



# HELL MODE

■ The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in  
Another World with Garbage Balancing ■

STORY HAMUO

ART MO





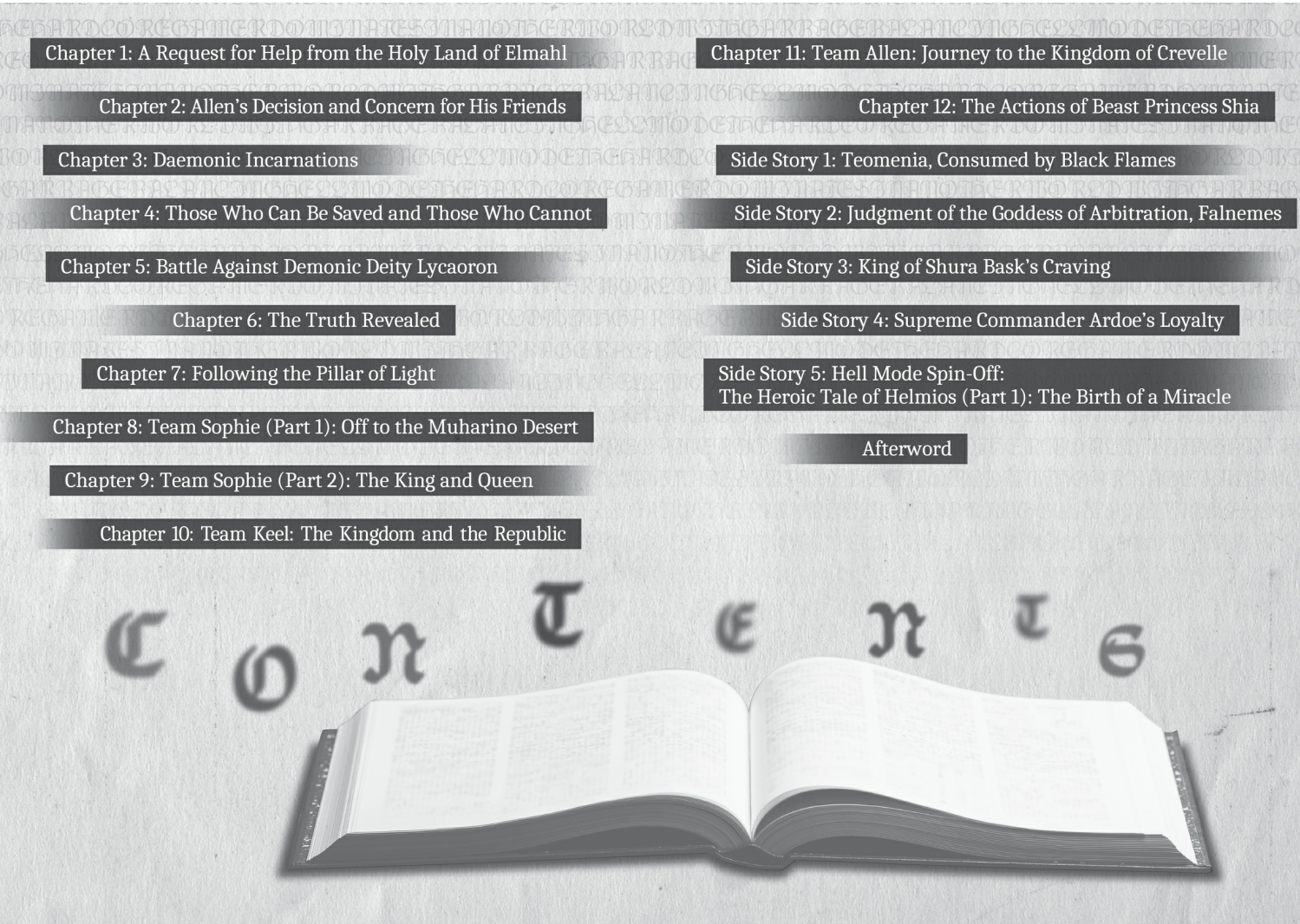
# HELL MODE

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# Chapter 1: A Request for Help from the Holy Land of Elmahl

A military officer dashed into the Baukisian emperor's audience hall and shouted out, his voice echoing off the extravagant golden walls.

"We've received a request for help from the Holy Land of Elmahl! It seems that the capital, Teomenia, is ablaze!"

Silence fell over the audience before everyone began to chatter among themselves.

Many nobles and ministers were gathered in the large hall, joining Emperor Pupun III and the four parties that had cleared the theretofore unconquered Rank S dungeon. Upon hearing the officer's report, they began to express their surprise.

"Did he just say that Teomenia is ablaze?"

"I heard that's where the execution of the pontiff of that one religion was going to take place."

Some even cried out in shock.

"Ablaze?! Just what is going on over there?!" Beast Prince Zeu let out a roar and turned and made his way over to the kneeling officer who had made the report and grabbed his shoulders.

"H-Hey, hold on!" the dwarven officer exclaimed as Zeu lifted him off his feet, which flailed about uselessly in the air.

"What of my sister, Shia?!"

The nobles, ministers, and even the emperor himself watched on with wide eyes as Zeu interrogated the man, his fangs bared in anger.

"Beast Prince, we're still in the presence of the emperor. Please calm yourself," the prime minister said, trying to hurriedly calm Zeu. Fortunately, it



seemed to bring him back to reality.

“Hmm? Ah, yes, my apologies.” With that, he set the officer back down on the floor.

*Huh. Judging by the way he’s acting, Shia must not have returned to the Beast Kingdom yet.*

It had been about half a year since Allen first heard that Shia, Zeu’s sister, had captured the Pontiff of the Church of Gushara, otherwise known as Daemonism.

“Please elaborate on what you mean by ‘Teomenia is ablaze’?” The emperor’s request prompted the officer to continue his report.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Just moments ago, we received a request for assistance from Neel, in Elmahl. According to their information, the capital, Teomenia, has gone up in flames.”

Two days prior, a massive fire had shot up in the city square in the center of Teomenia, where Gushara Selbirohl, the founder of the new religion known as the Church of Gushara, was to be executed. The pitch-black flames became a pillar of fire that reached up to the heavens, then gradually spread horizontally, engulfing the temple adjacent to the square. Eventually, it even reached the streets, blanketing the entire city in fire.

A priest who had managed to flee Teomenia had reported the incident and sent out the distress signal. Furthermore, Pope Istahl Kumes, who had been in the city to watch the execution, had tried to suppress the flames. Though the city was ultimately engulfed, his efforts had managed to buy time, with which the priests had escaped. After witnessing Teomenia be consumed by the fire, they made the two-day trek to the nearby city of Neel while caring for survivors and other priests. It was then that the request for assistance was sent to every country in the world. The status of the supreme leader of the Elmea Church, Pope Istahl, remained unknown.

“What d’ya mean a request for assistance was sent t’ every country?” Admiral Garara asked, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

*That’s true. Sure, this is a bit of an abnormal situation, but it seems odd to reach out to every country for assistance unless there’s some sort of special*



*reason. Perhaps the black flames have something to do with this?*

The Holy Land of Elmahl was one of the many mostly small nations located on Galiat, southeast of the Central Continent. Though this was a rather big deal, it was ultimately just a fire. All they really needed was fire suppression and assistance for the survivors, which they could have easily asked of their neighbors. However, the officer's response to Garara's question surprised even Allen.

"Well, some of the survivors apparently later turned into beasts."

"What?!" a voice boomed. "'Beasts'?! Are you saying they became monsters?!"

"According to the priest who issued the request, there was something altogether strange about the citizens and priests who made it out after them. When some of the priests who could cast recovery magic approached, they were attacked."

"The people who escaped the fire turned into monsters? Or were there monsters lurking among the survivors that attacked them?"

"Unfortunately, that's all I know. Since they were attacked so suddenly, they didn't have time to confirm the details."

None of it made sense. However, it was clear that there was something not quite human out there.

"Hmph. I guess it's possible there's a monster out there capable o' turnin' humans into other monsters."

Admiral Garara seemed to believe that something had used a skill of some sort in order to turn those people into monsters. In addition, Allen recalled learning in one of his classes at the Academy that monsters such as undead and vampires would attack humans and turn them into their kin.

"The monsters—apologies, the humans who were turned *into* monsters have been increasing in number over these past two days and continue to pursue the priests and other survivors. By the time they arrived in Neel, there were already enough of them to surround the entire city. At this rate, it won't hold out for much longer."



Fearing that this issue would spread beyond Teomenia and Neel to affect their allies, the priests had sent a distress signal to all nations across the globe.

“I wonder if this could be...” Helmios mumbled under his breath.

“Yeah, I think it’s possible they used Lady Freyja’s divine vessel,” Allen said, finishing the sentence. He had already shared the information about Freyja, the Goddess of Fire, having her divine vessel stolen by the Demon Lord Army with his party as well as the various members of Helmios’s, Zeu’s, and Garara’s parties. With that in mind, Helmios figured that a divine vessel—the gods’ source of power—would be capable of summoning forth a flame that could wipe out an entire city in an instant.

“In other words, this is the work of the Demon Lord Army.”

Keel, who always strove to live a just and honorable life, shook with anger. Helmios rested a hand on the boy’s trembling shoulder.

“We’re going to need to go rescue them, then.”

The Baukisian nobles in attendance cheered in approval at Helmios’s statement.

“What a hero that Helmios is!”

“He’s going to use his power to save humanity from the Demon Lord Army once again!”

“Elmahl is surely saved!”

Nowadays, the majority of Baukis’s citizens believed in Dungeon Master Dygragni. This was thanks largely to the fact that the Tower of Tribulation he had created served as a major industry within the empire and provided it with great economic benefits. Many dwarves who had prayed to Fire Goddess Freyja in the past now offered those same prayers to Dygragni. Even so, some, such as the blacksmith Habarak, continued to believe in Freyja.

There were other gods as well—those of good harvest, war, and so on—but the common point among them all was that the people who worshipped them also indirectly worshipped the God of Creation, Elmea, who was the highest ranked among all the gods. This was why all of the nobles were so pleased with



Helmios's words.

“Are you really going to go, Helmios? We're very much looking forward to seeing your future successes. Admiral Garara, will you be accompanying him to Elmahl?”

Garara turned to the emperor and bowed his head down low. “O' course, Yer Majesty.”

*Heh, interesting how Garara always talked about how demanding the emperor was, but it really doesn't seem that way at all.*

While it seemed as if the emperor had had a rather pampered upbringing, he wasted no time in deciding to send his forces to aid Elmahl. The prime minister's opinion, however, seemed to be at odds with the emperor's.

“Your Majesty, considering the circumstances we find ourselves in, I believe it would be best to have Admiral Garara bolster our own defenses.”

Casually glancing around the room, Allen found that some of the nobles and ministers were nodding in agreement.

*I guess it makes sense. Assuming this was the Demon Lord Army's next move, they had to have anticipated that another country would send help.*

Allen figured that the events occurring in Elmahl were just another part of the Demon Lord Army's new invasion plan. They were most likely a follow-up to the invasions of several countries that had been conducted over the past year.

The previous year's simultaneous invasions were actually a diversion to keep the gods from learning of their real plan: to invade the Divine Realm and steal Freyja's divine vessel. The operation seemed to have been planned decades in advance, anticipating that Dygragni's number of followers would increase while Freyja's would decrease, thus weakening her power. Assuming they had indeed used Freyja's divine vessel in this instance, that could only mean that this was all a part of the long-term invasion plan they had initiated last year. In that case, Allen figured that the Demon Lord Army must have already anticipated that other nations would try to step in to stop this.

Suddenly, a voice boomed from the entrance to the vast hall. “Pardon the intrusion! I have an emergency dispatch from the Empire of Giamut!”

The murmuring nobles and ministers parted to make way for the dwarf entering the hall. Judging by his appearance, the man appeared to hold a role equivalent to what would be a general back in the Kingdom of Ratash, Allen's home country.

"Wh-What is it now?!" The ranking officer stopped at the prime minister's statement, offered up a salute, and began to speak.

"The Demon Lord Army has begun advancing from the northern tip of the Central Continent!"

"What?!"

The chamber once again erupted in harried conversations.

\* \* \*

Until now, the Demon Lord Army had focused its invasions on the Central Continent, the Empire of Baukis, and Rohzenheim. They attacked the Empire of Giamut by marching south from their occupied territories in the northern part of the Central Continent while traveling across the sea from their home base, the Forgotten Continent, to strike at Baukis and Rohzenheim. It seemed that their goal in attacking these three locations simultaneously was to prevent them from assisting one another as was the purpose behind the Five Continent Alliance. This was nothing more than a guess, of course, but Allen was rarely wrong.

As a result of this, the Five Continent Alliance had been monitoring the territory on the Central Continent that had been occupied by the Demon Lord Army in order to be ready for any invasions. Specifically, they had built a fortress in Giamut near the border of the occupied territory, from which they would periodically dispatch magic ships and scouting units to see if any monsters were gathering. If such a thing were happening, it would be seen as the beginning of an invasion, and magic tools would be used to share this information with the other members of the Alliance.

The Demon Lord Army appeared to be aware of this system and would brutally attack any scouts they found. Thus, this information must have come from a Giamutan scouting party that had risked their lives to get it.



“Do we know how big of a force it is?” Helmios asked, turning toward the senior officer.

“About as large as before. We believe it stands two million strong.”

“I see. That’s definitely not something we can overlook.”

Zeus spoke up next. “But why now?”

“They had no choice but to act now,” Allen responded. “The Demon Lord Army wants to ensure that whatever they’re doing in Elmahl succeeds.”

Zeus mulled over Allen’s words for a moment.

“Hmm, they must want to use the divine vessel for something, then.” He sounded convinced by Allen’s explanation.

“What’s more, if they strike now, they can interfere with the class promotion system coming into effect next month. In light of that, it makes sense that they would invade now.”

The class promotion dungeon would go into operation the following month. If the Demon Lord Army had caught wind of this, it only made sense that they would want to either put a stop to or delay it before it gave the rest of the world a chance to get stronger. After all, during their invasions in the previous year and their battle against the No-life Gamers, they had incurred losses the likes of which they had never seen. It might have even taken them until now before they could muster up enough replacements.

“Well, that’s definitely problematic. If they’re sending a force of two million into the Central Continent, we’re in no position to just ignore them and send forces to Elmahl.”

“Yer right about that,” Garara replied with a scowl.

If the Alliance were to go up against a force of that scale again and did not send Helmios, a talented fighter who could wipe out numerous enemies on the front lines, and Admiral Garara, who could lead the sea-based defenses, they would suffer heavy casualties.

*Speaking of, I’m the grand strategist of Rohzenheim.* As a reward for his work on the battlefield, Rohzenheim had granted Allen the title of grand strategist.

This role meant that he was in no position to ignore the possibility of the Demon Lord Army invading Rohzenheim. *But it's not like I can just stand idly by and watch as people in the allied continents die.*

Unlike the Demon Lord Army's invasions, the assault currently going on in Elmahl was a danger occurring from within. This differed from Rohzenheim where they could build up forts, support a defensive line, and fend off external attacks over the decades.

Though he knew little about the religious country, Allen could imagine how Elmahl would deal with the crisis, and he doubted they could fend it off on their own. Thus, they would need help from abroad. But considering the phenomenon of humans turning into beasts, it was possible that the situation would spill into other allied nations unless they found a solution. In the event they could not, the problem could even spread beyond the continent itself. If they were going to help, they would need to do it soon.

Using Bird A's Return to Nest Ability, Allen could instantaneously travel between Rohzenheim and Elmahl, allowing him to deal with both problems at once.

*Over these past three months, I've really managed to make it a lot easier for me to fight.*

Allen was convinced that there would not be any problems.

Upon reaching Summoning Lvl. 8 and becoming able to Summon Rank A Summons, he noted that, unlike his Rank B Summons, they were far and away more powerful than their equivalently ranked monsters. For example, Dragon A could fight indefinitely even against Rank A monsters thanks to its Super Regeneration Ability, and Insect A could control enemies.

A total of fifty such Summons patrolled the outside of Rohzenheim's territory day and night, annihilating the remaining monsters of the Demon Lord Army and continuing to expand the safe zone. Furthermore, the restoration of the northernmost fortress, which had protected Rohzenheim from the Demon Lord Army for many years, was underway. There were parts that had not been repaired yet, but by using his Gold and Silver Beans to create a barrier that kept monsters out, it would presumably be able to fulfill its role as a defensive base.



Between his Summons and the nearly complete restoration of the northern fortress, Allen was convinced that Rohzenheim had what it needed to remain safe.

*Is it really going to be okay?*

Allen felt a twinge of uncertainty. He figured that the pillar of flame in Teomenia was due to the Demon Lord Army using Freyja's divine vessel. If that was the case, the Demon Lord Army had planned both that and the turning of the citizens into monsters when they had stolen the divine vessel. The execution of the founder of the Church of Gushara, also known as Daemonism, was surely related as well. In other words, that the Demon Lord Army had decided to cause this all to happen in Teomenia meant that there must have been some connection between Daemonism and the Demon Lord Army.

Allen had no idea how Daemonism had gotten its name. However, assuming that it, like how the Demon Lord Army had bided their time waiting for Freyja's power to weaken enough that they could steal her divine vessel, was a part of their long-standing scheme, there had to have been a number of people involved in their sinister plan.

Considering that the Demon Lord Army had put the Fire Goddess's divine vessel and Daemonism to use at the same time as they launched the invasion of Giamut, they had to have been making preparations for some time. If that was the case, it was possible that they also had other plans in motion, as well as traps prepared to keep people from interfering.

If Allen were to go to Elmahl's rescue and encounter such a trap, he would have no choice but to call back the Summons that were defending Rohzenheim. He had his doubts that Rohzenheim's defenses would be able to stand up against a Demon Lord Army invasion were he to do so.

Unlike Giamut, which had Helmios, and Baukis, which had Garara and his golem pilots, Rohzenheim did not currently have anyone boasting a powerful Talent. The Talent of Rohzenheim's strongest Spirit User, Gatoluuga, was a mere three stars. Making matters worse, Rohzenheim had suffered heavy casualties in the previous year's invasion and had not yet been able to recover the lost troops.

Allen's mind ran in circles as he tried to figure out which side to take and which to leave undefended. Meanwhile, Zeu turned to one of the Ten Heroic Beasts and addressed him.

"Hmph. Lepe, why did you all leave Albahal?"

*Huh? What's he going on about?*

"Hmm? Oh, well... Hey, no way! You can't be serious!" Lepe cried out in surprise, having seemingly put together what the Beast Prince was thinking.

The Ten Heroic Beasts had been summoned to Baukis from Albahal in order to help Zeu clear the Rank S dungeon. However, if they had been up front about their objective, Zeu's brother, Beast Crown Prince Beku, would have put a stop to them, as Zeu would become the heir apparent upon the dungeon being cleared. Therefore, they had made up the excuse of being dispatched to hunt the monsters interfering with Rohzenheim's recovery. They had also reached a secret agreement with Rohzenheim that they would provide assistance were Albahal ever to attack the Central Continent, thus ultimately earning them permission to leave the country.

"So I guess that means it's our turn to step up, Your Highness?" General Hoba asked.

"Correct. There are still some monsters remaining in Rohzenheim, and it's even possible that their numbers are on the rise. We shall make our way to Rohzenheim. Come with me, men."

"This is incredibly helpful," Allen could not help but butt in, "but are you really sure you want to do this?"

"Is there something wrong, Allen?"

"No, but aren't you being summoned to be the Beast King?"

Zeu held Allen's gaze. "Allen, do you know anything about our royal family?"

"Huh? I...think so." He had no idea what Zeu was referring to and stared back into the beastkin's eyes with a blank expression on his face.

"I am here right now in order to become the next Beast King," Zeu said quietly, though his words still echoed throughout the hall. "I was told by the



Beast King that if I were to clear the Rank S dungeon in the Empire of Baukis, I would be deemed to have completed my trial and thus gain the right to succeed the throne. However, the Beast King did not order me to come to the Rank S dungeon. I did not simply follow my father's instructions; I came to the Rank S dungeon of my own volition. Joining forces with you, Helmios, and Garara was also my choice."

Allen remained silent, allowing Zeu to continue.

"To be a member of the royal family, Allen, means to be a person who is capable of making decisions. The royal family was born to protect and lead our people—that is something we *must* do. Which means that, as a member of the royal family, I must make my own decisions and act upon them. Even a command from my own father is mine to decide whether to abide by or not. I am no mere pawn of the king."

Allen swallowed hard at Zeu's words and bowed his head down low. "I apologize. Thank you, it will be a great help."

"Which do you think will be more dangerous?" Zeu replied with a gentle smile to quickly change the subject.

"Huh?"

"Elmahl or Rohzenheim—which do you predict will be more dangerous, Allen?"

"Hmm, I guess I'd have to say Elmahl. I don't know what's going on there."

"I see. Well, that truly is unfortunate. There's a perfect crisis for the Ten Heroic Beasts and myself to show off our strength, yet we have to leave it to someone else."

"I...suppose so." Allen was unsure what else to say.

Zeu could tell that Allen had intended to try to save both Elmahl and Rohzenheim. He had offered up this plan so that the boy could focus his efforts on Elmahl.

"Oh well, such is life. As the prince of Albahal, it is my duty to protect Rohzenheim at all costs for the sake of my country. As such, I leave the defense

of Elmahl to you, Allen.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Allen stated, meeting the Beast Prince’s fierce gaze.

“Please keep her safe at all costs.” It hardly needed to be said for Allen to understand whom Zeu was referring to.

“I will. With everything I have,” Allen responded with a nod.

Temi mumbled under her breath that none of this had been foreseen in her fortune-telling and offered up a wry smile. “Well, it looks like I’ll be accompanying the prince, then.”

“What? We’re going to Rohzenheim? Lane.”

The annoyance in Lepe’s voice came across loud and clear, which seemed to anger General Hoba.

“You watch your tone!” he shouted at his fellow beastkin.

The swift exchange earned laughs from the rest of the Ten Heroic Beasts. It did not appear as if any of them were afraid of the Demon Lord Army they were likely to end up confronting in Rohzenheim.

Zeu turned back to the throne where Emperor Pupun III was sitting. “It appears the matter has been settled, Your Majesty.”

“Well then, I believe it’s about time we make our exit.”

“Y-Yes, I see. Be off, brave warriors.” Emperor Pupun III still seemed taken aback at the suddenness of this whole situation and nodded robotically.

“So, where should we head first, Allen?”

At Zeu’s prompting, Allen’s mind began firing on all cylinders. He had originally planned to return to the Rank S dungeon as soon as their audience with the emperor had finished, as they still had a lot of equipment left at their base on the first floor.

“Hmm, let’s head back to our base first and gather our equipment. Helmios, Garara, what would you like to do?”

“We’ll go with you,” Helmios replied.

“We’re fine as is. Ain’t much t’ speak of at our base anyway. Long as we have



our magic discs, we've got everythin' we need."

"In that case, I've already designated one of the guest rooms as a teleportation point, so I'll send some supplies your way a bit later."

"Looks like yer ahead of the game, Allen. But thank ye kindly."

"Goodbye, Your Majesty." With that, Allen, Helmios, Zeu, and their respective party members teleported out of the hall, leaving behind Admiral Garara and his party as well as a very surprised emperor and group of nobles.

"Wh-What was that?!"

\* \* \*

Allen and the group hurried to their base on the first floor of the Rank S dungeon and got their equipment in order. Helmios's servant, who had been living at the base, came to meet them. After speaking with Helmios, he agreed to clean up everything that remained there. Once that was finished, Allen requested that the servant renew his contract.

Though he had no idea how long it would take until things settled down in Elmahl, Allen figured that he would not be returning to this dungeon for some time. He definitely intended to come back, however, as not only did he still need to unlock his King Me skill, but also because he could take on Goldino, the final floor boss, whenever he pleased. He had even earned the chance to fight Dungeon Master Dygragni himself. As such, when he did finally come back, he wanted his base to be ready and waiting.

A short time later, Helmios, Zeu, and the Ten Heroic Beasts all finished their preparations. They made their way to Helmios's home in Giamut, where Helmios and Zeu would begin their journey.

When the two parted ways, Allen gave Helmios a thousand Blessings of Heaven to help minimize casualties on Giamut's northern border. Furthermore, just to be on the safe side, Allen provided him with a hundred each of Gold and Silver Beans, which would help the escaping soldiers were one of their forts to fall.

"I'll also be sending along ten Summons. I wish I could send more, but I just don't think I can spare them."

In the previous year's war, Allen had also sent Summons to support Giamut's northern border. The ones he had sent back then had all been Rank Bs, but this time, he was able to send Rank As.

However, for this war, Allen would have to focus his attention not only on Giamut's northern border, but on Rohzenheim and Elmahl as well. He had to keep in mind that any of those locations could face danger at any time. For that reason, he could only send ten Summons with Helmios.

"Ten is more than enough. Allen, Zeu, please be careful." As Helmios spoke, a Bird A sat dutifully on his shoulder. Allen planned to have Helmios and his party take it to their fort so that he could create a nest there.

*I hope this goes off without a hitch, but there's no telling what'll happen.*

With the information they had at hand, there was no way for them to know to what extent any of the continents would be invaded. But considering the ten-million-strong force of monsters Allen and his friends had faced the previous year, they could not let their guard down.

Allen's next stop was Fortenia, the capital of Rohzenheim. This was where the crux of the Demon Lord Army's invasion—and their life-and-death struggle against Rehzal—had taken place. However, thanks to support from the Five Continent Alliance, and Giamut in particular, good progress had been made on rebuilding. The elven queen and many of the capital's citizens had already returned.

Moreover, since the beginning of this year, they had begun to take in millions of displaced people from all over Rohzenheim. This restored hope to the disenchanting elves harmed by the war while also allowing them to manufacture elven elixirs, which they would export to Giamut and their allies in the Five Continent Alliance. It also meant that a portion of their workforce could begin creating weapons from monster parts. As a result, Rohzenheim had money to spare even after repairing all its towns and forts.

However, when Allen entered the temple, he noted that light was shining in from above. From that, he could tell that they had prioritized restoring functions within the capital while putting the temples on the back burner for the time being.

*It's just a matter of time. And yet now the Demon Lord Army is raring up to attack again right in the midst of rebuilding.*

Allen, led by royal elven guards, made his way to the queen, who was flanked by Grand Marshal Siguul and her generals.

“Greetings, Your Majesty. I apologize for the sudden visit.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Grand Strategist. I am always available to hear what you have to say.”

The elf queen then gestured to a white-clothed woman standing next to her. This woman, who looked like an older teenager, had a headband wrapped tightly around her forehead and held a candle in each hand.

“Thank you, Okiyosan.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Master Allen,” the pale-faced woman—a Spirit A—replied with a nod and a smile. Back in Allen’s past life, she would have been what was described as a Japanese-style spirit, and she had Abilities befitting that description. Given how different she looked from his Western-style doll-like Spirit B Summon, it was clear that she had been designed by a different angel than Merus.

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Type: Spirit
Rank: A
Name: Okiyosan
HP: 7,500
MP: 8,000
Attack: 6,800
Endurance: 10,000
Agility: 8,700
Intelligence: 10,000
Luck: 3,000
Bufs: Endurance 200, Intelligence 200, Physical Damage Reduction (Strong)
Ability: Voodoo Nail, Spirit Guide

There were not many opportunities to use her in the Rank S dungeon, but since the strong physical damage reduction buff she provided was quite useful considering Allen's low Endurance stat, he always kept one of her on hand. Unfortunately, no matter how many he made, the buff did not stack, but he figured that he could at least leave one with the elven queen to serve as a go-between before he moved on.

Siguul spoke up next. "We have received word from a messenger from the Empire of Giamut and have duly called up our soldiers."

"In that case, we'll have the Beast Prince and Ten Heroic Beasts join them. They should be a big help in the battle for Rohzenheim."

"Their assistance would be greatly appreciated!"

"I will thank them personally," the queen said, emotion welling in her throat. "I am grateful that they would act on behalf of Rohzenheim in spite of what we've done."

It had been Allen's decision to lie to the Ten Heroic Beasts when he had called them to the Rank S dungeon, saying that they would be helping to hunt the monsters remaining in Rohzenheim. However, though it might have been his doing, the queen herself had written a personal letter to Albahal to make it look more authentic. In a sense, she had lied to the Beast Kingdom, and she felt sorry about her actions toward the royal family and the mighty Ten Heroic Beasts who would still be participating in the upcoming battle.

Many talented soldiers had been lost during the Demon Lord Army's invasion of Rohzenheim the previous year. It would take at least fifty years for the elves, who had a low birth rate as it was, to replace the holes in their army, and that was assuming that there would be no more invasions. Therefore, while the queen was deeply appreciative of Allen for providing his Summons, Blessings of Heaven, Gold Beans, and Silver Beans, along with the immense power of the Ten Heroic Beasts while their fortresses were still under repair, she still felt a strong sense of regret.



The queen bowed her head down low in a sign of appreciation.

“Please don’t worry yourself, Your Majesty. After all, wasn’t it our original promise that the Ten Heroic Beasts and I would help you out of your darkest hour? We swear to fight to the best of our abilities,” Beast Prince Zeu responded curtly.

*Direct and honor bound. Prince Zeu is leaving quite the good impression of beastkin.*

Thus far, Albahal had not been on the front lines against any of the Demon Lord Army’s invasions, though they had provided supplies. This attitude was seen as a problem within the Five Continent Alliance, but Allen believed that Zeu’s remarks would change how they viewed the Beast Kingdom.

Allen had no idea when Zeu would become the Beast King of Albahal. However, the prince’s declaration that he would fulfill the promises made between his homeland and Rohzenheim would likely improve Albahal’s position within the Alliance. Furthermore, if the Beast Prince were to go to the front lines of the battle between Rohzenheim and the Demon Lord Army in the future, it would undoubtedly become a point of interest in the history of the world.

“Please come this way. I would like to discuss our upcoming plans,” Siguul said, ushering the beastkin into another room.

Zeu responded with a grunt and, with the Ten Heroic Beasts in tow, followed Siguul and his men out of the room. As they left, Allen turned to Dogora.

“I think it would do you some good to join the war party too, Dogora.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I think you should stay back and fight in Rohzenheim. The rest of us will head off to Elmahl.”

“What?! What’re you talking about?!” His voice echoed throughout the hall.

“What are you saying, Allen? We’re going to leave Dogora here?” Krena asked. She seemed unclear as to what his true intentions were.

“Back in the town at the Rank S dungeon, Temi of the Ten Heroic Beasts told

our fortunes, remember? When asked if Dogora would ever be able to use his Extra Skill, she told us that he should head off to the southeast, but that what lay in wait there was a trial that could take his life.”

“That’s true, but what does it have to do with anything?” Dogora fixed Allen with a steely gaze.

“Elmahl is located to the southeast of the Rank S dungeon.” The moment the words left Allen’s mouth, Keel seemed to pick up on what he was saying.

“So there’s a very real possibility that Dogora will die if he goes to Elmahl.”

“It’s hard to say. Ratash is also to the southeast, so I originally thought the fortune was referring to something happening after the class promotion dungeon opens up in Academy City next year. Because of that, I had Temi tell me if it was just Dogora who was in danger or if we all were.”

“And what did she learn in her fortune-telling?” Cecil prompted Allen to go on.

“That you are all at risk,” Temi answered in his place.

“What?!” Rohzen, sitting on his perch atop Sophie’s head, blurted out the moment he heard the news of the serious situation facing his friends. All eyes landed on him, waiting for him to continue, but he merely froze and failed to say anything more.

After some time, the group turned back to face Temi. Leaving the rest of the Ten Heroic Beasts at the doorway, the fortune teller walked over to the group.

“Of course, Dogora is the one facing the most danger. To say that he might lose his life isn’t quite accurate. Rather, he will most likely die.”

Upon hearing Temi’s fortune, Allen decided to reconsider things.

*Hmm, and here I thought the reason the southeast was dangerous was that the demons were going to send monsters or something to stop the class promotion dungeon from opening.*

“But if the southeast is dangerous, doesn’t that apply to everyone?” Dogora asked.

“No—listen, it’s pretty much guaranteed that you’re going to die.”

“No one said it’s a sure thing.” Dogora glared at Allen as he argued his point and finally got Allen to see where he was coming from.

*You’re okay with it even knowing the danger?*

Figuring that it was unlikely Dogora would change his mind no matter what he was asked, Allen decided to try a different tactic. Up until now, he had always worked within a certain margin of safety—a term he had used in his previous life—when fighting. This meant that he would first lower the perceived threat level in order to ensure avoiding truly dangerous situations. In the event that the risk was higher than anticipated, this would still give him some room to escape before falling into any actual danger.

This was the same assumption he had operated under while in the Academy’s dungeons and even when fighting in the Rohzenheim war. It was also why, in the Rank S dungeon, he had waited for his friends to get their class promotions before moving on to more dangerous floors, as well as why he had gathered all four parties together before taking on the final floor boss. All of his choices were made out of his desire to maintain his margin of safety and ensure his friends’ survival.

Were someone to die, Keel could revive them just once, and the party could bring one more person back using the spirit magic Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits. They would be unable to save a third person. Of course, if Keel were taken out, then things would become hopeless right then and there. That was why, even after defeating the final floor boss with the help of three other parties, the Gamers had gone back to farming iron golems rather than taking it on again. It had been an immense challenge even with all four parties working together, so there was no guarantee that Allen’s group could have done it safely on their own.

Although his behavior was extreme, Allen only acted after ensuring everyone’s safety. But that was all as it related to himself. When his friends’ lives were on the line as well, he never wanted to take any chances.

Allen somehow managed to explain all this to Dogora, but his friend did not seem to have changed his mind.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but it doesn’t matter.”

“No, it’s just...” Allen was trying to find the right words when Dogora cut in.

“Allen, I really do appreciate your concern. That’s why I’ve never mentioned this before, but I guess I should tell you now.”

Allen stayed silent as Dogora continued speaking.

“I’m not your pawn! You have no right to decide my future! *I’m* gonna decide what’s most important to me!”

His words caused Allen to swallow hard in surprise.

“I’m going with you to help save the people of Elmahl! I’ve already made my decision!”

This time, it was not just Allen who was stunned into silence, but the elven queen, Prince Zeu, and all the others in the room as well. Everyone stopped to look at Dogora.

*Is this what maturity looks like? Has Dogora finally grown up? Speaking of which, I remember Mash had grown quite a bit too. Maybe I’m the only one who hasn’t.*

Allen thought back on his interactions with his younger brother at the Gamers’ coming-of-age ceremony the previous year. Mash would be heading off to the Academy in April, so Allen had given him some rings to help boost his stats—though his younger brother had turned him down, insisting that he wanted to get stronger on his own. The boy eventually accepted his older brother’s present, but Allen could not help but realize that Mash had grown up more than he had expected, especially in light of his desire to grow strong. Dogora must have felt the same way.

In the Rank S dungeon, Dogora had had the opportunity to spend time with Helmios, a man loved the world over; the great Admiral Garara, who always cared for his men; and Prince Zeu, a beastkin who bore the burden of deciding the very fate of his country. Dogora had always said that he, too, wanted to be a hero, and had probably spent his time with those grand figures trying to figure out what he should do in order to become one. He had even trained under Dverg and listened to his stories, likely considering him a prime example of what a hero was.



His statement that he was not Allen's pawn had probably been strongly influenced by Prince Zeu's speech during the audience with the Baukisian emperor. Dogora was calling the shots for himself. And while he had not been born into a royal family, he shared Zeu's belief in what it meant to live as a hero.

Still, Allen was making the decisions on how they would proceed.

"Listen, Dogora, I value your life and all of my friends' lives immensely. If you end up in any sort of life-threatening danger, I'll send you back to the village. That might be the end of our adventure. Are you okay with that?"

Just like Dogora, Allen had shots that he needed to call—even if doing so meant going against his friends' wishes.

*This is probably the first time Dogora's ever really stood up for himself like this.*

Allen waited in silence for a few moments to give Dogora a chance to respond.

"That's fine. Do what you need to do," Dogora replied while puffing out his chest. The rest of the Gamers, who had been watching with bated breath, let out audible sighs of relief.

"Sorry for the commotion." After apologizing to the queen, the party prepared to head out to Elmahl. However, Rohzen, who had remained frozen atop Sophie's head, finally spoke up.

"Wait, you're about to leave? Hold on a moment!"

*Huh? He's been acting weird for a while now. Speaking of which, there was something off about his reaction when Temi said that we would be putting our lives at risk.*

Certainly, the elves had been surprised by Temi's fortune, but Rohzen in particular had seemed to react strongly to the news.

"What is it, my lord?" The elven queen looked alarmed at his odd behavior.

"Ah, well..." Rohzen coughed to clear his throat and readjusted himself now that all eyes were on him. Figuring that he was about to show them something,

Allen focused his attention especially hard on the God of Spirits.

“My lord?” This time it was Sophie who spoke to the Spirit God. When she did, Rohzen, still atop her head, stood on his hind legs and raised his hands skyward before slowly lowering them. In the flash, a curtain-like item appeared in his hands.

“Isley finally granted me the permission I had asked for. You may wear this.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“This, Sophie, is known as a Spiritualist’s Cloak. It was worn by the priestess Rohletta.”

“Wow, Rohletta’s cloak?! B-But are you sure?! Ah, my apologies for the outburst.” The normally calm and collected Siguul was beside himself with emotion and quickly apologized when he noticed that everyone was looking at him.

*“Spiritualist,” huh? That must be a Talent beyond Spirit User and even Grand Spirit User. “Rohletta” sounds suspiciously similar to “Rohzen” too, so I wonder if she’s a priestess who entered into a contract with him.*

“Thank you for your help in the face of danger, Spirit God. Though I must admit that your timing is impeccable.” Allen still had no idea what a Spiritualist was, but as he looked closely at the hemp robe that looked like a cultural artifact from one of the South American empires in his past life, he could not help but wonder why Rohzen would retrieve it now.

“Oh, well, I actually wanted to give it to you much sooner. I even asked Great Spirit God Isley if we could give Sophie some sort of reward for having saved the elves, as well as all you’ve done for us spirits. Though I guess now is the perfect time to give it to you. Alas, Isley has never quite been good with people. Ha ha.” He seemed to be speaking quickly on purpose, almost as if to pretend he had not entirely heard their question.

Though it seemed like it was only an excuse, it was also true that, with the exception of Allen, Sophie and the rest of the Gamers had undergone class promotions and now possessed four-star Talents. However, now that they were going to create a class promotion dungeon, that somewhat lessened the

importance of what they had gained. That was the reason Rohzen had gone out of his way to try to secure Sophie a reward befitting what she had done to prevent the invasion of Rohzenheim.

“Thank you, my lord.” Sophie took the hempen robe into her hands. Compared to Keel’s magic robe, it was not quite as bright white and looked more like a traditional garment.

*Still, Dogora’s the one in the most danger. Then again, I guess we don’t have any real reason to turn away the gift, even if it does show a certain amount of favoritism toward Sophie.*

Rohzen had provided Sophie with a great deal of advice back in the Rank S dungeon when the Demon Lord Army had stolen Freyja’s divine vessel, and now was no different. Though the spirit gods were not ones to discuss their true thoughts and feelings, it was probably for the best that the Gamers simply accepted any gifts from the gods that could keep Sophie out of danger.

As Allen recalled, Isley was the most powerful spirit living in the Divine Realm, who controlled all of the other spirit gods and Sovereigns of Spirits. The elves had no way of speaking with Isley directly and merely knew of the Great Spirit God’s existence as a sort of concept. Rohzen, on the other hand, would visit the Divine Realm from time to time, and apparently took the opportunities to speak with Isley.

“Your Majesty, I apologize for the additional request, but it’s imperative that we learn the defensive abilities of this item as soon as possible. Could you have an analyst look at this for us?”

“Of course; I’ll summon one at once. Siguul?”

“Ah, yes! There are some in the temple, so I’ll call one over right away!”

The party would next be heading into the dangerous realm that was Elmahl, and none of the members had the Analyze skill to check the effects of equipment. Since equipment in this world had various Endurance effects and such that could not be seen with the naked eye, knowing what effects your items had could greatly affect your battle plan. Before heading out, Allen figured it best to have the item looked at by someone with Analyze.

A figure showed up a short time later in the hall and, without waiting for an explanation, began to analyze the garment.

### **Spiritualist's Cloak Analysis:**

- Endurance: 10,000
- HP: 5,000
- MP: 5,000
- Physical Damage Reduction (Medium)
- Magical Damage Reduction (Medium)
- Poison Defense (Medium)

Allen was taken aback by the results of the analysis.

*Wow! Its Endurance is on par with equipment made from orichalcum! And the rest of its buffs are even better. This is one impressive piece of equipment.*

While Allen and the rest of the Gamers were stunned into silence, the elven generals and elders in the hall looked quite pleased. They thought quite highly of the priestess Rohletta, who had led the elves to victory in their battle against the dark elves nearly three thousand years prior. And now, despite facing annihilation once again, they were in possession of the cloak she had worn when she had guided them to salvation. Though Allen would have liked a weapon as well, he figured the spirit gods had done what they could to keep Sophie safe. In that light, he was glad to have it.

*Looks like we've gotten our hands on some amazing equipment. It'll definitely power Sophie up quite a bit, which is great, but that does nothing about the risk of Dogora dying. In a sense, this really does nothing to change the battle.*

Allen turned back to the queen and she nodded, apparently understanding what he wished to say.

"Well then, it's about time for us to head off."

"If you have enough time, I can arrange for a magic ship."

Allen shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary. I could hardly imagine taking a valued magic ship away from you when you're in the midst of preparing



for a Demon Lord Army invasion. Meruru?”

Meruru nodded and held up her slate-filled magic disc.

“Leave it to me! Tam-Tam, you’re up! Eagle Mode!” As she shouted out her command, she struck a cool pose resemblant of an eagle flapping its wings, just like Allen had suggested. She called it the “savage eagle pose” and had decided that she would use it when calling forth Tam-Tam in its Eagle Mode. Always a fan of thinking up new poses, Meruru seemed quite content with it.

The sunlight beaming through the temple’s roof that had been blown out during the battle with Rehzal suddenly dimmed. Everyone looked up to see a mechanical-looking magic object floating above the temple.

“I-Is that a magic ship?!”

Cries of shock could be heard coming from the elven guards outside. Only after their generals rushed over and explained that there was no threat did they calm down. What they saw was a huge, streamlined vehicle with a single main wing that extended past either side and a tail fin that protruded vertically from the rear. It was Tam-Tam, Meruru’s golem, in its “transportation (flying)” mode.

There were several types of transportation slates that allowed for travel via land, sea, and air, but generally, these all took up five magic disc slots. As a reward for beating the Rank S dungeon’s final floor boss, the Dungeon Master had added enough space so that up to twenty slates total could be inserted using both sides of Meruru’s magic disc. As a result, her golem was able to transform into a supersized, hundred-meter-long machine that could fly through the sky—a form that was impossible for a normal golem to take.

“All right, let’s go!”

Meruru briefly floated into the air before flying up through the hole in the ceiling and being pulled into Tam-Tam’s crystal cockpit, where the pilot’s seat was located. This was usually found in the chest of the golem, but in Eagle Mode it moved to the very front. As soon as Meruru disappeared through the hole in the ceiling, she opened up the back of the vehicle.

“Let’s go, guys!” Allen Summoned some Bird Bs, which his friends quickly mounted and rode into the sky. “Goodbye, Your Majesty. Please reach out via

Okiyosan if you need anything.” He then used the buff he received from Bird A, Flight, to fly up into Tam-Tam.

“O-Of course.” The queen watched in surprise as she saw the Gamers off.

“Do you know how to get to Elmahl?” Allen asked upon joining Meruru in the cockpit.

“Of course. I added a Map slate too.”

The cockpit consisted of a transparent window made of crystal and a single seat in which Meruru sat. Between the window and the seat was a pitch-black, horizontal, plate-shaped magic tool. Meruru placed her right palm over the plate and the world outside rotated to the left. Apparently Tam-Tam had turned.

When Meruru touched the black control panel with her left hand, a line of blue light appeared on it, drawing a simplified map. She closed and opened her fingers, followed by her tapping the control panel, which caused a red arrow to appear around Rohzenheim on her map. The arrow rotated to the southeast, seemingly showing Tam-Tam’s location and orientation.

“All right, we don’t have a lot of time. Let’s get going.”

“Gotcha! Full power! Tam-Tam, blast off!” No sooner had the words left Meruru’s mouth than Tam-Tam started to speed off.

“This really is amazing.”

Everyone looked forward to where Elmahl would soon appear. Dogora muttered something under his breath when he saw Sophie with her new equipment and Meruru piloting Tam-Tam, but his words were inaudible.

## Chapter 2: Allen's Decision and Concern for His Friends

While flying the Gamers south across Rohzenheim following their departure from Fortenia, Meruru made some adjustments to Tam-Tam's systems and controls. The golem's Eagle Mode, which boasted a wingspan of nearly a hundred meters, could easily fit all eight members in its large cockpit.

It was a rare occurrence for Allen and his friends to ride inside a golem. With the exception of one person, everyone in the party was inspecting the cockpit and watching Meruru work with great interest.

Meruru's magic disc was currently set up as follows:

### Meruru's Magic Disc

- Body slate (Full Body): one five-slot slate
- Gigantify slate: one two-slot slate
- Supergigantify slate: one three-slot slate
- Movement slate (Sky): one five-slot slate
- Map slate (World): one two-slot slate
- Enhancement slate (Agility): three one-slot slates

The reason she was using the three Agility-enhancing slates was so that they could reach the crisis-stricken Elmahl as quickly as possible. Since they would be traveling to a different continent, they had decided to use a Map slate that showed the layout of the entire world. They also had individual slates that provided more in-depth views of each of the five continents, which they could swap in if they so chose. Incidentally, they had even gotten their hands on one for the Forgotten Continent, where the Demon Lord was located.

The map the slate pulled up on Meruru's control panel consisted of a series of illuminated blue lines and a red marker that showed Tam-Tam's current

location. This marker was pointing off to the south, at a continent separated from Rohzenheim by an ocean. And though the map did not mark the borders of the multitude of small nations on the continent, the Gamers knew that just north of its center was their target: the Holy Land of Elmahl.

*It'd be great if it would show the locations of towns and forts. Though it looks like it lets you mark them yourself.*

Just as with the national borders, the map did not display any man-made objects such as towns, forts, or bridges. However, were the need to arise, all Meruru had to do was concentrate on her magic disc in order to mark any buildings.

“Are you sure we don’t need any weapons?” Meruru asked, turning toward Allen. Even in flight mode, the golem was capable of using long-range attack slates to equip weapons, which would attach to its wings. Equipping them would allow it to attack much like the mithril golems they had fought back in the Rank S dungeon.

### **Long-range Attack Slates: Abilities and Slots**

- Long-range attack slate (small multibarrel cannon): one slot
- Long-range attack slate (large multibarrel cannon): two slots
- Long-range attack slate (long-range sniper rifle): five slots

The problem was that if they wanted to use the long-range attack slates, they would have to remove the Agility-buffing slates. Since the golem’s speed was based on its Agility, they had little choice in the matter.

“I’m sure. It’s best to prioritize speed at the moment.”

“Okay, gotcha.”

