Dorothy during her explanation, making Dorothy misunderstand what she meant by fusion with the Divine Pillars. What Luquille was referring to was essentially a unification of

their powers. Through "skillful" wordplay, she had managed to create a situation that would end any dignity Dorothy had, the details of which will be omitted here.

At any rate, Dorothy's reaction at the time was very obvious. Whatever she was imagining in her head had left her speechless and caused her to turn red from head to toe. Any normal adult would have figured out what was happening at that point, but unfortunately Rion was too pure and innocent to understand. As a result, she was just worried about Dorothy, resulting in the current situation.

"Ah, your face really is red, Thee-chan! You definitely have a fever!" Rion shouted.

Dorothy made a wordless noise of alarm and embarrassment as she made the same mistake once again. Indeed, she was reminded of what she'd just been imagining. Once again, she went totally red, which only furthered Rion's worry.

"Uhhh...er, n-no! You're wrong!" Dorothy stammered, backpedaling. "This isn't a cold or fever or anything! Um, it's true that my face is hot, but it's not something for you to worry about, Rion-san! Definitely not!"

"Thee-chan!" Rion exclaimed. "I can see steam coming from your head!"

Dorothy was now experiencing the most panic she had ever felt in her life since she didn't want to be hated by Rion. Unfortunately, the more she panicked, the more her body's abnormal symptoms worsened.

"Oh? What's wrong? What's with all this fuss?" came a voice.

Kelvin had come in response to all the shouting. The moment Dorothy heard his voice, her heart screamed that he was unwanted, but then she got an idea.

"Prepare yourself, Kelvin!" Dorothy shouted.

"Whoa?!" he shouted back.

"Thee-chan!" Rion shouted as well.

Dorothy threw a surprise punch, which Kelvin dodged by a hair's breadth.

"Hey, what's with the sudden punch?! Is it a battle?! Are we fighting?! Awright!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Yes it is!" Dorothy confirmed. "I've been secretly warming up to get my revenge for our previous fight!"

"Warming up? Uh, that's not what it seemed like, but..." Rion muttered.

"I did it in secret while stopping time! I was very careful and thorough!" Dorothy insisted. "That's why my body is so flushed and steam seems to be coming off of me! It makes total sense!"

Her idea was to use her revenge on Kelvin as an excuse to explain the situation away. She figured he would gladly accept this provocation and nothing would seem unnatural. It truly was a perfect plan.

After a moment's thought, Rion spoke. "Ohhh, so that's all it was! You're so silly, Thee-chan, to go so far as to stop time to prepare! You must really want to fight Kel-nii, huh?"

"I... You're right, ha ha ha..." Dorothy muttered nervously.

Her strategy had worked wonderfully, and Rion was somehow convinced. With that, she could breathe easy for the moment, having avoided disappointing her friend.

Thank goodness, she thought, but she only had a moment of relief.

"Heh...heh heh! I'm so happy, Dorothy. To think that you'd want to fight me so much," said Kelvin. "I understand. I'll stay with you for the whole day! Let's have the best fight ever!"

"Yeah..." Dorothy was forced to reply.

"Fight hard, both of you!" Rion cheered. "I'm rooting for you!"

Now Dorothy had to accompany a very incensed Kelvin in order to convince him as well, forcing her into an unwanted battle. Her hardships would continue for a little while more.

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Black Summoner: Volume 19

by Doufu Mayoi

Translated by Kevin Chen Edited by Tess Nanavati

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