Meruru nodded, tapped around on the control panel, and traced the map with her finger. She looked full of confidence; Allen was sure she would not



make a mistake even if she were to get momentarily stuck on what to do next. He was thankful that she had put a lot of practice into piloting Tam-Tam.

While they were in the Rank S dungeon, Allen and the Gamers had repeated their schedule of three days in the dungeon followed by two days of rest. Ever since they had started farming iron golems earlier this year, Meruru had been proactively checking the effects of any new slates they found in treasure chests.

“Let’s move up a little higher; I’d hate to crash into any flying monsters. Oh, nice! Looks like Tam-Tam will head to Elmahl all on its own now. We should arrive tomorrow morning!” Having seemingly set Tam-Tam on autopilot, Meruru stood up from the pilot’s seat.

Krena’s eyes lit up as she looked at Meruru. “Wow, it can even fly on its own?! You’re amazing, Meruru!” Meruru chuckled shyly at this, and the rest of the Gamers—aside from Dogora—crowded around her.

“Guess I’m gonna rest until tomorrow morning, then.” With that, Dogora made to leave the cockpit.

At over a hundred meters long, Tam-Tam’s Eagle Mode was big enough for each of the party members to have their own rooms.

“Will he be okay, Allen?” Cecil asked, watching as Dogora left the cockpit.

As far as Allen was concerned, though he and his friends went on adventures together, what was most important to each of them varied. In Dogora’s case, it was to become a hero—his dream since childhood. However, Allen figured that, after mentioning that dream earlier at the temple in Fortenia, Dogora had realized that he was worrying his friends and begun to wonder if his decision was the correct one.

“Hmm, I think it’d do him some good to calm down and think things over.”

Cecil nodded, keeping her eyes on Dogora as he walked away. “I guess you’re right.”

On a whim, Allen flipped open his grimoire and noticed that Meruru’s MP was draining fast. A golem moved by consuming the MP of the owner of the magic disc used to call it forth, and that went for flying as well. Meruru was continuously using up her MP despite no longer being in the pilot’s seat.

*I imagine the MP usage rate is especially high when flying a Supergigantified golem.*

Allen recalled the MP recovery ring Sophie had returned to him. “It looks like you’re gonna run out of MP before we arrive at this rate. You should put this on,” he said, handing the ring to Meruru.

“Thanks.”

“Until we get there, let’s all take turns resting.”

“Good idea,” Cecil replied. “Even outside of dungeons, it’s important to keep watch at night.” Meruru would stay in the cockpit the whole time in case anything went wrong while the rest of the members rested. At the same time, Allen would use Bird A’s Return to Nest Ability in order to go back to Fortenia and pick up some necessary items.

Bird A’s Return to Nest and Homing Instinct allowed Allen to place nests on moving objects. He had first tested this by placing one on the magic ship that had taken the Gamers to their audience in front of the emperor of Baukis.

After some time, a light began to shine in from the port side of the southbound Tam-Tam’s cockpit. As it did, a dark object in the distance came into view.

“A continent!” Krena shouted, her face illuminated by the sunrise. Allen and the others in the cockpit crowded forward to take a look for themselves.

Once Tam-Tam’s shadow was finally over land, Cecil called out to Allen. “Where should we go first?”

Allen pulled out a map of Elmahl he had grabbed from Fortenia and opened it up. The map displayed on Tam-Tam’s panel had only a simplified version of the world and the continents alike; the details on it were hard to make out and it contained no information on towns. By looking at the map showing important cities and routes he had obtained, Allen was able to figure out where they were going.

“Here.” He pointed toward the Elmahlan city of Neel. Immediately, Krena and Keel both responded.

“Huh? But why?”

“What? Why there?”

*Huh, so these two were the first to take notice. Then again, I figured Keel would.*

“Teomenia is probably beyond saving. It’s already been three days, after all.”

Neel had sent out the call for help to all the nations of the world just one day earlier. In the message, they had mentioned that the capital of Teomenia had been consumed by a mysterious flame two days before that. Moreover, considering that the priests and commoners who had escaped the blazing capital had turned into monsters, Allen figured that Teomenia had fallen to those monsters by now.

“I see...” Krena’s shoulders slumped as she spoke.

Keel, however, appeared unconvinced by Allen’s decision. “Fine, then I’ll go it alone. I’ll head to Teomenia by myself.” Keel shot Allen a glare just as Dogora had in Fortenia. Referred to as the “Saint King of Fortune” among his friends, he was always concerned with the welfare of others and doing what was right.

When the Carnel family’s title and fiefdom were stripped from them, Keel, his younger sister, Nina, and the family’s servants were temporarily taken in by the Church of Elmea. Keel, who had already known that he had the Cleric Talent, received the title of “priest in training” and helped with the Church’s activities, using his magic to heal the wounds of the injured while supporting his family with what little money he earned in alms. He refused to turn his back on the debt he owed the Church and, if given the opportunity to help those in positions similar to his, would often spend his free time in any churches he happened to find.

Due to that experience and his strong sense of justice, he would spend his three days in the Rank S dungeon with the party and spend his two days off at the church located on the first floor of the Rank S dungeon. There, he would prepare food, heal the injured, and do whatever else he could to assist.

“If there’s even one survivor left, then I must go to them,” Keel declared in a passionate voice.

“How about temporarily splitting up the party?” Cecil seemed to be in support of Keel’s plan, but Allen shook his head.

“No. We still don’t know what’s actually going on. I plan on sending Merus to Teomenia, so could you agree with this plan for now?”

Even on his own, Merus would have little difficulty handling most monsters, allowing him to get an idea of what had happened and save any survivors. In the worst-case scenario of running into a demon, he could use his Angel Halo Ability to use Summons and have them deal with the situation. Even if he were struck down, Merus could always be Summoned again, so there was virtually no risk involved.

*I don’t know if this is actually the right decision or not, but we don’t exactly have time to argue about it.*

“So, we’ll prioritize getting information about Teomenia while working to save Neel, right?” Cecil clarified Allen’s plan.

Keel seemed sold on the idea. “I guess I get it.”

“That’s the plan. Do you know where you’re going?” Allen asked Merus.

“That I do. I’ve been there tons of times.” The Holy Capital of Teomenia was where the vast majority of believers in Elmea, the God of Creation, were found. Merus had undoubtedly traveled there on countless occasions as the First Angel.

“I’m counting on you.” With that, Allen Summoned Merus and sent him off to Teomenia.

“All right, then we’re off to Neel, huh?” Meruru adjusted Tam-Tam’s route as she spoke. The golem picked up speed, and within a matter of moments they were hovering in the sky over Neel.

Keel took a look out the front window of the cockpit and scowled. “They’re being attacked by monsters!”

Allen approached the window as well and looked down at Neel. Countless humanoid figures swarmed the outer walls of the city. Soldiers shot bows and threw rocks at them from the pathways running atop the city’s outer wall, and

the gate had been shut to prevent the monsters from entering. However, in addition to the humanoid figures, there were also trolls, ogres, and other giant monsters smashing their fists and clubs against the gate, which looked as if it could break away at any moment.

Just then, one of the trolls slammed its massive, treelike club into the gate and knocked it loose. Neel's soldiers watched in horror as it crashed inward toward them.

The city of Neel had prepared to respond to the raid based on information from those who had fled Teomenia. As a result, although they had been able to intercept their foe, the number of enemies had increased with time. On the morning of the third day, the soldiers finally began losing ground to the invading forces.

The soldiers were not planning on leaving, however. They would hold out for as long as possible, buying time to allow the residents to evacuate. Most of the soldiers present realized that they had no choice but to fight to the death, holding out until the very last moment.

Through the open gate rolled in something like a black tsunami. The beings that formed it looked like humans, but if that were the case, would they have so carelessly bumped into and stepped over their comrades while attacking their enemies? If they were human, they must have gone insane.

From beyond the tsunami of people came large monsters trying to push through them. A troll over five meters tall stood drooling in the gateway, probably having waited all night for this feast.

The priests of Elmea prayed while the soldiers adjusted their formation.

"Stand strong! We must protect the city!"

The soldiers responded to their captain's order with a mighty roar and readied the weapons in their shaking hands.

"Turn Undead!"

Suddenly, a young man in a white, gold-embroidered robe appeared, bathed in the bright morning sun. His voice carried far and wide as dazzling light poured down from above toward the wave of monsters both large and small.



The light illuminated those who appeared to be human, and they were reduced to ashes before they could so much as scream. Even the giant monsters such as the trolls and ogres instantly burst into flames, fell forward, and writhed in pain.

The soldiers reflexively craned their necks to look in the direction of the voice. Much to their surprise, there were several winged beasts floating above the city. Atop one of them stood a man with golden hair and a wand—the same young man who had spoken earlier. His wand emitted a divine light as he chanted once more, launching another attack and burning through a large number of monsters.

“There are still a few of them moving!”

A young woman wielding a large sword leaped down from one of the winged beasts. She chopped a troll clean in two as she fell, then dashed off toward the swarm of enemies the moment she hit the ground.

“Krena, Dogora, I’ll leave the rest to you,” the robed figure said. Dogora, with his large shield and greataxe, landed shortly after Krena, and the two shouted their responses.

“Right!”

“Gotcha!”

They immediately got to work swinging their weapons, fighting back against the encroaching enemies.

“Oh, wooow! Th-This is what the saint’s purifying light looks like? Wait! Then is this the youth in gold about whom they prophesied?! Perhaps Lord Elmea *hasn’t* abandoned us!” A smile broke out on the heavily wrinkled face of an elderly, apparently high-ranking priest as he shouted cries of thanks up to the heavens.

*Huh? “Youth in gold”? What’s he talking about?*

Allen left Krena, Dogora, and Keel to deal with the monsters within the city’s limits while he used his Summons to block the swarm from coming through the gate. For some reason, the phrase “youth in gold” struck him as odd.



Keel had upgraded his gear in the Rank S dungeon and was now wearing rather expensive equipment that would have been impossible for even a bishop or archbishop to get their hands on. After clearing the Rank S dungeon, Allen and his friends had farmed iron golems every day afterward, collecting wooden, silver, and gold chests from each one they defeated. In doing so, they had been able to get themselves better equipment.

---

Name: Allen  
Age: 15  
Class: Summoner  
Level: 82  
HP: 2,715 + 2,400  
MP: 4,300 + 2,900  
Attack: 1,508 + 10,400  
Endurance: 1,508 + 5,200  
Agility: 2,807 + 12,835  
Intelligence: 4,310 + 6,533  
Luck: 2,807 + 2,000  
Skills: Summoning {8}, Creation {8}, Synthesis {8},  
Strengthening {8}, Awakening {8}, Expansion {7}, Storage,  
Sharing, Quick Summoning, Equivalency, Deputize, King Me  
{Locked}, Deletion, Sword Mastery {4}, Throwing {3}  
XP: Approx. 600,000,000,000/1,000,000,000,000

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 MP  
Ring 2: +5,000 MP  
Adamantite Sword: +2,500 Attack  
Magic Cape: +6,000 Endurance, +3,000 Attack

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### Holder

Insect: A x 5  
Beast: A x 1  
Bird: A x 5, B x 6, E x 3, F x 1

Grass:

Stone: A x 1

Fish: A x 3, B x 3

Spirit: A x 10

Dragon: A x 41

Angel: A x 1

---

Name: Krena

Age: 15

Class: Sword Emperor

Level: 60

HP: 4,150 + 3,000

MP: 1,832 + 3,000

Attack: 4,150 + 3,000

Endurance: 3,968 + 3,000

Agility: 3,510 + 3,000

Intelligence: 2,250

Luck: 2,688 + 3,000

Skills: Sword Emperor {6}, Slash {6}, Phoenix Smash {6},

Healing Blade {6}, Supreme Ruling Blade {6}, Valor {2},

Sword Mastery {6}

Extra Skill: Limit Break

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Attack

Ring 2: +5,000 Attack

Necklace: +3,000 Attack

Adamantite Greatsword: +3,500 Attack

Adamantite Armor: +3,000 Endurance

---

Name: Cecil Granvelle

Age: 15

Class: Wizardess King

Level: 60

HP: 2,470 + 2,400

MP: 3,974 + 2,400

Attack: 1,640

Endurance: 1,686

Agility: 3,382 + 2,400

Intelligence: 4,138 + 2,400

Luck: 2,541 + 2,400

Skills: Wizardess King {6}, Fire {6}, Ice {6}, Thunder {6},  
Light {6}, Abyss {2}, Sparring {4}

Extra Skill: Petit Meteor

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Intelligence

Ring 2: +5,000 Endurance

Rod of the Wizardess King: +4,000 Intelligence, +20%  
Magical Damage

Robe of the Wizardess King: +4,000 Endurance, Magical  
Damage Resistance (High)

---

Name: Dogora

Age: 15

Class: Destroyer

Level: 60

HP: 4,089 + 2,400

MP: 1,919

Attack: 4,348 + 2,400

Endurance: 3,595 + 2,400

Agility: 2,849 + 2,400

Intelligence: 1,757

Luck: 2,664 + 2,400

Skills: Destroyer {6}, Full Might {6}, Explosion {6},  
Peerless Slash {6}, Slaughter Strike {6}, Fighting Soul  
{2}, Axe Mastery {6}, Shield Mastery {4}

Extra Skill: Heart and Soul

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 Attack  
Ring 2: +5,000 Attack  
Adamantite Greataxe: +4,000 Attack  
Adamantite Large Shield: +3,000 Endurance  
Adamantite Armor: +3,000 Endurance

---

Name: Keel von Carnel  
Age: 15  
Class: Saint King  
Level: 60  
HP: 2,740 + 2,400  
MP: 4,100 + 2,400  
Attack: 1,580  
Endurance: 1,786  
Agility: 2,893 + 2,400  
Intelligence: 4,030 + 2,400  
Luck: 3,634 + 2,400  
Skills: Saint King {6}, Healing {6}, Exorcism {6}, Purify {6}, Holy Wall {6}, Pray {2}, Sword Mastery {3}  
Extra Skill: Drops of God

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 HP  
Ring 2: +5,000 Endurance  
Rod of the Saint King: +4,000 Intelligence, +3,000 HP, +20% Healing  
Vestment of the Saint King: +4,000 Endurance, Magic Resistance (High), Curse Resistance (High)

---

Name: Sophialohne  
Age: 50  
Blessing: God of Spirits  
Class: Grand Spirit User  
Level: 60  
HP: 2,834 + 2,400

MP: 4,156 + 2,400

Attack: 1,933

Endurance: 1,719

Agility: 3,011 + 2,400

Intelligence: 4,243 + 2,400

Luck: 3,453 + 2,400

Skills: Spirit Manifestation {6}, Water {6}, Wind {6},  
Earth {6}, Wood {6}, Bow Mastery {4}

Extra Skill: Grand Spirit Manifestation

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 MP

Ring 2: +5,000 Endurance

Rod of the Grand Spirit User: +6,000 MP, -10% MP  
consumption

Spiritualist's Cloak: +10,000 Endurance, +5,000 HP, +5,000  
MP, Physical Damage Resistance (Mid), Magical Damage  
Resistance (Mid), Poison Defense (Mid)

---

Name: Volmaar

Age: 69

Class: Bow King

Level: 60

HP: 3,736 + 2,400

MP: 1,949

Attack: 3,965 + 2,400

Endurance: 2,960 + 2,400

Agility: 3,428 + 2,400

Intelligence: 1,566

Luck: 1,972 + 2,400

Skills: Bow King {6}, Keen Sight {6}, Fire Dragon Shot {6},  
Strongbow {6}, Power Shot {6}, Angled Shot {2} Bow Mastery  
{6}

Extra Skill: Arrow of Light

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 HP

Ring 2: +5,000 Attack

Adamantite Greatbow: +3,800 Attack

Garment of the Chief Protector: +4,000 Endurance, Breath  
Damage Resistance (Mid)

---

Name: Meruru

Age: 15

Class: Talos General

Level: 60

HP: 1,677 + 1,800

MP: 2,420 + 1,800

Attack: 782 + 1,800

Endurance: 1,318 + 1,800

Agility: 782

Intelligence: 2,420

Luck: 1,503

Skills: Talos General {6}, Flying Arm {6}, Drill Punch {6},  
Laser Sword {6}, Repair {6}, Alloy {2}, Spear Mastery {3},  
Shield Mastery {3}

Extra Skill: Union (Right Arm)

### Equipment

Ring 1: +5,000 HP

Ring 2: +5,000 MP

Necklace: Magic Disc

Talos King's Cloak: +6,000 Endurance, + 3,000 MP, Physical  
Damage Resistance (Mid)

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### **Notes**

- Krena is equipped with the necklace awarded as a first-clear bonus when they beat Goldino, the final floor boss.

- Meruru is equipped with new weapons and armor.

Perhaps the high-ranking priest's surprise was due to seeing Keel outfitted in garb that even the highest of priests could not wear, leading him to believe that this was some kind of divine miracle. Allen could confirm his suspicions once things had calmed down.

It seemed the other priests were also in awe. They gathered under Keel and his Bird B.

"Hey, you guys! Please step back; it's dangerous here!" Keel yelled at the priests while continuing to shower the waves of enemies with purification magic. The light emanating from the tip of his staff also rained down on Krena and Dogora, but it did nothing to them since holy purification magic had no effect on normal humans.

The humanoid figures, however, turned to ash when touched by the purifying light. Some of them, as evidenced by the burns all over their bodies and their charred, ragged clothes, were clearly reanimated corpses. Though they wore the same clothes as ordinary commoners, their pale skin gave away the fact that they were undead. Purification magic was detrimental to them.

Keel furrowed his brows and bit his lip. He deeply regretted being too late to save them. But if he did nothing now, there would be even more victims, so he stayed atop his Bird B and observed the monsters from above. The humanoid undead and large monsters noticed Keel, but made no effort to launch any stones or ranged attacks. "Dogora, Krena, leave these ones to me! Protect the citizens and catch any stragglers I miss!" Keel then slid on the two rings Allen had given him earlier, each of which boosted Intelligence by 5,000, and continued to cast his purification magic on the monsters still forcing their way through the open gate.

While the three of them fought within the city, Allen took out his grimoire and watched as line after line appeared in his log.

<You have defeated one daemoniac incarnation. You have earned 2,400 XP.>

<You have defeated one daemoniac incarnation. You have



earned 2,400 XP.>

<You have defeated one daemonic incarnation. You have earned 2,400 XP.>

*They must be monsters then, considering we're getting XP. The name "daemonic incarnation" must have something to do with Daemonism.*

The daemonic incarnations were clinging like ants to Neel's outer wall, using their colleagues as stepping stones to climb up and over it. The city's soldiers were desperately fighting back from the pathway with their bows and long spears, but they were having trouble with the giant monsters pushing their way through the swarm of daemonic incarnations.

Allen figured that he could leave the inside of the city and the area surrounding the shattered gate to Keel, Dogora, and Krena. "It looks like Keel and the others have the city under control, so we'll destroy the monsters on the outside. Cecil, you take this side with me. Sophie, Volmaar, Meruru, you've got the other side!"

Leaving Meruru in Tam-Tam, which was still in Eagle Mode, Allen, Cecil, Sophie, and Volmaar climbed onto Bird Bs. Then they left the city limits, moving in conjunction with Allen's Summons to take down monsters in a wider area.

"I-Is there really no way for us to save these people?" Cecil asked Allen.

Earlier, shortly after parting with Keel and the others who had rushed ahead to save the city, those who had stayed with Allen had tried everything they could think of to change the humans back from their monster forms. However, neither Blessings of Heaven nor any of the other herbs from his Grass Summons had worked.

"Considering the effect Keel's purification magic is having, it seems they're no longer human." Allen's words brought looks of gloom to the other Gamers' faces as they nodded.

Perhaps there was a way to return them to being human that they had not thought of, or maybe the conditions were not quite right. Whatever the case, they had no way of knowing how long it would take to determine the correct process, and casualties at the hands of the monsters would only mount during

the time they spent looking.

Neel was the closest city to Teomenia, and although it was large enough to deploy magic tools for emergency communications, there were several other small towns and villages in the surrounding area. It seemed unlikely that the hordes of monsters would not attack those smaller settlements as well, but there was no way to know what the situations were like in those places at that moment.

*A large city with a defensive wall like Neel's could probably hold out, but smaller villages and towns wouldn't stand a chance.*

There might have been some places a little farther away that had not yet been attacked, but it would only be a matter of time. If the Gamers did not reduce the number of monsters here in Neel, they would not be able to save those other villagers, to say nothing of the surviving residents of Neel.

“Right now, we just need to save all the people we can.”

As soon as Allen gave his command as the group leader, Cecil set about the task at hand. She leaned forward on her Bird B and stretched her hand out toward the monster horde outside the wall.

“Shining Vanish!”

Light began to gather at the tip of Cecil's rod. Once it had compressed to the size of a table tennis ball, it flew toward the throng of enemies at tremendous speed. A moment later, upon making impact, the projectile expanded into an immense burst of light several dozen meters in diameter. The explosion lasted a mere moment, and when it faded away, all of the trolls, ogres, and daemonic incarnations in the area of effect were gone.

“Thanks,” Allen said, grateful for Cecil's quick thinking. “It looks like they're weak to both light and holy magic.” Unlike Keel, who was primarily a healer, it seemed trolls and ogres could not hold out against Cecil's powerful magic attacks. However...

“It seems that some made it through.” Cecil pointed toward the wasteland where her light bullet had detonated. There, a massive troll was struggling to get back to its feet. Allen looked down at his grimoire.

“Looks like a troll king. There are ogre kings here as well.”

Troll kings were Rank A monsters and an upgraded form of normal trolls, their Rank B brethren. It seemed that there were several Rank A monsters within the mob surrounding the city.

“Hmm, I guess I’ll take care of this. Beas, you’re up.” The moment Allen Summoned his Insect As, the air filled with a tremendous buzz as five massive, thirty-meter-long bees appeared.

---

Type:	Insect
Rank:	A
Name:	Bea
HP:	9,000
MP:	4,000
Attack:	8,900
Endurance:	10,000
Agility:	10,000
Intelligence:	6,700
Luck:	5,500
Bufs:	Endurance 200, Agility 200, Poison Immunity
Abilities:	Slave Needle, Spawn
Awakened Ability:	Queen Cell

---

Compared to other Summons, Insect A had a rather complicated set of Abilities, which would take some time to fully test out. While Allen had been busy farming iron golems in the Rank S dungeon, he had sent some to Rohzenheim to clear out the monsters there, taking the opportunity to read about them using his log. In doing so, he had learned a fair bit about their Abilities and Awakened Ability.

**Insect A Abilities & Awakened Ability**

Slave Needle

- Insect A can control a monster it stings with the needle located at the tip of its abdomen. The effect lasts up to one month. Only the Summon whose needle pierces the monster can control it; Allen cannot give direct instructions.
- It can be used against almost all insect-, beast-, and giant-type monsters, but is not very effective against dragon-type monsters.
- It is ineffective on plant-, ghost-, armored-, or mineral-type monsters.
- There are no rank restrictions on the targets against which it can be used, but the needles also deal damage, which often kills monsters Rank B and lower.
- If successful, Allen receives experience points. In addition, that a monster has been enslaved is displayed in the grimoire's log.

## Enslaved Monsters

- A monster stuck by the Slave Needle. The effect wears off after one month or when the Summon that used Slave Needle dies. When the effect wears off, the target monster dies. Monsters will also die after taking a certain amount of damage.

## Spawn

- Creates one hundred Baby Beas, which are half the size of the original Insect A. Cooldown is one day.
  - The stats of the Baby Beas are half that of Insect A. The only Ability they can use is Slave Needle. If the original Insect A is Unsummoned, reverts to its card form after one month of being Summoned, or is defeated, all Baby Beas spawned from this Ability disappear.
-

Name: Baby Bea  
HP: 4,500  
MP: 2,000  
Attack: 4,450  
Endurance: 6,000 (Strengthened)  
Agility: 6,000 (Strengthened)  
Intelligence: 3,350  
Luck: 2,750  
Ability: Slave Needle

---

### Queen Cell

- Creates a Bea with the same stats and Abilities as the original Insect A. Cooldown is one day.
  - Newly created Beas can use the Spawn Ability immediately upon creation.
- 

Name: Parent Bea  
HP: 9,000  
MP: 4,000  
Attack: 8,900  
Endurance: 10,000 (Strengthened)  
Agility: 10,000 (Strengthened)  
Intelligence: 6,700  
Luck: 5,500  
Abilities: Slave Needle, Spawn

---

“All right, enslave the big Rank A monster and kill the rest,” Allen instructed the awaiting Summons.

The Insect As clacked their mandibles in response, turned around deftly in the air, and made their way toward the troll king.

Noticing the giant bees’ approach, the troll king that had survived Cecil’s light magic attack swung a huge, spiked metal rod to try to scare them away.

However, due to the considerable damage it had taken, its movements were sluggish, and the Insect As easily evaded the metal rod.

The troll king staggered, pulled about by the swinging of its metal rod, and one of the Insect As approached from behind. It grabbed onto the monster's head and pierced its neck with the needle extending from the tip of its swollen belly. The moment it did, the troll king tensed up and dropped the metal rod to the ground. Allen looked down at his grimoire from where he sat atop his Bird B.

<An Insect Summon has enslaved a troll king.>

"Nice! Looking good so far."

*First, let's clear out Neel and make it a defensible base. I can probably use my Beas to gather enough minions to make that happen.*

"Beas, use Spawn and send the Baby Beas to use Slave Needle on other Rank A monsters."

The five Insect As clacked their mandibles and used their Spawn Ability. Each one released a hundred white eggs onto the ground, creating a total of five hundred eggs in a split second. Little grubs crawled out of the eggs, entered a brief pupal stage, and then grew wings and transformed into Summons half the size of the Insect As. The five hundred Baby Beas, under the control of their parent Insect As, flew around the outer wall and began attacking monsters.

"Is it going well?" Cecil called out to Allen.

"Yep. We should get going too. I want to use the Rank A monsters as my minions, so try to go easy on them. That said, those guys have the ability to regenerate, so you probably don't need to worry too much about it."

Not only did troll-type monsters have a formidable amount of HP, but they also had a regeneration ability, which passively regenerated their HP. It would be a challenge for Cecil to take down a troll king with a single magic attack.

"Well, which one is it? Seriously, Allen." After mumbling her annoyance, Cecil headed out on her Bird B, attacking one monster after another as she flew over them.

Allen gave detailed instructions to the Insect As to enslave the Rank A monsters that survived Cecil's attacks. While they did that, he traversed the outer wall of the city atop his Bird B, using his Grass A to sow Gold Beans. When a Gold Bean fell to the ground, it instantly grew into a tree as tall as a person. These trees created barriers that, though invisible to Allen's eyes, would keep monsters Rank A and below from approaching. As he did this, he also tried using Blessings from Heaven and other herbs in an attempt to turn those showing up in his log as daemonic incarnations back into humans. Not a single one changed, however.

Meanwhile, along the pathway running atop the outer wall, the soldiers of Neel were stunned by the growth of mysterious trees and the fact that the monsters avoided them for some reason. The monsters were continuing to come from the direction of Teomenia, but they stopped moving before they got too close. The soldiers watched the winged beasts approach as the young heroes on their backs showered the monsters with spells and arrows from above, culling their numbers.

"J-Just what's going on here?"

"Have we been spared?"

When the soldiers looked at the ground between the trees that had suddenly sprouted and the city's outer wall, they saw that there were still hundreds of humanoid creatures left. Fortunately, a giant bee leading a swarm of smaller ones began attacking them, tearing them apart one by one with their mandibles. By the time the sun had completely risen, the large army of monsters that had been relentlessly attacking Neel had dwindled considerably.

"I guess we really couldn't save them," Cecil said in a sad voice.

"There's nothing we could've done," Allen replied clearly. He, as their leader, was ready to bear the burden of the decisions he had made. "After all, there was ultimately no right answer."

"Thanks. But could you please not treat us like children, Allen?"

"You're right. Sorry." While he had intended to help minimize her emotional burden, that was apparently unnecessary.



Eventually, Sophie and Volmaar returned. When they did, Cecil decided to ask about their next plan of action. “It looks like we’re all here. What now? Should we head to Keel and the others?”

“No. I want to send my Summons to the other towns first.”

*Considering the enemy’s strength and numbers, my original plan should work out just fine.*

Allen ordered the Insect As to leave their enslaved giant monsters and take the Parent Beas and Baby Beas on a search-and-destroy mission. He then began adjusting the cards in his holder for the battle. The pages of his grimoire flipped at high speed, and he Summoned some Beast As.

Ten giant wolves appeared when he did, each one fifteen meters tall and covered in silvery white hair. They had ferocious eyes and long, sharp fangs, as well as vicious claws on each of their legs. In addition to their huge bodies, their Agility stats were at nearly 10,000 even without Strengthening. Using their Ability, they could run faster than flying Summons. Allen figured these Summons had been created specifically for situations where every second counted.

---

Type: Beast
Rank: A
Name: Hayate
HP: 10,000
MP: 8,000
Attack: 10,000
Endurance: 7,000
Agility: 9,800
Intelligence: 7,500
Luck: 6,600
Bufs: HP 200, Attack 200, Increased Critical Rate
Abilities: Gale Strike, Blink
Awakened Ability: Blink Strike

---

“I see it’s finally time for us to take center stage, Master Allen,” one of the wolves said. Beast, Fish, Dragon, and Ghost Summons could usually speak to humans.

“Right now, we need your Agility. Do you know what to prioritize?”

“Yes. Saving villages and towns is more important than killing monsters. I already have the map in my head.”

Allen had already shared his thoughts with the Summons while they were still cards in his grimoire. Considering that time was of the essence, he had decided to take advantage of this special feature as a Summoner.

“Oh, right. If you’re not sure whether a target is a human who’s turned into a monster or simply a human running, just ignore them. Focus on rescuing as many settlements as you can.”

Allen then Summoned ten each of his Bird As and Ghost As to join the group of Beast As. He then gave Gold Beans and Blessings of Heaven to the Ghost As.

At Allen’s signal, the Beast As took off running across the now sparsely forested ground, scattering in all directions. Up in the air, the Insect As, Parent Beas, and Baby Beas chased after them in groups of about fifty.

“I wonder if there are any towns left to save.”

“Assuming the monsters are on the same scale as what we fought here, the Hayates and Beas should be able to handle them. All we can do is pray that they weren’t attacked by even more powerful enemies and that they’ve been able to hold out for these four days since Teomenia went up in flames like Neel here.”

“I guess you’re right. I wonder what happened to the residents of Teomenia.”

“I doubt there are any survivors.” As he spoke, Allen checked in on what Merus was seeing back in Teomenia. The Angel A had just arrived, but all he could see in his field of vision was a charred cityscape. Corpses riddled the streets, and whenever Merus did find something that moved, it was a daemonic incarnation with burns all over its body. The creatures remained unaware of Merus’s presence as he flew, and as he was prioritizing scouting and rescue, he dared not make contact. Instead, he simply continued his search.

*Huh? What's that?*

At the center of the city, in the direction of the square where the founder of the Church of Gushara had been executed, Allen could see a pillar of bluish-white light. When Merus looked up, he saw that the pillar of light rose vertically to a certain point in the sky, where it then bent at a right angle, turning due south.

When Merus made his way to the square, there was nothing but empty, charred ruins. This was where the huge pillar of fire that had incinerated the city had started, but now, there was no fire to be seen. The abnormal pillar of bluish-white light was rising from a location adjacent to the square—the Temple of Elmea, the God of Creation.

## Chapter 3: Daemonic Incarnations

Allen and the others rode their Bird Bs over Neel's outer wall and landed just inside the shattered gate. There, a large group of residents had gathered, a number of them staring agape at the group and their Summons. The majority refused to get close, however, instead merely watching from a distance as they talked among themselves.

"This crowd coming together must mean that all the monsters in the city have been beaten."

"Thanks to you, Keel, and everyone else, things worked out so well."

The residents' attention was focused on Keel, who was flanked by Krena and Dogora, as he conversed with several of what seemed to be the city's priests. Even from a distance, it was clear that something was off about him. Maybe he was thinking about what it meant to defeat the daemonic incarnations, or perhaps he was explaining to the priests what they had to do going forward, but whatever the case, people were paying close attention to Keel's serious demeanor.

*Now that I think about it, in the Church of Elmea, a Cleric is seen as a healer who performs miracles to save the believers.*

Allen thought back on his religious studies back at the Academy.

According to Elmean teachings, God of Creation Elmea watched over those who willingly underwent Trials. In order to support and guide those who did so for the sake of others, he began to bestow the power of healing upon them. If it was discovered at an Appraisal Ceremony that someone had a healing Talent, they would be admitted to the Elmea Church as a child of miracles. One such child had been found during Allen's Appraisal Ceremony.

*Huh, come to think of it, they had initially referred to Keel as the "youth in gold." Something tells me this is pretty important information.*

"Oh, Allen, you're back. It looks like they've been expecting us."

Keel had noticed Allen and called out to him. When he did, the group surrounding him suddenly turned to face them.

“Are those your allies, Sir Keel?” one of the priests asked.

Originally, healing roles were considered sacred. Thus, Keel, a healer who had also destroyed the monsters attacking the city, must have been some kind of miraculous figure. Keel shot an annoyed look at Allen and Cecil, who were smirking at the difference between this perception of him and his actual character.

“Correct. As I mentioned previously, they’re members of my party. The black-haired boy is our leader, Allen.”

“Allen? The Rank S adventurer known as the Summoner of the Beginning?”

*Whoa, they know who I am?* It had only been ten days since the announcement via magic tools that he had been granted the status of Rank S adventurer.

Allen approached the priest who had mentioned him. “Are you perhaps the one who sent out the call for help?”

Compared to the other elderly priests surrounding Keel, this man was much younger, appearing to be in his forties. He had long, bushy eyebrows and chiseled facial features. He was quite good-looking, if not a little too distinct, and seemed to hold a rather high position within the Church.

“That is correct; it is I who issued the order. You may call me Krympton.”

*“Issued the order”? In that case, he must be pretty highly ranked within the priesthood. Y’know, I recall learning about a high-ranking priest named Krympton at the Academy.*

“Ah, Krympton, one of the cardinals of the Church of Elmea, correct?”

“You are correct. Given the crisis we found ourselves in, I took control of the situation. Putting that aside, allow me to offer my sincerest thanks for making the journey here. I never imagined you would have made such haste. This is truly as was told in the revelation from Lord Elmea,” the shocked cardinal replied. While it was true that many of the priests surrounding Keel were of

high rank, they were more reserved than the cardinal. As such, they had tasked him with handling Keel, Allen, and the other party members.

Cardinal Krympton Dampla was the second-highest-ranking member of the Church of Elmea. Though a man of his station would almost certainly have been in Teomenia for the execution where the fire had broken out, here he stood, by all appearances safe and sound.

It was just before noon the day prior that the cardinal had sent out the distress signal. Normally, rushing over from the nearest continent by high-speed magic ship would take no fewer than five days. Even one of the fastest magic ships in the Empire of Baukis would need two to three days to make the trip. It was unthinkable that Allen had evaluated the distress call, decided to send aid, and made the necessary preparations for departure in just a single day.

“‘Revelation’? You mean to say that you had a premonition of these events?”

“Not exactly, but the pope mentioned that he had received a revelation just prior to the carrying out of the execution. He requested that a youth in gold be summoned...”

The cardinal, overcome with emotion, leaned in and pulled Keel into an embrace. Allen and the rest of the group simply watched on, making no attempt to assist their friend.

“Wha— L-Let go of me!”

*Sounds like it wasn't some kind of vision of the future, then. Judging by the situation in Teomenia, it wasn't enough to call off the burning at the stake, but Elmea had still alerted them of danger.*

Either way, it seemed that there was grounds for the Church to request help from the rest of the world. The pope, who had received a divine revelation of a youth in gold rushing to their aid, had ordered the cardinal to send that request, and in answering it, the Gamers now found themselves here.

After Keel had taken cover behind Allen's back, Allen carried on the conversation on his behalf. “Sorry, but I think it's too early to start getting emotional. The danger isn't completely gone yet, so could you please tell us a little more about Daemonism and what's going on now?”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. I trust you’ll continue your efforts to protect us?”

“Of course. We may only be one party, but I promise we’ll do our best.”

The Demon Lord Army had initiated an invasion from the north, and Allen wanted to reassure the cardinal that there was no cause for concern, even though his party had fewer than ten members.

“We believe in the revelation from Lord Elmea and thank you for your efforts. As for what happened...” The cardinal seemed to believe that this was somehow the intention of the God of Creation—something akin to fate. And though Allen did not know the specific details of the revelation, he figured it would be best if the Church entrusted him with carrying it out.

The cardinal began to describe what had happened. In the morning three days prior, throngs of people had filled the central square of Teomenia to the brim. They were members—so-called disciples—of a group called the Church of Gushara, and they had come knowing that their leader, Pontiff Gushara Selbirohl, was to be executed at noon.

“Did the disciples try to stop the execution?”

“Yes, they did. We of the Elmea Church, with the cooperation of Shia from Albahal, had captured Gushara and publicly tried him for his crimes and the terrible events his actions wrought. Our intention was to convince the disciples to abandon such terrifying, heretical teachings, but it only served to bring them together.”

Gushara had been guilty of many misdeeds within the Union over the past several decades. He had sweet-talked the people while skillfully increasing the number of his disciples by freely distributing alms. Behind the scenes, he gave his followers quotas for recruiting other disciples, and those who failed to meet them were severely punished or made examples of by being sacrificed to the evil god. Additionally, in order to maintain salvation without charge, he had made his disciples raid the homes of wealthy, noble, or otherwise influential people, many of whom had disappeared in the past few years.

It was only after the Church of Elmea had investigated and interrogated Gushara that all of this had come to light. The Church of Gushara had managed to keep such actions secret until then, even from most of its followers.



After it was decided that Gushara would be executed, the Church of Elmea had tried to convince his disciples that their pontiff had covertly perpetrated crimes deserving execution. Over time, this information reached every corner of the Church of Elmea; because not every city had magic tools for communication, the only way to explain the situation had been to gather believers of the Church of Gushara at a temple. As a result of these efforts, the execution has been delayed by more than a month.

“During that one-month period, the disciples of Daemonism gathered in Teomenia. It soon became clear that they intended to stop Gushara from being executed, so we assembled soldiers and kept them on standby.”

On the day of the execution, only mere days ago, followers of the Elmea Church who believed that the Pontiff of Daemonism deserved to be burned at the stake had gathered in the plaza, but there were an even greater number of Gushara’s disciples. A fence had needed to be set up to keep people from approaching the execution platform, and more troops had been stationed there. However, when the temple bells sounded at noon and Gushara was dragged to the platform, guarded by multiple soldiers, the cardinal and the priests had been surprised to find that Gushara’s disciples neither went on a rampage nor made any effort to save him.

Meanwhile, the pope had tried to persuade Pontiff Gushara one last time. If he were to change his mind and guide the disciples of Daemonism down the righteous path, he would be saved from being burned at the stake. In defiance of the merciful pope, however, Gushara had pulled what looked like a large silver plate out of his clothes. The next moment, pitch-black flames had overflowed from the silver plate, and the disciples were first to let out their cries of anguish. The pope did everything in his power to remedy the situation, but he had been unable to stop it and told the cardinals and other priests to escape from Teomenia.

“And was that the last you saw?” Allen asked.

“Yes. I beg of you, please save Pope Istahl. He has done so much for so many. I trust he is still safe.” The assembled priests began to sob at the cardinal’s words. Allen had heard at the Academy that Pope Istahl Kumes was a virtuous man who had led the Elmea Church for more than fifty years.

Prompted by Allen's gaze, the cardinal continued to explain what had occurred. In the end, around the time the cardinal had left the plaza, pitch-black flames had covered the area, engulfing a large number of the disciples of Daemonism who had refused to flee.

"I can still hear the cries of those we were unable to save. Alas, thanks to you coming to this town's rescue, I realize that this is what I was called to do."

"I understand. Thank you," Allen said to the pained cardinal.

*Does this mean that the pontiff consumed his disciples in the flame to turn them into daemonic incarnations? Were the trolls and ogres also transformed disciples? Or were some other monsters and demons at work?*

"What do we do, Allen?" Krena asked.

"Right, so we need to head to Teomenia, but we also need to protect the other towns and villages. However, before we can do any of that, there's still one more thing I need to check."

"Huh?"

Allen turned to the group that had gathered around them and shouted, "Excuse me, but are there any disciples of Daemonism here?!"

"What do you think you're doing, Allen?"

The group gathered around them started looking around at each other with suspicion. Krena and the others were still unsure of exactly what Allen was doing.

"Any believers of Daemonism, step forward now!" Allen shouted again.

"I-It's not Daemonism!" a young woman called out in response.

"Hmm? And who are you?"

A woman holding a baby stepped out from the crowd in front of Allen. "I'm a disciple of the Church of Gushara!" Allen inspected the woman.

*Huh, so there were disciples here.*

The reason Allen wanted to see if there were any believers was because he thought that no matter how much they had wanted to stop the execution of

their pontiff, not everyone would have been present for it. He figured that if there were any such people, he could find out from them how one became a daemonic incarnation.

When the Gamers had defeated the humanoid monsters surrounding Neel, the log in Allen's grimoire had noted that they were called "daemonic incarnations." Many of them had looked both in appearance and dress to be normal humans, with the only difference being the paleness of their skin. They had not started life as monsters, so they were probably humans who had been turned into monsters. If he could figure out the cause, he might be able to turn them back—or at the very least prevent their numbers from increasing.

"I'm sorry; I got a bit ahead of myself and accidentally referred to it as Daemonism," Allen said to the woman holding the baby when he noticed that she was glaring at him, tears in her eyes.

"N-No, it's fine." Though she seemed to forgive him, she still watched Allen with caution and held her baby tightly to protect them. The woman said nothing further as the crowd watched on in silence.

*I'm impressed she could be such an ardent believer.*

Allen did not have the same devotion to God of Creation Elmea as the rest of the world. He was grateful that he had been brought to this world and that he had been able to devote his life to it, but that was not faith. That being said, he had never believed in gods or anything, even in his previous life. He had played many games where good and evil clashed, where angels and demons fought, but he had done so because he had enjoyed those games, not because he had wanted justice to prevail or to defeat the devil.

In his previous life as Kenichi, he had played a certain online game under the username Kenpy. In that game, he had chosen the Holy Knight class not because of any overflowing sense of justice, but because he could acquire many skills that would prove effective against monsters. Holy Knight and the Dark Knight were two of the strongest warrior-type classes, but he had decided against Dark Knight because it had a lot of skills that were only useful in player-versus-player combat and could not be used against monsters. None of that was necessary to him since he had intended to level up by hunting monsters.

Once Kenichi had become an adult and started living on his own, Christmas was nothing more than a day to play games while eating fried chicken and cake from the supermarket. There would be fewer players online because it was a holiday, but that was all that crossed his mind. While that was Allen's way of thinking, he had no desire to criticize other people's beliefs. He felt that people were free to believe whatever they wanted.

However, if the Church of Gushara was killing people indiscriminately, he could no longer tolerate its existence. Though he might have apologized to the woman, he deemed the Church of Gushara to be an evil religion.

"So then, if you're a follower of the Church of Gushara, what are you doing here? You didn't go to Teomenia?"

"Well, you see, my child is still so young," she responded.

*Hmm, I see. There must still be quite a few disciples like her who were unable to go to Teomenia for personal reasons.*

There was probably a whole slew of people who had not gone, such as those who could not leave their small children, elderly parents, or grandparents; or those who had given up because it was too far away; or even those who tried to go but did not make it in time. There were also almost certainly those who were too poor to make the trip.

*There don't seem to be any serfs here in Elmahl. Its population is probably as large as it is because their travels aren't restricted*

Elmahl did not have a class hierarchy and had no slaves. First and foremost, any country that joined the Union had to abolish serfdom. While criminals were treated like serfs in that their movements were restricted and they were forced to perform farm labor, they were released once their sentences had been served. In addition, with the exception of theocracies such as Elmahl, the vast majority of Union nations were republics. The Union founders had been a group of influential people who had either declared independence or been exiled from the Empire of Giamut. They may have been against serfdom and the slave system.

Perhaps the reason the Church of Gushara had spread on this continent was due to the freedom of movement between countries. In that case, it seemed

that the ringleader had long planned to carry out his scheme on this continent, specifically in Elmahl.

“All right then, I’d like to ask you one more thing. Were there any terms or conditions for entering the Church of Gushara?”

“Well...”

The woman hesitated, so the cardinal spoke up in her place.

“I’ve heard that believers of Daemonism must drink something referred to as ‘holy water’ when joining the Church.” That he referred to the Church of Gushara as “Daemonism” right in front of one of its believers demonstrated how he considered Elmea and Gushara to be in conflict.

“Holy water?”

“It’s some sort of liquid that the pontiff referred to as such. All anyone had to do was drink it and they could become a disciple.”

“You’re rather well-informed.”

“We conducted an undercover investigation prior to arresting the pontiff. The Church of Elmea was unable to turn a blind eye in the face of such a dangerous cult as Daemonism.” Cardinal Krympton fixed the young mother and her baby with an angry glare. She returned his gaze with teary eyes.

“Did the priests conducting the undercover investigation by chance *drink* the holy water?”

“Most likely. However, we used magic to inspect it and found nothing out of the ordinary.”

*I see. But still, this so-called holy water seems pretty suspicious. Maybe it seemed safe but actually contained something that was responsible for turning these people into daemonic incarnations? And yet, this woman isn’t a monster, so maybe you had to be near the flame for it to take effect?*

“Keel, is there any kind of poison that a Cleric’s magic couldn’t discover?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. But I guess it wouldn’t be able to find anything that didn’t cause any direct injury when ingested. The poison can only be uncovered by a Cleric’s magic if it harms the person at the time the magic is cast.”

Allen finally voiced his theory. “So, if there was a poison that wouldn’t turn you into a monster when you drank it but would when combined with something else, then...”

“Huh, I see. Then maybe the people who drank the holy water were only affected once something triggered the reaction, such as hearing Gushara’s voice or touching or viewing the pillar of flame he created.”

“That’s what I think too,” Allen replied, agreeing with Keel’s hypothesis. “They made their preparations in a way that wouldn’t draw any attention and then turned all their disciples into monsters in one go. It’s a pretty elaborate plan.”

“Just what have you been going on about?!” the woman with the baby shouted at the group, tears forming in her eyes as she glared at Allen in frustration. “You call us disciples of Daemonism and go on and on about Pontiff Gushara’s holy water being poison, us disciples turning into monsters... What gives you the right to speak about us so horribly?!”

However, the gears in Allen’s mind were still turning; his attention was focused on other matters.

*Assuming that drinking the holy water was one of the conditions to transform people into monsters, they would stop gaining disciples once the secret got out. In other words, they would want to gather as many of them together as possible and turn them all into monsters at once. Hmm? I see...*

Allen slowly opened his grimoire and pulled a Potherb out from Storage. This medicine would cure any status ailment. He then used it on the woman who continued to fix him with a tear-filled glare.

“Gyaaah!” The woman immediately began to shriek, and a pitch-black shadow erupted from her back. The baby in her arms began to wail in surprise as its mother doubled over in pain.

The crowd surrounding Allen and the woman cried out in shock as they quickly backed up.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Something came out of her!”

“Look, it’s happening to him too!”

“What’s going on?!”

Shouts erupted throughout the crowd as people began to break away from the group. Looking closer, Allen noted that there were several other people hunched over in pain with black shadows erupting from their backs.

“Looks like it worked.”

Potherb had a fifty-meter effect radius, so it seemed that the nearby Gushara believers were affected in the same way as the woman holding the baby.

Upon Potherb’s activation, people watched on in terror as black shadows erupted from the disciples’ backs. These shadows squirmed and writhed in the sunlight before disintegrating into shimmering blue powder. The onlookers breathed a sigh of relief, but they were clearly suspicious and maintained their distance from those whom the shadows had been expelled from mere moments ago.

“Wh-What was that just now?”

“That was an exorcism fruit, a spirit medicine created using the World Tree fruit found in Rohzenheim,” Allen explained, brushing off the cardinal’s question with a simple lie.

Krympton seemed to be sold on this explanation and looked to Sophie, the representative of Rohzenheim’s royal family, for confirmation. He seemed to believe that Rohzenheim was involved in providing them with assistance. However, Rohzen merely responded with a silent grimace from his perch atop Sophie’s shoulder at the mention of the World Tree fruit.

“Such a valuable item is...”

“As a matter of fact, I brought it because I suspected something like this might be happening. Anyway, just to be on the safe side, I’d like to ask that you bring those affected by the shadows somewhere safe and guarded. Please don’t do anything rash.” Though it looked like they had solved the problem, there was no guarantee that they were no longer at risk of turning into daemonic incarnations.

*Well then, considering that Potherb has a fifty-meter radius of effect, it looks like I'll need to gather all the residents of the city into a small area and use it on them before filling the area with Gold Beans.*

Allen checked the quantity of Gold Beans, Silver Beans, Blessings of Heaven, and Potherbs he had in Storage and considered his next move. If he combined his inventory with the amount stockpiled in Rohzenheim and what had been provided to the Central Continent and the Empire of Baukis, he had access to a total of more than ten thousand items. He did not intend to use them wastefully, but even if he were to, he was unlikely to run out anytime soon.

“What do we do next? I guess we’re off to save another town?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Wait. Ah, I see now. Hmm...”

“Is something wrong?” Keel asked, eyeing Allen with suspicion as he watched a scowl form on the black-haired boy’s face. The rest of the group also focused on Allen.

“No, it’s just that Merus was killed in Teomenia.”

“No way! They got Merus?!”

“That’s right, Dogora. Looks like there’s a demon there.”

It appeared to Allen that they were still a long way off from resolving this situation.



## Chapter 4: Those Who Can Be Saved and Those Who Cannot

The sky was clear and bright, but the sun was already slowly setting to the west. About a day's trip south of Teomenia, beyond the hills along the road, was a huge tree in a corner of open grassland that cast a long shadow in the afternoon sun.

A man kept as low as possible and walked silently, keeping an eye on his surroundings. Meanwhile, in the hollow of the giant tree, a woman and a child crouched close to one another. The woman stared out of the cave, frightened, shuddering momentarily at the shadow heading toward her.

"Hey, it's me."

The woman instantly relaxed at the sound of the man's voice. The little girl cried out with a bright, beaming smile, "Welcome back, papa!"

"Shh! Anyway, how were things back in the village, darling?"

"The village has been razed and is filled with an unbelievable number of monsters, just as the priest said," the man replied in a low voice.

"I see. So, what do we do from here?"

"We should go south, and quickly."

"It's getting dark soon. Can't we wait until tomorrow?"

"No. If the monsters in the village start moving, they'll be here in no time. Let's get going."

The mother hesitated for a moment but realized that there were no other options left to them. She climbed out of the cavity in the tree. "No..."

"It is what it is. I'll carry Myla." As the father spoke, he thought about the events of earlier in the day that had led them here.

Early in the morning, the three of them had left to go shopping in a nearby

town. Usually, the father went out alone, but their five-year-old daughter had wanted to see the town, so the trio had decided the night before that they would all go together. Upon their arrival, they bought food at the market and ate lunch. As the family was humming a song on the way back along the road to the village, a desperate-looking priest on horseback approached them from the opposite direction, screaming, “Monsters are coming! Flee to the south!” The priest then disappeared down the road toward the city.

The family was doubtful, but they heeded the priest’s words; the man had hidden his wife and child in the hollow of a tree and tried to return to the village, avoiding the road the whole way. Just as the priest had said, the village was overflowing with monsters. At first, he had thought that some of the villagers had survived, but then he noticed that everyone had strangely pale skin and was wandering around aimlessly, making no attempt to escape. Monsters passed by the villagers without attacking as well, almost as if the two groups had become allies.

If the three of them had not left the village that morning or if he had ignored his daughter’s wish and left his family in the village as he always did, they likely would have already joined the monsters’ ranks. With that in mind, he thanked Lord Elmea for still having his family.

With the child on his back, he was about to leave the shadow of the giant tree when a terrible stench suddenly reached his nose. It was the same smell he had encountered in the village.

“Oooogh.”

Terrified, the man slowly looked in the direction of the moaning voice. A gentle breeze blew across a hilltop...and a troll was running down from it, heading right toward them.

“What?! Run!”

“Aaugh! Waugh!”

With an ugly smile spread across its face, a giant man-eating monster standing over five meters tall approached. Each step it took covered about twice the distance of a human’s stride, so in spite of its seemingly slow movements, it was actually approaching with tremendous speed. The father

abruptly took his child off his back and pushed her toward her mother.

“Darling!”

“Take Myla and run!”

He unsheathed his sword, which he carried only for self-defense and had never drawn before, and turned to face the troll, all the while keeping his wife and child behind him. He did not have hope that he could beat the troll, but he would die to buy time for his family to escape.

Suddenly, a new monster appeared from atop the hill behind the troll. The monster was huge and raced down the hill after the troll.

“Damn!” Even if he could block the troll’s path, the man worried that this new monster would chase after his wife and child. However, there was nothing he could do about that.

“Lord Elmea, please protect our child’s soul,” his wife prayed from where she stood behind him. She hoped that, even if they were to die, her child would be spared any suffering.

Finally, the troll reached the family of three, purposely slowing down as it approached. It smirked at their terrified faces.

“Waugh?!”

The troll reached out toward the man. A split second later, its head went flying through the air as if blasted away by a powerful gust of wind. The father stared in astonishment at the now headless torso.

*SLAAAAAM!*

The troll’s body hit the ground with such force that the earth shook.

“Huh? Wh-What happened...?”

“You humans there. Are you okay??”

An unfamiliar voice called out from behind the man. He spun around to find a terrifying sight.

“Eeeek!”

“Mamaaa!”

“Y-Yeah...”

The woman screamed while Myla cried out for her mother. The man, however, was at a loss for words at the sight of the remaining monster: a massive silver wolf, its mouth stained with blood. When he last saw it, it was still at the top of the hill behind the troll. Now, however, it had not only passed the troll, but taken its head off too.

“Looks like there are more.” The massive silver wolf looked past the family, prompting the man to look back up the hill. There, he spotted multiple shadowy figures cresting it and moving toward them.

“That’s ’cause you don’t kill them quietly. It looks like they’re coming as a horde now. Tee hee hee.”

“It seems that way. Think you can stop them for me?”

“Certainly. Tee hee hee.”

A voice came from the giant wolf’s back, and a woman dressed in white slowly descended. The father’s eyes were captivated by her beauty for a moment, but her dark expression sent chills down his spine.

The white-clad woman had a cloth wrapped around her head holding a candle on either side. She held a knife in her right hand and a wooden mallet in her left. Passing by the parents and their child, she fluttered toward the hill like a feather in the wind, her legs remaining deathly still. However, perhaps unaware of her unusual movements, the shadows rushed down the hill. A daemonic incarnation tried to attack the woman, who slowly raised her mallet in response.

“Earthbound Curse!” the woman in white yelled and hit the ground with her mallet. The ground shook for a moment, and countless human torsos shot up from the ground.

“Uaaagh!”

“Uaaagh!”

“Uaaagh!”

“Waugh! Now what’s going on?!”

The father screamed at the sight of the shadows, and the child clung desperately to her mother. What they were seeing were the upper bodies of spirits that had taken the forms of skeletons and zombies. These spirits grabbed the lower bodies of the daemonic incarnations that rushed over and pulled them down one into the ground after another. Then, as the trailing group of daemonic incarnations caught up, they stumbled and fell on top of each other.

The giant silver wolf jumped in next. It crushed and tore apart the daemonic incarnations with its huge, vicious claws. The white-clad woman also languidly approached and stabbed the fallen enemies with her wood-handled kitchen knife. In no time flat, only the parents and their child were left standing.

“Is it all over? Tee hee hee.” The white-clad woman let out a bizarre laugh as she opened her mouth so wide that it seemed as if it had been torn open.

Not knowing what had just happened, the family stood trembling as a shadow appeared over their heads. They looked up to see the bellies of several four-legged winged beasts, and they could hear the voices of several young men and women coming from atop them.

\* \* \*

“Huh, looks like they even made it all the way out here. There doesn’t seem to be any consistency in their movements.”

“Seems not.”

“Hayate, Okiyosan, keep up the good work.”

The giant wolf nodded in response to Allen’s words, then waited for the white-clad woman to jump onto its back before running back over the hill. After that, one of the four-legged winged beasts descended toward the stunned family.

A young man straddling the back of a four-legged beast calmly called out to them. “Good evening. Are the three of you safe?”

“Y-Yeah. Are we safe now?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about those things anymore,” the young woman sitting behind the man replied. However, the four-legged beast maintained its

position, and neither the man nor the woman showed any signs of moving. Just as the father started to wonder what was going on, something that looked like a magic ship modeled after a giant bird suddenly arrived, landing soundlessly in the meadow. The surprised family watched as its rear hatch opened to reveal many people standing inside.

“Come on; climb aboard.”

Obedying the young man’s command, the father timidly boarded the bird-shaped magic ship, and the people inside rejoiced over his and his family’s safety. As they told it, they had been saved and brought here by the young man and woman from earlier, their companions, and the monsters assisting them.

The tail of the silver bird closed after the mother and child climbed in. It next opened after they had landed in front of Neel’s gates. The father had seen this place before, but unlike back then, the gates themselves were gone and an unfamiliar forest surrounded the city.

Seeing the family and all the others off as they entered the city, Allen thought back on the past three days since he and his party had saved Neel. It seemed that the daemoninc incarnations and giant monsters from Teomenia had mostly been exterminated thanks to the Gamers and Allen’s Summons. Although they were not able to save some villages and towns in time, the group had rescued as many people as they possibly could have and evacuated them to Neel.

In the places that they had been able to rescue, Allen had planted Gold Beans to set up barriers that would keep out monsters and used Potherbs to prevent the residents from becoming demonic incarnations. Black shadows had appeared from some people’s bodies due to the effects of the Potherbs, but none of them transformed into daemoninc incarnations after that.

There were nearly five thousand former disciples of Daemonism in total. There were too many to fit in jail, so Allen had decided to turn several sections of Neel into quarantine areas for them to stay in. He had done so because the priests and villagers they rescued had told him that anyone bitten by a daemoninc incarnation would themselves become daemoninc incarnations in about a day.

Apparently the Potherbs’ effect purged the black shadows from even those

who had been bitten. Allen did not know if it would work immediately after someone was bitten or if he needed to wait a while, as he had not had a chance to confirm either way. Potherbs not only cured status ailments but also prevented them when used on healthy people. Their effects lasted for a whole day, so if he used them regularly, he would be able to prevent everyone from turning into monsters.

“You’ve done well, Sir Keel,” the cardinal called out, approaching the Gamers as they followed those they had rescued through the gate. He was always quick to thank Keel, possibly due to the revelation the pope had received before the incident at the execution. Additionally, the Church of Elmea taught that those with strong Talents were the God of Creation’s chosen ones. Keel’s four-star Talent of Saint King seemed to be highly esteemed by the members of the Church. It was also worth noting that the pope, too, was a Saint King.

Allen and the others finished their meal in the city’s dining hall, then they assembled in a conference room inside the church.

“The operation to rescue the surrounding towns and villages is mostly complete.”

“That may be true, Cecil, but we still can’t let our guard down,” Allen said.

The daemonic incarnations that had come from Teomenia were completely uncoordinated, each one acting independently. This made it impossible to attack a concentrated group and defeat them all at once, so Allen had instead sent out his Summons to track them down. Even now, he could not help but worry that there were survivors out there somewhere. On top of that, he still had no idea why the Demon Lord Army was using this strategy.

Allen noticed that Keel had a brooding look on his face. “Keel, it’s important to mourn the dead, but we have to accept the reality of what’s happened.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I can’t just turn off my emotions like you can.” Keel did not return his gaze.

*That’s fair. I’ve kind of always been this way.*

When the Demon Lord Army had invaded Rohzenheim the previous year, it had killed three million elves, with nearly half of them having been eaten by

monsters. The Army had also been clashing with the Five Continent Alliance in the northern part of the Central Continent almost every year for the past ten years, and with each assault, the Alliance lost more than a hundred thousand people. Moreover, the number being that low was thanks to Hero Helmios's appearance; before him, the Alliance had been losing over 150,000 per year.

For the past two years, Allen had distributed Blessings from Heaven and sent out Summons to provide support, but even so, he could not save everyone from the Rank A monsters.

*Speaking of which, the strength of all monsters increased by one rank after the Great Calamity.*

Ever since the Demon Lord first appeared in this world, not a day went by where the people were not threatened by monsters. The number of lives taken by the Demon Lord Army and its monsters was impossible to measure.

"Still, we can't save everyone. We're not omnipotent."

"I know that," Keel said, his voice tinged with regret. The rest of the Gamers also seemed to feel helpless. Sophie and Krena especially looked dark and sullen.

Allen Summoned Merus. It was for this reason that he had not allowed any priests into the conference room with them. As the former First Angel, every one of them would have recognized Merus. If it became necessary to use him to get the priests to act, Allen would do so, but if they inadvertently learned of Merus's existence, it risked causing unnecessary problems. Given this, he opted to keep Merus away from the priests.

"Tell me about the situation in Teomenia."

"I still haven't spotted any survivors," Merus answered. "It seems that any believers of Elmea and townsfolk unable to escape were killed by that Demonic Deity and his subordinates."

Merus had fought the demons guarding the altars in Teomenia's churches many times over the past three days, and each time he had been defeated. Were he still an angel, his death would have been permanent and irreversible, but now that he was a Summon, he could be endlessly revived using Allen's MP



and magic stones. Between battles with the Demonic Deity, he would report back to Allen on the situation in Teomenia.

“I couldn’t find the person named Shia you mentioned. It looks like she left Teomenia and didn’t come back, just as the priest said.” Allen had heard from the cardinal that after Princess Shia handed over Gushara, she had left Teomenia on other business, saying that she had no interest in watching the execution.

“Is Gushara the Demonic Deity?” Allen asked.

“No,” Merus replied. “He called himself Lycaoron.”

*A mysterious altar protected by one of the Demon Lord Army’s Demonic Deities, huh? Unless something changes, we’re always going to be caught on the back foot. If we just knew what the Demon Lord Army was planning, we could get the upper hand.*

“Then we have to defeat that Demonic Deity and save Teomenia!” Krena clenched her fist and huffed eagerly. Her dark and sullen expression from earlier was gone.

“You’re right; that’s where we need to start.” Allen appreciated how Krena always focused on what was important at times like this. “All right, we’re going Demonic Deity hunting tomorrow. Let’s show it what we’ve got!”

“Hell yeah! Let’s crush ’em!” Dogora bellowed eagerly.

*Looks like Dogora’s in high spirits too.*

All his friends nodded in agreement with his words.

## Chapter 5: Battle against Demonic Deity Lycaoron

About one thousand years ago, a young emperor was born in the Central Continent's northern Empire of Giamut. As soon as he ascended the throne, he began to invade other countries, and before long, he had succeeded in unifying the entire Central Continent for the first time in history. This was the beginning of despair for the nonhuman races, as this emperor was infamously known as the "Dreaded Emperor"—even in the present—due to his national policy of putting humans first and forcibly suppressing other races.

After escaping the oppression of the Dreaded Emperor, the dwarves, who possessed advanced metalworking skills, and the elves, who communicated with the spirits of nature, left the Central Continent entirely. As a result, a thousand years later, there were very few dungeons remaining other than those Giamut had deemed useful. Furthermore, the races who could not flee the Central Continent, such as the beastkin, were severely oppressed just because they were not human.

The Adventurer's Guild and the Church of Elmea boldly protested these actions. The Guild, whose goal was to operate without interference from any nation, had always aimed to protect people from all sorts of hardships. Therefore, in protest against Giamut's cruelty, it moved its headquarters to another country until the death of the Dreaded Emperor.

The Church of Elmea advocated that all were equal under Elmea, the God of Creation who gave birth to the world, and as they had nonhuman followers and priests, they directly opposed the Dreaded Emperor's actions. However, while the Church had soldiers, they were few in number and, unlike the Adventurer's Guild, did not have the strength to withstand the empire's military. The blood of a great many priests and believers alike was spilled as a result of Giamut's oppression. In response, the Church finally left the Central Continent. Its members crossed the sea, negotiated with the group of nations that formed the Union, and established a nation of their own in a corner of the Southeast Continent. That was how the Holy Land of Elmahl came into being.

Teomenia was named the new headquarters of the Church, and after the death of the Dreaded Emperor, while a branch was set up in Giamut, the headquarters never moved back. The biggest factor behind this move was that imperialism was inherently incompatible with Church doctrine. A thousand years later, Teomenia continued to be the religious capital of Elmahl and stood as a symbol of the prosperity of the Elmea religion, which had followers around the world.

The Teomenia that stood before Allen and the Gamers now, however, was completely changed.

“This is terrible. Who would do such a thing?” Cecil groaned from her seat behind Allen atop a Bird B.

Teomenia was quite different from the glamorous Empire of Baukis. Its infrastructure was of rather simple design made up of stone buildings adorned with trees and waterways fed by a pure stream originating in the mountains to the south. The city was renowned for having a rather subdued appearance. But now, all the trees had burned down, quite a few buildings had collapsed, and the waterways were filled with rubble and corpses, overflowing into muddied streets. A large number of daemonic incarnations wandered through the damp streets—some stumbling, some staggering, some spinning around where they stood, and others continuously falling and getting up again.

Allen and the others watched the goings-on from above the city.

The square in the center of the city had taken the most damage. Its main gate, once decorated with gorgeous patterns, was charred black. It was evident at a glance that this was where Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, had created the huge pillar of fire, from which the flames had spread throughout the city.

Adjacent to the square was a hill that looked like an upside-down bowl, with a long staircase leading straight to its crest and a ramp that spiraled around it. It was obviously an artificial hill, given the huge church standing atop it. This hilltop church had been built so that God of Creation Elmea could see Teomenia and the activities of its citizens in their entirety when he descended upon the world.

The roof of the church had been completely destroyed, and a pillar of bluish-

white light rose from within. Far up in the sky, it broke off at a right angle and extended straight to the south.

“What do you think that is, Allen? I’ve been wondering about it for a while now,” Dogora said from the back of his Bird B, which maintained its position next to Allen’s. The pillar of light had been visible ever since they had left Neel that morning.

“I don’t know, but I guess we can ask the demon waiting inside the church.” With that, Allen Summoned Merus. “The Demonic Deity’s down there, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Thanks.”

Merus nodded and flew away. He would come and launch a surprise attack from behind in the upcoming fight against the Demonic Deity. Allen would show no mercy to those who had caused so much destruction and sacrificed so many lives.

Allen landed his Bird B in front of the church, deciding to go the rest of the way on foot.

A Bird B was roughly the size of a small elephant and boasted powerful wings, allowing it to not only move at high speed, but also hover and stay in the air when necessary. It could easily keep its balance even when Krena and Dogora swung their weapons while riding on its back. If they could communicate well, it would allow the party to course correct toward the enemy as needed. It was particularly indispensable when fighting huge enemies with wide attack ranges, such as the golems they had fought in the Rank S dungeon.

Though the church they would be fighting inside was larger than most Elmean churches, it was nowhere near as tall or spacious as the Rank S dungeon. Going in with Bird Bs would actually restrict their movement. Thinking ahead, Allen had decided to go on foot.

Once inside the church, the Gamers found themselves enveloped in silence. The church, built to serve as a shrine to the gods, was filled with mostly empty rooms and corridors marked only by relatively simple structures, making it easy for sounds to echo. In spite of that, judging by the eerie silence, Allen

determined that there must be no one else except the Demonic Deity Merus had fought.

The party walked straight down the corridor and came to a place where stone statues lined the walls. Each represented one of the gods who controlled various phenomena, all of whom served under Elmea, the God of Creation.

*There's God of Bountiful Harvest Molmol. And next to it is Goddess of Fire Freyja.*

The statue of Freyja showed a woman with loose hair flowing down the sides of her face and extending to her knees. She was holding a sword with a wavy-edged blade and no guard. According to Rohzen, she had been rapidly drained of her power when her divine vessel was stolen. Was it possible that her divine vessel was actually that sword?

In any case, once her power was lost, fire would no longer be able to be created in this world. Apparently, they still had another two to three years until that happened, but as the Baukisian master craftsman Habarak had said, the future looked bleak. For example, his furnace could no longer generate enough heat to process orichalcum.

Passing through the aisles lined with statues of the gods, the Gamers came upon a large hall where worshipping and gatherings took place. The stone floor had been crushed in places, several pillars had fallen, and other scars of Merus's many fierce battles yet remained.

The hall was large enough to hold a thousand people. Allen looked to the front and saw a huge statue of Elmea in the depths of the room, in front of which was a sinister-looking altar. The skins and heads of monsters and the bones of humans adorned the tray enshrined in its center. On the tray was something that could only be described as a bluish-white mass of light, and a pillar of light erupted upward from that mass, extending into the sky.

None of the other Gamers had ever seen this place before, but as he was able to share Merus's vision, Allen was already familiar with the layout. He knew that there was a Demonic Deity nearby.

As he had expected, a demon with a big-eared, canine-like head sat cross-legged in front of the altar, waiting.

“Are you Demonic Deity Lycaoron?”

“That’s correct. You must be Allen So, Merus joined you, I see. I’ll have to report this.”

Lycaoron was lightly dressed, wearing only a cloth around his waist, as well as bracelets and anklets. He did not look to be very tough, but given that Merus had lost every one of their fights, he was most certainly agile.

*I wonder if he was a lycaon beastkin before becoming a Demonic Deity.*

According to Merus, the only real distinguishing factor between Demonic Deities and normal demons was that their average stat values exceeded 10,000 for one reason or another. Similarly, Allen recalled from his previous life that the only major difference between dolphins and whales was their size. Following the appearance of the Demon Lord, however, it seemed that the number of demons with stat values reaching up to 30,000 or so had increased now that natural law had been broken. When asked why, Merus vaguely responded that it was probably due to the Demon Lord’s power.

Allen continued to ask questions. “What is this pillar of light?” He still did not have enough information to come up with a way to resolve this situation.

“Do you think I’ll answer honestly? I heard that you and your companions were pretty smart, but apparently I was wrong.” Lycaoron bared his canines and sneered.

*He seems to know about us, so he might have been ordered to not give us any information. In that case, I guess we should get down to it.*

“I see. Oh well. I guess I’ll just have to destroy it, then,” Allen said.

At that moment, Merus flew through a hole in the ceiling and attacked the tray behind Lycaoron. However, before he knew it, Lycaoron had moved to his side and caught his arm midswing.

“Too slow. You’ll never catch me in a pincer attack like that.”

Allen, who had started running as Merus launched his surprise assault, attacked Lycaoron’s back, but the Demonic Deity twisted his body forward to avoid it. Without even turning around, the Demonic Deity landed a kick into

Allen's side, hitting him so hard that he was blown backward and smashed into a pillar.

"Gyaugh!"

"Allen, are you okay?!"

"It's okay, Cecil," Allen called back. "He's a wimp, just like I expected."

"A wimp, huh? I thought I'd give you a taste of the difference in our power, but are you trying to catch me off guard?," Lycaoron sneered.

*He's definitely pretty agile. If we don't take him down, I'll need to call back some of the Summons I put away.*

In preparation for the battle with the Demonic Deity, Allen had changed the composition of his Summons holder quite a bit. The area around Elmahl was still not safe, so he wanted to defeat this Demonic Deity and restart the cleanup operations as soon as possible.

Alas, Lycaoron did not give Allen much of an opportunity to think his situation over. After being kicked in the side and knocked back, he saw Lycaoron pounce at him for a follow-up blow. Allen crossed his arms in front of him to defend himself, but the kick still slammed him into the temple wall.

Because Insect As fought in large numbers, Allen would not be using them directly in his fight against Lycaoron. Thanks to that, he was benefiting from their Endurance buffs and thus only his arm was crushed. However, this attack also gave him the information he needed to gauge his enemy's Attack power.

"Okay, we're good! Everyone, let's start attacking!" Allen shouted to his companions.

"Hell yeah!" Dogora, who had been waiting for just that command, readied his large shield and greataxe, then rushed straight toward Lycaoron. He'd been focusing on this battle since yesterday.

"Is that why you attacked me? Did your leader risk himself to test my power? Not like it matters. No matter how many of you there are, it's all the same to me!"

Merus shook his arm free from Lycaoron's grip and attacked him once more.

As before, however, the Demonic Deity easily dodged. Dogora and Krena arrived and took turns attacking Lycaoron, but he evaded all of their swings as well. And he did so with only minimal changes to his positioning, showing off just how confident he was in his agility and ability to avoid melee attacks.

“Flare!” Cecil suddenly shot a fireball right as Lycaoron focused his attention on an incoming attack. However, without even looking, he waved one fist at the ball of flames, nullifying it with his bare hand.

“Hmph, a magic user? Perhaps I should take care of you first,” Lycaoron muttered. For the first time since the battle began, he left his standing position and attempted to move. He seemed to have decided that it was best to not neglect the rear guard and shot a glance toward Cecil.

“As if I’m gonna let you do that! Gyaugh!”

Dogora stood between Cecil and Lycaoron, but was blown back when the Demonic Deity punched his massive shield.

“Rah! Haugh?!”

Krena swung her greatsword down from behind Lycaoron, but his fist hit the side of her sword, deflecting her attack and causing her to stagger.

Lycaoron then launched an attack on Krena, who resumed her assault after she jumped backward and readjusted her stance. While thrusting his fist with tremendous speed, he quickly changed his position, making sure that Krena was between him and Cecil, Sophie, and Volmaar. Just like how Dogora had stood in his way to protect Cecil, he planned to use Krena as a shield against long-range attacks.

However, Krena desperately parried his brutal punches with her massive sword. She saw Lycaoron use Allen, Merus, and Dogora as his shield, and was observing the Demonic Deity’s minute movements. Once Krena found a pattern, she tried to make her way behind Lycaoron. In doing so, with his mind rather than his body, Allen recalled the tactics he and his companions had practiced—ones that were based on battle theories cultivated in the games he had played in his previous life.



## Allen's Axioms

- There's nothing more important than staying alive.
- If you want to win, don't concern yourself with fairness or one-on-one fights. Work together with your friends and attack your enemies from behind and the flanks, not head-on.

Allen had explained this to his friends to help them understand that attacking from the back or side increased their chances of landing a critical hit. He reviewed his grimoire's log and decided that, like most of the games he had played in his previous life, critical hits—which dealt double the normal amount of damage—existed in this world too. There seem to be several conditions under which one would occur, and though he still had not figured them all out, he did know that there were definitely factors that affected a person's critical hit rate. The difference in Agility between the attacker and the target and whether a target's vital point was hit were two such factors.

Among all of the conditions that could be met, the easiest was for the attacker to strike at an enemy's blind spot. Aiming for the target's back or side increased the chance of a critical hit. In that respect, Dogora, who tended to blindly attack head-on, did not often land critical blows. Though his Endurance, which allowed him to tank an opponent's attacks, was indispensable in helping his companions survive, Krena's skill and flexibility in battle were clearly superior. This had been true back during their time in Krena Village, and it remained true even following their clearing of the Rank S dungeon.

However, despite Krena landing some daring blows to their opponent's back and sides, it appeared that he had taken little damage. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"You impudent little runts!"

"Hngh!"

Lycaoron sent Krena and her greatsword flying with a single kick. Judging by the blow, Allen figured that Lycaoron not only specialized in Agility but also utilized the fighting style of a light-fighter class, giving him impressive

Endurance and Attack stats as well.

*Even after clearing the Rank S dungeon, I guess we still haven't grown strong enough to overpower a Demonic Deity.*

This battle was their first test of how able they would be to fight a Demonic Deity following their conquering of the Rank S dungeon.

Prior to their doing so, Allen had predicted that defeating a Demonic Deity would be no easy task even once they had beaten the dungeon, undergone class promotions, and upgraded their equipment. Demonic Deities had average stat values of 30,000, so without access to Helmios's God Strike Extra Skill, which dealt additional damage to demons, or Dverg's Breaker Strike, which dealt damage that ignored the opponent's Endurance stat, they would not be able to fight effectively. Even if they could defeat this deity, it would take too much time and risk everyone being gravely injured.

Despite that, they did not feel as desperate as they had in their battle against Demonic Deity Rehzal. Although none of the Gamers would have stood a chance in a one-on-one fight, Allen believed that if he managed to find the right team combination, they were evenly matched in a party-against-one situation.

*Krena still hasn't used her Extra Skill, and yet she's still doing pretty well. I'm glad we got her that class promotion.*

Allen looked at the rear guard to see how their long-range attacks were coming, but apparently both Cecil and Volmaar were afraid that they would hit their comrades and interfere with their attack timing. Picking up on this concern, Sophie hatched another plan.

"Lord Gale, please lend me your strength!" she called out to the spirit of wind.

"Okay, mama!"

This spirit took on the appearance of a young, spiky-haired boy in shorts. He blew hard through his pursed lips, and a thin thread of emerald-green wind wrapped around Lycaoron. After restraining the Demonic Deity, the thread tightened even further, digging into his flesh and causing him to bleed.

"What?! You can manifest spirits?!"

Lycaoron seemed more surprised about her complete control over spirits than he did about the damage he took. A moment later, however, the bleeding Demonic Deity swung his arm and tore away the wind rope.

*Sophie seems to be a bit stronger than the rest. Rohzen also seems to be protecting her. That aside, is that tray really that important?*

The cloak Sophie had equipped not only increased her maximum MP but also increased the amount of MP she was able to give to her spirits. That seemed to have increased the wind spirit's binding power.

"Sophie!"

"Understood!"

Allen had reviewed their strategy with her ahead of the fight, so merely calling out her name was all that was needed to get her to act. Though he still had no idea what the pillar of bluish-white light emanating from the tray was for, in his several battles with Merus, Lycaoron had referred to the object as an altar. It was clear that protecting the altar was his highest priority.

*Now that we've established the difference in power between him and us, I think we're ready to move on to our next strategy. Lycaoron seems to have gotten a little too cocky.*

Over the past four days, Allen had continuously Summoned Merus and sent him to fight Lycaoron. He had done so even as Merus was defeated by the Demonic Deity time and time again, all in order to get a sense of his fighting style and gather information that would help him come up with countermeasures. While Allen was traveling between settlements and rescuing people, he had made use of that information to evaluate strategies and tactics that would keep him and his friends from dying in their upcoming battle.

In addition to gauging Lycaoron's strength, Merus had also performed a thorough examination of the surrounding area—including the inside of the church—in search of survivors, prisoners of war, and any injured people who had failed to escape. Him having done so was imperative to the success of one of the few decisive attacks they could use against the Demonic Deity.

Allen issued the order for their next plan of attack. "Cecil, Sophie, you're up!"

“Got it!”

“Leave it to me, Lord Allen.”

The two girls and the spirit hurried to distance themselves from Lycaoron.

“Dogora, don’t let him get past you!”

“I-I know! Leave it to me! I got this!” Dogora replied, but it was hard to make out. His face was flushed and he spoke quickly, seemingly trying to cover up his struggle.

*Hey, you can just speak naturally, y’know.*

Allen figured that Dogora found salvation in the fact that he was able to hide his burning-red face behind his shield.

“No matter what you do, it won’t change how this ends. Are you still ignorant of the sheer difference in our power?” Lycaoron sneered at Allen’s change of strategy in what he deemed to be a useless struggle, perhaps because he had maintained his advantage since the start of the battle.

“Hmph. No need to belittle me. Sophie, he’s all yours.”

“Of course. Nymph, please lend me your strength.”

In response to Sophie’s call, a water spirit taking the form of a girl wearing a raincoat appeared. Her whole body was wet as if she had only recently been in a heavy rainstorm, and water gradually pooled at her feet.

“Leave it to me, Sophie,” Nymph responded quietly. She then raised her hands, and the water on the floor floated into the air with a *slosh*, creating a film of water between the Gamers and Lycaoron.

“Blizzard!” Cecil unleashed her ice magic, instantly freezing the gigantic mass of water so as to aim countless spikes toward Lycaoron.

“Heh, is this some kind of combo technique? You plan on destroying the altar as well as me? How interesting.”

Lycaoron, acting as a shield for the altar, smiled fearlessly when he saw the block of ice. He seemed to have figured out that it would be used to crush and impale both him and the altar. Full of confidence, he bent his knees slightly,

refusing to move from where he stood. The marble floor cracked beneath his feet.

*Just like I thought, he's overconfident in the difference in power between us. Come on out, Poppo.*

After confirming that Lycaoron had taken up his stance to intercept the attack, Allen Summoned his Bird F and used its Awakened Ability, Messenger. "Meruru, the preparations are complete! You can go whenever you're ready!"

Messenger transmitted his voice only to those he targeted, ensuring that Lycaoron did not hear his instructions. Only Meruru, who was standing by in the cockpit of the golem kneeling on a hill two and a half kilometers away from Teomenia, had received them.

"Finally, it's our turn! Let's go, Tam-Tam!" Meruru shouted in excitement and jumped to her feet, inputting her commands into the magic disc located in the cockpit. One of Tam-Tam's arms, which was protruding toward the church with its elbow resting on its upright knee, transformed into a long cannon barrel. This was the combined effect of the long-range sniper rifle attack slate and the five Attack enhancement slates that maximized its power.

Using the effect of Messenger, Meruru was able to share the vision of the Bird F and thus figured out Lycaoron's location inside the church. She adjusted Tam-Tam's aim based on this information.

"Target, Demonic Deity Lycaoron! Long-range sniper rifle, fire!"

Light leaked from the tip of the sniper rifle aimed at the church, and in the next moment, a beam of it shot out from the muzzle toward the church. The walls of the temple evaporated the moment they were hit by the magical rays, and those that entered through the holes that were created showered Lycaoron with ultrahigh heat from the sides.

"Huh? What the— Gah?!" Lycaoron, who had been preparing for the ice block that was about to be launched at him from the front, was momentarily taken aback. He was exposed to the beam before he even had a chance to cry out.

Allen watched as the wall of ice in front of them instantly turned to vapor the moment the ray of light melted through the wall on the left.

“Whoa! Are we going to be okay?!” a panicking Cecil shouted to Allen.

“The light can only go straight and the steam should diffuse it, so we should be fine.”

*I wonder if it was maybe a little too close. It's pretty hot.*

“Hey! Did you say ‘should be’?!” Behind him, Keel desperately cast healing magic on his companions to keep their HP up. However, Allen ignored the comment and contacted Meruru.

“All right, Meruru, I think we’re good.”

When the light faded, Lycaoron and the altar were nowhere to be seen. All that remained were the holes left in the church walls that had melted into mud and the marble floor boiling where the light had passed over it. Moved by the sight, Allen trembled in awe of the destruction wreaked upon the church by Meruru’s mithril golem’s long-range sniper rifle.

“So this is the power of a long-range sniper rifle with a 30,000 Attack stat? It’s pretty epic.”

“Come on, Allen!” Cecil practically screamed. “Now isn’t the time to be impressed by such things!”

Allen looked around and saw that the pillars that had been caught in the light ray were beginning to tilt inward where they had been burned through. Additionally, the hole just above the altar was widening and debris was raining down from the ceiling.

“Everyone, run!”

Allen and the others straddled their Bird Bs and made their way through the church’s hallway. Narrowly avoiding the walls and pillars that were falling like dominoes, they managed to make their escape.

When Allen turned around, he saw that the church had been completely destroyed and that the pillar of pale light was now gone. The blast seemed to have either destroyed the altar or caused it to stop functioning.

“Hundreds of years of Teomenia’s history...” Keel muttered in disbelief.

“Battles against Demonic Deities inevitably involve sacrifice. Unfortunately,

it's necessary if we hope to prevent further casualties."

Allen looked at his grimoire, but there was no mention in the log of having defeated their enemy. He then reminded the rest of the party of their cover story that this was all the work of the Demonic Deity.

*We'll have to do something about any witnesses.*

Merus, who was watching Allen and the rest of the Gamers wearily, seemed to pick up on what Allen was thinking. "It looks like we're not done yet. He's coming!" he cried in surprise. Just as he did, the rubble of the collapsed church was suddenly blasted away.

Lycaoron emerged from the wreckage. Though he specialized in Agility, the burns on the right side of his body and the unsteadiness of his legs showed that he had lower Endurance than other Demonic Deities. It seemed that the long-range sniper rifle, which consumed 1,000 MP per shot, was so powerful that not even a Demonic Deity could take a hit from it and come out unscathed.

"You bastards! You destroyed the altar! The altar dedicated to Gushara!"

Judging from his shouts, Allen determined that the altar was needed by Gushara and that the pillar of light was sending something to him.

For all the times he had made Merus fight Lycaoron in order to gauge his fighting ability, Allen had never been able to learn anything about the altar. He had wondered if he could elicit some reaction by either destroying the altar or otherwise making it appear that he was going to do so.

*Well, Tam-Tam's attack was able to take it out, so we no longer need to worry about it helping Gushara anymore.*

Cecil braced herself for battle and seemed to pick up on the Demonic Deity's change in demeanor. "It looks like you've really got him riled up now."

"Kill! I'm going to kill you all! Get ready to meet your demise!" Lycaoron shrieked at the Gamers, his fangs bared. Silver scales grew out of the charred right half of his body, and two horns sprouted out of his forehead. The horns arched toward the back of his head and emitted a bright light. At the same time, long, thick claws grew out of the tips of his fingers, and a second row of fangs cropped up just behind the teeth already in his mouth.

Having seen tons of such examples in the anime and games of his past life, this transformation was rather boring to Allen. It was a common trope for the enemy to have a second form where their body grew to twice its original size.

“He looks pretty mad.”

“You’re right, Cecil. Let’s keep our distance.” As Allen responded to Cecil, the members of the rear guard all rose into the sky on their Bird Bs. Now that everyone was outside and could move freely, there was no need to have them use their magic, bows, and other long-range attacks from the ground. At the same time, Merus disappeared.

“It’s about time to finish this. Krena, activate your Extra Skill.”

“Got it!”

The moment Krena responded, her body began to flicker as if wrapped in a haze. She used her Extra Skill, Limit Break, which increased all her stats by 3,000, then ran up the remnants of the church with enhanced speed and struck at Lycaoron’s transformed body.

“Hrgh!”

Lycaoron landed a blow on Krena and sent her and her greatsword flying backward. Being in his second form, he, too, had grown stronger, widening the power gap between him and the Gamers once more.

Krena immediately stood up and faced Lycaoron. Predicting that she would receive a blow or two, Keel cast his healing magic just in time.

“Buy us a little bit of time. Both of you, focus on protecting the rear guard,” Allen called out to Krena and Dogora, who had longed to get involved, encouraging them to not overdo it. “Keel, keep up the support!”

“Heh! You’ve still got more up your sleeve, huh?!”

Lycaoron stepped forward, initially pretending to head toward Krena and Dogora. However, he passed between the two of them and aimed for the rear guard. Once he was sandwiched between the vanguard and the rear guard, he turned to start fighting Krena and Dogora. It seemed that he was wary of being sniped again and was trying to stay close to the Gamers. His movements were



no longer unsteady like they had been when he had first emerged from the rubble, and it seemed as if the transformation had healed most of the damage he had taken.

Given that he had developed his plan assuming that he might not be able to completely defeat Lycaoron, Allen continued to follow it.

“I’ve brought them. Hopefully this will work,” Merus said, appearing next to Allen via Bird A’s Homing Instinct.

“Whoa, hey, looks like something pretty exciting’s going on here,” Lepe yelped in surprise.

“What a shame to see a leading church of the world meet such a fate.” Temi let out a sigh.

*Yeah, it’s all the fault of this Demonic Deity. You can’t just let him get away with that, can you?*

Seeing the two newcomers who were with Allen, Lycaoron flinched momentarily. “What?! Newcomers?! Not that it matters!”

“Are you sure you just need the two of them?” asked Merus, who had escorted the two members of the Ten Heroic Beasts from Rohzenheim.

“They’re plenty. Lepe, Temi, sorry for calling you here all of a sudden, but I need your help.”

“Y’know, Allen, I thought you humans were different from us beastkin, but only *you* will do something crazy like this!” Lepe said in amazement as he took out his instrument, then started playing and doing a little dance. He played Gale Beat, which had the auxiliary effect of increasing Attack and Agility.

Simultaneously, Temi silently used her skills to support the vanguard. Krena’s and Dogora’s movement speed were boosted by them, but the two were still unable to land a decisive blow against Lycaoron.

“Okay, Sophie, you’re up next. Please use the Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits,” Allen instructed in accordance with the strategy he had thought up the night before.

“Certainly, Lord Allen. Lord Rohzen, please lend me your strength.”

“Ha ha. I hope this works.” Rohzen floated up into the air, shook his hips, and cast Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits.

“Krena, focus on his legs.”

“Got it! Supreme Ruling Blade!”

Krena used Supreme Ruling Blade to slice into Lycaoron’s right thigh. With Limit Break still in effect, the buffs from Lepe’s and Temi’s skills, and the additional thirty percent increase to her stats from the Blessing of the Sovereign of Spirits, her greatsword crushed his scales and cut about halfway through his leg.

*Aha! Just like with Rehzal, all you need for your attacks to get through is to stack buffs.*

Lycaoron’s face contorted from the pain. He reflexively tried to tear Krena away from his right hip with his claws, but Dogora rushed in and held up his Adamantite Large Shield just in time to protect Krena’s head.

“Gaugh!”

Without missing a beat, Allen gave his next order. “Your turn, Merus.”

“Certainly.”

Merus flew closer to the immobilized Lycaoron and kicked as hard as he could into the Demonic Deity’s left leg. Merus had also had his stats boosted by Lepe, Temi, and the Blessing of the Sovereign Spirits.

*SNAP!*

Lycaoron’s left leg snapped, dropping him to his knees. Krena, Dogora, and Merus then quickly distanced themselves from him.

“Wh-What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

With both of his legs destroyed, Lycaoron seemed to realize that this had all been part of some kind of master plan. It was far too late now, however.

“Cecil, are you ready?”

“Here I go! Petit Meteor!”

Cecil’s body shimmered as if she were in a heat haze. She put all of her MP

into the tip of her staff, then raised it high into the air. When she did, a huge, burning, bright-red rock appeared at the far end of her staff, which then began to fall toward the ground.

Allen rushed toward Lycaoron as soon as he heard Cecil call out from atop her soaring Bird B.

“Ha ha! Did you think that you could hit me with your magic attack if you took out both my legs?! You idiots!”

*Yup, we need one final push to make this work.*

Lycaoron had guessed that they were using the relatively simple strategy of immobilizing him and then defeating him with magic, but that made Allen’s sudden approach nonsensical. He could not simply ignore Allen’s attack, however, so he lashed out toward his opponent with his claws.

Allen tried desperately to avoid the strike, but Lycaoron’s upper body was intact and his arms could still move quickly. Unable to dodge, Allen’s side was torn open. The pain of having his internal organs gouged out made him want to vomit, but despite that, Allen stabbed his sword into Lycaoron’s chest.



“Hngh! Huh?!”

With the sword now lodged into his vital organs, Lycaoron desperately tried to yank it out with both hands.

“Sophie! I need Gale!”

“Yes! Lord Gale! Please restrain Lycaoron!” Sophie responded instantly, having already been ready for this. She put all her MP into binding both Lycaoron and Allen with a thread of wind.

“What?! Why you...! So you’re going to die with me?!”

“You’re smart, Lycaoron. And that’s your downfall.”

*You think too much about every little detail. That’s how Petit Meteor was able to get this close.*

Allen’s sudden approach, his landing a blow on a vital organ, and Sophie restraining the two of them had pulled Lycaoron’s thoughts away from Cecil’s Petit Meteor.

“Allen, wait!” Cecil screamed. With the ceiling of the hilltop church destroyed and the huge, red-hot stone now visible, she was worried that she had gone too far.

Cecil’s Petit Meteor had grown so large that it could easily crush the entire massive church and the hill it sat atop along with it.

“Later! Keep the sword! Homing Instinct!”

When preparing his strategy, Allen had set up a nest in the city’s central square in advance. He teleported the Gamers, Lepe, and Temi there, leaving Lycaoron behind.

Shortly after Allen disappeared, Lycaoron, unable to put together what had just happened, saw a huge, blazing rock with a diameter of over a hundred meters falling from the sky. Knowing that he had been lured into this spot as a part of Allen’s strategy, he realized that he could not escape the impact range of the meteor. Left with no other choice, he tried to catch it with both hands.

“Graaaaarrgh! I can’t believe this! Allen, you little bastard! Don’t think for a

second that we're done here!"

Lycaoron was all alone. No one was around to hear his cry as the huge rock crushed both the church and his body.

## Chapter 6: The Truth Revealed

The moment Allen returned to the back of Cecil's Bird B, the giant boulder created by her Extra Skill, Petit Meteor, crashed into the church. A thunderous roar could be heard as both the church and the hill upon which it sat were crushed by the meteor's overwhelming weight. Shortly thereafter, a shock wave and a blast of hot air assailed the plaza.

"That plan went so well, it's almost funny. Did we beat him?" Cecil asked, turning around. The moment Allen opened his grimoire, she tugged at it to get a peek inside.

"Fortunately, he was just a musclehead with high stats, so thanks to Merus's help, it wasn't too hard to plan a strategy." Allen then contacted Meruru using Messenger. "Meruru, we should know if we beat him any moment now. If he's still alive, I want you to shoot him with your sniper rifle again."

"Roger that!" Meruru responded from Tam-Tam's cockpit. Even from the hill outside Teomenia where her golem knelt in wait, its one arm still transformed into the long-range sniper rifle, the massive meteor had been visible.

In the unlikely event that Petit Meteor had not been enough to defeat Lycaoron, Allen planned to have Meruru shoot him with another magic bullet. He had no need to worry, however. A line appeared in his grimoire, telling him that the battle with the Demonic Deity was over.

<You have defeated 1 Demonic Deity.>

Allen also felt a new power surge through his body.

<You have reached Lv1. 83. Your HP has increased by 100. Your MP has increased by 160. Your Attack has increased by 56. Your Endurance has increased by 56. Your Agility has increased by 104. Your Intelligence has increased by 160. Your Luck has increased by 104.>

*All right! I gained a level! Doot do-doot!* Considering that the world was not

actually a game, leveling up was not accompanied by any sound effects, though Allen played one in his head.

Allen shared the good news with his still-nervous companions. “Good news, everyone. It looks like we defeated the Demonic Deity!”

“We did it!” Krena cheered, jumping up and down.

“Very well done, Allen,” Keel said, a satisfied look on his face, while Allen was still going over the fight in his head.

*The strategy played out almost perfectly. More to the point, Homing Instinct worked exactly as planned.*

“Well, it’s all thanks to Merus investigating how the Demonic Deity fought.”

Allen had had Merus battle Lycaoron countless times over the past four days to get an idea of the Demonic Deity’s fighting style.

“I died a bunch doing it too.”

“You did a great job healing the team, Keel.” Once again, Keel had healed the vanguard with perfect timing. Thanks to that, Krena and Dogora had been able to move around without ever truly being exposed to danger.

Compared to Rehzal, Lycaoron had by no means been weak, but the Gamers had been able to take him down thanks to Allen’s strategy, which he had had a chance to perfect during their time clearing the Rank S dungeon.

“Well, it was all part of the plan. But still, was it really okay to go that far? What are we going to do when this is all over?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

Keel still felt that there were a lot of issues that needed to be resolved before he could accept Allen’s praise. For example, the church, which was once the headquarters of the Church of Elmea and had welcomed believers from all over the world, was in ruins. Both it and the hill it sat atop had been crushed. When the Gamers arrived on this continent to save the citizens, part of the plan had been to protect the Church of Elmea, Keel had claimed wearily.

Allen gave a mischievous smirk. “It was a tough battle. Let’s split before the citizens return.”



“Hey! Why’re we always like this?!”

Due to the role he and the party had played in the destruction of Rohzenheim’s capital city of Fortenia and the church in the Holy Land of Elmahl, Keel was racked with guilt. Allen accepted this, but he also could not forget to thank the two Heroic Beasts whom he had met in the Rank S dungeon.

“Temi, Lepe, thank you for coming out to help despite you both having been left to take care of Rohzenheim.”

“Listen, I don’t know anything about what you’re doing here, nor about this operation we took part in. Besides, I’m getting worried about those soldiers. Can you send us back to the battlefield now?” Temi, a Beast Astrologist and stalwart advisor to the Beast King, disavowed all knowledge of what had happened here. She simply wanted to get going.

During the past week or so that Allen and the others had been active in the Holy Land of Elmahl, battles with the Demon Lord Army, with soldiers numbering around one million strong, had begun in various parts of the Central Continent. Approximately 500,000 had landed in northern Rohzenheim as well, and the war was already underway there. Another 500,000 or so were approaching the sea north of Baukis, so it seemed that the total number of invaders would once again be around two million.

Allen had heard from Helmios that the Demon Lord Army was trying to take advantage of the fact that they seemingly knew where he was. Additionally, Allen had learned through his Spirit A that, unlike the previous year, the enemy’s chain of command was solid, and they would be launching stunning attacks this time around. That was why he could not call Helmios to fight Lycaoron. He had considered asking Rosetta for help since she could steal the Demonic Deity’s skills and weaken him, but it seemed that their opponent only used physical attack skills and no special moves, so Allen had decided that there was no need for her to come.

In Rohzenheim, Prince Zeu had proposed organizing a guerrilla force and launching a preemptive attack instead of barricading themselves and defending their position. As before, the elf generals, who had envisioned defensive battles in their forts making use of the elves’ strengths in elemental magic and archery,

had not immediately agreed with his proposal. However, Siguul explained that if the guerrilla force, organized around the Ten Heroic Beasts, were deployed alongside Allen's Summons, it would be possible for them to reduce the enemy's numbers before said enemy reached the gates of the forts. He had also noted that, under the right circumstances, there was the possibility of them flanking the attackers. For these reasons, the proposal had been adopted.

The Demon Lord Army seemed to have picked up on the deployment of the guerrilla troops, however, as they had changed their route to try to bypass the ambushes. Using her fortune-telling, Temi had predicted the enemy's route, using the results to deploy Summons and effectively move their guerrilla troops so as to continue to engage the enemy. Allen had gleaned all of this via his Spirit A and had thus decided that it was not possible to call in the other Ten Heroic Beasts since they were currently engaged in combat.

"Huh? I'm tired, Allen. Can't we take a rest? Oh, and hey, do you have a molmo you can give me?" Lepe, a bard who was intent on living his life however he pleased, was not terribly concerned about what had happened to the church.

"Sure thing, Lepe. How about some jerky too?"

"Thanks."

"I'll send you supplies later." With that, Allen sent Temi and Lepe back where they had come from. He then went over to Dogora to properly thank him.

"Dogora, I need you to speak naturally next time. Lycaoron didn't find us out though, so that was good. You were a huge help." However, Dogora only frowned at this and looked down, evading Allen's gaze.

"Yeah, I got it."

"Hmm? What's wrong, Dogora?" Krena peered into Dogora's face. Meruru, who also rejoined the team, and the others also looked at him with concern. Dogora, however, refused to meet anyone's gaze. Instead, he clenched the handle of his greataxe so tightly that his fingers turned white and closed his eyes in pain.

"Shit!" He suddenly cried, throwing down his greataxe and dropping to his knees. "Why can't I activate my Extra Skill?!"

*Just as I expected, he was really betting that today would be the day. He'd been thinking a lot about it since yesterday.*

Allen recalled Dogora having listened more intently than ever during the strategy meeting the day prior. While fighting Lycaoron, he had attacked boldly despite his opponent being many times stronger than him, and when Krena was in a tight spot, he had jumped in and defended her. From Allen's perspective, Dogora had fought well.

On top of that, Allen felt that Dogora had played the role of a shield all but perfectly. The rear guard had almost never been attacked because Dogora had always positioned himself between them and Lycaoron, and it had worked. However, judging from his shout earlier in the battle, Dogora seemed to have been trying to activate his Extra Skill. And just like before, it had not activated.

With Attack increases from both Lepe's buff and the necklace obtained as a reward for defeating the final boss of the Rank S dungeon, Krena had been able to activate her Extra Skill and deliver a decisive blow to Lycaoron. However, Dogora's attacks had not dealt sufficient damage to Lycaoron, which was partly because of the role Allen had instructed him to fill, but he seemed to think that it was somehow connected to the fact that he had been unable to use his Extra Skill since the fight against Rehzal in Rohzenheim.

"Merus, why don't you just tell us? I don't know why you're hiding it," Allen told Merus, who was silently watching Dogora. He had always thought that there was a reason Dogora's Extra Skill continued to fail to activate, and Merus seemed to know something about it.

"I can't tell you," Merus responded firmly.

"And you can't tell us why either?"

"I can't. That would betray the natural law, which is something I want to avoid. However, considering the circumstances, I don't think there's any other choice."

After a short pause, Merus spoke again, his expression heavy.

\* \* \*

The Gamers split into several groups to eliminate the monsters remaining in

Teomenia. They had decided to ensure that Teomenia was free before discussing Dogora's Extra Skill. Allen certainly believed that talking about any concerns his childhood friends from Krena Village had was important, but protecting the lives and safety of others who were currently in danger had to take priority, which meant that they first needed to eliminate the monsters lurking nearby. And though he doubted there were any such cases, if anyone in the city had survived by desperately hiding out in their basement, they needed to be saved.

Allen asked his Spirit A, which could pass through walls, to check inside buildings, but no survivors were found. However, the No-life Gamers were able to concentrate fully on eliminating the monsters as a result, and by the time evening had rolled around, it seemed that Teomenia had been completely rid of them.

As the sky began to darken, the party boarded Tam-Tam and headed for Neel. Allen had planted Gold and Silver Beans around Teomenia to create a protective barrier and left his Summons to deal with the monsters lurking around the city. If they could secure the surrounding area, the refugees from Teomenia would soon be able to return to their homes.

From Tam-Tam's cockpit, Allen gazed out at the darkened, empty city of Teomenia. The rest of the group had formed up around Dogora and Merus and were waiting for Allen and Meruru to come before they could start. When the two finally took their seats, Dogora cut right to the chase. "Well? Talk."

"First, allow me to explain why I didn't want to discuss this matter. This is something even Rohzen doesn't know."

Merus apparently had lived for about a hundred thousand years as the First Angel. This was why he felt no inclination to refer to Rohzen, who had become a god at the young age of five thousand, by any sort of title.

"Even the Spirit God doesn't know?" Sophie muttered as she stopped her hand from gently stroking Rohzen, who was perched on her lap.

"That's correct, descendant of the Priestess of Prayer. The Spirit God knows that there are many things he can't say, but he doesn't know why he must remain silent. You see, when the new gods were first learning of the ways of the

world, Lord Elmea only said not to tell people these things; he did not give a reason for it.”

“I see.”

“In other words, even the Spirit God is not allowed to know why. This isn’t something I’m particularly keen on discussing either, so are you sure you want to hear it?”

“I think it’s fine.” Allen nodded and looked down at Spirit God Rohzen, who appeared to be asleep on Sophie’s lap.

“The gods value harmony. We’ve talked about this before, but you do know how hard it is to maintain this harmony, do you not? Since you have memories of your previous life and can compare the two worlds, Sir Allen, I would say you’re more aware than others about what happens when a world’s harmony is not maintained.”

Allen tried to remember everything from his previous life. Back then, many countries had descended into anarchy due to political turmoil. Police and militaries had used excessive force, and the citizens who were against them had taken up arms and engaged in civil war. Due to poor weather, crop production had not been able to keep up with consumption, food supplies had not been able to keep up with increased imports, prices had risen, and the overall value of money had dropped. And he even saw on TV and the internet that some countries required a wad of cash to buy even a bottle of milk as a result of hyperinflation.

Building off of such examples, Allen sought to explain what a country lacking harmony would be like in this world.

“Hmm, it’s kind of like when a country falls into chaos after the loss of its king or a drop in the value of its gold coins.”

Having learned in the Academy about a country in which civil war had broken out, Allen’s friends nodded in understanding. After the king had been dethroned, a general had assumed the role and begun functioning as an autocrat. They had also learned about the importance of currency being standardized around the world.

“Sure, but that was a national situation, not a global one,” Merus explained. “Should the whole world be out of harmony, the outcome will be far worse.”

In response to Merus’s reproach, Allen formed a new hypothesis based on his memories of his previous life. “Oh, cheats like duping bugs being rampant, and how real-money trading makes in-game transactions meaningless. That sort of thing?”

“Bugs, cheats... If I remember correctly, Sir Allen, you’ve experienced the fraying of the world’s logic, the unintended turmoil of the God of Creation, and the shameful acts of trying to profit from that turmoil. Well, it’s kind of like that.” Merus shared Allen’s memories, and it seemed that he had referenced them even when he was an angel, using them to help decide what characteristics he should give Summons.

Allen recalled a duplication bug found in a game he used to enjoy playing. Any item had been able to be replicated infinitely under certain conditions, which was a death knell for a game when it caused the value of hard-to-obtain items to plummet. Of course, the management side had realized this and meted out strict punishments, such as freezing the accounts of those who were duping as well as those who traded the duplicated items, while also taking measures to fix the system. Although the duping bug had been made unusable, the management had not been able to immediately erase the multiplied items, and the economy remained in a state of chaos.

*Well, there’s no such thing as a perfect world. Certain settings need to be enforced to maintain the state of the world.*

In his previous life, there had been no such thing as a perfect game with no bugs or cheats. Even beyond gaming, the news was constantly reporting on people who had found loopholes in laws and other real-world systems that had allowed them to profit unfairly. It made sense that the world was flawed, and that flawed logic could be exploited. And in response to such bugs and cheats, the management side would increase regulations and freeze users.

“So you’re saying that in order to prevent such information from being leaked, Elmea doesn’t inform even those who have newly become gods and controls information closely?”

“Correct. However, complete control is impossible. Because of that, we have gotten this far by fixing systems that have frayed many times over, all the while changing the logic.”

“‘Changing the logic,’ huh?”

“But as a result, either every child born will become a hero, or sudden changes in Talents will leave people unable to do what they should be doing. We’ll find ourselves in an impossible situation no matter the outcome. It’s happened many times before.”

Suddenly, Allen picked up on something.

*Oh, right. I see. That’s why you always maintained a distant attitude. That’s why you don’t want to appear in front of the priests of the Elmea Church.*

It had only been four months or so since Merus appeared before the Gamers as a Summon, but even so, Allen felt that Merus had always tried to maintain a certain distance from them. He thought it was strange that he did not want to be Summoned in front of the Elmean priests. On the other hand, whenever he asked Merus to help with something, Merus would sometimes become annoyed or sarcastic, showing his true personality. Allen figured that Merus was keeping his distance from the people of this world, and the Summoner had made his own assumptions. But now, he sensed that there was a good reason for it.

“Merus. About this world that lost its harmony...”

Before Allen even had a chance to finish speaking, Merus spoke up. “I destroyed it, of course.”

Allen heard the rest of the Gamers gasp.

“No, the gods would never do something like that...” Sophie, an ardent believer in the spirit gods, was even more shocked than the rest of her friends.

“That can only mean...”

“Your theory is correct, Sir Allen. Lord Elmea will not directly involve himself.”

“Huh? But then who...” Cecil seemed to figure out the answer before she even finished her question.

“That’s correct. I... We angels, who are God’s representatives, did it. It’s been about a hundred thousand years since I was created, and it’s happened several times during my life. Of course, destroying the world means destroying the humans who inhabit it. If you were to total it all up, the number of people the Demon Lord Army has killed in the past few decades is minuscule by comparison.”

*For the past fifty years, the Demon Lord has been waging wars year after year and has managed to destroy four countries. The total must be around a hundred million, but for that to look minuscule must mean...*

“Of course, destroying the world doesn’t happen that easily. And when we recreate the world, we take measures to prevent the same things from happening again. However, as time passes, new cracks appear in the logic, and people who try to take advantage of those cracks will inevitably appear. So, we fix the cracks and change the logic, but the result is a further disturbance of the harmony. If Lord Elmea decides that the disturbance is too much, the process is repeated.”

Merus grimaced bitterly.

*A great reset once every tens of thousands of years, huh? I wonder what would have happened in my previous life if there’d been a god thinking the same thing.*

In Allen’s past life, each country had experienced poverty, discrimination due to differences in wealth and race, and both conflicts between religions and disagreements within sects, which would often culminate in civil war. Human activities had also led to wars of aggression against foreign countries and environmental problems that resulted in natural disasters and starvation. Mankind had tried to find a way to deal with these issues, but they had not resolved the differences in national intentions or the conflicts between ethnic groups, and thus no fundamental solution had been found.

“When a man notices a crack in logic, he always tries to take advantage of it. And it’s not just for selfish reasons, like seeking power or honor. There were those who tried to use the cracks for altruistic reasons such as wanting to improve the world as they knew it—to help others. In any case, once it was



known to one person, it was only a matter of time before it spread. That's just how humans are."

"Even if they keep silent, there are still jobs in which people's minds are read, as well as fortune-telling." Allen could tell that Merus was wary of Temi.

"Indeed, you are correct. When I talk about why Dogora can't use his Extra Skill, I bring up this story because this very thing has caused a rupture in logic before. And hearing about it means that you and your friends will gain knowledge that will lead to a situation that could destroy the world. This is why I don't want to talk about it. What do you think after hearing all this? Do you still want to hear more?"

Dogora silently looked at Merus. His thoughts were clear from his gaze alone; he did not have to express them in words. The rest of the Gamers looked to Allen, who met everyone's gaze one by one before finally looking at Dogora.

"Please continue. If we don't know the reason, we won't be able to save the world from the Demon Lord." Allen gave Merus that answer for the sake of both the world and Dogora.

"Then I'll continue. Lord Elmea brought Allen from another world. Am I right?"

"Yup. It was mostly by force, without really asking me what I thought."

*I mean, I'd just set up my character to play a game, but when I started, I became a baby in another world.*

"Actually, just like with Allen, there was a plan to bring together those who had self-selected to come to this world from their own. Lord Elmea referred to this as the 'Eight Heroes Plan.'"

"There are eight people like Allen in this world?!" Cecil suddenly shouted.

"Hey, whaddya mean by that?"

"Oh, I just thought that it sounded like a lot of work."

Cecil had heard that Allen had made various requests to the God of Creation and that Merus, when he was still the First Angel, had been tasked with dealing with these requests. Doing so had always been difficult for him, and those

difficulties would have only compounded if there were eight such people. Though Cecil thought it would be fun to have eight Allens around, she could only imagine how challenging that would have been for the Divine Realm.

“More accurately, it was a plan to summon eight people. However, when the first one, Sir Allen, was brought here, something unexpected happened and the plan fell through.”

“You mean how I almost chose the Demon Lord class?”

“Correct. Sir Allen was about to choose Demon Lord, so Lord Elmea quickly prepared the Summoner class instead. Since this was an eight-star class, we could no longer carry out the rest of the plan to call forth the others.”

“So, Lord Elmea had initially prepared Talents and powers enough for eight people, but they were all funneled into me?”

“Indeed. All of Lord Elmea’s power, which was originally planned to be distributed to eight people, was put into one person—Sir Allen. As a result, his actions thus far are all connected to this power.”

“No, they’re because Allen worked hard,” Krena, who had been silent until this point, rebutted. She probably meant to say that even before she had invited him to play knights, he had been trying to develop his Talent by throwing stones at trees.

“That may be so. Sir Allen’s actions have far exceeded Lord Elmea’s expectations. Some have even been so extraordinary that they border on insanity. In any case, only once every several tens of thousands of years does a demon become a Demonic Deity. Please understand that it’s not normal for someone such as Allen to be able to defeat one with such a crazy strategy.”

While his friends remained dumbfounded, Allen asked Merus another question. “Did the Eight Heroes Plan end there? What does that have to do with Dogora?” Allen thought for a moment, then added, “Ah, I get it, you came up with something else instead.”

“That’s right. We can’t call anyone with the appropriate aptitude from another world anymore.”

“And that’s why you brought all these Talented people together around me,”

Allen said, having heard enough to understand their new plan.

In this world, each person had their own Talent, but humans' growth when it came to levels was equal and limited. Most people lived their entire lives in Normal Mode; few reached Extra Mode and became what gods and Demonic Deities called the Liberated. Since that made it impossible for them to obtain the power to oppose the Demon Lord, the gods had tried to call forth people from another world who would choose Hell Mode.

Moreover, it seemed that just one person was not enough. Allen figured that this was why all these Talented people born in this world had gravitated toward him.

His childhood friend's Talent was Sword Lord. The daughter of the lord of the land was born with the Wizardess Talent. At the Academy, he had met an elf princess and a dwarf golem user. These were no coincidences.

"I just gave you a hand to make it easier. If we overdid it, the Demon Lord Army would certainly have reacted. Everyone gathering around you was the result that Lord Elmea wanted, but it doesn't mean you were being manipulated."

"God wants me to fight the Demon Lord Army?" Cecil asked Merus.

"What you should do is up to you to decide. However, he probably thought that if you got acquainted with Allen and became friends with him, that would naturally happen. In the first place, even if we'd gathered eight otherworlders as originally planned, we didn't know if all of them would choose to fight the Demon Lord in accordance with Lord Elmea's wish, let alone if they would even be able to do so. Our plan merely anticipated such a possibility."

"Then Pelomas's silly Extra Skill, Libra, was also arranged for by God. In other words, it was fate."

Like Krena and Dogora, Pelomas was a Krena Villager born in the same year as Allen who had been found to have a Talent. As they had learned at their Appraisal Ceremony, his was Merchant. He possessed the Extra Skill Libra, which allowed him to see the value of things based on current global standards.

"Was it due to Lord Elmea's involvement that there were so many unusual

people in Krena Village?”

“How rude. I’m not unusual.” When Allen said this, all of his friends, with the exception of Sophie and Meruru, shot him exasperated looks. Instead, Meruru’s face clouded over for a moment, and Sophie gazed over at her dwarf friend.

“Come to think of it, Pelomas is going to marry Fiona, right?” Cecil brought up one of the details she recalled about Pelomas.

“Mm, I don’t know about that. Viscount Granvelle said that Mr. Chester seemed to be enthusiastic about the idea, at least.”

Allen had kept a Summon in the capital of the Kingdom of Ratash to act as a liaison. Through that Summon, he occasionally communicated with Viscount Granvelle, Cecil’s father. Among the matters they had discussed was that the Pelomas Whaling Company was doing well and that the wealthy merchant Chester had finally given Pelomas his blessing to become his daughter’s spouse.

It was love at first sight when Pelomas had first met Fiona, whose father was the wealthiest merchant in the Granvelle fief and the owner of several luxury inns in both the Ratash capital and Granvelle City. Chester had told him that he would approve the marriage once Pelomas became self-sufficient, and so the young man had started his business while studying at a commercial school in the royal capital.

“Hmm. If that’s what her father said, then it’s pretty much decided,” Cecil said. “Did we ever talk about the wedding? I want to see Fiona’s dress.”

“Yay! Pelomas is getting married!” Krena shouted in excitement, and the rest of their companions nodded happily. During their time at the Academy, Pelomas had often come to ask Allen for advice, which was where they made his acquaintance.

*Nah, Raven mentioned that Pelomas was firmly rejected.*

Allen had heard from Raven via his Summon in Ratash’s capital that Pelomas was ultimately turned away by Fiona and that he had only recently recovered, deciding that he was going to refuse to give up.

Allen updated his friends on the latest development. “No. Even if her father has agreed to their marriage, Fiona isn’t interested. Not yet.” Though Chester

recognized Pelomas as a proper merchant, Fiona had rejected him.

“Huh? Pelomas is going to the dungeon now, isn’t he?”

“That’s right,” Allen responded to Merus’s question. “Fiona says that she’s only interested in strong men, so he seems to be trying to become stronger by taking on the dungeons. Raven is helping him out.”

*Besides, I already lent him some rings and equipment. For a fee, of course. Not that I charged Raven and the others brokerage fees, though.*

Allen had introduced Pelomas to three adventurers—Raven, Rita, and Milci—who had helped him out in Granvelle City. The three were now affiliated with the Pelomas Whaling Company. It seemed that Pelomas had hired several mercenaries in addition to them and was diving headfirst into the dungeons. Allen found it very merchantlike to spend money on allies and equipment.

“Well, how nice of him to do that for the woman he loves!” Sophie said excitedly, her golden eyes shining as she blushed.

“Hey! Get focused, everyone! And cut it out, Allen!” the potato-faced Dogora yelled at the group, his face burning red. It was for his sake that Merus had said all he did, and Dogora remained quiet out of respect for his friends’ joyous occasion, but they were going off on a huge tangent. He could not help but be upset about it.

“Got it, but don’t glare at me like that, okay?”

*It’s Merus’s fault for not stopping us. Anyway, how far did we get into the story? We were talking about friends, right?*

In his heart, Allen tried to place the blame on Merus and get things back on track.

“Hmm? So you mean that you couldn’t bring seven heroes together in some village or gather up Saintesses and Sword Lords without being found out by the Demon Lord Army?”

“Pretty much. Anyway, now we can finally get to talking about Dogora’s Extra Skill. In truth, all of your Extra Skills are different from those normally given to an individual with your Talent, not just Dogora’s.”

“Did you choose a strong one?” Dogora butted in to ask.

“As a matter of fact, I did. There are countless Extra Skills, but they vary in power. For Dogora, I chose a particularly powerful one.”

“Huh? Then why can’t I use it?! That makes it useless!”

“Actually, Dogora’s Extra Skill is of the King grade.”

“King grade?!” everyone shouted in unison, as they had never heard that phrase before.

“There are many Extra Skills, each with different effects,” Merus continued. “Grades are roughly determined according to the magnitude of the effects and are named ‘General,’ ‘King,’ and ‘Emperor’ in ascending order. A person can be given up to three Extra Skills, but all three will not always be General grade, nor will the second always be King, though it’s common for the first to be General and the second to be King. To be more specific, all of you except Sir Allen and Dogora have General-grade skills, with Dogora alone having a King-grade Extra Skill.”

*So I guess Cecil’s Petit Meteor and Limit Break are the lowest grade, then? Does this mean that General and King correspond to their Talents?*

In terms of the number of stars assigned to a given Talent, there were many three-star Talents with “General” in the name, such as Talos General; many four-stars named “King,” such as Saint King; and many five-stars named “Emperor,” such as Sword Emperor. Allen was impressed by the rather unified system.

“Why am I the only one who’s King grade?” Dogora sounded rather cheerful all of a sudden.

“Because I aimed for a combination that would be useful in subjugating the Demon Lord. Lord Elmea insisted that there’s no General-grade Extra Skill strong enough for an Axe User.”

Apparently Elmea, the God of Creation, had had a hand in the changes to Extra Skills as well.

“Hmm? So that’s why he can’t use it?” Allen asked.

Merus nodded before responding. “There aren’t many people who have King-grade Extra Skills from the get-go. You have to be born with one, and that’s very rare. However, in order to master it, you have to acquire a certain amount of power. A person must spend the majority of their life training a single technique before they can finally use it as they please.”

It seemed that Merus had been watching Dogora struggle, thinking that it was natural that he could not use his Extra Skill. He commented that he was surprised the boy had activated it once.

“Isn’t there an easy way to use it?”

“There is not. Extra Skills consume a person’s life energy. You have no choice but to wait for the right time to risk your life and use your power, and that time may not ever come.”

“So I’m special? Is that what you mean?” Dogora mumbled with a serious expression.

*Oh? Say yes, Merus!*

Allen glanced at Merus, who sighed as he nodded. “Dogora. Helmios is empowered to hunt Demonic Deities. You have the power to do that too, but it’s up to you whether you can use it the way he does.”

*Oh? Helmios too?*

“Is Helmios’s God Strike also a King-grade Extra Skill?”

“That’s correct.”

*Whoa, so Dogora also has a power comparable to a Demonic Deity’s special attack. Hmm? Wait...*

“So you’re saying that the Hero has trained that much? That doesn’t make sense given what you said before.”

Merus’s earlier explanation had made it sound like something that required decades of hard work.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you about it. Helmios has also been granted a special Extra Skill. He took his time to learn the General-grade skill first.”

A bit annoyed, he went on to explain how things like this could lead to a crack in the logic.

Apparently Helmios had two Extra Skills, which he had gained at the General- and King-grade Talent levels. Since he had mastered these Extra Skills one after the other, he could use his King-grade one, God Strike, whenever he pleased.

“Really? No way. We spent so much time together and yet he never said anything about that.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t get it. What does this all mean?”

“It means, Krena, that Helmios has at least two Talents—a General-grade one and a King-grade one.”

“Whoa. That’s amazing. I can’t believe Dogora has an Extra Skill equivalent to the Hero’s special sword skill.”

Krena returned her gaze to Dogora after hearing about Helmios’s two Extra Skills and circled the discussion back around to him. He had been given an Extra Skill that rivaled or even surpassed that of the Demonic Deity-hunting, world-saving Hero Helmios.

“I have power,” Dogora said. “The kind of power given to a hero.”

“It’s a power worthy of one who is recognized as a hero,” Merus replied.

“A hero. I can become a hero?”

Dogora dropped his gaze to his hands, lost in his emotions.



## Chapter 7: Following the Pillar of Light

After defeating Lycaoron and clearing out Teomenia, the No-life Gamers took a night's rest in Neel. The next day, they headed for Rohzenheim to procure supplies to send to Elmahl. Allen had contacted the queen the night before and obtained her informal consent, and he and his friends were now in the palace in Fortenia to have her officially accept their request.

"The crisis of the Holy Land of Elmahl was truly precarious. Just as our country was saved from the Demon Lord Army's invasion, the Holy Land of Elmahl should also be saved. As companions facing the same troubles, there shall be no limit to our assistance."

"Thank you. I'll contact you if there's anything else we need."

After Allen thanked the queen, the elven soldiers led the group out of the temple and into a huge warehouse. It took several people to open the huge doors, inside which sat a mountain of food bags.

"We have already secured enough food for the people of Fortenia to survive the winter. Please use this."

There were many spirit magic users in Rohzenheim, and with the help of the wood, earth, and water spirits' skills, they could easily produce food. Even with the elves who had taken refuge in the southern part of Rohzenheim returning as the reconstruction of Fortenia progressed, their food supplies did not go down. In fact, the spirit magic users were now gathered in one place and increasing their food production. Furthermore, each of Rohzenheim's liberated cities was also being rebuilt, so even if Fortenia's pantry were emptied, food could be procured from neighboring towns.

Incidentally, the Empire of Giamut was the largest exporter of food in the world. It had built granaries throughout its vast territory to keep its people, which made up the lion's share of the world's population, from starving while also accumulating as much as was necessary for war and exporting any surplus to other countries. In particular, the Empire of Baukis, which had little arable

land, often conducted trade with Giamut, offering up its magic tools.

Rohzenheim, on the other hand, whose population was only a few tenths of Giamut's, produced only what the elves needed to eat and thus did not export food. However, this was due to the elven tendency to grow and harvest only what was necessary without considering stockpiles or exports. If they so desired, they had the means to produce several times more than usual.

To start with, Allen chose a portion to send to the city of Neel. He called out to the elven soldiers leading the way.

"Please join us. We'll be teleporting, as originally planned."

"Certainly."

Once the teleportation was finished, they found themselves in a plain just outside of Neel. Many priests were waiting on the spot.

"Ooh!" the group shouted in surprise and admiration.

"I can't believe how much you brought! Am I witnessing a miracle?!" Cardinal Krympton trembled as he stepped forward from the crowd.

"We also brought some elves with us. Please listen to what they have to say about what kinds of food are available." More than half of the food was grain, with the rest consisting of vegetables that could be preserved.

*They're probably so excited because even the idea of Elmahl producing food this year is a lost cause.*

The entirety of Elmahl had been devastated by attacks from monsters and the daemonic incarnations. Though cities the size of Neel were surrounded by walls that kept the daemonic incarnations from invading until Allen and the others had arrived, it had been impossible for many villages, protected by nothing but wooden fences, to prevent the invasion. As a result, the villages and towns responsible for the region's food production were hit hard, and the prospect of recovery was still quite dim. Considering that cross-border magic ship operations had been suspended and would not resume until the domestic situation had stabilized, there was little hope of support from neighboring countries.

Because anyone who was bitten by a daemonic incarnation would become one themselves in about a day, Allen wanted the survivors to avoid contact with these monsters as much as possible. As such, when rescue operations were completed, he would plant Gold and Silver Beans to create protective barriers in the places where monsters had been cleared out. They had been brought food so that they could minimize their excursions and instead simply wait for Allen's Summons to wipe out the daemonic incarnations.

The priests expressed their gratitude. They were quite surprised since they had never requested such assistance, but Allen had gone out and done it on his own initiative.

"This should settle most of your issues. From now on, the number of Summons dedicated to exterminating the monsters will be lower, but rest assured that we'll take care of all of them."

Insect As, which were mobile and could fly around undisturbed, continued to produce Parent Beas and Baby Beas every single day. The number of troll kings and ogre kings that they had enslaved exceeded a thousand. Allen had also ordered them to escort the convoys that would be traveling around the Holy Land of Elmahl and distributing food to its cities.

"Not only did you save our capital from the clutches of the Demonic Deity, but you also left opportunities for future reconstruction. Thank you so much for everything." The cardinal extended his hand toward Allen. The day prior, Allen had told him that they had defeated Lycaoron, eliminated the monsters and daemonic incarnations that were swarming around Teomenia, and set up a barrier.

Just as the cardinal was about to offer to help Allen in any way he could as a show of thanks, Meruru called forth Tam-Tam, Allen returned the handshake, and the Gamers made to leave.

"I hope we meet again. Of course, please contact me if there's any way I can be of assistance!"

With that, Allen and the others boarded Tam-Tam, which was in Eagle Mode. Once the waving priests were out of sight, Allen visited Meruru in the cockpit.

"So, are we on target?"

“Looking good. We’re heading due south.”

From here on, the party would be chasing after the pillar of light that had extended vertically from the altar placed in Teomenia’s church and bent out at a right angle, shooting off into the distance. Off to the south was where they would find Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism.

“Can I go to my room for a minute?” Dogora called into the cockpit.

“Sure thing. I’ll give you a shout if anything happens.”

Dogora wanted to practice his swings and do some strength training in his room aboard Tam-Tam. On the way back from Teomenia, he had heard from Merus that he had a very special skill, and that whether he mastered it was up to him. Merus had also mentioned that his power might even exceed that of the Hero, inspiring Dogora to train even harder than he ever had before. He was devoting his whole self to it.

The rest of the Gamers spent their time in their rooms or relaxing in the lounge. Around evening, they finally reached the central area of the continent where the Union was located.

“What is that? An island?”

“It *is* an island. And it’s floating, Allen! Slow down!”

Cecil’s and Krena’s voices came from the cockpit, prompting the rest of the group to rush in from the lounge. Outside the window, off in the distance and farther up, was something that looked unmistakably like an island. To be precise, it was as if a piece of land ten kilometers in diameter had been scooped out of the ground and lifted into the air. It floated diagonally above the direction Tam-Tam was traveling in. Allen and the others looked up at its underside.

Tam-Tam had prioritized movement speed and avoiding fights with monsters by flying at a high altitude. Considering, then, that they could still only see the underside of the island, that could only mean that it, too, was extremely high in the air. The whole island was covered with something like a white, shiny film. Allen wondered if the color of the glowing membrane was similar to that of the pillar of light.

“What are we going to do? Get closer?” Meruru asked Allen.

“For the time being, let’s move above the island and head over to the other side. Don’t get too close to the film of light.”

“Roger!”

Meruru manipulated Tam-Tam’s controls, and the golem shot upward. Once higher than the island, it flew from the north side to the south. Meanwhile, the team returned to the Eagle Mode lounge and observed the island through the windows lining either side of the hull.

*It’s pretty big. I wonder if anyone lives there.*

Allen also looked out the window. The whole island appeared rocky and rugged, with no signs of life in sight.

“Huh? I see something,” Krena suddenly said. “It’s a castle.”

Allen and the rest of the Gamers gathered around her to look out the left-side window. Looking in the direction Krena was pointing, they could see a building on the top of a rocky peak that rose from the center of the island.

“A castle? Or a temple, maybe? What is it?” Allen saw part of the building glowing. This light was different from that of the film covering the island, however. It looked almost as if something were ablaze. Allen sent a picture of the scene to his grimoire, a feature that allowed it to record an image of what Allen could see.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anything else... Wait, what’s that?” Keel asked from his window running along the right side of the hull. He pointed out the window, at a piece of the glowing membrane covering the island, as Allen approached.

“Isn’t that the same pillar of light that was in Teomenia’s church?”

A pillar of light extended horizontally out from the film surrounding the island and shot off toward somewhere. Allen entered the golem’s cockpit and looked at the console in front of Meruru. On it, the surrounding topography was drawn with blue lines, while Tam-Tam’s position, orientation, and flight direction were indicated by triangular arrows drawn with red lines.

Currently, Tam-Tam was on the south side of the island. The pillar of light extended south from the island's glowing membrane, though it might have been more accurate to say that it was actually extending toward the island from somewhere else off to the south.

"Then..."

"Yep. The incident must not be over yet. There are still countries that are under attack by the daemonic incarnations just like Elmahl was."

Allen had a hunch that more battles awaited him and his friends farther to the south. In Teomenia's Elmean church, the pillar of light rising from the tray Demonic Deity Lycaoron had referred to as an altar had turned at a right angle in the sky and headed south. And this island floated directly to the south of Teomenia, the capital of the Holy Land of Elmahl. Furthermore, a similar pillar of light extended horizontally from the southern side of the island toward the south side of the continent.

Based on this information, it was possible that the pillar of light emanating from Teomenia's altar had continued toward the island's glowing membrane until Allen and his friends had destroyed it. A similar altar might have been located off to the south of the island as well.

"Does this mean a country off to the south is being attacked by daemonic incarnations like what happened in Elmahl?"

"That's not all, Cecil. We've only seen the south side of the island so far. There may be other pillars of light. Meruru, go around the island."

"Roger that."

Tam-Tam moved to the east side of the island, and once there, Meruru spoke again. "There's one here too." She looked out the cockpit window in the direction they were traveling. Allen saw a pillar of light, exactly the same as the one on the south side, extending horizontally from the east and connecting to the film of light that covered the island. When they passed the north side, where they had first approached the island, and headed to the west, there was a pillar of light there as well.

"There are three countries besides the Holy Land of Elmahl where these

things have been happening?” Keel muttered, a dark look on his face.

*The reason there’s nothing to the north is that we destroyed Teomenia’s altar. But there are still three remaining. Why did I not notice this until now? Is the situation just as critical in those places or was Teomenia a special case?*

Perhaps they were asking for help from their neighbors but the news had not reached Elmahl. Or perhaps they had poor relations with their neighbors and had not sent a distress signal.

*There’s no sense in thinking about the reason; the possibilities could be endless. The real question is what we should do next.*

As Allen sorted the situation out in his head, he approached the cockpit window and tried something. “Hmm? I can’t Summon.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Cecil asked.

“There was a templelike structure at the center of the island, right? I thought someone who’s involved in all this might be there and tried to Summon something up to check it out, but I can’t Summon anything within the barrier.”

“Perhaps that film of light is a barrier. You cannot Summon through barriers,” Merus, who was listening to Allen’s exchange with Cecil, responded.

In that case, Allen Summoned an Insect A outside the light barrier. “Bea, destroy the light film.”

*“Bzz, bzz!”*

Insect A heard Allen’s command through Tam-Tam’s window, approached the membrane of light, and extended a huge needle from the tip of its abdomen. Its stinger was so large that if a human were to be stabbed by it, there would be more than just a gaping hole in their body. The large needle moved closer, but then...

*CRACK!*

A bright flash of light temporarily blinded Allen. What he had originally thought was a popping sound turned out not to be true as he watched the Insect A careen straight toward Tam-Tam.

Meruru immediately manipulated Tam-Tam’s controls to avoid it. “Whoa,

there! Allen, it looks pretty dangerous!”

“Even a Rank A Summon can’t break through this film of light.”

For a moment, Allen considered instructing Meruru to give Tam-Tam’s weapons a shot, but it would have been problematic if they were repelled as well.

“Hmm, maybe if all the pillars of light are destroyed, this barrier will disappear too,” Allen mumbled to himself while deciding on their next plan of action.

“It’s finally time to split the party up into three groups,” Keel said. He seemed to be recalling the discussion they had had when they were on their way to rescue the Holy Land of Elmahl. At the time, they had debated between going to Teomenia, where all the problems had originated; to Neel, where the call for help had come from; or splitting into two smaller groups and heading to either city.

“No. I’m guessing that there’s a Demonic Deity protecting each of the pillars’ altars.”

There were eight Gamers—nine if they included Merus. However, if they divided up into three groups, each would only have three members. They would not be a match for a Demonic Deity.

However, Keel held his ground this time. “There’s no need to fight the Demonic Deities. The priority is to help those who are being attacked by daemonic incarnations and monsters. Once we save everyone, *then* we can all come together again and fight.”

“That’s true. But the Demonic Deity might attack you while you’re saving people.” While what Keel had said made a lot of sense, Allen could not be sure that the Demonic Deity guarding the altar would not take an aggressive stance. But Keel persisted.

“Allen, please trust us a little bit. If a Demonic Deity attacks, we can run away or contact each other with a Summon and help each other out.”

Keel fixed Allen with a serious gaze. No matter what Allen thought, he looked as if he was going to fight to get his point heard.



Allen glanced at each of the other Gamers. Everyone had the same serious expression on their face as Keel. Apparently Allen was the only person not on the same page.

“Yeah, you guys are right. I guess I was just too concerned about safety.” Allen then considered a situation where he would split the party into three and prioritize the rescue operation.

Like Teomenia, all three places were probably filled with daemoninc incarnations, Rank A and lower monsters, as well as giant monsters, to say nothing of the Demonic Deities. If they did not have to fight any of the Demonic Deities and could just deal with the monsters, splitting the party into three teams would not pose any problems. If a Demonic Deity happened to attack one of the groups or if they found themselves in a pinch while trying to save people, they could either escape with their Summons or await rescue from another team.

“All right, I’m going to divide up the party. While I’m thinking about how we’re going to go about it, I want you to pack a hundred of each of these items into a bag. Also, call Dogora here.” After he finished speaking, Allen took Potherbs, Blessings of Heaven, Gold Beans, and Silver Beans from Storage in bundles of one hundred and placed them in the cockpit.

*It should be fine to split up our supplies among all three groups. Though I’m the only one who can use Storage, magic bags should work just as well.*

Allen’s teammates carried magic bags with them at all times. They always kept a certain number of healing potions produced by his Grass Summons on hand in case something happened, but it seemed that there would be a lot of victims who needed rescuing from the daemoninc incarnations this time. Therefore, he needed to distribute a significant amount of recovery items.

Allen had already supplied healing potions for the rescue operations in Elmahl, as well as having given some to Admiral Garara, Helmios, and Zeu, but he still had more than enough in stock. In between the Rank S dungeon assaults, he had had Merus assist him with building up his supplies. By having all his preparations in order, he had very little he needed to worry about.

## Grass Summon Healing Items

- Gold Bean: 6,800
- Silver Bean: 6,800
- Blessing of Heaven: 30,000
- Potherb: 15,000
- Seed of Magic: 50,000
- Frond of Life: 1,000,000

## Magic Stones

- Rank S: 6,895
- Rank A: 10,000
- Rank B: 2,400,000
- Rank C: 1,000,000
- Rank D: 70,000
- Rank E: 10,000,000

“Will you be calling some Summons back from Elmahl?” Merus asked.

“Yep. I need to do something about the number of Summons out there roaming around on their own.”

Considering the party distribution, Allen had sorted out eighty Summon slots. He Deleted all of the Beast As running around slaying monsters in Elmahl as well as most of the Spirit As, leaving only one for communication purposes. He figured that the Insect As and the Rank A monsters they had enslaved were enough to annihilate the remaining monsters. In fact, he could not just Delete his Insect As. When they were returned to card form, their Parent Beas and Baby Beas would also disappear, and the monsters they had enslaved would die. However, it was possible to simply leave the Parent Beas, Baby Beas, and enslaved monsters behind in Elmahl and have the Insect As move to the east and west of the Union.

By doing all this, it would be possible to send ten support Summons, including the Insect As, along with each of the three teams—one heading to the east, one west, and one south.

## Breakdown of Summons (80 Total)

- Northern border of Giamut: 10
- Northern border of Rohzenheim: 15
- Holy Land of Elmahl: 5 (15 currently, but 10 will be moved)
- Rodin Village and elsewhere: 5
- Bird As used for teleportation: 10
- Summons sent with the east, west, and south teams: 10 each (30 total)
- Grass-type Summons: 5

All that was left was the breakdown of the three teams.

Though he did not think it would happen so soon, Allen had always figured that it would eventually become more efficient to act in small groups than as a large party of eight, and he had previously discussed this with his friends. However, this time, Allen also agreed that Keel's opinion was more valid than his own. And since he had already been considering team divisions, it was easy for him to choose how everyone would be split up.

"All right, then, let's discuss the team breakdowns."

"Team'? Ooh! Teams!"

"That's right. First of all, the west team is me, Cecil, and Dogora."

"And will you be our leader, Allen?"

"That's right, Cecil. I'll be our team leader. The south team will be made up of Keel, Merus, and Krena."

"And the team leader?" Krena looked at Allen with a twinkle in her eye. It was clear that she wanted to do it.

"Right. I think Merus would—"

"No. Humans should be in charge of such matters."

Before Allen could finish speaking, Merus rejected his suggestion.

“Hmm, I guess that makes sense. In that case, Keel.”



“Sure, got it. I was the one who came up with this idea anyway.”

Keel nodded firmly, a serious expression on his face. When Allen looked at Krena, it was clear as day that she was disappointed. Allen did his best to encourage her, saying, “I need you to get just a bit stronger before I can leave the role of leader to you.”

“The rest of you—Sophie, Volmaar, and Meruru—are on the east team. Sophie will be the team leader.”

“We’re going to the east?”

Sophie frowned for a moment, but Allen missed it and continued speaking.

“That’s right. Sophie, Keel, listen up.”

“Yes?”

“You’ll be accompanied by Swell and Okiyosan so that you can ask me any questions if need be. However, the final decision is yours, no matter what. From now on, I don’t know what awaits each of us, but I’m sure there will be times when it’s difficult to deal with the problems you encounter using just the Summons that are with you. In those times, be sure to get the cooperation of the locals. The role of leader will involve carefully deciding what the citizens can do, what we can do, and what the Summons can do.”

“I understand.”

“O-Okay.”

Sophie seemed lost in thought. Allen wondered if she was really ready, so he decided to give her a little more prompting.

“Sophie. I’ve said it several times already, but I’m leaving everything to you. It’s up to you to decide your own priorities.”

“Okay. Leave it to me, Lord Allen.” Sophie gave a clear and confident reply.

*Ultimately, it’s all about finding the perfect balance.*

## **Team Breakdown and Direction**

- West: Allen (Leader), Cecil, Dogora
- South: Keel (Leader), Krena, Merus
- East: Sophie (Leader), Volmaar, Meruru

Both Merus and Allen were able to Summon, so them having been put on different teams only made sense. It did, however, leave the remaining team with no members who were able to Summon, thus decreasing their ability to cope with any problems that might arise. That was why Allen had placed Sophie, who could manifest spirits, and Meruru, the pilot of Tam-Tam, on that team. It was a good fit, as both of them surpassed others in terms of fighting prowess, second only to Allen and Merus. Sophie had powerful armor now too. And, of course, Allen had also considered the balance between the vanguard and the rear guard when deciding on the team composition.

Once the team member announcements had been made, each of the teams packed a large amount of recovery items into their magic bags and asked the queen of Rohzenheim for additional food support through his Spirit A. It was April now, which was the time when seeding normally began. Though they still had food stockpiles, given the situation in Teomenia, it seemed likely that even more food supply assistance would be needed.

After the queen replied approving the request, Meruru landed Eagle Mode Tam-Tam, and the teams prepared to head off in their respective directions.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye for now. Good luck, everyone.”

Each of the Gamers replied to Allen with their sentiments. Then, they split into their three teams.

## Chapter 8: Team Sophie (Part 1): Off to the Muharino Desert

After parting ways with Allen and the rest of the Gamers, Sophie's team boarded Tam-Tam in its Eagle Mode and headed for the east side of the continent. From above the pillar of light extending east from the island, they followed it toward their destination. However, even after flying for several hours straight, they still had not reached their destination.

"It feels like we're all alone out here," Sophie mumbled as she looked out the cockpit window.

The Galiatan Continent, where the Union was located, had a large mountain range near its center, with lush forests and grasslands surrounding it. But farther to the east, the climate became dry, and wastelands stretched wide.

Having grown up in the lush Rohzenheim, Sophie felt a little uneasy about seeing all the greenery fade away below her. In addition, she was now separated from Allen and the others, and she had to act and make decisions as her group's leader. And if that was not bad enough, the Demon Lord Army was almost certainly waiting for them at the other end of this pillar of light. Sophie's face clouded over as she considered how little hope for salvation there likely was at their destination, even if they were to rush there.

"At this rate, we'll reach the edge of the continent by tomorrow morning," Meruru said while looking at the location information displayed on the control panel in front of her. Considering that Volmaar, a Bird A, and a Spirit A were the only others in the cockpit, she thought that Sophie had been speaking to her, though in truth she had simply been talking to herself.

However, as soon as she replied, Meruru hurriedly stood up with a surprised yelp and rushed in front of Sophie, who was standing by the cockpit window. "Team Leader Sophie! I propose that we continue flying!" the dwarf girl said, giving a brisk Baukisian salute. This must have been the same way she had saluted her superiors when she had served in the Baukis Imperial Navy the



previous year in their battle against the Demon Lord Army.

Just as Krena had been envious of Keel's appointment as leader, Meruru looked upon Sophie's appointment with reverence. She seemed to think that Sophie had somehow been recognized by Allen, and it seemed that her salute was a manifestation of that feeling. Yet this only served to make Sophie uncomfortable.

"M-Meruru, there's no need to address me that way. We're friends, remember?" Her reaction was partly inspired by how suddenly Meruru had reacted, as well as being influenced by her concern that, were she to tolerate Meruru's behavior, she might continue to be treated like a military leader.

Meruru seemed both taken aback and humbled by Sophie's words. "Ah, yeah, I understand."

"I have to say, though, you really did a great job this time around," Sophie quickly followed up, hoping to keep her teammate's spirits high.

"You really think so? Hee hee hee." Meruru's expression brightened immediately. Seeing that, Sophie relaxed a bit.

"I suppose now is a good time to have some lunch, then."

"I agree, Princess Sophialohne," Volmaar replied.

Meruru put Tam-Tam on autopilot, and the three team members moved from the cockpit to the lounge. She had been keeping a close eye on what was going on outside for the entire time she had been flying the golem, so it was time for a break.

While Sophie and the others rested, the Spirit A kept an eye on the situation outside. There, the Insect As, Parent Beas, and Baby Beas followed after Tam-Tam, ready to take on any threat that made itself apparent.

Some of the Insect As, which had been in charge of exterminating the daemoninc incarnations and the monsters roaming around Elmahl, had left their enslaved Rank A monsters behind and brought their Parent Beas and Baby Beas with them. They moved a little slower than usual since they had to match the speed of their Baby Beas, but when they eventually caught up, Allen planned to have them use their Spawn Ability to increase the number of Parent and Baby

Beas and thus be as prepared as possible to face the situation.

Sophie and the others knew that Allen, who was headed west, could see out of the eyes of his Summons. By boosting his Intelligence, it was possible for him to access dozens of fields of vision at the same time.

Sophie sat on the sofa in the lounge and chatted with Meruru. Meanwhile, Volmaar removed the skin from a molmo fruit with a knife and prepared some snacks.

“That long-range attack you pulled off against the Demonic Deity was quite impressive. All without ever even practicing it, at that.”

Among the Gamers, Krena was always the first to rise to the occasion. She had a rare three-star Talent called Sword Lord, and had been quick to use her Extra Skills ever since unlocking them in Academy City.

During the war in Rohzenheim, Cecil had shown great promise. Even now, her Intelligence was greatly boosted thanks to the rings she had obtained in dungeons and from auctions, and by riding a Bird B, she was able to let the Summon take care of evading incoming attacks while she focused purely on offense.

Allen had told Sophie back in the Rank S dungeon that she contributed greatly to the party. Though she did not necessarily intend to, it seemed that she was able to put as much of her MP as she could handle into any of the spirits she manifested to attack on her behalf. Even a juvenile spirit was able to defeat Rank A monsters with ease, greatly improving the stability of the party and the speed at which they could take out their enemies.

However, Sophie believed that it was Meruru who had really played an active role in clearing the Rank S dungeon. In particular, from around the time when her magic disc had begun to fill up with slates, she had played a variety of roles, such as protecting her companions, attacking enemies, and supporting the party. She had become just as vital as Keel’s healing magic.

“Thank you, Sophie. And you too, Volmaar,” Meruru mumbled through a mouthful of food.

“Don’t worry about what Keel said, Meruru.”

“Huh?” Meruru looked surprised by that statement, so Sophie decided to explain in a bit more detail.

“When Merus said that Elmea had brought everyone together around Lord Allen, Keel commented that it made sense that Elmea had led all of Allen’s companions to his hometown to join him on his adventure. But that’s only Keel’s opinion. You’re just as much one of Allen’s companions as the rest of us, guided by Lord Elmea.”

“Y-You’re right. Er, wait... Did I look like I was worried about that?”

“Yes, it seemed that way.”

Merus had discussed this while explaining how Dogora had been given a special—albeit not easily activated due to the restrictions placed on it—Extra Skill by Elmea, the God of Creation. He had said that this was all the result of leading children with Talents to the same place at the same time to help Allen fight the Demon Lord, but he had not said exactly who they were. That was when Keel had remarked that many unique individuals had lived in Krena Village, which had caused Meruru to think that perhaps she was not one of those who had been led to join Allen.

Now that Sophie pointed it out, Meruru finally remembered the circumstances that had brought them together.

“Ah, right...”

Meruru had first enrolled in a school in the Empire of Baukis, but at the end of her first year, she was told that she had been selected for a government-sponsored study abroad program. In exchange for her tuition and living expenses being covered, she was to become a student at the Academy run by the Five Continent Alliance, a place where people of all different races and nationalities were sent in order to create a sense of solidarity between them before they went on to fight the Demon Lord Army together as one.

A major factor in Meruru’s decision to go had been that her family was by no means wealthy. Her father, the breadwinner, was a low-ranking soldier, and she had four other siblings. Meruru had learned at her Appraisal Ceremony that she had the Talent of Talos General, but Baukis had not granted her any special assistance just because of that. However, international exchange students were

another story entirely. Upon finding out that she could study without being a burden to her parents, Meruru had accepted the offer and come to the Academy in the Kingdom of Ratash. At the insistence of her homeroom teacher, Carlova, she had joined Allen and the others.

If she had not been eligible for a government scholarship, she might not have gone on an adventure with Allen and the rest of the Gamers. She felt uneasy, believing that she, a citizen of a completely different country, was not a true companion led to Allen by Elmea.

“You know, Meruru, I was also born in a different place from you and Allen. What’s more, I was born quite a long time before the rest of you. And yet here we are, all together. It’s all thanks to Lord Rohzen’s guidance that I was able to join you and the others. Maybe Lord Elmea encouraged him to do so, but I don’t think that’s important. Now that we’re all together, I think that’s all that matters.”

Hearing Sophie say this in her usual calm tone made Meruru understand once again why Sophie had been chosen as their team’s leader. “Thank you, Sophie.”

“You’re welcome. We’re friends, you know. Even though we’re a smaller group than usual now and the going will certainly be tough, we should still give it our all.”

Meruru nodded with a bright smile on her face. “Absolutely!”

\* \* \*

The next day, Meruru woke up on the sofa in the lounge.

Merely keeping Tam-Tam in its Eagle Mode constantly consumed Meruru’s MP, so she had to regularly use Seeds of Magic to keep her MP up as she flew. This did little to help her growing sense of fatigue, however. To combat it, she made sure to take frequent naps.

The previous evening, she had let the Spirit A take over while the three of them slept. Upon waking up, Meruru found Sophie and Volmaar to be missing, though she found them when she left the lounge and made her way to the cockpit. Sophie was standing at the front of the cockpit, looking out in the direction of travel, and Volmaar stood behind her, gazing out the right-side

window.

“Good morning. Have you been up long, Sophie?”

Sophie turned around at the sound of Meruru’s voice. “Good morning, Meruru. I just woke up, actually. But more to the point, you should take a look at this.” Sophie pointed out the window, and Meruru stood at her side to look out it.

All she could see was a desert of endless yellowish sand. Tam-Tam flew above the cloudless desert along the length of the pillar of light that extended parallel to the ground. About three hundred meters ahead, she saw it break at a right angle and descend to the ground.

“Ah! We’ve finally reached the terminus!”

Meruru sat in the pilot’s seat and made Tam-Tam hover before standing up by the window again and watching the pillar of light descend.

“What is that? I see a purple, slime-like object in the desert.”

At the end of the pillar of light, there was a lake with a strong reddish-purple hue that glistened in the morning sun. Meruru referred to it as slime since the water itself looked rather squishy.

“That was probably an oasis. I’ve heard that there are several such places here in the Muharino Desert.”

The crescent-moon-shaped Muharino Desert stretched across the west side of the Galiatan Continent, where the Union was located. A single river flowed through this desert, running northwest from the mountain range in the center of the continent, but it was not very wide, and there were very few green areas in its basin. In contrast, there was a lot of greenery where the water veins that flowed beneath the desert appeared on the surface, forming ponds and lakes. Towns and villages had been built around such locations.

Each of these settlements was self-governing and independent, forming a so-called city-state. They had made trade agreements and established distribution networks to carry goods to the outside world, but other than that, they had minimal interaction.

The pillar of light terminated in what was once one of those city-states. The lake that had served as its water source had clearly changed to an abnormal color, appearing poisonous and polluted.

Sophie recalled Allen pondering over why the distress call was not sent from any of the locations outside Teomenia, as similar crises were occurring in those places as well. It all made sense now as Sophie observed the scene unfolding in front of them.

Even if some people had managed to escape from the villages and towns that had fallen under attack, they likely had not made it to another city-state alive. Those who had not been killed by monsters living in the desert had surely found themselves unable to escape from the demonic incarnations that chased after them endlessly, without even needing to pause for rest. Furthermore, careful preparation was needed in order to survive away from any water sources out in the desert. It was possible that they had simply collapsed and died.

“This is terrible.” That was all Sophie could say as she tried to manage the anger building up in her chest. The people who were attacked had either had no time to ask for help or had not received it even if they had asked, and anyone who had not died in agony had been transformed into a daemonic incarnation. Just imagining it made Sophie shudder with anger before a sense of sadness washed over her.

“What should we do, Sophie? Allen told us to go to the city with the pillar of light last, right?”

“That’s correct.”

Their operation prioritized the rescue of towns and villages and the saving of any survivors. Allen had said that it would be fine to go to the pillar of light where a Demonic Deity was supposedly waiting after the situation had settled down and the safety of the people had been secured.

Sophie tried to suppress the emotions swirling within her chest and gather her thoughts.

“Princess Sophialohne.” Volmaar, who had been silent until now, finally spoke up. “First, let’s head to the village. I doubt it’s very far from here.”

“The village. Right.”

“Village?” Meruru was confused, but quickly went into action.

“All right, we can keep talking while on the move, so I’ll tell you where we need to go,” Sophie responded.

“Sure thing. Just tell me the way.” Meruru traced the control panel with her finger, causing Tam-Tam to fly in the direction Sophie indicated.

A few hours later, in the middle of the desert and about a kilometer off in the distance, Meruru spotted a huge structure that appeared to be their destination.

“Wow, there’s a big city! It’s a tree, isn’t it?! It looks just like the World Tree!”

The first thing Meruru saw was a giant tree reminiscent of the World Tree she had seen in Rohzenheim. It was surrounded by an outer wall made of bricks, which enclosed a massive area several times the size of Teomenia.

“That’s right,” Sophie said in a stiff tone. “It seems that the battle has already begun.”

Meruru tapped at her control panel, turning part of Tam-Tam’s cockpit window into a magnifying glass to observe the outer wall surrounding the giant tree.

“What is that?”

The outer wall was specked with monsters that had the upper bodies of humans and the lower bodies of scorpions. Some were trying to climb the outer wall by sticking their scorpion legs into the gaps between the bricks, while others were focused on pushing open a large gate that appeared to be the main entrance. Other monsters, taking the form of gigantic snakes and lizards, were pushing past the scorpionic ones, making their way toward the outer wall.

Arrows and fireballs were being shot down from the pathway running atop the outer wall. The battle seemed evenly matched, with the human-scorpion monsters being defeated and the other large monsters being kept in check.

Sophie looked at the human-scorpion monsters and spoke in a melancholic tone. “It seems like there are also daemoninc incarnations out there. They’re

almost certainly the people who lived in the nearby villages and towns.”

“Princess Sophialohne, we should get going,” Volmaar suggested, taking up his bow.

“You’re right. Meruru, can you get a little closer to the village? We need to save it!”

“Yeah! Got it!”

Tam-Tam’s speed increased, and Sophie called for them to halt once they were three hundred meters away. Her eyes spotted a soldier pointing a bow and arrow at her from the path running along the outer wall.

“Stop here, Meruru,” Sophie said. “Should we get any closer, the villagers might mistake us for enemies.”

“I guess you’re getting off, then?”

“Yes. Lord Allen left us a Griff to fly on.” Volmaar and Sophie mounted the Bird B and waited for the boarding gate at the bottom of Eagle Mode Tam-Tam to open. The Spirit A who was accompanying them approached and let out an eerie laugh.

“I will go first. Kya ka ka ka.”

“Thank you. That will be very helpful.”

The Spirit A flew down from the gate and landed on the sand, swinging down the mallet it held.

“Earthbound Curse!”

Circular ripples spread from the point where the mallet hit the ground, causing translucent ghosts and yellowed skeletons to emerge from the sand. With ghastly wails, they pounced on the daemoninc incarnations and monsters.

This was Spirit A’s Awakened Ability, which restricted an enemy’s movement. It had a cooldown of one day and a radius of one kilometer, and it seemed to be effective regardless of the type of monster it was used against, but it had no effect on floating opponents or structures, even if those structures were in contact with the ground. Opponents of Rank C and below would have their movements halted for about an hour, while those at Rank B were impeded for



approximately ten minutes. Rank As had that time shortened to about ten seconds, and Rank S monsters such as the iron golems in the Rank S dungeon were more or less unaffected.

The team's Bird B flew in, Volmaar climbed on its back, and fired an arrow. Sophie manifested the spirit of the wind to stop the movements of the large monsters, and the Insect As and their Parent Beas and Baby Beas followed up by enslaving them with Slave Needle. This allowed the team that was split into three to replenish its forces.

"Looks like the battle's already started, so I guess I'll be joining too!" Meruru put four small multibarrel slates into her magic disc and shot the desert monsters with her multibarrel guns, two on each side of Eagle Mode Tam-Tam's wings.

The soldiers on top of the outer wall had obviously been wary at first, but when they saw Sophie and the others fight without taking aim at them, they decided that the strangers had to be allies. They had initially loosed several volleys of arrows, but that had quickly stopped. Their power was negligible compared to that of these newcomers.

In less than an hour, the daemonic incarnations and monsters that covered the city's outer wall were wiped out.

Sophie and Volmaar flew their Bird B toward the main gate of the town, where the majority of the monsters had been attacking. The huge gate was full of scratches, but it seemed to have survived somehow. Tam-Tam then landed, and Meruru exited, manipulating her magic disc and causing Tam-Tam to disappear instantly.

The sun continued to rise toward the middle of the sky, casting harsh light onto the desert sand, which reflected some of it back upward. Sophie, wearing a sun-blocking overcoat, silently looked up at the gate. She could not decide what to do now that she was in front of the village. She did not even know what to say. However, the fact that she had been able to save this village from its impending crisis did a lot to give her a sense of peace.

Sophie and the other three were wearing overcoats they had brought with them in their magic bags to protect them from the dust and strong sunlight.

Before long, the iron door that was the side entrance of the gate opened, and armored soldiers appeared. They had taken off their helmets, revealing their gray hair, brown skin, and long, elf-like ears. Among them, one who appeared to be particularly young—in his late teens if he were a human—stepped out in front of Sophie. His hand was on the hilt of the sword dangling from his waist, meaning that he was still suspicious of the party.

“This is Fabraaze, the home of the dark elves. I am grateful for your help. However, our rules forbid outsiders from entering. Wait, you’re...”

The young soldier referring to himself as a dark elf noticed Sophie’s golden eyes staring at him, and his face suddenly took on a startled expression.

“My apologies. I never thought that the princess would come here.” A dark elf soldier, who seemed to be the young soldier’s superior, seemed to have decided to take charge of the situation. He used a hand gesture to instruct his men to release the handles of their swords. However, he continued to stand there and refused to approach.

Sophie felt a pinprick deep in her chest, but she tried her best not to show it.

“Yes. My name is Sophialohne. May I please meet with King Olvahs?”

“Please wait for... Actually, please come this way.”

At the soldier’s invitation, Sophie and the others entered the side door. Inside the thick outer wall, which was a long passageway, the sunlight was blocked, and that alone made it feel much cooler. On one side of the passage was a wooden door, which a soldier ushered them through and into a waiting room. The only entrance to the room was the door they had entered through, and the soldier asked them to wait there.

“Pheeew. It was pretty hot out there.”

Meruru, who had a Bird A perched atop her head and was still wearing her overcoat, sat down on the sofa in the waiting room and let out a sigh of relief. Compared to elves, dwarves were apparently more resistant to heat, but even so, the heat of the desert seemed to have had an impact on her. Sophie, too, found that sweat was causing her hair to cling to her neck. From inside her magic bag, she took out a leather bag filled with fruit water and began to drink.

“Yes, it certainly is. I thought it was quite hot in the Empire of Baukis, but it’s even hotter here.”

Sophie sat down next to Meruru, while Volmaar stood by the doorway. Realizing that he, like the dark elf soldiers, was wary of his opponents, Sophie felt another pang in her chest.



“So this is the dark elves’ village,” Meruru said innocently. “Have you not been here before?”

“No. I have heard about it from the elders and Her Majesty the Queen, but I didn’t know that it was this strict. Perhaps that’s how it has managed to stay safe.”

Over three thousand years ago, war had broken out between the elves and the dark elves in Rohzenheim. The birth of Rohzenheim’s Priestess of Prayer turned the tide of battle sharply in favor of the elves, and the defeated dark elves migrated to this continent, built villages throughout the desert, and were now living in hiding. Sophie had been told this story when she was a child. As she grew up, she learned that the story was indeed true, and that her homeland and the dark elves’ home of Fabraaze would send people back and forth. Additionally, she found that it was not due to an amicable agreement, but rather as a sort of mutual way of spying on one another, ensuring that they kept out of each other’s way.

“I *thought* you were kind of surprised to be on the team heading to the east.”

“Oh, really? Did it look that way?”

Meruru gave a triumphant, fearless smile, implying that she was rather observant of others too. “It did. Tee hee.”

“Things might get a bit messy once we meet King Olvahs. Don’t be caught off guard if they do.”

Meruru nodded at Sophie’s words of caution and responded with a question of her own. “Wait, we’re not meeting a queen?”

“Yes. It seems that only men can be the monarch of the dark elves, though. I heard that the right to succeed the throne is given only to those born into the royal family or the family of one of the elders.”

“Huh, so you don’t have to be the king’s child to become king?”

“It’s the same in Rohzenheim. We’re all equal under the World Tree.”

In Rohzenheim, elves were considered part of the World Tree and therefore did not have a family name. When asked about their origins, their response was

always “Rohzenheim,” never “the country of Rohzenheim.” They had no social statuses either. Elders were those who brought people together, and the queen was the priestess who delivered the voice of the World Tree to the people. Neither was a status, but rather a position. People had to fill them, but that did not make them better than anyone else. However, the reason that the right to inherit the throne did not depend on lineage was that, compared to other races, both the elves and the dark elves had an extremely difficult time having children.

“Elves and dark elves are similar, aren’t they? Then, do dark elves have something like a Spirit God?”

Sophie and Volmaar tensed up for a moment at Meruru’s question. “That’s right. In Fabraaze, they worship the Sovereign of Spirits, Lady Fabre. She has lived longer than Lord Rohzen, so please, uh...watch your words, Meruru.”

“Ah, got it. I’ll be careful.” As Meruru nodded, the door to the waiting room flung open.

Sophie and Meruru looked back at the doorway while Volmaar, who had been silent and vigilant the entire time, stepped forward. He stood to block the entrants, a dark elf soldier and an older dark elf dressed in a robe, from entering the room. However, the robed dark elf merely ignored his presence and spoke directly to Sophie.

“Ah, Princess Sophialohne. And what, exactly, brings an elven princess here without any sort of prior notice?”

Sophie stood up, waited for Volmaar to step aside, and bowed to the elderly dark elf.

“It’s been a while, Elder Jiamnir. I’ve already explained to that soldier over there what brought us here.”

Elder Jiamnir of Fabraaze was entrusted with negotiations with the outside world and had visited Rohzenheim before. Sophie had met him several times before.

“Yes, that’s certainly true. But in that case, I believe you must contact us in advance or I’m afraid that even the princess herself would be denied entry.”

Sophie smiled softly, though she remained undaunted and continued the negotiations. “I have something that I need to tell King Olvahs.”

“I am grateful for your help in the fight against the monsters that attacked our city. As thanks, what do you say we arrange for a personal letter from the king expressing his gratitude?”

Part of Sophie’s cloak, between her chest and stomach, wriggled as the elder spoke.

“Oh, my apologies. I’ll prepare a meal soon,” Sophie said. She took one hand out from her cloak, which she had kept on even in the waiting room where they were away from direct sunlight. She unfastened the clasp around her neck, revealing her hidden arm—and the Spirit God she was holding—to the elder.





“Huh? Whoa!” the elder spluttered. He and the soldier accompanying him both stared at the Spirit God with dumbfounded expressions, remaining motionless.

“Lord Rohzen said that he was hungry. Excuse me, but could you prepare something to eat?” Sophie ended her remark with a smile.

“O-Of course! Hurry and tell the king that Princess Sophialohne of Rohzenheim has brought Lord Rohzen!”

“C-Certainly!” The dark elf soldier rushed out the door in a hurry.

“Princess Sophialohne, please bring Lord Rohzen here,” Elder Jiamnir said, urging her out of the waiting room.

“Ha ha. You’re beginning to resemble Allen, Sophie.” Rohzen whispered into Sophie’s ear with a wry smile.

“Not quite. This is necessary, so I hope for your understanding.” Sophie followed the elder out of the waiting room, with Volmaar and Meruru in tow. The group of four went down the hallway and down a side passage. At its end was a doorway leading to a garden bathed in gentle sunlight. At the elder’s prompting, Sophie and the others stepped out into that sunlight.

“Wow! Is this really a desert?!” Meruru cried out in surprise.

In front of the group, a huge tree rose about a kilometer up into the air. Its long, thick branches extended sideways, and the green leaves overlapping those of the smaller trees around its base created a massive, green canopy that covered the village like a tent. The ground below was dirt, not sand, and flowers swayed in the warm breeze. They had no way of knowing if the outer wall or the trees had come first, but without this green tent that softened the strong sunlight of the desert to the same level as the sunlight filtering through the trees of a forest, this village would have been no different from the desert outside. It, too, would have been uninhabitable.

“Oho ho. This is the power of Lady Fabre,” the elder said proudly, having now recovered from the shock of seeing the Spirit God.

“That’s quite a fine tree.” As Sophie said this, she could feel the eyes of the

dark elves on her. They seemed suspicious of strangers.

“Soon. Soon, this tree will grow enough to be worthy of being called a World Tree.” The elder’s voice had a pleased ring to it.

“How wonderful.” Though Sophie merely spoke her mind, when Elder Jiamnir heard her words, he looked sad and dejected. “My apologies. That was a thoughtless remark,” she continued.

“Don’t worry about it,” the elder replied while hanging his head. “It’s not your fault. However, please be careful how you speak in front of the others. Anyway, we will now take you to the king’s shrine.”

A cart pulled by two small, bipedal dragons was waiting at the end of the walkway.

## Chapter 9: Team Sophie (Part 2): The King and Queen

About an hour after boarding the cart pulled by the bipedal dragons, Sophie's team arrived at the shore of a lake where the trunks of giant trees stretched out as far as the eye could see. The water of the lake was so clear that they could see the trees' roots at the bottom of it. A cool breeze blew in from the lake, and when Sophie took a deep breath, she felt her chest lighten.

From the shore, a wooden bridge stretched across the water to a large tree, which Elder Jiamnir led the group over. Looking down at the lake from the bridge, the shadows of fish of various sizes were visible, and at the base of the giant tree at the other end, the terrace of a shrine had been built. The wooden shrine sat on stilts, with pillars extending from the roots of the tree. The terrace stretched across the width of the shrine, and a large number of dark elves were gathered there to offer their prayers to the giant tree.

Sophie paused as she felt a sense of *déjà vu* at the sight. She soon realized that this was a replica of what she saw every day at the base of the World Tree in Fortenia.

"Everyone wishes for the World Tree to grow as soon as possible."

Sophie nodded in response to the elder's words, then she urged him to continue to move forward. They entered the shrine and walked down the hallway, where they heard various voices as they moved. It sounded as if the voices were arguing about something, but Sophie could not tell if it was because they had been battling daemonic incarnations and monsters or if it was due to the decision to let Sophie inside.

"I assume King Olvahs will arrive shortly."

The elder nodded in response to Sophie's statement. "Of course. In fact, he's already here. I wouldn't dream of keeping Lord Rohzen waiting."

Upon hearing that the king of the village was on the other side of the sliding

door in front of her, Sophie finally took off her overcoat, which she had been wearing to protect herself from the sun.

“Good idea. I’d hate to be rude.” Meruru followed suit and also took off her cloak.

“That attire...” the elder said, freezing in place when Sophie took off her cloak. He was sure he had seen the garment she was wearing, which looked like the national dress of an ancient South American empire from Allen’s previous world, somewhere before. Despite his loss for words, though, he continued to guide Sophie.

Many dark elves were waiting in the hall, sitting in rows on either side. Sophie wondered if the armed ones were commanding officers. In the back of the room, there were people in robes who looked like elders. They followed Elder Jiamnir and watched Sophie and Volmaar as they entered the hall.

Sophie soon realized from their silent gazes that she was not welcome. Some even glared at her with open hostility. There was a tatami room at the back of the hall that was one step higher, where a male dark elf with jet-black skin and silver hair was sitting cross-legged. His golden eyes had been staring at Sophie for some time now.

While most dark elves had brown skin, gray hair, and reddish-brown eyes, the one with a different appearance was Olvahs, the king of the high dark elves. He ruled over the dark elf home of Fabraaze.

“Welcome, Princess Sophialohne. It’s rare to have a guest in my village, much less a high elf.” Olvahs’s voice echoed throughout the hall. He opened his hands, clenched his fists, and thrust them out past his cross-legged knees. “And, of course, I would be remiss to not welcome Spirit God Rohzen. On behalf of Fabraaze, I would like to offer my sincere greetings.” The king bowed deeply to the Spirit God held tightly in Sophie’s arms.

A creature stared at the Spirit God. Sitting next to Olvahs was a boy with jet-black skin and silver hair—seemingly the son of the king—and curled up on his knees was a shiny, jet-black weasel. It raised only its face and was glaring at the Spirit God on Sophie’s chest. Sophie realized that this weasel was Fabre, the Sovereign of Spirits who protected Fabraaze.

Fabre's and Rohzen's gazes met. Sensing this, the hall suddenly fell silent. Neither side said a word for quite some time.

The king suddenly opened his mouth to speak. "All right, have a seat over there. Now, I can tell by the battle garb you're dressed in that Rohzenheim still looks down on our village."

Reaching out his hand, he pointed toward the front of the tatami room. There were three rugs of a similar design to the one on which the king sat.

"I'm sorry. Due to the urgency of this matter, I didn't have time to change. It's a pleasure to meet you, King Olvahs and the people of Fabraaze. I am Sophialohne of Rohzenheim. Thank you for your warm reception."

Sophie glanced around the room as she gave her introduction, then stepped forward and sat on the provided rug. Meruru sat cross-legged on the rug next to her, while Volmaar knelt behind Sophie, ready to move if anything happened.

However, much of the room refused to remain silent. Many of the dark elves here, including village leaders, elders, and generals, sustained the existence of the dark elf village.

"What?! H-How dare you speak so rudely?! And you say it is urgent?!"

"That's right! You come in here all high and mighty without even introducing yourself?! Are you planning on invading and destroying our village?!"

They seemed angered by the arrival of a princess from Rohzenheim in the garb of a priestess—the outfit that a priestess wore when she had once led the elves to victory in an age when the elves and dark elves were at odds with each other.

The elder was so angry that his jet-black skin took on a bright red hue, while the general tried to grab the sword at his waist. However, it seemed that it was forbidden to put one's hand to their sword without the king's permission, as the general cast an appealing glance in Olvahs's direction seeking such permission. As soon as he got permission, he planned to lower his center of gravity to cut through the impudent visitors. He looked prepared to pounce on Sophie at a moment's notice.

"Whoa, what's wrong?"

Volmaar stood up to protect Sophie from the hostile elders and generals. “Miss Meruru, let us leave this to Princess Sophialohne,” he said in hopes of calming Meruru down.

Sophie seemed to have foreseen that the elders and generals would behave in this manner. It was hardly surprising.

The Spiritualist’s Cloak, which she had obtained just before leaving for Elmahl, had special meaning to the elves and dark elves. Thousands of years ago, when the elves and dark elves were at war on the continent of Rohzenheim, the dark elves had occupied every city and fortress, leaving only the city at the base of the World Tree.

The current God of Spirits, Rohzen, had appeared in front of an elven girl who was desperately praying to the World Tree. The praying maiden made a contract with Rohzen, a spirit god at the time, and the elves made rapid progress. All cities and fortresses held by the dark elves who did not give up their stance of total resistance fell, and the dark elves were driven out of Rohzenheim. No one here had been alive at the time, but it seemed that they were nonetheless familiar with the cloak Sophie was wearing.

One of the dark elves in attendance glared daggers at Sophie, but she had been prepared for this. He went on to remark, “She could have taken it off, couldn’t she?”

Sophie bowed deeply to Olvahs. “King, I am not in any way responsible for my own history. However, I am truly sorry for any rudeness in my actions. I apologize from the bottom of my heart, so please forgive me.”

The king stuck out his palm and tried to pacify the angered elders and general. Anyone could tell at a glance what his gestures meant. With a piercing gaze that carried with it an order for his men to shut up, the king made his attitude clear. In response, the elders and generals reluctantly sat back down on their cushions.

“So, I hear you have something you want to tell me. Is it about the monsters that have been attacking this village for the past few days?”

Sophie watched as the king, keeping a close eye on her group, returned to the topic at hand. His eyes shifted from the Spirit God in her arms to Meruru at

Sophie's side, then up a little to the Bird A atop Meruru's head. The Spirit A who had accompanied them to allow the party to communicate with Allen was not present, as she was exterminating the remaining monsters outside the village. This also indicated Allen's willingness to leave the interaction with the dark elves to Sophie, the princess of Rohzenheim.

"Yes. I'm here to fight those monsters. We just killed the ones surrounding the city, but we haven't able to destroy the root of the issue that causes them to appear. And so, I would like to tell you about the causes and what is currently going on."

"Hmm. So you, an elf, are proposing to give us advice?"

The king narrowed his golden eyes as he said this. In spite of his gentle tone, the contrast of his sharp gaze stood out. However, Sophie had no intention of backing down.

"It's up to you how you judge our story. I just don't want to cause any trouble between us due to neglecting to tell you."

She figured it was best to be honest about what she thought and let the king decide. Beyond that, she had no idea what options were available to her.

"Hmph. So, the condescending nature of Rohzenheim remains unchanged, I see. But if it's that important, Princess of Rohzenheim, let us gamble on the history between us. You may speak to your heart's content."

"Thank you. First off, I want to inform you that this incident was part of a plot by the Demon Lord Army."

Sophie told those in attendance that Teomenia, the capital of Elmahl, had been set ablaze. While the fire raged, monsters disguised as humans had suddenly appeared as a result of so-called holy water distributed to followers of the evil Church of Gushara. Humans who were bitten by these monsters, known as daemonic incarnations, would transform into them as well, causing the tragedy to spread farther across the land. In addition, when Sophie and her friends had received a distress signal from people who had escaped from Teomenia, they had found once they arrived there that a Demonic Deity had taken up residence in the church. Though they had been able to defeat their opponent, it was proof of the Demon Lord Army's involvement.

She then went on to explain the existence of an island floating in the sky, which led her and her companions to infer that the south, east, and west of the Union were experiencing similar situations to the one that had occurred in the north. That inference had guided her here, where they had spotted an oasis town. She concluded that the pillar of light they had followed was likely the cause of the disasters taking place in the Muharino Desert region, as well as in Teomenia.

After Sophie finished speaking, the dark elf elders and generals who had been listening quietly raised their objections in hushed tones.

“Don’t be deceived, Your Majesty!”

Some were so outraged that they immediately took to their feet. The millennia-old feud between the elves and the dark elves was still unresolved, and even in spite of the fact that she had saved the village from an enemy attack, they refused to listen to Sophie due to her status as the princess of Rohzenheim. Their actions were purely reactionary.

However, the king remained silent and continued to stare at Sophie. He finally spoke only after the clamor subsided. “So, what do you want us to do after telling us this story?”

“As I said earlier, it is up to you to decide how to react.”

Sophie’s response led to another round of gasps of astonishment and angry objections from the dark elves.

“What the hell?!”

“So the elf princess just throws all her problems down at our feet?!”

It seemed as if they had a hard time accepting that she would explain so much and yet offer no solutions.

King Olvahs, who continued to hold Sophie in his golden-eyed gaze, let out a sigh before speaking softly. “I heard that you are the new queen of Rohzenheim, but it seems that it will take some time before you can become one. I don’t know what your true intentions are. But for the time being, at least, I acknowledge your message, Elf Princess.”



“Thank you, King Olvahs.” Judging by the king’s reaction, she doubted that he believed her completely, but if nothing else, she had managed to say everything she had intended to. Her only desire was to help the people living in this village and the Muharino Desert.

She would do whatever she could to those ends, but she doubted that would be enough. That was why she wanted Fabraaze to cooperate with her. But she could not force them, nor did she want to. She wanted to pass on what information she knew, and she had done just that. However, she had no idea what to do next.

Sophie remained silent for some time before King Olvahs, who continued to closely inspect her face, spoke again.

“Then, I have something to tell you. You fought against the monsters that were attacking our village. I believe it would only be proper for me to thank you on behalf of the village. What do you think?”

Sophie blinked. This, she figured, was King Olvahs testing her and giving her a chance. The dark elves remained silent, and she took a deep breath. As the leader of the team, she summoned up the courage she needed to do what she had to do.

“I have a few requests.”

The king, who had maintained the same posture throughout their entire interaction, finally leaned forward. “Speak.”

“First of all, I would like a map of the Muharino Desert. As I said earlier, the monsters that were once humans are attacking towns and villages, and they are only increasing in number. If you have a map, then even those of us who are unfamiliar with the lay of the land may be able to hurry and provide some assistance.”

When Sophie thought about what Allen would ask for, the first thing that came to mind was a map.

Allen liked analyzing situations and was interested in figuring out as many things as he could. He was particularly interested in making his own maps before taking action. As Cecil had once remarked, “Allen is made up of maps.”

She could think of countless examples where this was true, such as back when she had first met Allen in Academy City, their battle to save Rohzenheim, and even their time in the Rank S dungeon.

“Hmm. You assume we have a map. Why?” the king replied, asking a question of his own.

“Because while this village must be supported by Lady Fabraaze’s power and protected by your dark elf warriors, I don’t think that’s sufficient for anyone to survive in the desert. For example, there are undoubtedly times when you need assistance from other settlements. In cases like that, I believe there must be a person with a map who goes out of the village for such purposes.”

With the help of spirits, they could draw water from the veins that flowed beneath the desert, allowing them to grow grains and vegetables. However, there were times when they needed more than crops alone—things such as salt and minerals. When they did, there had to be people who came to sell those goods, and there had to be people who went out to trade crops from this village in order to obtain the funds to buy them. In that case, there almost certainly had to be a map of the desert.

“I see. And you have other requests?”

“Yes. I would like to be granted a place to keep those who have managed to escape from the monster attacks.”

“Are you asking me to provide them sanctuary in the village?”

“No. For example, I assume there must be a market outside the village where you conduct trade. I would like permission to expand that area or build a refugee camp nearby.”

After listening to what Sophie had to say, King Olvahs leaned back.

“To prepare land for outsiders... Hmm, I heard that Rohzenheim was attacked by the Demon Lord Army last year, but even so, unlike us, it looks like you have some leeway.”

“I’m sorry. I just want to save as many lives as possible.”

The king remained lost in thought. It was unclear whether he had even heard

Sophie.

“I see. Judging by what you said earlier, I believe the strange half-human monsters who attacked our village today are probably the people of Rukoaque. I suppose that means they fell to the Demon Lord Army.”

Upon hearing the king mention the city’s name, the other dark elves began murmuring about Rukoaque among themselves.

“What kind of city is it?”

“Rukoaque is the closest city to our village,” Elder Jiamnir said in response to Sophie’s question. “Long ago, there were no lakes or springs around here. With the help of the spirits, we drew underground water veins and created lakes, and until recently, we did not have any need to invite other races from beyond our borders to exchange crops for what we needed. We were able to be self-sufficient. But about twenty years ago, an oasis suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and humans began to gather.”

Somehow, by the power of some pontiff, water began to be produced there. Even with the power of spirits, it was practically impossible to create water from nothing. Were such an act to occur, it would be a miracle of God, so nomads and travelers who heard rumor of this place had migrated. This settlement, which had initially started as a small village, grew into a large city.

“They would occasionally come to our village and ask to come inside, but we never let them in. Not even once. Come to think of it, I suspect this must have been a part of the Demon Lord Army’s plan.”

Hearing the elder’s story, Sophie also became convinced that the name of the oasis city where the pillar of light stood must have been Rukoaque. This “pontiff who created water” whom the elder spoke of was likely the Pontiff of the Church of Gushara. They had set a trap using the water people needed to survive. Just the thought of it caused a sense of anger to well up in her chest.

“Is there anything else, Elf Princess?” King Olvahs asked as if he had guessed Sophie’s thoughts.

Sophie looked at the king. She knew the time had come for her to ask what she had known for years she would have to ask him the moment the two met.

“I want to ask about King Rehzel.”

King Olvahs’s golden eyes narrowed in suspicion at this.

“My father?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. That your father’s name was Rehzel.”

Even as the words left her mouth, Sophie could feel her cheeks flush, and she instantly understood the reason behind the king’s quizzical expression. She realized that it was because of the strong hatred she held for this figure and the anguish she felt deep in her heart over those who had been turned into monsters at the hands of the Demon Lord Army.

King Olvahs shifted his gaze from Sophie to Elder Jiamnir.

“Come to think of it, I received a similar inquiry from Rohzenheim.”

“Yes. During last year’s battle with the Demon Lord Army, Rohzenheim suffered a great deal of casualties, and when the king sent a letter expressing his condolences, I received a similar question. Since it was such a rare occurrence, we elders held a discussion, and I responded only that it was the same name as the king’s father. However...”

He added that he had responded to the question with a pro forma reply, but there had been no news beyond that.

At that point, Sophie could not help but interrupt the elder. “We certainly did ask that question. We apologize for refraining from replying until today. However, this was because there was something I needed to ask you directly, King Olvahs.”

Sophie recalled the year she was enrolled in Rohzenheim’s Academy, which had come before she had studied with Allen and the others at the Academy in Ratash. It had been a year of growth and learning for Sophie, who turned fifty this year. She and her classmates had gained knowledge of a great many things. A year was not long given elves’ life spans, but it was an unforgettable year for her.

That was because, the following year, Rohzenheim had been attacked by a force from the Demon Lord Army that was five times larger than usual. In

response, to save their people, the elders of Rohzenheim had had no choice but to take similar measures to those taken by the Empires of Giamut and Baukis. In other words, they had issued an order summoning back all of the students studying in domestic Academies.

What Sophie had learned upon returning home to Rohzenheim with Allen to save her homeland was that most of her former classmates who had gone to the battlefield in response to their summons were missing in action. A year later, they still had not been found. It was believed that they were probably eaten by monsters, but most of the bereaved families still visited the elders' association to ask about the results of the search.

Just the mere thought of it evoked a strong sense of hatred within her toward Rehzal, the Demonic Deity who was the leader of the Demon Lord Army faction that had attacked Rohzenheim and tried to take possession of the World Tree. Many of her compatriots had died because of him, and many of her dear classmates had been lost. Though they had ultimately defeated Rehzal, she could not help but wonder if he and Fabraaze's dark elves were still trying to settle a grudge against Rohzenheim for having chased them out, and whether the same thing could happen again. Even though she knew her thoughts were little more than a baseless accusation, she still could not stop herself. The realization of what she was doing merely made her chest hurt.

However, Rohzenheim had been unable to ascertain what kind of relationship the Demonic Deity named Rehzal, a former dark elf, had had with the village of Fabraaze. Even after a truce had finally been signed with King Olvahs five hundred years ago, there was an overwhelming lack of information, as most of the exchanges had occurred purely between the elders in charge of diplomacy, who had traveled back and forth.

The dark elves had long since decided on the next king from among a dozen elders and royal children. After the armistice had been signed, Rohzenheim and Fabraaze had begun keeping each other informed of their respective changes of king and queen. However, the name of the candidates had not been reported, and the name Rehzal had been neither among the successive kings known so far nor among the elders known to Rohzenheim.

Now, the only way left was to ask the people of Fabraaze and King Olvahs

directly. When she learned that she had gotten a reply from the village of Fabraaze saying that Rehzal was the name of King Olvahs's father, Sophie had decided that she must one day go to Fabraaze. She had not been able to think of anything else she could do to let go of the hatred that tormented her.

And finally, her opportunity had come.

She, of course, had also thought that telling this story might make it harder for her to do what she had to do now. Even though Fabraaze had been cooperative in dealing with this situation, their cooperation might come to an end should she ask about Rehzal. However, she wasn't able to put aside her bitterness and hatred for the onetime dark elf Demonic Deity who had slaughtered millions of elves as she proceeded to speak with the dark elves. As the princess of Rohzenheim, she could not simply turn a blind eye to the horrific past. She figured that she should broach the subject before securing their promise of cooperation.

"Hmph. It sounds like this is a topic Your Highness intends to press. Well then, before I talk about my father, let's hear what you have to say. It seems that the current circumstances may also relate to my father."

Sophie nodded at the king's words and took a deep breath. "Yes. When we faced off against the commander of the Demon Lord Army that invaded Rohzenheim last year, he referred to himself as Rehzal." She blurted all that out in a single breath.

The dark elves gasped. They, too, knew that Rohzenheim had been invaded by the Demon Lord Army. They also knew that even Fortenia, the home of the World Tree, had fallen, resulting in many casualties. Some hated the elves and Rohzenheim, but none had disputed the king's condolences, even in spite of their historical animosity.

As far as the king was concerned, not only had the princess, who was often referred to as the next queen of Rohzenheim, come to their village without any advance notice, but she had also gone so far as to accuse his father of attacking her country. He could not have possibly predicted this.

Right away, all the dark elves in attendance voiced their angry objections in unison.

“Impossible!”

“Don’t mess with us!”

“Discard the Armistice Agreement!”

Meruru, who did not have nerves of steel like Sophie or Volmaar, looked as if she could burst into tears at any moment due to her anxiety over the sudden uproar.

“Huh? What?” The boy, who looked to be about eight years old and was believed to be Olvahs’s child, could hardly hide his shock. He began to tremble with fear and looked as if he wanted to run away as the rage of the dark elves intensified.

“Don’t worry, Luke. You have nothing to worry about as long as I’m here.”

“Thank you, Fabre.”

The boy, who Fabre referred to as Luke, seemed to calm down a bit. He started stroking Fabre’s head and back as the weasel curled up in his lap.

Among the armed dark elves, the elderly general who sat closest to King Olvahs rose to his feet. “Your Majesty, now is the time to declare that the five-hundred-year-old truce was a mistake. Let’s annul the treaty and invade Rohzenheim.” At this statement, many generals stood up and voiced their support.

“Silence,” King Olvahs said in his usual soft tone.

“Huh?! M-My apologies, Your Majesty.”

Hearing this, all of the dark elves fell silent, looking over to their king in shock. The king’s expression turned angry, and even the general who had called out to him apologized, suddenly lost for words. Even Luke was frightened more by his own father, the king, than he was by the generals and elders.

King Olvahs opened his golden eyes and cast a piercing gaze at Sophie.

“Young lady, think twice before you open your mouth next time. Just like you, we do not mind how much blood must be spilled, friend or foe, for the sake of our clan’s pride.”

Sophie held the king's gaze, staring back at him with her own strong-willed, golden eyes.

"Yes, we Rohzenheim elves shed a lot of blood against the Demon Lord Army back then. We suffered over three million casualties and still have not managed to recover all of the corpses. The person who caused such a terrible loss of life, the one who said he turned from a dark elf to a Demonic Deity in his quest for the World Tree, gave us the name Rehzal. This is why Rohzenheim asked whether the village of Fabraaze was aware of the name."

After Sophie finished speaking, the hall fell silent. Everyone present, with the exception of Sophie and King Olvahs, was left speechless, waiting to see what would happen next.

"So, what happened to the demon?" King Olvahs asked.

"We defeated him," Sophie replied. She recalled Rehzal muttering something at the end. As she thought back on the Demonic Deity's last moments, King Olvahs slowly closed his golden eyes.

"Why did you tell me about this?" The king spoke with his eyes still closed.

"If Rehzal really was your father, then please, I beg you to let me know what could have inspired him to become a Demonic Deity. That's all I want."

Even after Sophie finished speaking, King Olvahs's eyes remained closed. His brooding silence felt endless as everyone awaited his reply.

"You said you wanted to build a shelter near the village, and that you wanted a map," the king finally said. His gentle voice echoed throughout the hall as his golden eyes opened.

"Yes, that's correct."

"Allow me to make the preparations. Elders, from now on, discuss with the princess of Rohzenheim those matters which best serve both of our interests."

"Thank you for your cooperation, King Olvahs." As Sophie bowed her head and thanked the king, one of the elders butted in.

"What?! Are you really asking us to cooperate with her?!"

"Of course," the king replied in a calm tone. "This is a matter that concerns



our village and its surroundings.”

“B-But, Your Highness! Before we get to that, we must confirm the truth of her story!”

“That’s pointless!” one of the generals shouted, interrupting the elder who was speaking. “What she said was a clear insult to us and our people! We should repay her insolence with arrows! Please entrust me with our forces! I will ensure that our wrathful arrows are delivered to Fortenia!”

“Is that so? In that case, I imagine you should hold a meeting of the elders. I was the one who suggested the armistice, and I am the one agreeing to cooperate with the princess of Rohzenheim this time around. If you deem my judgment incorrect, I suppose it’s not appropriate for me to be the king of Fabraaze any longer. But this isn’t the place to discuss such matters.”

“What?! Are you suggesting your retirement for this decision?!” The generals and elders were alarmed by King Olvahs’s assertion that he would stake his very role as king on maintaining his choices.

All eyes naturally gathered on Fabre, who was curled up in Luke’s lap. However, the Sovereign of Spirits had nothing to say about the matter. Because of this, even the irritated generals and elders had no choice but to calm down.

“So, what shall we do now?”

“Once we’ve reached an agreement with the elders about the refugee shelter, I’ll entrust you with medicine that will halt the daemonic incarnations. After that, we’ll go around to all the towns and villages on the map you entrust to us and defeat the monsters. We will be looking out for survivors.”

“Hmm. Come to think of it, I heard that you’re using monsters.”

“Yes. Those are Lord Allen’s Summons.”

“Hmm? Ah, yes, the man of light who shook off the darkness and saved Rohzenheim.” King Olvahs knew of Rohzen’s prophecies, which were believed in Rohzenheim.

In order to reassure the elves, who were invaded by the Demon Lord Army every year and were tormented by anxiety and despair, Rohzen often gave

them prophecies of salvation. This included the arrival of a man of light who would shake off the darkness. So, when Allen and his friends had come to save Rohzenheim the previous year, many elves had come to believe that Allen was the man of light who shook off the darkness that the Spirit God spoke of. This had been communicated to Fabraaze through the diplomatic elders.

“Then are you also a friend of this man of light who shook off the darkness?”

At the king’s words, Sophie naturally smiled and nodded.

“Yes, I am. Well then, it’s about time for us to take our leave. I have to start talking with the elders as soon as possible.”

When Sophie looked at King Olvahs’s face, she noticed a change in his golden eyes that caused her to go silent. There was anguish in them, and she realized that it was similar to the pain that she had to face within herself—the pain of the hatred she still harbored for those who had murdered her people.

The king was suffering from a contradiction within himself. Perhaps there was something he wanted to say or ask but, as king, could not. And yet, he did not want to remain silent, as it pained his heart. What did the king want to say or ask?

At that moment, Sophie forgot their respective positions and saw the dark elf in front of her as a person she needed to reach out to and support. What was making him suffer? Was there anything she could say to get rid of his suffering? Finally, she arrived at an answer.

“I’m sorry!” Sophie spoke in a deliberately surprised tone. “I thought I should share what Rehzal’s last words were before he died.”

The moment he heard that, the golden eyes of King Olvahs opened wider than ever before. “What did my father say?”

Sophie smiled and leaned forward, raising herself on her knees as if she were going to get up from the rug.

““I wanted to show this wonderful tree to my compatriots in a distant land.”” It was then that Sophie realized that the last words of Rehzal, who had become a Demonic Deity, were not about hatred toward the elves, but about his brethren who shared the same desire to return to the World Tree.

When she learned that Rehzal and the dark elves were dealing with the same pain as her, Sophie felt the heat running through her cheeks again. And she was not the only one.

“Thank you for telling me about my father’s final moments, Princess of Rohzenheim.”

Fabre sat on Luke’s lap, quietly staring at Olvahs. Meanwhile, Olvahs bowed deeply, refusing to look up for a while.

“I see. Father... I’ve been searching for you for quite some time,” the king muttered in a hoarse voice, his face downcast. Sophie could tell that he was crying.

## Chapter 10: Team Keel: The Kingdom and the Republic

While Sophie and her team made for Fabraaze, the home of the dark elves, Keel's team flew to the south. Merus led the group, and Krena and Keel followed behind him on their Bird B. Allen had not sent a Spirit A along with them since Merus would be with them and could serve as both a liaison and fighter. Instead, he had had their team's Insect A utilize its Queen Cell and Spawn Abilities to increase the number of Parent Beas and Baby Beas accompanying them. He had done this because he had no plans to have any of the Insect As who had finished up their extermination efforts in Elmahl come join up with them.

Though Keel's group had begun chasing the pillar of light two days earlier, it seemed to go on endlessly above their heads.

"We don't seem to be getting any closer," Krena called out from behind.

"Yeah," replied Keel, who sat in front of her. They had repeated this exchange every hour or so since first taking off, and yet they seemed no closer to their goal.

After some time, as darkness began to creep up on the party from behind, Merus stopped at the front of the formation. "I think we should call it a day."

"Got it."

"Understood, Lord Merus."

The team landed in a meadow. It was mostly flat, which offered them a great view of the sky. Ahead of them, it was dyed orange, while behind them, it was painted black.

Once they had decided on a location, Merus took out their firewood. He held out his hand, palm facing up, and a black mass appeared in front of him from which he could take out whatever he wanted. Naturally, it could also store whatever they wanted as well.

Merus was using his Angel Halo Ability to access Allen's Storage, which Allen had made arrangements for in Angel Halo's permissions. They could also use Storage to transfer items among themselves. However, by using Bird A's Return to Nest, both of them could come and go as they pleased, so there was no real need to use Storage to exchange items.

The group began setting up camp, with Keel focusing on cutting grass and leveling the ground for a bonfire. He then laid out a circle of stones, set firewood in its center, and lit it.

"All right, we should— Krena, what's wrong?"

"Shh!"

Seeing the serious expression on Krena's face, Keel braced himself for an approaching monster. As he held his breath and watched on, Krena drew a knife that was sheathed behind her waist and stalked silently forward. After making a wide turn to the left, she approached a part of the grassland where the soil had risen. Then, she suddenly pounced onto the mound, grabbed something, and stabbed it with her knife.

*"SQUEEEAK!"* A high-pitched scream echoed across the open meadow.

"Hee hee, I caught it! Looks like we're eating good tonight!" Krena stood up, beaming and clutching the horns of a horned rabbit that was bleeding from its neck.

"Y-Yeah," Keel stuttered.

While the healer was still flustered by the suddenness of her action, Krena found a flat stone to lay the horned rabbit on. From there, she expertly field dressed the creature, removing its head, skinning it, and gutting it. She then cut the meat to make it easier to eat and skewered the pieces on tree branches Merus had taken out of Storage before placing them around the bonfire to cook.

"Looks good. Eh heh heh."

Though they were all technically adults now that they were fifteen, Keel could not help but feel that they had not really changed. Cecil always managed to keep Allen under control, yet she still did not show any semblance of being the

aristocrat that she apparently was. She and Meruru were lighthearted and innocent; Sophie was the only female member of the party who maintained a calm demeanor.

While Krena was cooking the horned rabbit, Keel took out some fukaman and laid them out on the stones surrounding the bonfire. He spoke to Merus while he waited for them to heat up.

“Are we still not going to arrive anytime soon, Lord Merus?”

“As I said before, cut the ‘Lord.’ No need for formality here.”

“I understand, but you see, I’m still an apprentice priest, and... No, I understand. I’ll stop now.” The look of annoyance on Merus’s face finally caused Keel to give in.

Keel was an apprentice priest with the Church of Elmea, and though Merus was the *former* First Angel, the apprentice priest could not accept Merus appearing before him as a simple matter of fact like Allen, Krena, and Dogora had. However, as Merus seemed to really dislike any form of honorary title, he decided to stop using one.

On the other hand, some people did not mind using formal terms when referring to Merus, even if it offended him. Sophie was one such example. In her case, she was stubborn—or rather, she did things the way that felt most comfortable for her.

“If we keep moving at this rate, we’ll reach the southern tip of the continent tomorrow,” Merus said.

“I wonder what we’ll find there. It doesn’t seem like there’s a desert out there like what Sophie encountered,” Keel replied.

The leader of each team knew what each of the other teams had encountered thanks to the Spirit A accompanying each team sharing its sight with Allen and Merus. However, the mere act of Summoning did not necessarily give them access to the Summon’s sight, and they needed to set the sharing for each individual Summon. Just like Allen, Merus needed 200 points in Intelligence to share with a single Summon, so with his Strengthened 22,000 points, he could share the sight of up to 110 Summons.

“The grasslands should spread out all the way down to the coast. If I recall correctly, there’s a country called Calvarna or Carlonea or something out there.”

“Keel, the meat’s ready. Here ya go.”

Krena chomped on the fatty, grilled thigh of the horned rabbit and offered a chunk of meat to Keel as well. Keel took it, split open a heated fukaman, stuffed the meat inside, and took a bite.

There were a number of people who believed that Elmean priests did not eat meat, but there was no such precept in the teachings of Elmea. They were free to drink alcohol as well. And though they were taught to refrain from excessive eating and drinking, that was no different from the average person. Of course, they could also get married and have children, with some churches in small rural villages even being run by families.

“Calvarna? Carlonea? Did one fall and the other rise to prominence? Did they change their name?”

“No. Both Calvarna and Carlonea exist. About ten years ago, Carlonea became independent from Calvarna. There’s been constant friction between the two ever since.”

Merus had lived as the First Angel for about a hundred thousand years. During that time, he had been working on the Mortal Realm through the Church of Elmea under the direction of God of Creation Elmea. As a result, he was somewhat familiar with the affairs of the Mortal Realm.

About twenty years in the past, a smoldering pro-democracy movement in the southern part of the Kingdom of Calvarna, south of the Union, had developed into an independence movement. Within ten years, those who had been aiming for independence had, despite opposition from the royal family, succeeded in getting half of the national army on their side and thus made the south into an independent republic. A lot of blood had been spilled back then, and even now the two countries were on the verge of war.

“You sure know a lot, Merus!” Krena said, munching on her food while listening to the story.

“It seems like we’re about to get involved in a rather complicated situation.”

Keel recalled hearing that Sophie and the others had had a hard time asking Olvahs, the king of the dark elves, for a map so they could save the desert cities. Looking up at the bright stars piercing through the darkness of the night sky, he could not help but feel that wherever they were headed, problems awaited them.

\* \* \*

The next day, Keel and the others continued their journey across the endless grasslands, gazing up at the pillar of light that extended off to the south. Around noon, they began seeing man-made objects down below. For the past three days, they had hardly found a trace of any kind of settlement, so they finally felt that they were nearing their destination. Considering that the whole purpose of what was happening on this continent seemed to be to create as many heretics as possible, logic dictated that densely populated areas would be targeted.

“But these places are all deserted,” Krena muttered to herself as they looked down at the empty villages, derelict cities, and crumbling stone bridges. They all looked as if they had been abandoned for years.

“It seems that the monsters are running rampant farther south,” Merus said.

“Right. I see a castle up ahead, but still can’t see the ocean. So I guess that’s Calvarna here on the north side?”

Keel spotted a castle town up ahead that was likely the capital of the Kingdom of Calvarna. It was quite an impressive sight. However, the pillar of light continued to extend south, and the capital and its surroundings appeared peaceful, at least from their viewpoint up in the sky.

About an hour after passing over the capital and following the pillar of light farther south, the team heard loud explosions off in the distance.

*BOOOOM! BOOOOM!*

This happened three or four times in quick succession.

Merus sped up, and Krena and Keel pushed their Bird B to keep pace with him. Before long, they could see a large river running across their field of vision.



From Keel's point of view heading south, the left side—the east side—flowed in a large arc from the north to their rear, turning off toward the south as it moved right, or west.

As they got closer, they could see that both banks of the river sloped steeply, almost like cliffs. At the top of either slope, three fortresses were built facing each other. Both of the ones in the middle were larger and built farther inland than the fortresses flanking them. Large stone bridges extended out from the fronts of each of the fortresses, though they had by now crumbled and appeared to be sinking into the river. Keel could not help but wonder if the sounds they had heard earlier were of them being destroyed.

Judging from the fact that the fortresses were facing each other, this river seemed to be the border between the Kingdom of Calvarna and the Republic of Carlonea. It was common to define national borders along geographical features that were difficult for people to alter, such as mountains and rivers, and building fortresses near them was also a common practice in national defense.

"They're fighting!" Krena cried out. When Keel looked down in the direction she was pointing, he saw people with the hind legs of goats clinging to the fortress in front of them. After watching one of the creatures with matted fur climb up the slope of the bank on uneven footing, it seemed clear that the monster had swam across the river from the Republic of Carlonea on the opposite bank. The party could also see giant, monkey-like monsters swimming across the river.

Just like the ones in the Muharino Desert, whose lower bodies were those of scorpions, the daemonic incarnations in this area seemed to have taken on a different appearance than those in Elmahl.

From inside the fortresses, defenders shot magic and arrows at the daemonic incarnations and monsters to keep them from approaching. The number of enemies surging in was so large, however, that it looked like they would break through at any moment. Furthermore, the fortresses seemed to be built for fighting between humans and stood less than ten meters tall. The monsters unleashed by the Demon Lord Army were large, often exceeding several tens of meters, so the defenders needed strongholds at least twice the height of the

ones they were in if they wanted to try to fight against them.

“It’s coming from that direction.” Keel ground his teeth. Apparently, the source of the pillar of light was in the Republic of Carlonea, and it seemed that it had already fallen into the hands of the Demon Lord Army.

“Let’s go help!” Krena shouted. Keel nodded in agreement and started thinking about what they should do.

“I’ll leave that fortress to you two.” With that, Merus began to ascend. The team’s Insect A, Parent Beas, and Baby Beas rose after him and split off to the east and west.

If he thought about it, Keel realized that Merus acted very similarly to Allen. His instructions were short, and the meaning behind them tended to only be discernible after the fact. Rest breaks in the dungeon had been the time to learn from Allen why he had given the directions he had in the previous battle and to study how he should have acted. As a result, Keel had learned to work closely with people who did not usually bother to explain themselves.

Keel and Merus each had their own respective parts to play, and Keel carried out his role believing that Merus would be aware of his movements and support him.

“Got it.” Keel nodded and had his team’s Bird B descend toward the fortress below. As he approached, several large monkey monsters that were hanging with one hand from the outer wall facing the river began to sway left and right like pendulums. They used the centrifugal force to throw themselves up and onto the corridor running along the top of the wall. Keel watched as soldiers were crushed, lumps of their flesh scattering about. One soldier had been grabbed by a large monkey monster.

“Gah!” Though the soldier tried to shake the monkey monster off, its grip seemed to be quite strong. The man’s armor audibly began to crumple, and his elaborately decorated helmet fell from his head as he faced the sky.

“Captain Myuhan!”

“Release our captain!”

The other soldiers thrust their spears and swung their swords toward the

monster in an attempt to help their captured comrade, but when their weapons struck the monster's hair, they only made high-pitched clanging sounds, as if they had hit metal. None of them could even scratch the monster.

Apparently, the soldiers stationed in these fortresses were there to keep the Republic of Carlonea in check, so while there were some who had Talents, it did not seem like there were that many of them. The monster they were facing seemed to be a Rank A. Talentless humans could only raise their stats up to around 3,400 no matter how hard they worked, but a Rank A monster's were at least ten times that.

Even armed with a steel spear, the massive stat disparity could not be made up for. In this world, stat values represented fundamental differences in strength. Unless you were blessed with the right conditions or had the right equipment or magic support, a gap that large was impossible to overcome.

The giant monkey monster loosened its grip on Captain Myuhan momentarily before tightening it once again. Crushed armor bit into his flesh and crushed his bones.

"Graaah!" Captain Myuhan screamed as blood gushed from his mouth.

The giant monkey grinned and licked its lips as it looked down at the soldiers who were struggling in vain at its feet. Hearing the screams of humans and seeing them in despair seemed to make it happy.

"Yaaah!"

A woman with flowing pink hair bellowed as she suddenly landed on the pathway. At the next moment, the giant monkey's arm, still clutching Captain Myuhan, fell beside her. No matter how much the other soldiers had swung their swords, they had been unable to so much as cut the hair covering the giant monkey's arm, much less make it through the skin to lop it clean off.



The giant monkey monster stared down at the newcomer, but when it saw its own arm lying next to it, it finally became aware of the pain.

“Agu?! Gyaaaugh!” the creature screamed, clutching its severed arm with its other hand.

“What is this? What’s going on? Some kind of miracle?”

Amid the giant monkey’s screams, those words were clearly audible to the soldiers. They looked in the direction of the voice and saw Captain Myuhan crawling out from the grasp of the monster’s severed arm. When they rushed over to help him up and took off his crushed armor, the soldiers noticed that all the wounds that should have been on his body were nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

From his bird’s-eye view of the situation, Keel determined that, if they were to have any hope of saving the fortresses, which looked as if they could fall at any moment, his top priority was to restore the soldiers’ HP and MP. After Krena leaped down from the Bird B to launch her opening strike, he immediately used a Blessing of Heaven.

Thanks to Merus using the Insect A, Parent Beas, and Baby Beas to fight the monsters swarming the remaining two fortresses, the daemoninc incarnations and giant monkeys at the one they were defending had stopped increasing in number. And so, Keel decided to concentrate on the task at hand.

He used Seeds of Magic. Doing so meant that the soldiers who used magic and skills would be able to return to the front lines.

“I’ll heal your injuries! Just hold on a little longer!” he shouted from atop his Bird B as he circled the fortress. The soldiers looked up in amazement at first, but when they felt their wounds heal and their MP recover, they regained their courage, repositioned their weapons, and headed toward the remaining monsters.

As for the giant monkey that had just lost its arm, it was still far from finished. “Kukyiiiiii!” After unleashing an earsplitting screech from either pain or sheer rage, it swung its remaining arm down at Krena, the one who had dared cut off its arm.

“Hngh!”

Krena caught the blow of its massive fist with the side of her greatsword.

*CLANG!*

Cracks spread out radially in the cobblestone pavement as the heel of Krena’s boot dug into it. However, using her incredible strength, Krena pushed her greatsword up and knocked the giant monkey’s fist away as if it were nothing. She then jumped after the recoiling giant monkey and followed up with another attack, swinging her blade down from its shoulder to its chest. Her Slash skill cut diagonally into the monster’s body, and fresh blood dyed the fortress bright red.

Just as the monster’s corpse fell onto the corridor, Keel’s called out to Krena from above. “Krena, the gate is about to be destroyed! Get down and fight there!”

Krena leaned over the battlements and looked down. The daemoninc incarnations, which had goatlike lower bodies, crossed the river and ran up the slope before gathering together and repeatedly ramming the steel main gate.

“Understood! Everyone, please keep protecting this area!” With that, Krena hopped off the wall, leaving the surrounding soldiers behind.

“Wait, what?!” Before the soldiers let out that startled cry, Krena landed in the midst of a daemoninc incarnation horde.

“I am Sword Emperor Krena. Bring it on!” she shouted, introducing herself with a dignified, serious expression.

Hearing her declaration, the daemoninc incarnations, including those that were ramming the gate, turned their attention to Krena. They all had different transformations, with some having only the lower body of a goat, some having fur all the way up to their shoulders, some having twisted horns on their heads that resembled those of a goat, and others still fully resembling goats. There were even those that had oblong black eyes.

“Hyakoo, hyakoo!”

“Hyakoo, hyakoo!”

“Hyakoo, hyakoo!”

The daemoninc incarnations coughed dryly, kicked the ground with their hooves, and charged at Krena.

“Burn! Phoenix Smash!”

Krena’s body was instantly engulfed in flames. Holding the hilt of her greatsword with both hands, she rotated 360 degrees on the spot, and a flaming horizontal slash hacked at the daemoninc incarnations rushing in.

“Hyapiiii!”

Dozens of daemoninc incarnations were cut to pieces and caught on fire, killing them. She repeated this attack two or three times every ten seconds, wiping out all of the enemies gathered in front of the gate.

According to Allen’s analysis, in terms of overall strength, daemoninc incarnations were on par with Rank C or Rank B monsters and posed a threat to humans without Talents. The Endurance of a Rank C monster was between 300 and 600, and that of a Rank B monster was around 2,000. Comparatively, Krena had over 15,000 points in her Attack stat. Adding in the offensive power of her weapon, which was boosted temporarily by her skill, she could take out all comers.

However, the daemoninc incarnations that crossed the river and ran up the sloped bank, as well as the monsters that climbed up along the wreckage of the crumbling bridge, continued to rush in without hesitation.

Krena stood with her back to the gate, glaring at the surging horde of monsters and holding her greatsword aloft. The blade emitted a white light that dazzled like a miniature sun, enveloping her. Then, from among the mob, a large bear monster approached, sweeping away the daemoninc incarnations.

“Rah! Supreme Ruling Blade!” She spoke resolutely as she swung down her shining greatsword.

“Hyagaooo?!”

The large bear was slashed from its head to its abdomen and vanished with a death cry. Light then shot out from Krena’s greatsword, crushing the enemies

coming from behind the bear monster and reaching all the way to what remained of the bridge on the shore about fifty meters ahead.

The bridge had existed since before the independence of the Republic of Carlonea, and it seemed to have been crafted so that the piers on this side could be quickly destroyed in case of an attack from the opposite shore. This feature had been put to use at the start of the attack by the daemonic incarnations and monsters, and as expected, it had prevented the enemy from crossing the bridge. The remnants, however, were destroyed by the shock wave from Supreme Ruling Blade. Large plumes of water shot out of the river as the wreckage sank into it.

Having created a straight, empty lane through the crowd of enemies, Krena rushed in with her greatsword shouldered. After a short delay, the horde began to close in around her, and she used the opportunity to again unleash her Phoenix Smash skill. More than a dozen daemonic incarnations fell to it, but a surviving giant monkey monster jumped at her. She was knocked to the ground by its immense strength.

“Healing Blade!” Krena cried, thrusting out her greatsword. It pierced through the large monkey’s stomach and out its back, annihilating the opponent instantly. However, daemonic incarnations quickly rushed in.

“Rah!” Krena stood up, monkey corpse and all. She started delivering powerful kicks to the incoming enemies, making it seem like had not taken any damage at all during her previous scuffle with the monkey.

Krena had four skills: Slash, Phoenix Smash, Healing Blade, and Supreme Ruling Blade. The power, performance, attack range, and cooldown were different for each.

## **Krena’s Skills**

- **Slash:** Consumes 10 MP per use and doubles the power of sword attacks. There is no cooldown, and it can be activated by slashing vertically, diagonally, or horizontally, making it the most convenient of her four



skills.

- Phoenix Smash: Consumes 30 MP and unleashes a fire-based attack that burns enemies within a ten-meter diameter of Krena. It has a ten-second cooldown and can cut 360 degrees with a single blow, but it can only be activated by swinging the sword horizontally.
- Healing Blade: Consumes 50 MP and, upon landing a blow, heals Krena for one-quarter of the damage dealt. If the enemy is killed in a single blow, she recovers one-quarter of the enemy's total HP. Cooldown is thirty seconds.
- Supreme Ruling Blade: Consumes 100 MP and has a cooldown of ten minutes, which is the longest of all four of her special skills. This skill is also restricted in that it can only be activated by holding the sword high and swinging downward. However, if it hits, not only is it three to four times as powerful as Slash, but it also shoots out a roughly fifty-meter shock wave that can be up to twice as powerful as Slash.

Using these four skills, Krena single-handedly defeated countless daemonic incarnations and monsters as they came in to attack. Unlike Allen, she did not plan her skill use around their cooldown times, but rather acted according to her instincts. She skillfully coordinated her swordsmanship and stance while stringing together each of her skills.

The soldiers of the fortress leaned over the parapets as they watched the lone warrior fight against over a thousand monsters. At first, they were stunned, but they soon readied their bows so that they could assist with long-range attacks. In the end, however, they realized that their help was not needed.

“What is that woman? Is she an incarnation of the God of War?”

“Does this mean Lord Elmea never abandoned us?”

Captain Myuhan, who was among the soldiers watching Krena in action, traded his crumpled armor for an undamaged piece and put on a new helmet.

He then raised his voice and issued an order. “All right, men, change positions! It looks like that swordsman will be in charge of this place!”

“Yes, sir!”

The fortress was already surrounded by monsters that had climbed the slopes of the riverbank. Even if Krena protected the river-facing front gate, it would be meaningless if the rear gate—the one facing the Kingdom of Calvarna—was breached. Captain Myuhan divided the surviving soldiers into three groups and placed one on each of the three undefended sides.

Watching everything from above, Keel circled his Bird B around the fortress while firing cleansing magic to take care of the large number of enemies attacking the flanks. There was already a large number of dead people within the fortress walls, but there were still thousands of soldiers fighting within the fortress which could accommodate at least ten thousand. Deciding in his heart that he did not want there to be any more casualties, Keel continued to move about between the two remaining sides while using his healing skills and Blessings of Heaven.

Captain Myuhan looked up at the sky and sent a silent thank you to the young man in the gold-embroidered robe riding a griffin. He wondered if he would be able to learn the full story of the day’s events if he survived the attack.

Just then, above the river, a bright light appeared. From a single point in the air, countless purple bolts of lightning radiated down toward the surface of the water.

“Huh?!”

*BOOOOM!*

A moment later, there was a sound akin to the earth rumbling, and the river exploded where the lightning had struck it. Columns of water of various sizes shot upward, filled with sediment from the river’s depths. This was Merus’s Awakened Ability, Judgment Lightning. It launched a wide-range attack downward using his 22,000 MP, wiping out all the daemoninc incarnations and monsters in the river.

Night fell on the wide river that divided the Kingdom of Calvarna and the

Republic of Carlonea. As it did, the number of daemoninc incarnations and monsters that were crossing the river finally dwindled.

\* \* \*

Even as the sun set and the surroundings grew dark, Krena continued to defend the fort's main gate, which faced the river, from the oncoming enemies. By this time, there were far fewer of them flanking the fortress, and soldiers worried about Krena had emerged from the main gate to set up bonfires around the area. Torches were also lit along the four battlements to aid everyone's vision.

Merus's Insect A, Parent Beas, and Baby Beas began to take control of the monsters around the east and west fortresses. Once it was completely dark, with the full moon high in the sky, they were finally ready to take on the daemoninc incarnations crossing the river. From there, Merus got to work on building a formation to protect the river, while Keel and Krena, being human and thus needing rest, decided to return to the fortress to eat.

When they met in the fortress courtyard, Keel could hear Krena's stomach rumble.

*GYOO GYURGLE!*

"I'm hungry," Krena said.

The ever-cheerful Krena wore a weary smile on her face, probably because they had arrived before noon and had not eaten anything since. Up until now, Allen had managed their meal times in order to keep Krena running efficiently, as her hunger tended to slow her down. Thanks to that, Krena had not felt this worn out since back when she was at the Academy, save for in situations where something truly out of the ordinary was happening. Dogora, meanwhile, had always been told to just hang in there when he complained about being hungry.

"I noticed. But it's gonna be a while before we get any food, I think."

"Really?"

"We worked pretty hard today, though, so I'm sure they'll make something super tasty for us."

When Krena heard that it would take a little longer for her food to come out, she thought about reaching into her magic bag and taking out some of their preserved food but stopped herself. She really wanted to eat her fill of fresh, delicious food after having fought all day. Keel smiled and heaved a sigh as he watched her let go of the magic bag after momentarily reaching into it.

Shortly thereafter, Keel spotted a soldier running through the bonfire-lit courtyard, heading toward him. Though he, too, was already quite exhausted, he figured that he needed to meet with and speak to the head of the fortress.

“I bet he’ll feed us something good if we follow him. Maybe we’ll even get a feast. Let’s get going.”

“Sounds good!” Krena rubbed her belly and spoke happily.

The approaching soldier stopped and jolted at Krena’s outburst. “Please follow me.”

They were then led inside the fortress. Unlike castles, which were places where politics and social gatherings took place, fortresses were buildings meant for battle. They had narrow, complicated passageways that were only as wide as they needed to be. After turning a few corners, a pair of double doors was opened, on the other side of which about ten soldiers, including Captain Myuhan, were waiting. A piece of parchment with a map drawn on it was spread out on the table they stood around, and decorated helmets were also placed on the table, with one in front of each man. Apparently, these were the people in charge of the fortress.

“Thank you for coming. Right this way, please.”

Keel noticed that Captain Myuhan’s voice trembled as he spoke. Looking around, the other soldiers were also watching Krena from afar. They had seen her bisect the body of a nearly ten-meter-tall Rank A monster easily as though she was slicing a piece of bread or fruit. Furthermore, she was casually walking into the room with her large sword, still soaked in the blood of countless monsters, strapped to her back. The soldiers swallowed hard at the sight. Keel recalled being looked at in a similar manner when he had ridden his Bird B down into the fortress courtyard.

“My name is Rankopar Myuhan. On behalf of this fortress, I thank you for

your support. You seem to be a noble, if I'm not mistaken?"

Keel felt as if Captain Myuhan was judging him by his appearance. Currently, both he and Krena were wearing armor they had acquired from silver treasure chests while farming iron golems in the Rank S dungeon. All together, their gear was worth well over a hundred thousand gold coins. In particular, Keel was wearing a pure-white cloak embroidered with golden thread and carrying a staff embedded with golden gems.

"I'm not of high rank, but...my apologies for not introducing myself earlier. I am Keel von Carnel, a mere apprentice priest who serves Lord Elmea. My companion here is Krena, and as you can see, she is a swordsman."

As Captain Myuhan had given his family name, so too did Keel. From behind their captain, the soldiers were whispering among themselves, "The Carnel family?" It seemed many were unaware of a noble who owned a corner of land in a small nation located in the far center of the continent.

However, the soldiers seemed relieved to learn that Keel was a nobleman, and some of the tenseness in Captain Myuhan's expression seemed to disappear. He probably figured that since Keel was a noble, he had common sense and would not do anything unexpected or act rashly during their discussion.

Since Keel's priority was to save the fortress, he had not put any thought into whether those in it would welcome him or not. If their first impression of him had made them even slightly suspicious, they presumably would not have invited him into the building. Had they closed the gates on him and his friends, they would have had no choice but to give up and withdraw, at least for the night.

With that in mind, Keel remembered what Allen had said when dividing the party into three teams. He needed to consider what the Summons could do, what his team could do, and what the citizens could do. The situation he was faced with could not be resolved by sending out Summons, nor could it be done by his group on their own. He would need the help of the citizens to sort things out here. This meant that he had to gain an understanding of the situation and think about how each of the three groups in question should move. Keel figured

that Allen had chosen him as a team leader because he had faith in his abilities.

Changing the tone of his voice, Keel bowed politely. “I’d like to thank everyone for inviting us.”

“No, please allow me to offer you *my* thanks. I promise that the Kingdom of Calvarna will someday offer you its appreciation.”

Keel could sense that Captain Myuhan’s words were filled with the utmost gratitude and respect. However, he and the others had no interest in receiving a gift from the country.

“Yes, I’m grateful for that, but for now—”

*GYOO GYURGLE!*

Just as Keel had begun to speak, Krena’s stomach rumbled once again. It was so loud that it could be heard throughout the entire hall. Everyone’s eyes focused on Krena, who looked around in surprise.

“This is going on way too long. I’m hungry.” The look on her face was one of absolute desperation; she had not looked this crestfallen even when surrounded by hundreds of daemonic incarnations. She embodied such a strong sense of hunger that it almost seemed as if she had been wandering the desert for three days.

“I’m sorry. We’ve been so busy that we haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

In reality, they had only skipped lunch, but Keel lied for the sake of Krena’s dignity, as well as to make things easier.

“Is that so? As a matter of fact, we were just about to eat. Why don’t you join us?”

“Ooh!” Krena’s expression instantly brightened as one of the high-ranking soldiers offered to guide them.

Krena and Keel followed the man back down the narrow hallway until they reached what looked like a dining room with many wooden tables. “We will be honoring those who went above and beyond in today’s battle. Would you care to join us?”

Armored soldiers rushed in with steaming pots and massive platters of grilled

meat.

“Yes, I’d love to.”

“Of course! Let’s eat!”

With those statements, Keel and Krena sat in the back of the dining hall with the ranks of soldiers. As they waited for the food to finish being prepared, the heroes of the battle arrived. Keel remembered seeing some of them moving skillfully about the battlefield from his overhead view of the battle. They all looked nervous and apologetic when they entered, but when they spotted Krena, their faces lit up and they started talking to one another.

Keel overheard the soldiers’ conversations.

“It’s the Sword Lord. Look, she even has a greatsword. D-Do you think I can go talk to her?”

“Stop! Don’t be such an idiot!”

“Do you think I could ask to fight against her? Or at least have her be my sparring partner?”

“Seriously, knock it off! You’re gonna get kicked out!”

Despite the many casualties they had endured, the soldiers seemed to be in high spirits, probably due to their miraculous victory. It seemed that these muscleheads were all quite gifted, as evidenced by the fact that they had survived. If they could score even a single blow against Krena, who seemed to them like some sort of demon of war, they would almost certainly be hailed as a hero from then on.

They also seemed to have misinterpreted Krena’s Talent to be Sword Lord. Considering that Sword Kings were rarely ever born and that class promotions were still not common knowledge, the odds of someone being a Sword Emperor were about as good as the odds of someone being born with the Talent of Hero.

Once all the soldiers had taken their seats, one of the officers stood up and gave a brief victory speech. Then, after introducing Krena and Keel, a small feast began.

Right away, Krena, who had been waiting like a dog told to stay, grabbed a piece of bone-in meat with each hand. She alternated between the two, taking a bite out of one and then the other until, in no time flat, she had finished them both. All the soldiers in attendance smiled brightly at the sight. It showed clearly on their faces that they accepted Krena.

“I am truly grateful to you both. Considering that it will still take a few days for the main army to arrive, I thought it would be impossible to deal with such a large number of enemies.” Captain Myuhan’s body shook as he spoke. He must have remembered the feeling of being in that monster’s grasp.

“The main army? So you were the advance party?”

Keel had thought that the fortress was too large for the number of soldiers that had been fighting. There were just too many shortages, and while he had assumed that it was because they had already lost so many soldiers, that did not seem to be the case.

“That’s right. The main army is scheduled to arrive the day after tomorrow at the earliest. You surely must have seen it, but about ten days ago, that pillar of light in the sky started emanating from the Republic of Carlonea, stretching across our country. It traveled north through the sky, but we came here to see what it was and to prepare for a possible attack from Carlonea.”

After hearing Captain Myuhan’s story, Keel decided that it was time to tell them why he and his team were here. “Actually, we didn’t come here by accident. We followed that pillar of light from up north in Elmahl.”

He went on to explain how they had gotten to this point, starting with the fact that they belonged to a party led by a Rank S adventurer. Hearing Elmahl’s distress signal, they had come to this continent to help. He spoke of the tragedy that had occurred in Elmahl’s capital, Teomenia, and the possibility that the Demon Lord Army was the one pulling the strings. Upon considering that the event in Teomenia that turned people into monsters was related to the appearance of the pillars of light, they had split into three groups, each one searching for one of the other places where the pillars had appeared. The teams had traveled east, west, and south, with Keel’s having been the one to come all the way out here.



After detailing everything, Keel politely informed the captain that he planned to investigate the pillar of light that seemed to be coming from the Republic of Carlonea. However, he noted that he would appreciate it if, before that, the captain would tell him about what was happening in the Kingdom of Calvarna and the Republic of Carlonea.

“Is that so? This isn’t the only place where it happened? Regardless, it’s great to hear that you’ve already found a possible solution.”

Captain Myuhan looked somewhat relieved as he listened to Keel’s story. Apparently, when Keel said that he and the others had mostly solved Elmahl’s problem, he had gained some hope that things would also be resolved for their country. Perhaps he had also heard about the birth of a new Rank S adventurer via the notice sent to the entire world by the Adventurer’s Guild.

“So, you said that the pillar of light appeared about ten days ago. Could you tell me more about that?”

“Certainly. Let me start by talking about the day when the people reported that a pillar of light was extending from the southern sky off to the north.” Captain Myuhan stopped putting food in his mouth and began to speak.

By the time the report had reached the royal castle that day, the situation had become known throughout the country, causing quite a ruckus. Later that day, the captain had used a magic tool to contact the capital city of the Republic of Carlonea, Mitpoi, but he had not received a reply.

After about a day or so without a response, the royal family decided to send some diplomats to the republic to investigate. The next day, the diplomats departed from the fortified city of Kurumei, which was only about two days north of the current fortress. Kurumei was home to about a hundred thousand people, and like the trio of fortresses on the riverbank where the captain, his men, and Keel’s team were today, it had been built following the republic becoming independent. The main army Captain Myuhan had mentioned earlier was also stationed there.

Two days after their departure, the diplomats had passed through this fortress and crossed the stone bridge—the one that Krena had destroyed during the battle with the monsters—for the opposite bank.

“From the fortress on the opposite bank, it takes more than five days to travel by carriage to the capital, Mitpoi. While we waited for the diplomats to arrive, we were keeping contact with Mitpoi via magic tools.”

Captain Myuhan’s story was more detailed than Keel had expected, and it seemed like it would be quite some time before he got the information he wanted. He would have preferred that the captain kept it brief and only touched on important points, but he was the one who had asked the captain to explain in detail. Trying to keep an ear out for only the details he was concerned about was harder than he had expected.

“And then what happened?”

“The diplomats returned. That was two days ago. They said in a panic that the first village after passing through the fortress on the opposite bank was being attacked by monsters.”

The diplomats had gone straight past the fortress and headed back to Kurumei. The fortified city had a resident general who was the commander in chief of the royal army, so they were going to request him to dispatch the main army.

Meanwhile, Captain Myuhan, who had remained at the fortress, had dispatched messengers to the east and west fortresses to prepare for the monster attack.

“A general? But aren’t you in charge here?” Keel inquired.

“That’s correct, but to be more precise, I’m one of the people responsible for protecting this fortress. I’m just a regimental commander.” Keel remembered the man’s ornate helmet. Was that the sign of the regimental commander?

“That’s why you said that the main army wasn’t ready earlier.”

“Indeed. That’s why it’s nothing short of a miracle that we survived today’s battle.”

“By the way, I heard that you’re on bad terms with the republic on the other side of the river. Have you been to war with them since they became independent?”

“There hasn’t been a war since the other side declared independence and founded their nation. This is all little more than a skirmish, which is why we have so few people at this fortress. Hmm?” Captain Myuhan suddenly looked startled by something.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“No. No, it can’t be.”

“Please let me know if you have picked up on something,” Keel said, urging Captain Myuhan to continue. “It might be related to the current situation.”

“Actually, a few years ago, the Republic of Carlonea asked us to sign an agreement to mutually reduce the number of soldiers here.”

After becoming independent, the two countries had spent several years building fortresses and strengthening their defenses against one another. They had spent three or four years doing that before the republic had decided that it wanted to reduce the number of soldiers permanently stationed at the fortress. It had also suggested that the kingdom do the same.

At the time, the republic had had over 10,000 soldiers posted at the fortress across the river. However, after more than four years without either side attacking or being attacked, its leaders had grown tired of them glaring at each other. In addition, none of this was cheap; expenses for this meaningless feud had only accumulated. They had thought that it would be best to limit the number of people with Talents stationed there and place general-level commanders in the rear. In order to make that happen, they had wanted the Kingdom of Calvarna to carry out a similar reduction in military forces.

Under normal circumstances, such a proposal would never have worked out. Silently reducing their own numbers would have been one thing, but they had revealed what they were doing and then suggested that the other side follow suit. This had been the perfect opportunity for Calvarna to launch an attack. They had simply needed to wait until the republic had reduced its forces as agreed upon. Had the republic been lying about the reduction of soldiers, Calvarna would have just needed a backup plan in place to pivot to. As such, it had been an unprecedented proposal, with some of the ministers who participated in the discussions having said that Carlonea was crazy.

“Sounds like it was too good to be true. But what ultimately happened?”

“As you can imagine, we agreed to the pact.”

The deciding factor had been money. Lessening the number of soldiers at the fortress by a certain amount through the offer of severance pay to those who wanted them would make it possible to reduce expenses in the long run. With fewer people there, less food and fuel would need to be sent and transportation costs would go down. For those reasons, the royal family had decided to sign the agreement.

“If that pact led to today’s crisis...” Captain Myuhan groaned, now seeming to truly grasp the seriousness of the situation.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by the shouts of soldiers resounding throughout the room.

“Nooo! What is this power?!”

“Hngh!”

“You’re amazing, Krena!”

“Look! She’s raising him with one arm!”

Keel saw Krena holding a soldier who was significantly taller than her up in the air with only a single open hand under his back. The soldier flailed about, but Krena deftly balanced him on her palm to keep him from falling.

“H-Hey, Krena...” Keel was at a loss for words.

“Whoa! Not even Sarge stands a chance against her!”

“H-How could I?!”

Laughter erupted from the soldiers. The man the group referred to as “Sarge,” whom Krena was balancing, was looking on in astonishment, and Krena set him down on the floor. “Who’s next?”

This was met with more laughter. Apparently, the sparring match had started while Keel and Captain Myuhan were talking, and once it had, the innocent Krena and the brawny soldiers could not be stopped. Keel quickly gave up and spoke to Captain Myuhan again.

“By the way, what is the history behind the independence of the Republic of Carlonea?”

“It all started when Mitpoi, then the largest city in the southern region of our country, complained to the royal family,” the captain answered.

The capital of the Kingdom of Calvarna had always been—and still was—in the north, and only the northern territories had received tax incentives, as they were the ones that had delivered food and fuel, as well as managed exports. Mitpoi, the largest city in the south, had filed a lawsuit on behalf of the southern part of the country, as the southern territories across the river had remained unchanged.

“The beginning of the matter was economic dissatisfaction. Did something happen to cause it?” Keel asked, trying to dig deeper into the source of the conflict.

“It seems as if there was a priest of some kind of new religion giving advice behind the scenes, stating that all should be equal under the eyes of God. As a result, the resentment in the southern part of the country intensified. Their dissatisfaction with the royal family reached a boiling point, and they finally went so far as to declare independence. The ministers and royal family tried to reach an amicable solution with the south, but their efforts were in vain, and war broke out. I had only just joined the army when this happened, so I remember it well.”

“A new religion, you say. Was it by chance the Church of Gushara?”

“I’m pretty sure it was something like that. You don’t think...?”

“Yes. Apparently, the Church of Gushara is somehow connected with the Demon Lord Army’s strategy.”

Keel told the astonished Captain Myuhan as much as he knew about what they had experienced in Teomenia, as well as about the conditions that had led to the outbreak and spread of the daemonic incarnations and how to deal with them.

“That’s why we have prepared medicines that can prevent daemonic incarnations. Also, I have some beans that can keep daemonic incarnations and

monsters away, so I would like to begin by planting them along the riverbank. Doing so will create a line of defense to keep them at bay. I was hoping you and the soldiers here could assist with that.”

“In that case, I’ll be more than happy to assist. I’ll talk to the other captains as well, but I’m sure they’ll all readily agree.”

Watching Captain Myuhan’s reaction, Keel felt that Krena’s straightforward personality and the politeness with which he tried to deal with the fortress’s soldiers would likely win them their cooperation.

“Also, I would like to acquire a map of this country—or rather, of the Republic of Carlonea. There may still be people across the river who can be saved.”

“Ah, a map?” Captain Myuhan frowned.

“Is that a problem? I just need to know the location of the main towns and villages.”

“No, I promised to repay you for your assistance. I promise to get you a map. However, to be honest with you, the only map we have in this fortress at the moment has information on it that we cannot share with a foreign nation. If only we had an old map from before their independence, I would have given it to you immediately. Or I can consult with the general when he arrives in two or three days. How does that sound?”

“No, time is of the essence. Could you at least show me the map that you have?”

“Well...”

However, Keel pressed on in spite of Captain Myuhan’s reluctance. People’s lives were at stake, and he could not wait two or three days.

“You can keep an eye on me as I look at the map. If that’s not possible, then at least let me write down the rough locations of the towns and villages.”

“Hmm.” Captain Myuhan folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

“Oh, there you are,” Merus said.

“Huh? And you are...?”

The angel suddenly appeared in the dining room. Apparently, the defensive line of Summons and monsters was now complete. He waltzed calmly into the room, gliding across the floor as he approached Keel and Captain Myuhan.

Captain Myuhan seemed to recall having seen images of Merus many times in the churches and temples he had been going to since childhood.

“So, did you get the information? And what is Krena doing?”

Keel looked around before answering. Unsurprisingly, Captain Myuhan and the other soldiers who were present were all staring at Merus with blank expressions. They looked as though they had never expected that an angel would appear in front of them.

“Huh? Is that First Angel Merus? What’s he doing here? I don’t get it.” The moment one of the soldiers said that, everyone in the room except for Keel and Krena dropped themselves to the floor in unison. Even the sweating Captain Myuhan prostrated himself, doing so with such force that it seemed as if he had slammed his face into the floor.

The messengers of Elmea, the God of Creation, and the angels who conveyed the word of God to the people were far more noble than any mortal king. In fact, this was a sight he had probably never expected to see while he was still alive, which made the situation all the more confusing. Or perhaps he thought it was too intense of an experience to have confirmed the existence of angels and could not bear to face one directly. Keel felt similarly from his own experiences.

“So, did you get the map? We’ll head to the Republic of Carlonea tomorrow.”

“We were talking about that just now. They apparently can’t give us a map, so we were exploring other options.”

“What did you say?”

“I said they can’t give us a map. That’s why—”

“Huh? You won’t give us a map?” Krena asked.

“Huh?!” Captain Myuhan, who had been listening to Merus and Keel discuss the situation, was taken aback when Krena suddenly spoke to him.

“There’s not much that can be done about it. The general who has the

authority to decide what to do about the map won't be here for another few days. So instead..."

"Who is this general?" Merus asked.

"Hmm?"

"Who is it that's saying they can't give us the map? I'll talk to them directly."

Keel moved his gaze back to Captain Myuhan, who was trembling, his face still pressed into the floor. He did not know what to do besides make himself look smaller and hope that he would not have to suffer the wrath of an angel.

At that point, Keel decided that it was up to him to convince Merus.

"Listen, Merus. They can't give us a map, but they can let me copy it down. We can leave tomorrow with no issues." When Keel finished speaking, Merus held his gaze.





“All right. Do as you wish,” he said, and with it, he disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared.

“Okay. See you tomorrow,” Krena replied in parting, albeit a little too late.

As soon as she had finished speaking, the soldiers raised their heads in unison. Keel, seeing the surprise, fear, and confusion on their faces, understood why Merus was reluctant to appear in public. And why Allen had included him in his team.

“Well, Krena. You’ve eaten a lot. Now it’s time to get some rest.”

“Yeah! It was really delicious!”

Krena nodded vigorously and lazily headed out of the dining room. Simultaneously, Keel turned to Captain Myuhan.

“Please get some rest. We will make a copy of the map tonight,” the captain said.

Captain Myuhan’s solemn expression as he spoke caused Keel to hold back on making any further comments about letting him be involved in copying the map. He felt bad and wanted to apologize for the burden he was putting on him.

# Chapter 11: Team Allen: Journey to the Kingdom of Crevelle

It had been three days since Allen split up the party into three teams. He, Cecil, and Dogora were riding on a Deputized Bird B and heading west. By using the Deputize skill, the griffin had become larger than normal, giving them more than enough space for all three to ride on the one Summon. Allen was also utilizing the extra space to hold some soil that he was using to create more healing items.

For the past three days, he had been constantly Summoning Grass Cs to generate Potherbs. He used Quick Summoning to Create, Synthesize, and activate the Abilities of the Summons while Cecil and Dogora tossed the completed Potherbs into Storage via his grimoire, which was sitting right next to them. They were able to do all this from the back of their Bird B.

Were he only interested in movement speed, Allen could have used Bird A's buff, Flight, to soar through the sky on his own. However, not only would that consume more MP, but he also wanted to increase his stock of Potherbs and other items as much as possible.

Using his Spirit A and Merus, whom he had split between the other two teams, Allen kept an eye on how things were going.

On the eastern side of the continent, where Sophie's team had headed, the pillar of light seemed to end in an oasis town that had been built near the dark elf village of Fabraaze several decades earlier. Something suspicious seemed to have been involved in the founding of the city, and Allen was convinced that the Demon Lord Army wanted to turn the city's inhabitants into daemonic incarnations.

Meanwhile, Keel and his team, who had headed to the southern reaches of the continent, had not yet arrived at the pillar of light's source. Allen believed, however, that the daemonic incarnations in that region were coming from a country that had gained independence around twenty years prior. The Church

of Gushara seemed to have been involved in it becoming sovereign.

The various points of origin for the pillars of light seemed to overlap with places at which some important event that was ultimately favorable to the current situation had occurred. Assuming that was the case, it was nearly all the evidence Allen needed to confirm that this was a long-term plan that had been set up across the continent. Working off of that assumption, Allen started to think that there might be other plans like it waiting to be put in motion in other parts of the continent, but that they simply did not know about them yet. Were that to be the case, he would not have enough Potherbs to handle the situation.

Taking a look around, Allen noticed that the sun was now setting behind them. Dogora spoke up, voting to call it a day. “It’s getting dark. We should set up camp soon.”

“You’re right.” Cecil agreed with Dogora, so Allen had their Bird B descend. In doing so, a large swamp came into view, prompting him to a detour in search of a dry spot. It seemed that there were many water sources in the area, and the river split into many tributaries and small creeks. The wetlands had treeless marshes scattered throughout.

Before long, Allen found a place next to a forest that seemed to have been dried out by the afternoon sun. He landed the Bird B and checked the ground with his feet, confirming that it was not muddy.

“I wonder if this area is still all right.”

Along with some firewood and a fire-starting magic tool, he took an insect-repelling magic tool out of Storage. When a magic stone was attached to it, an incense-like smoke would come out, driving away all manner of bugs. For the past two days, the team had been moving between the forest area and the swamp area, so he had purposely teleported to the Empire of Baukis to pick up something that could deal with insects.

Of course, the insect repellent would do nothing to prevent monsters from approaching, but that could be dealt with using some Gold Beans and leaving an Insect A on guard duty. That allowed all three members of the team to sleep through the night without the need for a lookout.

Before long, fire had spread all the way through the large pile of wood, and it

was burning like a campfire. Allen then pulled hunks of meat still on the bone out of Storage and skewered them on a branch over the fire to roast.

“This is delicious!”

Dogora bit into the cooked meat. It seemed that no matter what he ate, he always found it to be delicious. Even today, he had done nothing but rock back and forth atop the Bird B, yet he still had an insatiable appetite.

Allen closely inspected Dogora’s body, which had been growing both in height and in girth. Rather than becoming an agile fighter who could take advantage of his mobility, it seemed that his physique was more suited to a heavy warrior type.

“I wonder what’s going on with the other teams. Is Keel’s team still fighting?” Cecil asked.

“No, the battle is over. But it seems they took some time to heal the wounded soldiers and plant Gold Beans around the fortress,” Allen replied.

According to information shared earlier by Merus, Keel’s team had yet to reach their destination. The ostensible reason was that they were getting the fortress and soldiers ready to fight, but in truth, it was because the map they were promised had not managed to get prepared overnight. As a result, Krena found herself with some time on her hands, which she spent enjoying some sparring and practicing with the soldiers.

“Looks like Krena is the same as ever,” Dogora said.

“Thanks to that, though, they said they would be able to secure a fighting force that will help them annihilate the daemonic incarnations. Since the country’s main army should be arriving at the fortress where Keel and the others are waiting within the next day, Krena has been sparring with the soldiers to see who’s strong enough to join them on their advance team.”

“Heh, sounds like they’re doing a great job.”

*Keel is doing his best in negotiating and making proposals. You need to hang in there and do your best too, Dogora,* Allen thought, silently offering words of encouragement to his friend.

“It seems that Sophie and the others who went to the east have also begun to help the nearby towns.”

It was just this morning that Sophie and the others had earned the cooperation of the dark elf village of Fabraaze and opened a refugee center not far outside it. When she had gone to check in on the situation in the early afternoon, she was told by a dark elf elder that he had formed a select party to hunt daemonic incarnations.

Apparently, the dark elves had entrusted Elf Princess Sophie with the task of hunting daemonic incarnations, liberating neighboring cities, and directing refugees to shelters as needed. However, they seemed interested in providing more than just shelter, and the elder had said that he had organized the strongest army in the village and would dispatch it to subdue the daemonic incarnations. Sophie agreed with the proposal and expressed her gratitude. That same afternoon, they had set up a united front for the first time, liberating an oasis city that had managed to withstand the monsters’ attack. Tam-Tam’s Eagle Mode’s mobility and carrying capacity had helped with that.

Allen asked the Spirit A to show him Sophie and the others’ fight, and what he saw was Sophie, Volmaar, and Meruru’s Tam-Tam fighting off monsters clinging to adobe walls. There were several scenes where it was necessary for Sophie to give all of her MP to the spirits, and the fact that they were the first to show off their strong fighting abilities was probably what had won them the cooperation of the dark elves.

“Sophie seems to be the same as usual,” Cecil remarked.

“Hmm. Unlike me, Sophie tends to be quite calculating,” Allen replied.

Cecil noticed that Allen had used the word “calculating” in lieu of “cunning.” She let out a sigh, commenting under her breath that he was no different.

*Come to think of it, King Olvahs is quite an extraordinary person.*

King Olvahs had allowed them to open a shelter and provided them with a map after a single meeting. However, Allen predicted that this was not because he was interested in showing any kind of charity, but rather because he wanted his village to maintain its status even after things had settled down.

If Sophie and the others were able to rescue other towns in the Muharino Desert on their own, it could lead to the interpretation that the dark elf village had abandoned all responsibility and left the situation to someone else for the sake of their own protection. Were that to happen, it could prove quite embarrassing among city-states, and some of the rescued settlements might close their gates to trade with Fabraaze. Even if they were to continue to be able to trade, they also risked being taken advantage of

Allen figured that if King Olvahs, the leader of the dark elf village, had thought that far ahead, or if he had merely sensed the possibility of what could come and decided to show a willingness to help from the beginning, then he was not to be underestimated.

*I'd expect no less from the guy who was involved in fighting against the elves for thousands of years. I wonder what will happen in the future in a battle of wits between Sophie and Olvahs...*

"Does this mean we have to go all the way to western limit of the continent?" Dogora asked.

Considering that Sophie and Keel had had to go all the way to the eastern and southern limits, respectively, before finally arriving at the points where the pillars of light originated, Dogora's prediction was a definite possibility.

"If it's farther west than here, I'm pretty sure that'll take us to the Kingdom of Crevelle."

On the west side of the continent where the Union was located, countless rivers of varying sizes flowed from the central mountain range out into the sea. These rivers formed wetlands and forests as they moved westward, ending on a jagged coastline dotted with coves. A country called Crevelle was located there, and most of its inhabitants were said to be fishkin. Despite hearing rumors about them, Allen and his friends had never seen a fishkin. They even recalled the name having been mentioned back at the Academy, though they had not had the opportunity to learn about them in detail.

"Ah, yes, the fishkin kingdom. Beast Princess Shia apparently headed there." Or at least, that was what Allen had heard from the cardinal.

"That was just after she caught Pontiff Gushara," Cecil noted, "so it's already

been about a month. I hope she's okay."

If that was where the pillar of light originated from, it was almost guaranteed to be a terrifying place where daemonic incarnations and other monsters ran rampant.

"Though they may not be on the same level as the Ten Heroic Beasts, she's still in charge of a pretty elite force, so I imagine she should be fine."

The strength of the daemonic incarnations varied from individual to individual, but they tended to range between Rank B and Rank C. Most of them were accompanied by Rank A monsters, however. But Allen figured that Shia, known as the War Princess, was likely still alive, especially with her elite squad in tow. Of course, he had never actually met her and knew nothing about her stats or skills, so it might have been nothing more than wishful thinking.

"But why did she go to the Kingdom of Crevelle after capturing the founder of the heretical cult? Do you think she's also after the Holy Orbs of Macris?" Cecil asked.

"I mean, she may be known as the War Princess, but she's still a princess at the end of the day." Allen doubted that was the reason, but he tentatively entertained the possibility for the moment.

"I knew it!" Cecil shouted excitedly. "I'd guessed that the Holy Orbs of Macris would be in the Kingdom of Crevelle if they really existed!"

"Hey, could you at least talk in a way that I can understand?"

Dogora seemed to be struggling to keep up with the conversation, so Allen decided to put a stop to it.

"No, not right now. This isn't the place to discuss such matters."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Now's not the time is all I'm saying. I'll tell you the next time we're alone. Or maybe you can ask Keel. He might know."

"Huh?"

Dogora was confused as to what was going on. Allen really wanted to explain the details of the Holy Orbs of Macris, but that would mean bringing up the



Prostia Empire and the Tears of the Holy Fish Macris in front of Cecil. To avoid doing so, he needed Dogora to be satisfied with his nonanswer for the time being.

Since Allen was once a servant of a noble family, he was aware of the unspoken rule that a man must not talk to a woman about the Prostia Empire and the Tears of the Holy Fish Macris. It was a popular topic among aristocrats and the wealthy, but since men tended to avoid the topic, women either had to ask other women or read about it in books. Therefore, in Ratash's noble households, there was more than one copy of a picture book with a title like *The Story of the Prostia Empire*, which would be read to the nobles' daughters by their mothers, sisters, and wet nurses.

Cecil also loved this picture book. When she had learned that Allen could read, she had ordered him to read it and tell her his thoughts. Hence, Allen could still remember at least a rough summary of the book.

Once upon a time, there was a man named Macris, who was the crown prince of the Prostia Empire. Triggered by a certain event, he met a girl, Deirdre, who lived in a rural village on the outskirts of the empire and fell in love with her. Macris confessed his love to Deirdre, but she turned him away, saying that their respective statuses were just too different. However, deep in her heart, she also was in love with him, and after they met time and again, they pledged their love to each other. There were several twists and turns, such as his father, the emperor, opposing their relationship and them being separated due to various circumstances, but the bond between the two lovers only deepened, refusing to break. Finally, the emperor acknowledged the relationship between the two, and it came to the point that they received blessings from all over the empire.

Alas, that was not their happily ever after. Many years earlier, a vicious monster had been sealed in the territorial waters of the Prostia Empire, but it escaped from the seal just before Macris and Deirdre's wedding and went on a rampage that threatened to destroy the empire. In order to protect his beloved Deirdre and the future of the empire in which he planned to live with her, Macris went to the temple of Aqua, the God of Water, and asked for the power to fight this monster. His wish was granted and he heard the voice of Water God Aqua, but the water god told him that he would be turned into a fish in

exchange for the gift of power. Macris accepted this, and when he was transformed into a huge fish, he went to battle the monster. After a desperate battle, he succeeded in sealing the monster once again.

However, Macris did not tell Deirdre about his contract with Water God Aqua. With his battle finished, he landed at the feet of his beloved, but she ran away in fear at the sight of the giant fish. Knowing that he would never be with Deirdre again, Macris shed large tears before leaving for distant waters. Thus, Holy Fish Macris remained in the sea, where he still swam all by his lonesome, protecting the Prostia Empire and Deirdre. The tears he left behind crystallized and were kept by Deirdre, who regretted hurting the man she loved, as treasures of the Prostia Empire.

That was the story as Allen recalled it. After he had finished reading it to her, Cecil had been adamant that he give her his impressions, so he had done just that.

“This picture book details how the royal family will protect even a girl from the frontier so long as she is a citizen under them, and because it serves as a model for the ideal relationship between the royal family and the people, it is popular among the nobility and the rich. Also, given that the two weren’t together in the end, the story is also careful to not deny the class system.”

When he had said that, the smile had immediately faded from Cecil’s face. Her expression had become one of fury as she proceeded to beat him up. The mere memory of the story made one sad, and talking about it would bring one to tears. It was not unlike how, in his past life as Kenichi, there had been a popular location that every girl wanted to visit at least once in their lives but that he himself had never gone to. It seemed that even in this world, he still could not understand such romanticized dreams.

Back in the Academy, Allen learned that the Prostia Empire still existed. Surprisingly, it was a large empire at the bottom of the sea south of the Central Continent. There were few countries that had any sort of direct diplomatic relations with it, so the details were mostly unknown, but it was apparently comparable in size to the Empire of Giamut.

Additionally, although Allen did not know if they were the same ones that

appeared in *The Story of the Prostia Empire*, there were jewels called the Tears of the Holy Fish Macris, or the Holy Orbs of Macris, which were extremely valuable to the fishkin. There had even been cases of these jewels being sold, however the sale prices had been so high that Allen and his friends would not have been able to afford one even with the money they had earned in the Rank S dungeon. However, some of them had indeed been sold, and with the huge amount of money the fishkin had obtained, they had bought land above the sea and founded the Kingdom of Crevelle.

“Holy Orbs of Macris apparently cost millions of gold coins. There’s no way we could buy one,” Allen stated bluntly.

Cecil turned red and lashed out at that. “Huh?! ‘Buy one’?! What are you talking about?! I’m a sensible person too, you know! But anyway, are there any problems in the Kingdom of Crevelle?”



*You liar. I could see your eyes sparkling at the thought.*

Allen decided to keep his thoughts to himself now that the conversation was back on track.

“Seems like there are,” he continued. “The Kingdom of Crevelle is a vassal state of the Prostia Empire, and it seems that they were dissatisfied with this arrangement. There was even talk that a civil war could break out.”

Tears of the Holy Fish Macris were apparently traded by the Kingdom of Crevelle via the Prostia Empire, or so Allen had heard from the cardinal. What happened in the Republic of Carlonea might have also been happening there, and in addition, Princess Shia had supposedly headed for the Kingdom of Crevelle after she had heard about the situation.

“Then, Princess Shia went to the Kingdom of Crevelle to try to do something about it?”

“You catch on quick, Dogora. That’s the natural assumption.”

“Right, and if there’s a Demonic Deity there, that means there’s a battle awaiting us.” Cecil stopped eating and spoke in hushed tones, the expression of a girl who longed for her picture book fading away into a more serious one, as if she were deep in thought.

Allen and his friends all shared the same goal of fighting against the Demon Lord Army, though their personal goals and values all differed. Allen saw no problem with this and felt that his peers’ values should be respected.

Sophie believed in the prophecies of the spirit gods and strove to act in a manner befitting a princess by being one who gave hope to people in distress, particularly the elves. Keel had a strong sense of justice and could not abandon those in trouble, but as the head of the Carnel family, he had ultimately decided that he would take care of his sister and his servants who had joined him. He prioritized the happiness of his young servants.

Meruru, too, valued her family. Her father was a low-ranking soldier in the Baukisian military, and her older brothers also served as soldiers, fighting for their family and country. Meruru’s goal was to support her family, and she fought against the Demon Lord Army in the hopes that the day would come

when such fighting would no longer be necessary. On the other hand, Krena and Dogora, who wanted to fulfill their childhood dreams of becoming heroes, wished to fight. They looked forward to growing in battle and never missed a single day of training.

In Cecil's case, she was driven by revenge for the loss of her older brother Mihai, whom she cherished, loved, and idealized.

*That was in the letter too.*

Viscount Granvelle had shown Allen the last letter his eldest son, Mihai, had sent him. It began with him expressing his gratitude to his parents for raising him, then went on to say that he wanted Thomas to take care of the Granvelle family, that he worried about Cecil, and that he was sorry for not being able to come home soon. It had ended with a request to tell Allen to protect Cecil.

Mihai had been a kindhearted young man who had often sent letters like that, and Cecil, who greatly admired her older brother, possibly was the most resolved when it came to fighting with her life on the line. Even now, her face, illuminated by the glow of the bonfire, reflected that determination.

"Apparently, the Granvelle family will be granted the title of count this year. Perhaps you should go check in on them once this is all over with," Allen suggested. He spoke as though he was just thinking about what the Gamers should do once the battle ended.

Currently, House Granvelle was growing its presence in the Kingdom of Ratash. Mithril mining was at its peak, and their daughter, Cecil, had been mentioned by name in a letter sent to the royal family by the queen of Rohzenheim, the leader of the Five Continental Alliance. The queen had hailed her as the hero who finished off an enemy general. Moreover, Viscount Granvelle, the head of the family, played an active role as a contact point for diplomatic relations between Ratash and Rohzenheim, and he greatly contributed to the kingdom.

There was talk of raising the Granvelle family from viscount to count status, but apparently this was not just a result of their contributions to the royal family.

"Of all the things..." Cecil, who knew about the situation, scowled slightly.

“Apparently, the king said those exact words too. You guys might get along.” Allen jokingly referred to how Cecil’s remarks were extremely similar to the king of Ratash’s. It was met with a powerful, remarkably painful pinch.

“Hrngh! Ouch! Lady Cecil!”

“Are you serious? I mean, err...never mind.” Cecil shot a glare toward Dogora, immediately shutting him up.

“Argh! You guys don’t know how I feel about this!”

Cecil angrily huffed at Allen and took a big bite out of her piece of meat. Her appetite seemed to have returned.

Allen rubbed at his throbbing face. “Well, from what I hear, the king is powerless to do anything about the princess.”

“Even so! Brother Thomas is responsible for this too!” She took another angry bite of the grilled meat.

Some time ago, when Allen had teleported to the Kingdom of Ratash and heard from Viscount Granvelle about the status of diplomatic relations with Rohzenheim, he had learned that Cecil’s older brother Thomas, who was two years older than her, had recently begun dating Princess Leilana, the daughter of the king. He had heard that King Invel, Princess Leilana, Viscount Granvelle, and Thomas had already held a dinner party.

Their first encounter had been when Thomas was attending the Nobles College, a school for children of nobility without Talents. While there, he had attended a ball. Thomas, who was serious about his studies but had a quiet personality, had not participated in the dancing and was just observing the goings-on at the venue when Princess Leilana had arrived and seemingly taken a liking to him. By making Thomas, who had good grades, her private tutor, they had spent more time together, which had led to them forming a relationship. Allen had heard this story from Thomas himself.

Ratash’s nobles were divided into two main factions, the royalist faction and the Academy faction, depending on how they thought about the future of the country. The Nobles College belonged to the royalist faction and was often joined by many children of the nobility. For the future of the princess and the

royal family, King Invel had decided that it would be better to keep her in contact with the future royalist aristocrats and had thus sent the princess to the ball, but upon his succession to the throne, King Invel had been busy dealing with the war with the Demon Lord Army and Rohzenheim and various other political issues, including diplomatic relations with the princess. Because of that, he had been unable to keep an eye on the princess's movements. That was why it had taken a long time for him to find out about their relationship.

Allen had heard from Viscount Granvelle that when the king had learned of this, he had called Viscount Granvelle to confirm the details. All the king had said on the subject was, "Of all the things..."

Later, following the dinner between the two families, they had begun to consider plans to grant the Granvelle family count status. In addition to their appreciation of the Granvelle family's contributions to the kingdom, it was decided that they would recognize the relationship between Thomas and Princess Leilana. There were also rumors that the purpose of the change was to address their difference in status.

In addition, there was conflict between the royalist and Academy factions. Count Hamilton and Viscount Granvelle were on good terms with each other. After King Invel raised Viscount Granvelle's status to be on par with that of House Hamilton, there were rumors that the king intended to bring the Granvelle family into the royalist fold. And as Allen and his party had successfully cleared the Rank S dungeon, the royal family wanted to use Cecil to bring this Rank S party under their control; there were rumors stating that the king found this to be the perfect opportunity to strengthen their influence.

There was a reason, however, that Cecil was outraged rather than delighted by this turn of events. After the death of her brother Mihai, rumors had circulated that the royal family had sent Mihai to a fierce battlefield in order to reduce the power of the Academy faction. The current king, Invel, who was the crown prince at the time, had made the final decision on the appointment.

In a letter sent by Mihai to Cecil, he had stated that many lives could be saved by fulfilling a dangerous role. He did not want anyone to be angry over his death. She did not know if those were Mihai's true feelings or if the letter had been written by someone else, but Cecil, who believed in her brother, thought



that hating the royal family would go against her late brother's wishes, leading her to have mixed feelings.

“Oh yeah, Thomas also wants to go to the class promotion dungeon.”

Beginning in April, the Kingdom of Ratash would finally have a class promotion dungeon. Not only would anyone who completed the class promotion quest be able to upgrade their class, but even those who were born Talentless would have the opportunity to acquire one.

Therefore, in order to support Princess Leilana, who would eventually go to the battlefield, Thomas had decided to acquire a Talent. For that reason, Allen had been asked to help with his class promotion quest—something that he had told Cecil about.

## **Classes and Talents**

1. Those who were born without a Talent can gain a Talent by clearing the class promotion dungeon.  
However, what Talent they receive is generally selected at random from the positions “Vanguard,” “Middle Guard,” “Rear Guard,” and “Other.” It cannot be chosen by the person themselves.
2. Those who already have a Talent can undergo a class promotion one time.  
Those who acquire a Talent as per point 1 can do this as well, so those born without a Talent can undergo class promotions up to twice. In addition, when a person with a Talent undergoes a class promotion, they can choose from among the Talents of the same lineage and of a higher level.

## **Conditions for Class Promotions**

1. Up to eight people can enter the class promotion dungeon and clear it at a given time.

2. Those without a Talent must be at level 60 when clearing the class promotion dungeon. Those with a Talent must be at level 60 and all Talent skill levels must be at 6 when clearing the class promotion dungeon. If an individual does not need to undergo a class promotion, then they do not need to meet the conditions set forth in point 2 to enter the dungeon.

Clearing the class promotion dungeon required eight people in Normal Mode with maxed-out skills and levels, and classes with a total of ten to twelve stars, making it difficult enough that there would be casualties were things to go awry. This was announced to the people in January via an oracle, and Thomas seemed to have been prepared for it.

“Thomas sounds pretty motivated. Perhaps I should help out too.”

“You probably should. He’s your brother, after all.”

“Right... I mean, that’s not what I mean!”

Cecil agreed for a moment before she shot it down. The life and future of her brother were at stake, so she was not against it, but she could not simply agree with it either.

Meanwhile, Thomas’s father, Viscount Granvelle, was desperate to keep his heir from going to war. However, Thomas was determined, causing the viscount to empathize with King Invel’s anguish at having to send his daughter to the battlefield. Allen figured that must have been how all fathers felt.

*Speaking of which, Mash is also the same age.*

Mash, who was planning to go to the Academy this year, had successfully passed the entrance exam.

“Now that the class promotion system is about to start up, it’s too bad there’s no Great Pope,” Dogora whispered while Allen was thinking about his brother.

“Yeah.”

“I suspect that he was one of the victims when Gushara went up in flames.”

The pope, the supreme leader of the Elmean religion, possessed a rather rare

Talent called Saint King. He was supposed to have been in Teomenia, but he had been missing since the day the Pontiff of the Church of Gushara was executed. Even though Merus had been defeated by the Demonic Deity Lycaoron, he had repeatedly visited the religious capital of Teomenia and continued to search around the central square where the execution had taken place. Ultimately, however, he had found no sign of Great Pope Istahl.

For that reason, the details of the class promotion quest opening in April and the story of Fire Goddess Freyja's divine vessel being stolen by the Demon Lord Army had not yet been shared with much of the world. Usually, matters related to the operation of this world took the form of Elmea, the God of Creation, giving an oracle to the pope, who would then relay it to the world.

"Fire Goddess Freyja's divine vessel was stolen by the Demon Lord Army. In order to overcome this crisis, God of Creation Elmea created the class promotion dungeon. God has given us this trial in order to give us hope."

This was what the pope had wanted to say to inspire everyone, and he had also planned to execute the Pontiff of the Church of Gushara by the end of March. Considering that this plan was thwarted, however, it was possible that the disappearance of the pope was also part of the Demon Lord Army's master strategy.

"Well, I don't know what will happen, but we'll be entering the Kingdom of Crevelle tomorrow. Let's rest for now," Allen said.

"Yeah."

"Roger."

With that, Allen and the rest of his team were left to their own thoughts before falling asleep.

## Chapter 12: The Actions of Beast Princess Shia

At the western end of the continent of Galiat lay the Kingdom of Crevelle, where Allen and his friends were currently heading.

As they looked up at the pillar of light crossing the clear sky from east to west, a procession headed east through the wetlands of the Kingdom of Crevelle, making their way toward the center of the continent. It was a long line that stretched on forever, with wagons pulled by water buffalo interspersed here and there. More than half of the line consisted of fishkin carrying luggage and young children on their backs.

They had blue hair, pale skin, and four fan-shaped cartilage protrusions on either side of their faces. Thin, finlike membranes stretched between these protrusions, which served the same function as ears on humans. It was a common feature of the race to have webbed fingers and scales that grew irregularly in various places on their bodies.

The majority of the fishkin wore tanned leather loincloths and sleeveless bodice-like vests, but some soldiers wore rounded armor that looked like crustacean shells, guarding the sides of the caravan that stood about ten people wide. The winding but continuous procession stretched out for around ten kilometers, avoiding forests with poor visibility while navigating the wetlands. The massive queue consisted of approximately two hundred thousand people.

At the western end of the procession—its very back—was a group that looked different from the fishkin. They were a group of beastkin, and their leader was at the head of the group, guarding their surroundings from the back of their horse.

This leader, a woman dressed in a flashy red-and-gold cloak, was a tigerkin. The leather breastplate peeking out from her cloak had many fine scratches on it, indicating that she was a nimble warrior who valued her agility. Her golden hair was tinged with black in places, and her golden-brown eyes, with which she vigilantly observed her surroundings, showed the confidence and vitality of a

young woman who had just come of age.

Next to her, a rhinokin with a huge mallet on his back rode a horse of his own. He was also attentive to his surroundings while talking to the tigerkin.

“There were forty-two dead in last night’s battle. It was hard to recover the corpses, but we buried them in the camp before we moved and kept their bracelets as mementos.”

“I see. They died for my military authority. The least we can do is return their belongings to the fatherland.”

“Of course.”

“Is anyone injured?”

“None at the moment. I’ve told the men to come forward if they were bitten by that strange entity, but I received no reports this morning. Also, we’ve received supplies from the Crevelle royal family.”

“Hmm. I sent out the order last night and they’ve already arrived. I guess it’s only natural, considering the situation they’re in.”

“Indeed. Furthermore, you’ve been summoned by the king.”

“Got it. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

The tigerkin grinned, showing her canine teeth, and sent her horse galloping forward. After a short time, she saw a miniature portable shrine protected by fishkin soldiers. It was shaped like a small house, with a rectangular pedestal about five meters square and a roof and walls made of thin spikes. Beneath it was a huge wheel, guarded in four directions by three water buffalo, making twelve in total. Soldiers who also served as escorts led these water buffalo.

A soldier who noticed the approaching tigerkin gestured to tell her to move her horse to the left for when she came up alongside the shrine. There was a scaffolding-like structure protruding from the shrine that allowed one to get on it from their horse and then enter the building.

The tigerkin entrusted the horse’s reins to the fishkin soldier, nimbly moved to the scaffolding of the shrine, and opened the sliding door that made up one of the walls. Inside, a well-built old fishkin sat comfortably on a rug, with

secretaries and bodyguards on either side. He wore what appeared to be a colored leather coat and a broad coronet of dull gold on his forehead.

This fishkin was the king of the Kingdom of Crevelle. Nearby was a fishkin also wearing a leather coat and a thin diadem, and judging from their physique, they seemed to be a woman. This shrine was apparently moving the Crevelle royal family, including the queen and princess.

“Oh, thank you for coming, Your Highness Shia. Please sit down,” the King of Crevelle said to the tigerkin in a gentle tone. He held up his hand and indicated with his palm where she should sit.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Shia answered briefly before sitting down in the indicated seat. “I’m truly honored. I apologize for rushing matters, but first, I’d like to thank you for replenishing our arrows.” She bowed her head in respect to the king and thanked him for the supplies she had been told about by the rhinokin, Captain Rudo.

“I only did what was expected of me,” the king replied. “I heard that there was another fierce battle last night.”

“Yes. I lost a lot of subjects.”

“Is that so? Say, do you think it would be possible to let our own elite soldiers show off their powers?”

Shia figured that this was the reason she had been summoned. She also sensed that this could serve as an opportunity to advance her plans, which she had been working on for some time.

“I appreciate your concern. It’s true that there is nothing more reassuring than being able to rely on the power of your country’s elite. However, it takes an entire hour to make it from the head of the procession to the back, even on a horse. In order to protect a procession of that length, a large number of soldiers are required. Moreover, if the elites are dispatched, it will be difficult to protect Your Majesty. In fact, do you think it would be possible for the royal family to move a little farther forward? Then we can fight without having to worry.”

The king was correct that the burden on the beastkin would be reduced if the

soldiers of the Kingdom of Crevelle were concentrated in the rear, but that would leave the sides of the long queue shorthanded. The points that needed defending were concentrated in the rear as things were, so Princess Shia thought that it would be easier to protect everyone if they were more dispersed.

“But it’s a king’s duty to protect the people,” the king said softly.

“Absolutely. You’re an excellent king, Your Majesty. However, we will finally arrive at the fortified city of Carlo in three days. Please consider moving there as soon as possible. Our country has already begun moving troops and supplies there, and we have decided to ask for help from our allies.”

The long procession was heading to the fortress city that was almost certainly underneath the pillar of light that ran from east to west across the Kingdom of Crevelle. When Shia mentioned it, she put particular emphasis on the word “allies.”

“O-Our allies? But our country still hasn’t formally entered into an alliance with your nation.”

A certain strength filled Shia’s eyes. “Oh? Are you saying that it was only in vain that we shed so much blood for your people and the royal family?”

“No, no. I can’t thank you enough for your actions and the bravery of your country. However, we can’t make an alliance with other countries based on our own discretion and without permission from the empire.”

“That is true. The treaty you signed with the empire stated that your country may not form treaties with other countries without the empire’s approval.”

“What?! Wh-Why do you know that?” Her statement elicited a look of surprise from King Crevelle. He never imagined that Shia would know the contents of the treaty between his homeland and the empire.

“Therefore, I would like you to propose to the Prostia Empire an alliance with our country.” When Shia said that, a shocked expression appeared on the king’s face.

“That... You must certainly know just how difficult that is. Right now, our country is not on good terms with the empire,” the king replied.

“Of course I know that. But there are exceptions to everything, no? With all that we’ve accomplished, surely the empire can’t simply ignore your claims.”

The great undersea empire, the Prostia Empire, had thrived on its own thus far due to the abundance of undersea resources. If they needed anything, they traded with other countries using the port of the Kingdom of Crevelle, a vassal state. For this reason, the Kingdom of Crevelle never entered into alliances with other countries.

“Besides, this might be a good opportunity. Before I came here, I was in Elmahl up in the north, it was common sense that without the Kingdom of Crevelle’s port, the Prostia Empire could not trade with other continents. I heard rumor that your country is plotting independence from the empire.”

“Of course not! That’s inconceivable! Such rumors must be a plot by those who want to drive a wedge between our country and the empire!” King Crevelle’s shouts were high-pitched and hoarse. Hastily, his secretary rubbed his back and made him drink from a porcelain cup.

“It must have been a plot by the believers of Daemonism. They are cunning people. Come to think of it, perhaps it was a part of their evil plot to demand that their pontiff be arrested and held for trial prior to his execution.” Shia’s eyes took on a terrifying glare as she spoke, like that of a hungry beast.

“As I thought, it was the followers of Daemonism that attacked.” The king quickly tried to steer the conversation in another direction.

“Even Your Majesty must have seen how the people of your country took on bizarre forms and attacked their comrades. Those hideous acts must be the work of the Daemonism believers. In other words, there is a possibility that those who seduced the people of your country have already infiltrated your lands. Of course, this also means that it’s possible that they had an opening that we could’ve utilized to ruin their ploy.”

“Is that so...?” An expression of despair and chagrin washed across the king’s face. Apparently, even if the king had a plan to separate his country from the empire, it did not reflect the views of his people.

The room was filled with a brief silence. Then, the princess opened her mouth. “Ah, um, Your Highness Shia.”



“What is it, Princess Carmine? And you may call me Shia.”

“Yes, Miss Shia. I am truly sorry for causing you all this trouble. As a descendant of the royal family who should protect the people of Crevelle, I will definitely repay you for this kindness.”

Princess Carmine touched the bracelet of woven leather wrapped around her right arm. Within it, a flat gem gave off a purple shine.

“Do not worry about it, Princess Carmine,” Shia replied to her counterpart in a friendly manner. “Let’s talk again after everything settles down.”

Suddenly, screams could be heard coming from outside the small shrine. “Enemy attack! I-It’s a big army!”

“They’re here already?”

Shia stood up and bowed briefly to King Crevelle, the queen, and Princess Carmin before leaping out of the shrine. There, the fishkin soldiers were shouting about an enemy attack and discussing the unprecedented scale of the charge.

As Shia pulled on her horse’s reins to get it out of the line, a deerkin with magnificent horns ran up to her.

“Vice-Captain Rasu, what’s the situation?”

“According to the scout’s report, there are around twenty thousand enemies, Your Highness! They will catch up to us in another hour.”

“Twenty thousand? They’re really going all out. I guess they’ve decided that this is a critical juncture for them.” Shia grinned, baring her canine teeth.

“This is no laughing matter. Captain Rudo says that we should at least retreat by ourselves.”

“Hmph, that’s fine. But we’ve gone to great lengths to persuade the royal family and caused the people a great deal of suffering. Can we really let that amount to nothing?”

Most of the people of the Kingdom of Crevelle were walking on foot. Though not impossible, with this much distance to cover, the people would not stand a chance of escaping no matter how hard they ran if the enemy was not stopped.

On the other hand, if they were abandoned here, all two hundred thousand refugees, including the royal family, would be massacred.

“A messenger from the advance unit sent to the fortress city of Carlo has just arrived. They’ve begun bringing in soldiers, supplies, and food. I believe we should retreat there, Princess Shia.”

“Then tell the messenger to dispatch their troops immediately, protect the royal family and people of Crevelle, and help them withdraw to the fortified city of Carlo. We can hold out for two days.”

“Pardon my insolence, but I fear that would be reckless. Please rethink your plan.”

“I shall not. If the Crevelle royal family falls, there will be no future for me now that we’ve formed an alliance.”

Ignoring Vice-Captain Rasu’s concerns, Shia jumped on her horse and pulled on the reins, sending it into a trot.

Rasu ran side by side with the trotting horse. “Huh? An alliance?”

“We formed one just now.”

“Once again, doing things all at your own initiative. His Majesty will be furious with you all over again.”

Before long, the two of them reached a wetland about a hundred meters wide and surrounded by forests on both sides. There, two thousand beastkin were scattered in waiting for Shia. When they looked at their leader’s face, they gave her a look of resignation and understanding.

“There are around twenty thousand enemies on their way, but the path we must take remains unchanged. So I ask you, is there anyone who thinks that I have no power to carry out my duties as commander? If so, there is no need to hold back. You may leave at once.”

At her words, not a single one of the two thousand beastkin nodded. They knew that the Beast Princess would only say such things if she was prepared to fight with her life on the line.

She had done the same when she had captured the Pontiff of Daemonism. At

that time, hundreds of her companions had ended up losing their lives, but the Beast Princess had said that their deaths “became the cornerstone of her authority.” She did not take the sacrifices of her allies lightly, but neither did she let the fear of death stop her.

The soldiers of the beastkin corps silently gripped their weapons, realizing that this was where they would risk their lives.

“The soldiers of Crevelle also said that they would fight with us. Let us do everything in our power.” Captain Rudo spoke in a booming voice so that everyone could hear his words. It sounded as if he was talking to the entire Crevelle army.

“That’s reassuring, at least. Now, let’s set up camp. Mage squad, build a defensive barrier. All we have to do now is buy some time.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the mage squad members all shouted. They then dug into the swamp mud with their earth magic, piled it up about five meters high, and created a number of defensive walls with countless sharp, conical pillars facing the enemy. They then shot ice magic to freeze the moisture in the barrier and reinforce it, repeating this action several times as they moved backward.

These ice barriers were not meant to defeat the enemy, but rather to prevent them from approaching the main wall and to reduce their physical strength if they tried to push through by force. Another aim of stacking many layers of defensive walls was to block the movement of enemies and disperse them so that they could not attack in groups.

Finally, a high defensive wall was built. It stood about ten meters tall, one hundred meters wide—the entire width of the wetland—and about five meters deep. This defensive wall had a pathway atop it similar to those found on the outer walls of fortresses and served as the final line of defense. Shia, the beastkin corps, and the fishkin soldiers who had rushed to help left about a thousand soldiers behind and went up to the pathway.

About thirty minutes had passed when the enemy began to appear through the first rows of barriers.

“Already here, huh? Looks like they’re energetic. Archers, take up positions!”

Shia fixed her gaze on the approaching herd of monsters. At the head of the group were daemonic incarnations that had been transformed from humans, including those with frog heads growing out of human bodies and those with human heads implanted on salamander bodies. In the back, there were monsters such as lizardmen and giant crab monsters that moved easily through the swamp.

“You know what to do! Aim for the legs and eyes!”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The archers served as the middle guard in battles between small groups, but they could also serve as the vanguard when facing off against medium-and large-sized groups. The beastkin, proud of their physical strength, their beefy arms thicker than their heads and their backs broad, drew their rigid shortbows fitted with the arrows they had received from the Crevelle royal family as far as they could, causing their muscles to bulge. Just as the enemy ran up to the first barrier, “Loose!” Under Shia’s command, five hundred arrows were released all at once.

Normally, shortbows were not suitable for long-distance sniping, but the beastkin used their outstanding dexterity and power to shoot them from afar and at high speed, even when shooting horizontally.

The five hundred arrows were shot down diagonally. They rained down on the approaching enemies, piercing the monsters’ skulls and crushing their knees.

“Gwaurgh!”

“Gwaurgh!”

“Gwaurgh!”

The daemonic incarnations running at the front of the formation screamed and collapsed. After that, the daemonic incarnations and monsters behind them rushed in. When they stumbled over their fallen companions, the beastkin archers loosed another volley of arrows, and then a third, killing them one after another.

“Mage squad, attack with ice or lightning! Whatever you do, don’t use fire!” Shia instructed while the archers continued to shoot their arrows.

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The mage squad let out volleys of ice magic, freezing the monsters’ feet together with the swamp. In addition, lightning magic ran through the moisture of the swamp and the slime on the monsters’ bodies, increasing the damage it dealt. The reason for not using fire magic was that it would be blocked by the slime and could melt the reinforcement of the defense wall.

However, perhaps because the beastkin were only trying to stall for time, their enemy gradually closed the distance. Several minutes later, they had climbed over the first defensive wall and were approaching the second. Were that to be crossed, all that would be left was close combat in front of the final defensive wall.

“As expected, there are too many of them,” Shia murmured to herself as she saw the first of the monsters cross the second line of barriers and reach theirs. She then looked behind her, where she could still see the backs of the Crevelle people. Her face took on a bitter expression.

Just then, Rei, a lightly dressed foxkin serving as the commander of the scouting unit, came running up to her.

“Twenty thousand troops are approaching through the forest from the right wing and the front left wing of the main camp!”

“What?!” Shia shouted. “Isn’t this the whole army?!”

Hearing this, Vice-Captain Rasu was startled and looked back at Shia, who had already engaged the first wave of daemoninc incarnations that had crossed the parapets. To the left and right of her, a force of spear-wielding beastkin and fishkin was deployed to prevent the hordes of monsters from climbing over the final barrier.

“This is bad!”

“Vice-Captain Rasu!”

Rasu ran off before hearing all of Rei’s report. No matter how brave the beastkin corps was, fighting against that number of opponents was too much for just one person. Shia could not stay in such a place.

All at once, the daemonic incarnations with the lower bodies of frogs jumped over the barrier, knocking down the vanguard with their momentum before landing on the pathway.

Shia struck the attacking monsters, and when she stepped back, she tore off the head of a monster that was about to bite her. Another monster stepped up to fill its place, however. This one was a daemonic incarnation that had transformed into a giant salamander head with a human head attached to it.

“Watch out, Princess!”

Rasu jumped on Shia and pushed her down as he covered her body. The daemonic incarnation’s wide maw yawned wide and gnawed on his shoulder.

“Gah!”

Vice-Captain Rasu’s upper body was chomped down by the monster. Above its mouth, the human head wore a nasty grin.

“You bastard!”

Seeing this, Captain Rudo wavered for a moment as though he was surrounded by haze. He swung his hammer at an unbelievable speed, gouging out both the salamander and the human heads in a single swing. He kept swinging, crushing the surrounding daemonic incarnations one after another.

Rasu, however, who was helped up by an unharmed Shia, summoned the last of his strength. He raised his voice and belted out his command. “All units! Protect Princess Shia and withdraw to the fortress!”

“Rasu!”

Tears welled up in Shia’s eyes as she looked down at Rasu, lying limp in her arms, his eyes open.

“Your order, please, Your Highness! This barrier will no longer hold!” Captain Rudo, standing between the two and their approaching enemy, shouted.

Rasu heard this voice like a distant thunderclap. Though he could hear it, it sounded as if it were coming from somewhere far off. In other words, his whole body was numb, and his mind and vision were growing cloudy. He willed himself to stay alive, but he also believed that if he gave his life for Shia, he

would die with no regrets.

“Don’t die, Princess. Augh, aaaugh?!”

Hearing Rasu’s faint whisper, Shia’s eyes widened as she watched his horribly scarred body slowly regenerate. However, the regenerating body was completely hairless, unlike a beastkin, and it was nothing but abnormal black flesh.

“I’m sorry. I’ll free you from your suffering.”

With tears in her eyes, Shia reached for her hip and drew her dagger. She thought that she would rather put an end to him herself than let him be reborn in a hideous, unwanted form.

*BZZZT! BZZZT! BZZZT!*

As the sun quickly faded, there was a deep rumbling sound, like something was falling to the earth from the sky. The sound alone made the ground shake.

An innumerable number of huge enemies were flying in. Shia reflexively looked up at the sky, and for a moment, she was so frightened that she forgot about the monsters surrounding her and the danger her own life was in.

“Gichigichi!”

The horde of monsters making that noise looked like a rain cloud at first. A rain cloud moving at great speed from the east where the Crevelle people had fled. But as it approached, it turned out to be a gigantic swarm of bees. The rumbling sound was the batting of their wings. The grating noise produced by their large jaws rubbing together sounded like metal scraping against metal.

All at once, the gigantic swarm of bees descended at a tremendous speed like a sideways rain.

“M-Monsters!”

“What are they?!”

“It’s the end of the world!”

As the beastkin continued fighting the monsters, Shia could hear the cries of her men.

“Ha ha. Does this mean that my trial is not yet over? Temi, you senile old fool.”

Shia cursed Temi, the court astrologer who had not made any mention of the fact that this awaited her. It was then that she noticed the massive griffin flying out in front of the swarm of bees.





# Side Story 1: Teomenia, Consumed by Black Flames

In the center of Teomenia, the religious capital of Elmahl, was a man-made hill with a church built atop it, overlooking the city made of stone. No one could have possibly known that on this day, that very city would be engulfed in pitch-black flames.

\* \* \*

The “oracle room” located in the back of the church was an empty, windowless room with a high ceiling and only a single door leading into the antechamber. In this room was an old stone platform, on which lay an old man in the white robes worn by high-ranking priests. If one were to take a closer look at the body of the old man, they would find that the necklace he wore emitted a dull, golden glow that stood out against the whiteness of his clothes. On closer inspection, one could see that his body was floating a few centimeters above the platform.

The elderly figure was none other than Istahl Kumes, who was over eighty years old and still served as the Great Pope of the Church of Elmea, a religion with churches located all over the world.

Before long, the Great Pope’s body gradually began to emit light. With each breath, the light increased and his body lifted farther off the platform. By the time he was several meters above it, his breathing had nearly stopped and the intensity of the light had reached its peak. After a while, however, the light gradually subsided and his body slowly began to descend.

Upon his return to the platform, the Great Pope’s breathing normalized. He let out a deep breath and opened his eyes.

“Finally... The time has come,” he mumbled, his lips curving into a smile before he stepped down from the platform and headed toward the room’s lone door. His movements were unsteady, befitting his age. As soon as the door opened, the bishops and archbishops waiting in the antechamber surrounded him.

The Church of Elmea was the only organization that could directly receive information about future events in the world, which came in the form of oracles from God of Creation Elmea, the creator and operator of the world. Naturally, that information would affect the policies of every nation and directly lead to changes in people's lives. As a result, its impact on the world would be far greater than any the Empires of Giamut and Baukis, the leading nations of the Five Continent Alliance, could have. Since oracles could only be received by the Great Pope, the head of the Church, the highest-ranking members gathered to discuss the contents of the oracle as it was imparted to them the same day it was received.

And yet, this oracle was so sudden that no notice had come as part of the previous one. That oracle, which had been sent immediately after the new year, had only contained an announcement explaining the purpose of the launch of a class promotion dungeon and a statement that the details of the dungeon would be communicated before it opened in April. The previous evening, First Angel Lapt had told the Great Pope that an oracle would be sent today. Assuming that relatively important information would be conveyed, Church officials ranked bishop and higher had been summoned in haste.

"Thank you for your hard work. How was it, Great Pope?"

"This was quite a sudden oracle, one for which no prior warning had been given. Was the message of great importance?"

"Did Lord Elmea bestow upon you a difficult task?"

The priests seemed uneasy when they noticed that the Great Pope had a solemn look on his face.

"Hmm. I've been particularly busy as of late, but it seems like those days have finally come to an end. I suppose I'll be able to relax before Makkaron has a chance to." Makkaron was the name of the Great Pope's personal friend, the guildmaster general of the Adventurer's Guild.

"What kind of oracle was given to you?!"

Ignoring the archbishop's grave expression, the Great Pope crossed the antechamber and entered the adjacent conference room, where a long table was set up with several chairs around it. There were three stenographers sitting

at the table near the entrance, who greeted him. The pope, though tottering, took his seat on the other side of the table by himself, and the archbishops entered the conference room immediately thereafter. As they hurried to their seats, the stenographers placed inkwells next to the parchments spread out in front of them, took their quills in hand, and readied themselves to transcribe. Once they were ready, the Great Pope opened his mouth.

“A youth in gold will rush in from the heavens, bringing with him the light of hope. Raise your voice, for the coming age is dazzling and filled with hope.”

The archbishops blinked their eyes as the Great Pope closed his mouth.

“I-Is that all?” One of the bishops, who was leaning over the table and listening intently, spoke in a slightly bewildered tone. The Great Pope looked around at the other bishops to see that they all had the same expression on their faces. All three of the stenographers looked up from their sheets of parchment, seemingly waiting for his next words.

“That’s correct. The news from the oracle was sudden, and though the message was short, I believe this matter to be more important than most. In fact, I think it means that a new era has begun; it’s time for a young person to lead the Church instead of an old man such as myself.”

“I see. That’s certainly one interpretation.” A relatively young bishop nodded.

The wording of oracles varied from one to the next, with some giving information about specific times and places while others were vague in details and used highly abstract language. Many priests nodded when the Great Pope said that he considered the words “youth” and “coming age” to indicate the end of the current era, in which Great Pope Istahl led the Church, and the birth of a new pope.

“It’s been twenty years since I assumed the role of pope, and thirty more since I became the Great Pope. I have done enough. I’ve been thinking that it’s time I entrust the future to someone younger.”

“But is there anyone currently with the Church who can serve as the pope? There has not been another Saint King yet, and a Saintess is no substitute for the Great Pope.”

Within the Church of Elmea, a Talent was considered a miracle brought about by the God of Creation. In order to become a bishop who led the believers as the head of a regional church, having one was considered essential. This was especially true of those who would sit on the papal seat as the leader of all members of the religion. For that role, the four-star Talent of Saint King was a requirement.

“This is likely what the class promotion dungeon is for. Some will complete their training there and become Saint Kings. Hmm? Wasn’t a man called Allen, who conquered the Rank S dungeon, comrades with a man who holds the Saint King Talent?” Though the Great Pope sounded optimistic, as he spoke, a slightly bitter look appeared on his face. At around the same time the adventurer named Allen had conquered the Rank S dungeon, the Church had encountered a rather troublesome situation it had never dealt with before.

The Church had once received an oracle from the God of Creation about a Talent called “Summoner.” The reason for this oracle had been that Summoner was an unprecedented Talent created when Allen was born into this world and the Great Pope needed to know the details of it. Recently, however, those details had been shared with the Five Continent Alliance. Every country that was part of the Alliance had contacted the Church of Elmea, asking that all the information it had be disclosed. They had all thought that they would find out what kind of Talent the first person to conquer the Rank S dungeon had and that the Church of Elmea would have received the details about it from the God of Creation. The Empire of Baukis, among others, had even used high-speed magic ships to send over a dozen imperial envoys.

In order to meet their demands, it had been necessary to search for documents that contained the details of past oracles, and as a result, the archives had been effectively ransacked. That had all occurred just a few days prior, and Church officials had finally been relieved of this painstaking process.

“I’m curious about the word ‘rush.’ It seems to indicate a sense of urgency and can be interpreted as a bad omen.”

Just as one of the bishops was about to express his opinion on the details of the oracle, a loud *bang* filled the room as the door to the meeting room was violently thrown open. Through it entered an out-of-breath man in his forties—

Krympton Dampla, an attractive man dressed in the robes of a cardinal who served as secretary to the Great Pope. He hurried over the moment he spotted his superior.

“I’ve been looking all over for you, Great Pope!”

“Ah, I apologize for all the trouble. Last night, I was suddenly told that there would be an oracle, but I suppose no one was able to get in touch with you due to today’s preparations.”

“Indeed. The time for the execution of Gushara, the Pontiff of Daemonism, is approaching. Please begin your preparations.”

“I see...” The Great Pope’s reply showed a hint of hesitation, though the cardinal did not seem to notice and merely continued to talk.

“As planned, once the burning ceremony is over, I will have you come to the square and tell the assembled followers of Daemonism the truth.”

“W-Wait!” the Great Pope interjected.

“Is something the matter?”

“I would like to give Gushara one more chance at reformation. What he did is by no means forgivable, but if it was done out of a desire to save those who were suffering and he now regrets his deeds from the bottom of his heart...”

“Why now? Not only did he call himself a messenger of God and mislead the masses, but he also worked with the upper echelons of Daemonism to rouse some believers into committing horrific acts of brutality. His actions are already clear in the eyes of God.” The cardinal’s face reddened with anger, perhaps remembering what had been revealed in the trial. “If we release the person who ordered such barbaric acts into the wild, it will only incite the anger of the people, and there is no guarantee that no one will come forward to punish us, even soiling their own hands. Wars will break out once more, blood will be shed, and innumerable crimes will be committed. By punishing those who perpetrate such acts, we can prevent unnecessary conflicts and protect the good people of the world. This is to stop him from carrying out further barbarism. While I detest admitting it, is this not, in a sense, our last act of kindness toward Gushara?”

“I know. I know that very well. But I think offering this chance in front of those who were spared by him may allow him to rehabilitate. That’s what I want to believe.” The Great Pope gazed upon the cardinal with a look of conviction.

“Understood,” the cardinal replied, nodding reluctantly. “If Your Greatness wishes it, then I shall review the process surrounding the execution.”

With that, the cardinal and the Great Pope left the church. Descending the long stairs from the top of the hill and making their way to the central plaza, where the execution was to take place, the cardinal informed everyone through the holy soldiers that there would be changes to the burning ceremony.

Eventually, when they had made it halfway down the stairs, the Great Pope could see the square below. Countless people had gathered there, their bodies pressing up against both one another and the fence set up around the square to keep them out of the execution site. At the end of the stairs, the holy soldiers acted as a human barrier, pushing aside the crowd and making way for the Great Pope and the cardinal to enter the plaza.

A holy soldier who acted as a messenger between the cardinal and those at the execution site went up and down the stairs three times before the Great Pope reached the bottom of them. By that time, the crowd had spotted the Great Pope and the cardinal, and they began to raise their voices.

“Please give divine punishment to the leader of the evil cultists!”

“What a generous end he has been granted!”

“Lord Gushara saved us all!”

In the crowd, there were members of both the Church of Elmea and the Church of Gushara. Those who believed in Elmea were excitedly awaiting the burning of Gushara Selbirohl, the Pontiff of Daemonism whose actions had been brought to light during the trial, while the followers of Gushara hoped to save his life. Judging by the volume of their pleas, it seemed that many of the latter had gathered in the plaza. This was exactly what the Church of Elmea had wanted, in the hopes that Gushara’s execution would cause those who believed in Daemonism, otherwise known as the Church of Gushara, to abandon his teachings.

Taking in all the voices and gazes coming from the plaza, the Great Pope stood with the cardinal in front of the path leading into it, which was flanked by holy soldiers.

“Cardinal, please wait here.”

“Certainly.”

The Great Pope alone made his way alone to the square where the execution would take place. Opposing opinions were thrown at him from both sides, but he moved forward slowly, listening to each of them.

Upon entering the plaza, he was assailed by voices from literally every direction, and he could no longer make out the meaning of every word. As he drew closer to the stake in the center of the square, he began to feel as if he were walking through a heavy rain, listening to the sound of each drop hitting the ground.

A thick pillar jutted out from the execution stand, which had been made by stacking a large amount of straw and firewood together. A man wearing a tattered purple robe was tied up and hanging from the pillar, his head limp. Fires were lit on either side of the platform, each of which was attended to by a priest who was taking up the role of an executioner. They seemed to have heard the cardinal’s orders to change the execution procedure and were just watching the Great Pope’s approach.

Eventually, when he arrived in front of the stake, the Great Pope faced the bound man and called out to him in a loud voice that belied his age. “Gushara! I’d like to speak with you!”

His voice was clearly audible over the roar of the crowd, and the moment it was heard, all of the onlookers fell silent. In the center of the silent plaza, the man tied to the pillar on the execution stand, Gushara, slowly raised his head. The Great Pope grimaced as he noticed several bloodstains on the collar of his robe. Were they from when he was captured by the Beast Princess? Or was he treated roughly by the priests during his trial?

“Why, if it isn’t Great Pope Istahl, the Living Miracle. Heh, do you need something from me?” Gushara seemed to be laughing, his face still distorted by scabs and swelling.



“Is this how you want it to end?”

“I wonder... But alas, this is undoubtedly the end. This farce will be over soon enough, yes?”

“If you are willing to correct the course of those who have repented their past actions and believe you to be a messenger of God, we shall not take your life. What say you?”

“Correct my ways? My, that’s quite a biased statement. How typical of you.”

“Are you saying that what you have done and what you have caused those who believe in you to do is right?”

“I referred to myself as a god for the sake of those you abandoned. Can’t you hear their voices as we speak?”

The Great Pope fell silent for a moment at Gushara’s words. He could hardly hear precise words over the roar of the crowd.

“You promised free salvation,” he said.

“There are people so deep in poverty that they cannot afford to spend even a single silver coin. Don’t tell me that you’re unaware of this. And yet, despite knowing, I’m sure you still demand compensation from those who suffer.”

“The role of the church is to lead people down the right path,” the Great Pope said as if he were speaking to himself. “And the right path is to keep your heart ready to take on the Trials of the Gods and to pay the price for your actions. Of course, we’re no exception. There is a cost to the maintenance of our organization.”

The Great Pope recalled the information he learned about what Gushara and his followers had been doing since the emergence of Daemonism and the conclusion of the recent trial. “Besides, no matter how much you claim that you’re trying to save people, if you force them to commit such savage acts, will you not simply create new suffering? How will they be spared?”

The Church of Gushara did not ask for compensation when using recovery magic on its followers. This starkly contrasted to the Church of Elmea, which required at least one silver coin as compensation.

The doctrine of the Church of Elmea was to face the Trials of the Gods given by Elmea, the God of Creation. Just as living things had to sacrifice the lives of others in order to obtain sustenance, and just as humans had to cultivate the earth and grow trees in order to obtain sustenance, all living things had to pay a price in pursuit of what they sought. These were the Trials of the Gods, and facing them meant that all actions seeking results, including salvation from others, had to be paid for by the person who sought them.

In accordance with that, the Church required those who came to it in search of salvation to pay a price. Those who were unable to do so were considered incapable of facing the Trials of the Gods and were not treated as believers. This was a harsh and difficult situation for anyone living in poverty; suffering from disaster, disease, or famine; unable to work due to having a weak body; or with no one to help them. And so, some of them began to cling to the Church of Gushara.

By simply drinking some holy water as part of their initiation ritual, they were able to heal their wounds, recover from illness, receive food, and return to their daily lives with renewed vigor without paying a single coin. The truths they uttered spread by word of mouth, and people who were struggling to make ends meet continuously threw themselves into the arms of the Church of Gushara.

However, free salvation did not seem like a realistic doctrine and begged several questions. Particularly for the Church of Elmea, which believed that deeds required compensation in order to be performed, that lack of clarity could not be overlooked. So, as the Church of Gushara grew, the Church of Elmea began to independently investigate its movements.

What they revealed was a very real and frightening truth. Daemonism incited the poorest of its followers to attack the homes of wealthy people and aristocrats, the warehouses of merchant companies, and traveling merchant caravans, from which they would steal money and goods. Additionally, wealthy people who became believers were made to donate large sums and had them use evil methods to scrape together money to keep making those donations.

The children of aristocrats who had lost both their families and their homes to fires and had nowhere else to go even though they had survived, the

unemployed and their families who had fallen into homelessness after the companies they had worked for dissolved, wealthy people who wanted to continue making donations, farmers who had lost their arable land due to it being forcibly purchased, and many others who had joined the faith out of reliance on its free salvation were made to contribute to its expansion.

After some time, the Church of Elmea had been contacted by the Beast Princess of Albahal, who then went about arresting the leader of Daemonism.

In the trial held after the pontiff's arrest, it was found that some of the formerly wealthy followers of Daemonism who had once been victims to the Church of Gushara's evil deeds, had been forced to steal from the wealthy. These victims were fed convenient lies so that they would not catch on to the fact that they were in this situation precisely because of followers of Daemonism. In the process of comparing the testimonies obtained from the believers, it was discovered that the pontiff had told the children of the aristocrats that their homes had been burned down by another aristocrat who secretly harbored a grudge. Meanwhile, those who had lost their jobs and arable land were told that the things that had happened to them were the acts of a rich man working in the shadows. All of these people were urged to bring about justice and collect funds in exchange for the offer of free salvation.

"Of course, it may be your desire to save the poor that caused them to carry out such barbaric acts. In that case, you should be able to tell your followers that the end does not justify the means. You have the chance right here and now to—"

"'Barbaric acts,' you say? Heh heh." Gushara's mocking voice interrupted the Great Pope. "Are they not what you refer to as a Trial of the Gods, Great Pope?"

The Great Pope furrowed his white brows. "Hmm? What are you trying to say?"

"With the appearance of the Demon Lord, fear spread throughout the world. Could that not be considered a Trial of the Gods as well? If so, then haven't you been avoiding this Trial, simply listening to Elmea's words for fifty years from the safety of your hilltop? Did many believers not shed their blood and squander their fleeting lives in your place because of the Demon Lord Army?"

Did your former comrades not do the same?”

“That is certainly the case. Thus, while I am ashamed of myself for living in leisure, I must live with that guilt for years to come and trust that I can still spare many lives by conveying Lord Elmea’s words to the people. *That* is the price that I must pay.”

The Great Pope answered Gushara’s question with conviction. He had come up with his own answer to the repeated tragedies in which priests and saints who believed in Elmea had lost their lives to the Demon Lord Army, which was exactly what had happened to many of his former companions.

“Is that so? Keh heh heh.”

“What are you laughing at?” the pope asked.

“Oh, I just thought that it was a pity. Since you’ve spent so much time earnestly thinking about Trials of the Gods, I could’ve prepared a special one for you...if you can survive *this!*”

“What are you on about? Have you gone mad?” For the first time, the Great Pope felt uneasy. He realized that he had gravely misunderstood something; he was not sure about what yet, but the dreadful thudding of his heart was telling.

“Oh, no, I’m quite sane. Everything has gone as planned. I was caught by those filthy beastkin, I attended your silly trial without any complaints, and I pretended to be a foolish, miserable human being all for this very day.”

“What are you saying?”

“Everything was so that my plan would reach fruition today. That’s what I’m saying.”

As Gushara spoke, something fell onto the platform from inside the tattered robe he was wearing. A dull, metallic sound echoed through the silent plaza as the item rolled off the platform and onto the ground. The Great Pope looked down in shock and saw the sooty bottom of a large silver tray. There was no way that the person tied to the stake could have had such a thing.

“This is the divine vessel of Freyja, the Goddess of Fire.”

Hearing Gushara’s words, the Great Pope felt the color drain from his entire

body.

“What?”

“Thank you, Great Pope. I trusted that you would surely gather for me the fools who believed that I was God’s messenger!”

The Great Pope looked up and saw that Gushara’s face was no longer that of a human.

“You fiend!” the Great Pope shouted. He moved backward with agility that was unimaginable compared to his previous stumbling movements, distancing himself from the stake.

Immediately afterward, flames as black as night overflowed from the silver tray. They quickly spread across the stone pavement of the plaza, where there was nothing to burn, and spread not only to the execution stand but also to the torches and the holy soldiers acting as executioners who were standing next to them.

“Auuugh!” the two holy soldiers screamed as they burned up and were turned into dark cinders.

Confusion erupted in the crowd. The throngs of people tried to flee the area before the slowly spreading pitch-black flames could reach them, but they were blocked by each other from all sides, hindering their movements. They pushed and shoved each other, flailing wildly, but that only further slowed them down.

All the while, the ominous, pitch-black flames gradually spread. When the fire finally came into contact with the fence surrounding the plaza, the Great Pope cried out, encompassing the square with a golden light.

“Away with the wicked! Sanctuary Road!”

“Gwaaauuugh!” Gushara’s scream could be heard through the blaze.

“I refuse to let you do as you please, Gushara!” the Great Pope roared from several meters above the ground.

The crowd looked toward where the voice had come from. There, they saw the light of the Extra Skill Sanctuary Road pouring out in all directions from the body of the Great Pope, who was floating in the air and surrounded by golden

light. It enveloped the silver tray, instantly extinguishing the pitch-black flames.

As some turned to face the screaming Gushara, the fire surrounding the stake went out and the body of the man, still tied to the stake, was engulfed in pale-blue flames. The crowd witnessed how the wounds they had sustained during the chaos were healed in the blink of an eye by the golden light emitted by the Great Pope, and they moved slowly, fearfully, away from the square.

“O Great Pope! You truly embody the miracles of the great Lord Elmea!” the cardinal, who was trying to protect the people around him by casting a defensive wall spell, cried out.

“Heh heh heh. What wonderful power. I expected nothing less from the Living Miracle. But the power of man is nothing before the power of God!”

Despite the pale flames burning him, Gushara laughed fearlessly, freed himself from his restraints, and descended from the pillar sitting atop the pyre. His tattered robes had already burned off, exposing his pale skin. He stood on his tiptoes and lacked heels; he had long, multijointed fingers; and his skin looked slimy to the touch despite being bone dry. Though he resembled a human, it was clear that he was anything but.

“A monster? No, a Demonic Deity.”

While the Great Pope was busy regretting that he had not realized who his opponent really was before seeing his true form, Gushara placed his hand over the silver tray. The pitch-black flames, which had nearly been snuffed out, rekindled, and like before, spread to the surrounding area. As they did, they pushed away the golden light of the Sanctuary Road.

The Great Pope touched the necklace that hung from his neck. “Lord Elmea, please lend me your strength!” As he prayed and released the necklace’s power, the golden light of the Sanctuary Road regained its power and again drove back the flames.

“Ah, so you had Elmea’s miracle. But you should know that this is only a fraction of God’s power!”

The flames increased in strength, repelling the golden light and spreading out once again. Seeing this, the Great Pope knew that he had been defeated.

“Cardinal!” The Great Pope, without taking his eyes off Gushara, called out to the cardinal, who was outside the fence behind him. “Assist everyone in escaping. We can’t hold this place any longer.”

It was then that the realization hit the pope.

“I-I see... I understand now...” he muttered.

The cardinal deployed his defensive magic to protect the crowd from the approaching pitch-black flames. The golden light was suppressing them, but he could see that it was slowly losing ground. He knew that he had to retreat, but refused to abandon the Great Pope, and had put off making his decision. However, when the pope called for him, the cardinal turned toward the voice.

“Great Pope!” the cardinal cried out in despair as he saw the golden light gradually dimming and the Great Pope’s floating body slowly descending.

“Cardinal, raise your voice!” The cardinal stared back blankly for a moment as the Great Pope began to speak. “Remember the oracle given to us by Lord Elmea! Send a distress signal to the world! When you do so, a youth in gold will rush in from the heavens, bringing with him the light of hope.”

The Great Pope, who was now nearly touching the pitch-black flames burning on the ground, announced this loudly, helping the cardinal steel his resolve.

“Run, everyone! Flee to Neel!”

Following the cardinal’s instructions, the priests and holy soldiers who were present at the scene began to retreat. Most of the crowd had already started to move from the square to the streets, but some mysteriously remained; there were no means to save them for now. Escaping from Teomenia was likely to cause even more chaos, and now the only thing left to think about was getting as many people as possible out of the city safely. Fortunately, including the cardinal and some of the priests, there were people with Talents among the holy soldiers. He believed that the people could at least flee to the nearest city, Neel.

“Farewell, Great Pope.”

Hearing this sobbing cardinal’s voice behind him, the Great Pope smiled with satisfaction.

Gushara smirked. “Oh dear, they’re running away. How foolish you are, Great Pope, to rejoice at being abandoned by your subordinates.”

“Foolish? Ah, perhaps I am... But it’s precisely because I am such a fool that I can stay here and keep hope alive. Makkaron, it looks like I’ll be going first.”

The golden light surrounding the Great Pope’s body then disappeared. He fell into the dark blaze that had overtaken the plaza and dropped to his knees. In the next moment, the pitch-black flames climbed up his white robe and consumed him.

As if that were some sort of signal, the pitch-black flames flared up, enveloping everything that remained in the plaza.

“Yaaah!”

As the crowd fled, those who had chosen to stay shouted in unison. Their cry was not one of anguish or despair, but of joy. They were the leaders of the Church of Gushara. Because of their hatred of the Elmean religion, they had allowed themselves to be complicit in Gushara’s actions, and were even aware of his true identity.

The pitch-black flames activated the true effect of the holy water that permeated their bodies with its hideous magical power, transforming them into monsters—daemonic incarnations.

Gushara looked up at the clear sky and reported to the absent Demon Lord. “I, Demonic Deity Gushara, have fulfilled one of the conditions of the Demon Lord’s plan. Let us move on to the next stage!”

He turned his back on the city of Teomenia, which was gradually being engulfed in pitch-black flames, and walked up the long stairs leading to the church. Behind him, the mysterious necklace containing the miracle of the God of Creation fell from the chest of the Great Pope, who had been turned into a lump of charcoal in the shape of a human. A clear metallic sound rang out as it landed on the stone pavement of the plaza.



## Side Story 2: Judgment of the Goddess of Arbitration, Falnemes

A hundred years prior to the birth of Allen and the rest of his friends, there was a country located on the continent of Galiat, where the Union was located, known as the Zenitex Merchant Kingdom. The country, which worshipped Merchant God Zehni, became a hot spot for commerce thanks to its position on flat land along a river. It went unnoticed that a cadre of money-hungry merchants eventually absorbed so much wealth that they managed to buy noble titles and wormed their way into control of the government.

One of those money-hungry merchants was a man named Spachax, who was known as the Merchant King. After expelling the former royals and aristocrats, he changed the name of the country to Zenitex. Then, he expanded the borders of the royal capital and had his mansion built anew on the eastern hill where the royal villas had stood, making it the center of state affairs. The former royal castle was abandoned as a result, and the divide between the rich and the poor grew so extreme that markets and warehouses were the only things in the capital that were not mansions or hovels. The streets were filled with those who were too poor to live in the hovels and had no hope of getting out of such a life. All they could do was gaze up at Spachax's beautiful mansion, so large that it could be mistaken for a castle, and its splendid grounds.

In one room of the mansion were about ten merchants who had been summoned by Merchant King Spachax—a regular occurrence. They were some of the wealthiest merchants in Zenitex. Around the perimeter of the golden statue of Merchant God Zehni, who took the form of a plump, smiling man, they offered up tributes of gold, silver, and jewels. Spachax looked contentedly at the offerings he had collected from the merchants and finally offered a chunk of gold, more precious than his own life, placing it on the altar. He then headed to the right, toward the center of the manor by a wall, where his jewel-encrusted throne sat.

Once he settled into his throne, the wealthy merchants also moved to their own luxurious seats, not forgetting to first kneel before the haughty Merchant King in unison. Their heads were so low that they practically rubbed against the brilliant carpet.

“It is all thanks to the power of the Merchant King that this mercantile nation has been granted the great honor of undertaking the repair work on Teomenia’s church,” one of the merchants said.

Hearing his words, the other merchants nodded, also praising the Merchant King.

“No, no. It’s all thanks to your donations. Besides, when the actual construction starts, you’ll each have a role that you must fulfill. I’m merely a merchant who asked for the favor of Lord Zehni.” Spachax gave a look of pride and arrogantly leaned back into his throne.

Indeed, it was he who had persuaded Elmahl to allow them to work on the church’s renovation. There was no way, he thought, that a mercantile nation could undertake the work without him. Once the construction started, he planned to have the wealthy merchants gathered here offer their goods at a bargain.

“And so, you must not hesitate to donate to Lord Zehni. If you offer up a great donation, he might pay you a visit.”

“I-Is that true?!”

“Of course. I was once like you, but through constant dedication, I was able to get close to Lord Zehni. In any case, how are the preparations for the Union summit going?” Spachax asked, changing the subject.

A summit meeting was held on the Galiatan Continent once a year as a way for the member countries of the Union to gather together. The venue changed every year among the members, and Zenitex Merchant Kingdom was to host the next one.

“Despite repeated notices, not only has the eviction of the area not progressed, but the residents rioted the day before yesterday, and the officials seem to be having a hard time,” a wealthy merchant entrusted with the land

readjustment and establishment of the venue explained.

The candidate site for the venue was once a commercial district centered on the trading of timber, but it had moved following Spachax's expansion of the royal capital's borders. He had abandoned the entire district in the process, and the outraged residents strongly opposed Spachax and his faction for their decisions. This time around, they deliberately refused to be evicted, going so far as to launch a protest movement.

But Spachax only snorted. "Huh? Is that all? Just crush them."

"Sir?" the merchant replied.

"I'm telling you to take out the trash. Why do you think we spent most of the offerings and donations to renovate the church? It was so we could get the Union to approve of slavery at the summit."

Spachax had requested the order to rebuild Teomenia's church to become the country to host this year's summit. Elmahl, the headquarters of the Church of Elmea, which had worshippers all over the world, naturally had a loud voice within the Union. After receiving the recommendation and finally becoming the host country, the only thing left to do was to secretly approach the leaders of other member states and, at the next meeting, add the phrase "each country can allow slavery at its discretion" to the Union Charter. That was the Merchant King's plan.

"Is it just for the sake of these impoverished people that I've been forced to stand still?" Spachax said so angrily that he practically spat the words out.

Seeing that, one of the wealthy merchants hurriedly laughed and followed suit. "W-Well, as always, I'm impressed by your idea, Merchant King. I see that you intend to spread slavery to every nation."

"What are you talking about? If other countries also adopt slavery, wouldn't that prevent us from selling our products cheaply?"

By making good use of slaves, who did not receive wages, the cost of bringing products to market could be kept low, making it possible to sell them at low prices. This was true for crops, stone, lumber, ores, and even processed products. If they could do that, even if there was an expense for shipping, many

countries would buy their exports.

“Many of the member countries of the Union were founded by people who escaped from the Central Continent during the era of the Dreaded Emperor. Even if slavery could be adopted, many countries would not do so. However, that is actually more convenient. They likely think that it will be fine because they won’t employ the policy.”

“I see. You’re truly a brilliant man.”

“You get the picture now, then? Of course, it’s better to have fewer opposing opinions, so we need to at least let our guests enjoy their stay in our country. To that end, we must clear that district and completely rebuild it. Once the church renovation in Teomenia is finished, we should start grading the ground so that we can immediately proceed with the construction.”

“Yessir!”

The wealthy merchants responded in unison, marking the end of their regular meeting for making offerings and reporting to Zehni. After the ten merchants left, the Merchant King remained in his room. Just as he relaxed his shoulders and took a breather, the golden statue of Zehni, surrounded by the offerings on the altar, began to slowly move.

“L-Lord Zehni!”

Spachax hurriedly straightened up as the golden statue of Zehni leaped from the altar in front of him and grew as its feet touched the floor. Spachax tumbled out of his throne and fell to his knees with such force that he almost rubbed his head against the brilliant carpet just like the wealthy merchants had earlier. Zehni, now the size of a human, looked down with satisfaction and spoke.

“You’re making money, I see. That’s excellent, oho.”

“Thanks to Libra, given to us by you, the great Merchant God, everything is going well. Soon, we will be able to start rebuilding Teomenia’s church.”

“That’s most excellent. Being such a dedicated follower, I expect you to pull it off successfully. So, are you preparing for a summit meeting or something of the sort, oho?”

“That’s still in the works. As expected, it’s quite a challenge to work the church and the venue at the same time.” Just as those words left Spachax’s lips, the smile on Zehni’s round face turned into a look of fury.

“How many times must I tell you that time is money before you’ll get it through your thick skull, oho?!”

“I-I’m sorry!” This time, when Spachax prostrated himself, he did rub his head against the carpet; he showed no hint of his status as a great merchant lord. “Then please, I beg of you. Please rethink this plan.”

“How could you be so leisurely?! You have no idea how coldly I’ve been treated among the gods! The renovation of Lord Elmea’s church and the venue for the summit meeting must happen simultaneously! Increase the influence of this nation and show the world that I exist, oho!”

“Th-The world?”

“Of course. What’s with that face? I gave you Libra, which allows you to see the truth of the world. But there are many who cannot handle it and end up destroying themselves. To prevent that from happening, I *can* give you some advice, but that depends on my mood, oho.”

Zehni’s cold words made Spachax shrink even more.

“I-I apologize for my impudence. I’d like to repay you for paying attention to a lowly human like me, who is good at nothing but doing business. I shall begin preparing the venue immediately!” Spachax bowed repeatedly as he spoke.

Looking down at Spachax, a smile returned to Zehni’s round face.

“Hmm, very well. Once that is achieved, we shall shame those who said that we are buying faith. I can practically imagine the looks of frustration on their faces, oho!”

The Merchant God gave a conniving smirk. Then, suddenly, a cold wind blew from behind Zehni. Spachax looked up and saw that there was a wall behind Zehni, and that the window on the wall to Zehni’s left was still closed.

“What’s this?” The Merchant God, who was looking down at Spachax as he muttered, had a look of surprise on his face. “This presence... C-Could it be...?”

*Thwump!*

The next moment, the walls of the mansion were torn open and a beast with long, sharp horns appeared in front of Zehni and Spachax. She had no hair, and her entire body was covered in scales, but her long, slender legs and lean body more closely resembled those of a horse than those of a dragon or lizard.

“Falnemes,” Zehni groaned loudly. The name sounded familiar to Spachax.

“The Goddess of Arbitration? I don’t believe it,” Spachax said.

“That’s right. I am Arbitration Goddess Falnemes.” The horned beast, or rather, Falnemes, the Goddess of Arbitration, introduced herself in a calm, feminine voice. “By order of Creation God Elmea, I have come to judge you, Merchant God Zehni, for your abuse of faith.”

“Eek! Please forgive me!”

The Merchant King watched in shock as Zehni cried out and knelt down with such force that he rubbed his head against the plush rug, just as Spachax had done earlier.

“It is time for judgment,” the Goddess of Arbitration said, pointing the long, sharp horn that protruded from her forehead at the Merchant God and slowly approaching him.

“Witness my power, oho!” Just before her horn reached the Merchant God, who was still lying flat with his head against the carpet, he suddenly stood up and raised one of his hands above his head. “My sacred treasure, give me the strength to crush my enemies, oho!”

*Whoosh!*

A gold coin appeared in Zehni’s raised hand and instantly swelled into a gigantic disc. He grabbed the rim and tried to slam it sideways into the Arbitration Goddess’s horn. However...

“How foolish.” The Arbitration Goddess stepped back faster than Zehni could move, then quickly moved forward again. She made for the giant gold coin that Zehni had swung off target, piercing it—his divine vessel—with her long, sharp horns and skewering his body.

“Gwuagh?!”

While still impaling the groaning Zehni with her horns, the Arbitration Goddess slowly raised her head and lifted the Merchant God’s body almost to the ceiling of the mansion. Then, with a slight shake of her head, she left only the giant gold coin on her horn. Zehni’s golden body slammed against the wall and slid down it, slumping when it touched the floor.

“This is the end.”

“Eeeek! Whatever you do, p-please don’t erase me, oho! I repent!” Zehni’s round face contorted as he begged for his life, but the Arbitration Goddess rose onto her hind legs and slammed her front hoof down on the Merchant God’s head, a grotesque squelch filling the room.

The body of the Merchant God, his head now crushed, turned into a pile of gold coins whose color quickly faded to a dull gray. It turned into dust and disappeared.

“I’ll be taking this.” The Arbitration Goddess muttered to herself and slowly turned to face Spachax. The trembling Spachax’s frightened eyes met the cold gaze of the Arbitration Goddess.

“Please forgive me!” Spachax jumped to his feet and knelt down with such force that his head once again rubbed against the plush rug. “F-For Lord Elmea’s sake, I’ll make the most splendid church, better than any other! S-So please...!”

Falnemes was silent for a while as she looked down at Spachax, who bowed repeatedly.

“Allow me to deliver your words to God of Creation Elmea,” she said before walking out of the mansion through the destroyed wall.

After this encounter, Spachax was so afraid of the Arbitration Goddess that he used Zenitex Merchant Kingdom’s financial and labor powers to an absurd degree to repair the church in Teomenia. The expenses ran sky-high, finally causing a peasant rebellion and civil war to break out. This ultimately led him to lose his title as Merchant King.

\* \* \*

Falnemes returned to the Divine Realm and headed to Elmea's church. When she reached the hall where the God of Creation was waiting, she placed the Merchant God's divine vessel with a hole in it in front of Elmea.

First Angel Merus, who was standing at Elmea's side, watched the situation unfold.

"I have cast judgment on Merchant God Zehni and collected his divine vessel."

After hearing Falnemes's report, Elmea slowly nodded.

"Was the Merchant God out of control this time as well? It seems to be a recurring issue. I hope his successor does well."

Once Elmea had finished speaking, Merus stepped forward and picked up the large gold coin—the Merchant God's divine vessel.

"Thank you, Arbitration Goddess, for your hard work. Please do take a rest..."

Just as Merus was about to offer words of praise, Elmea opened his mouth as if he had remembered something.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Falnemes, there's one more thing I'd like to ask you."

"Whom should I judge?" Falnemes asked matter-of-factly.

"It seems that a Demon Lord has been born among the monsters. However, it seems to be different from usual. Please look into it. Of course, should you find that they are violating my principles, I shall leave it to you to cast judgment."

"With all due respect, Lord Elmea, the Goddess of Arbitration has just returned home. This task is far too—"

"Understood. I shall be off."

Merus tried to voice his objection, but Falnemes had already turned and was leaving the church. Elmea silently watched her go.



## Side Story 3: King of Shura Bask's Craving

Approximately twenty years before Allen was certified as a Rank S adventurer, a man who possessed the four-star Talent "Asura," a part of the Swordsman line, was admitted to the Academy. He showed great promise, but was uncooperative and did not get along well with others, a fact that was often pointed out by his homeroom teacher. After assaulting that very teacher for their harsh criticisms, he left the Academy and became an adventurer.

This man hated interacting with people and spent his days challenging dungeons alone without a party. He quickly improved his skills, and by the time he was in his mid twenties, he was able to defeat a Rank S monster all by himself.

The Adventurer's Guild found this to be sufficient grounds to recognize him as a Rank S adventurer, a title that conferred various rights and privileges that the Guild would accommodate the exercise of. Though this process was quite the arduous task, the goal of bestowing a Rank S title was to make the adventurer, who was able to defeat a Rank S monster by themselves and go against all rules of common sense in terms of power, retain the bare minimum ties to society. They were encouraged to recognize the hope that their power had given to the rest of the world and gain a sense of responsibility.

Guildmaster General Makkaron, who had already become the head of the Adventurer's Guild, was the one to certify the man as such.

"This is your adventurer's ID card. Also, as a Rank S adventurer, your alias will be 'King of Shura.' Is that okay?"

The man did not seem to be listening to Makkaron and was fiddling with the adventurer's ID card he had received. A normal adventurer's ID card had an emblem embossed on it that indicated the rank, but his had an emblem made of gold embedded in it.

"Whoa, it's so shiny and gold," the man remarked. "Does carrying it make you stronger?"

“There’s no such effect,” Makkaron replied. “It’s just proof of your status.”

“What? How boring.”

The man was shirtless, with two leather belts hanging from his shoulders that crossed over his chest. A large sword sheath was fixed to each belt with studs, and he was carrying two large swords on his back. He had a wide belt around his waist with several pouches hanging from it, and into one of them he threw his new adventurer’s ID card.

“Later.”

Just as the man was about to leave the room, Makkaron called out to him.

“You have received a summons to the battlefield from the emperor of Giamut.”

“Again? I’m not interested in—”

“I have heard that some commanders of the Demon Lord Army have valuable items.”

“Huh? Are you serious? Then I guess I’ve gotta take those,” the man replied with a grin.

This smirking man called himself Bask.

\* \* \*

At the time, the Empire of Giamut was unable to withstand the invasion of the Demon Lord Army; its defensive lines were slowly pushed south every year. Even its most well-protected fortresses were not safe, as hundreds of thousands of Rank B or higher monsters would sometimes swarm them, either felling them or forcing them to be abandoned.

Bask was sent to one such fortress. He was too late, however, and it fell before he could reach it.

The soldiers and allied officers who were able to escape encountered Bask as they withdrew to the city south of the fortress. One officer asked him to retreat with them and help defend the city, which was the last stop on the supply route to the fortress, but he merely remarked that he found the idea boring. Instead, he headed to the fortress alone.

For the next three days, the city was shrouded in despair. Its outer wall was over ten meters high, but even that was unlikely to be able to stop the swarm of monsters that had attacked the fortress. Of course, there were some who thought of fleeing the city and moving south along the army's supply route to the previous relay point, but the Demon Lord Army moved far quicker than expected. If any of them were caught, they would certainly be killed.

The soldiers who had escaped the fortress suppressed their fear and continued to keep watch, but in the afternoon of the third day, one of them spotted something approaching the town from the direction of the fortress. Using a scope magic tool, he quickly learned that the lone, slow-moving figure was Bask, who was supposed to have been heading toward the fortress.

"It's Lord Bask! He's alive!"

The officers of the allied forces opened the tightly closed gate and greeted Bask, whose body was covered in dried monster blood.

"I'm so glad you came back alive..."

An allied officer, regretting that he had had no choice but to watch as Bask made his way to the fortress, approached him in tears. But Bask merely passed by him with a troubled look on his face. He dropped what he had been holding in front of the assembled soldiers, and they all froze at the sight.

It was the head of what appeared to be a high-ranking demon. On top of that, it had a clearly horrified look on its face, as if it had been exposed to something terrifying just before its death.

"There was nothing there. This guy had nothing interesting on him. That bastard Makkaron lied to me," Bask grumbled to himself.

However, his complaints were drowned out by the cheers of the surrounding soldiers. Overjoyed by the fact that the Demon Lord Army unit that had occupied the fortress had been destroyed and that they and the city would no longer be attacked, they failed to notice his dissatisfaction.

"You're just as the rumors say, Lord Bask, King of Shura! You've accomplished a splendid feat! Tonight, we celebrate!" an officer exclaimed.

Bask's eyes lit up.

“Yeah? I could go for some good grub. Monster meat tastes like shit.”

Word of Bask having defeated the Demon Lord Army unit that had occupied the fortress spread quickly throughout the city, and the night was much brighter than the one before. More bonfires were lit throughout the city than on the defensive walkways along the tops of the outer walls, food stores that had been secured in anticipation of the siege were opened, and meat and booze were distributed throughout the city.

By far, the most boisterous was the banquet honoring Bask held in the town square. A large plate of grilled meat was placed on a simple table made by resting a wooden board over some barrels of liquor. Bask sat in front of it and ate whatever he could get his hands on, while soldiers and town residents got drunk as they reveled in their newfound freedom. They all enjoyed drinking and eating to their hearts' content as they watched him voraciously chow down.

“Truly, thank you so much, Lord Bask. Please eat as much as you want,” the elderly mayor of the town said while pouring liquor into Bask's mug. He was so overcome with emotion that tears rolled down his cheeks.

Bask nodded silently while chewing on a mouthful of meat, then downed the booze in a single gulp. He did not say a word, partly because his mouth was full, but also because he was not the friendly sort. After all, he did not particularly enjoy being appreciated or praised by others.

In addition to the old man, many other residents came and took turns pouring alcohol into Bask's mug. Bask never responded, as he was busy wolfing down grilled meat and thinking about what he was going to do next.

While he was deciding whether to believe what Guildmaster General Makkaron had told him and stay in the northern fortress for a bit longer, awaiting the new invasion of the Demon Lord Army that would soon arrive, a young, fat officer called out to him.

“Oh, you must be Bask. You've truly done well this time.”

This man was different from the retreating officers Bask had met on his way to the fortress. He staggered toward Bask's table, accompanied by what appeared to be his entourage of soldiers, and stood in front of Bask, spilling alcohol from the wooden mug in his hand. A member of his entourage took a

small barrel used as a chair from a nearby resident and placed it behind the officer. The officer sat down on it and held out his mug for another soldier to fill.

However, Bask simply continued to eat without responding.

“Hey, you! Answer him!” one of the soldiers shouted at him.

“This man here is the heir apparent of Count Buchtan!” another added.

“Now, now,” Officer Buchtan said, trying to calm his men. “I hear Bask is an adventurer. He probably just doesn’t know what manners are.”

“Hmph. You’re annoying,” Bask spat. A bitter look came to his face as he remembered the displeasure of having gotten into a tussle with an aristocratic child and their lackey back at the Academy. Bask, who had no desire for any interpersonal attachments or to have to listen to anyone, particularly disliked nobles.

“In any case, you’ve produced excellent results,” said a drunk Officer Buchtan, getting back on topic. “Would you be interested in serving under me? Once this war is over, I will be taking over as count.”

War was a place for warriors to demonstrate their power. It was also a place for aristocrats, who wanted to show off that they had the financial resources to maintain powerful private armies, to find new potential to further bolster their forces. For soldiers, performing in a manner that attracted the attention of the nobility led to advancement in the ranks; some of the soldiers present looked at Bask with admiration when Officer Buchtan made his offer.

Thus, Bask’s response was something no one could have predicted.

“Not interested,” the King of Shura said curtly.

“Huh? I couldn’t hear you quite well. What did you say?” Officer Buchtan asked.

“I said I’m not interested.”

Officer Buchtan looked at him blankly for a moment and grinned, misunderstanding Bask’s words. “I see. Not satisfied with being a foot soldier, are you? I’ll specially appoint you as my knight guard...”

The noble gulped and quickly fell silent when he was met with Bask's glare.

"Get lost," Bask spat. "You're making the food taste bad."

His words made silence settle in on the rowdy celebration.

"Wh-What did you say?!" Officer Buchtan shouted.

In response to Officer Buchtan's sudden shout, one of the soldiers standing behind shouted out as well. "H-How dare you use that tone toward Master Buchtan!"

He pulled out the sword from his waist and tried to stab Bask in the chest. It pierced only the wooden mug that Bask held up in front. The King of Shura twisted his wrist. The sword, unable to withstand the swift and powerful movement, snapped in two with a dull metallic sound.

"Hmph. Weaklings." Bask stood up and tossed the mug aside, the sword still piercing through it.

*SHINK!*

Quick as a flash, Bask used one of the large swords on his back to slash at the attacking soldier, slicing him, table and all.

"What?!"

Everyone present was shocked and stiffened up for a moment.

"Tch! Have you gone crazy, Bask?!" Officer Buchtan exclaimed. "Everyone, take down this traitor!"

The soldiers hurriedly drew their swords and surrounded Bask. However, because they were drunk, they forgot who they were up against.

"What the hell? You're all weak, so stop being a pain in the ass." Bask pulled out another greatsword from his back and swung it at the nearest soldier, killing him instantly.

The one-sided slaughter ended about an hour later. Bask had killed everyone who raised a weapon at him. He had chased Officer Buchtan and his henchmen through the city, cutting them down one after the other and painting the city with blood. Not once did he attack the frightened townspeople or the unarmed

soldiers who had fled. Finally, the future count had been cornered near the outer wall of the city.

“W-Wait a minute!” Officer Buchtan stammered. “Let’s put this matter behind us! Water under the bridge! I know! I’ll make you the commander of the knights! So—”

The man’s neck was cut clean through with a single stroke of Bask’s greatsword.

“Hmph. Weakling,” Bask spat.

He walked away, leaving behind the residents of the city who stood dumbfounded after having witnessed the nightmarish carnage.

\* \* \*

Several years after he disappeared from the battlefield in the northern part of the Central Continent, Bask was found on the Garlesian Continent, located to the southwest of the Central Continent. Lehmciel, a birdkin nation, existed on this continent where nonhuman races had created their own countries, following the example created by Albahal.

That night, the cries of the birdkin queen and princess echoed through the royal castle of Lehmciel’s capital.

“F-Father!”

“You brute! Let go of His Majesty!”

The queen and princess were in the hallway leading to birdkin king’s bedroom, and in front of them was Bask, who had just come out of that bedroom and was holding King Uron by the back of his neck. Behind the two stood spear-wielding soldiers who had responded to the king’s crisis and were ready to stab Bask to death if they had the chance.

“Hmph, I have no personal interest in this guy, but his life’s important to you, no? In exchange for your precious king, I want you to give me the Sacred Necklace.”

Bask picked up the body of the birdkin king by the neck as he hefted his shield. The king’s feet dangled in the air as he flapped about.

“Th-The Sacred...!” the queen sputtered. Bask grinned when he saw her expression change.

“I knew it. It’s written all over your face. That thing must offer some incredible power. It would be a shame to leave it in such a desolate country, so I’ll take it off your hands. Heh heh.”

Bask’s body, adorned by ornaments, shimmered in the light of the torches hanging on the hallway wall. Two jeweled rings decorated the hand that was holding the king’s neck.

“So, the rumors of someone rampaging throughout the world in search of valuable magic tools was true...” The birdkin king spoke in a hoarse voice, putting his hands on the one that was strangling him in hopes of preventing further strangulation.

For the past year or two, there had been incidents of royal castles and tombs being attacked for their treasured items all over the Garlesian Continent. From eyewitness testimonies, it was immediately known that the culprit was Bask, the King of Shura, but no one could stop the Rank S adventurer. As a result, the two greatswords that Bask carried on his back had changed from being made of adamantite to being made of orichalcum, and although he remained shirtless, he was now covered from head to toe in magical tools.

After hearing about the Sacred Necklace in the birdkin kingdom from his most recent victim, he had sneaked into the royal castle under the cover of night.

“D-Do you really think I’ll give the Sacred Necklace, which is purported to have been granted as a miracle by the God of Creation, to the likes of you?!”

Bask knitted his brows at the birdkin king’s words. “What? You think you can talk to me like that?”

*SQUEEZE!*

“Gyaaagh?!” The birdkin king let out a shrill scream as Bask’s grip on his neck tightened. The queen and princess gasped, and the soldiers stepped forward, but Bask was using the king’s body as a shield; the soldiers could not thrust their spears at the intruder.

“Be quiet, you weaklings. It sounds like you guys don’t understand the



situation you're in. The reason I'm not killing you all is because it would be a hassle. I could slaughter everyone here and then search for the item, but that'd be a waste of my time."

The soldiers were horrified by the calmness in Bask's eyes as he spoke. He was dead serious.

The next moment, Bask took a step forward, and the soldiers instinctively took a few steps back. Bask smiled with satisfaction and put his mouth next to the king's ear.

"A miracle from the God of Creation sounds fantastic. Such a valuable thing only is meaningful if it is possessed by a strong person. Take me to your treasury. Or should I kill everyone here?"

"I-I understand. I'll guide you."

The king gasped and gave directions to the treasury. Upon hearing them, Bask issued an order. "The queen and princess should walk ahead of us. It would be annoying if there were any traps." With that, he made the queen and princess lead the way.

Eventually, the two ladies walking at the head of the group stopped in front of a huge door. Bask pushed them aside and stepped forward, punching in the door of the treasury with his free hand.

*CRAAAAASH!*

The hinges came loose from the wall and the door collapsed into the treasury. Bask stepped over it on his way in. While still strangling the king with one hand, he kicked open locked boxes on the floor and overturned them, spilled the contents of small boxes on shelves by knocking them down, and scattered gold coins and ornaments across the room in search of the Sacred Necklace. On the other side of the broken door, the queen, princess, and soldiers watched on in fear.

After about an hour of searching through the treasury, Bask finally realized that what he was looking for was not there.

"Bastard! You tricked me!"

“Waaagh?!” The king, who had gone limp from being dragged around by his neck, let out another high-pitched cry as Bask strangled him.

“Where is it?”

“W-Well...”

“Hmph. All right, tell me which one you want me to kill: the princess or the queen.”

The king’s eyes widened at Bask’s words.

“Wh-What?! Do you not have any sense of humanity flowing through you?!”

“Dunno. Where’s the Sacred Necklace?”

Bask gripped the hilt of one of the two greatswords he carried on his back.

“I-It’s not here,” the king answered in a raspy voice.

Bask gave a small nod, then swung the greatsword from his back and pointed the tip at the treasury door. The birdkin queen and princess were huddled together, trembling, but when the sword was pointed at them, they began to cower in fear.

“So, which one should I kill?” Bask asked.

“It’s in Teomenia!” the king shouted. “We offered it to the Great Pope! After hearing the rumors about you, we thought it would be safer there!”

Bask brought the king close to his face and peered into the royal’s eyes. Bask was uncooperative and did not fit well in group situations, nor was he good at reading people’s words, but his keen intuition allowed him to sense the emotions of others. The birdkin king’s eyes, as he saw them, were calm despite the situation he was in. By revealing the truth that he had been hiding, he seemed to have been freed from the fear of his lies being discovered.

“Tch. It looks like you’re telling the truth,” Bask spat, then threw the king’s body onto a pile of gold coins and left the treasury. No one tried to stop him on his way out of both the castle and country of Lehmciel.

\* \* \*

After leaving the continent of Garlesia, Bask crossed the eastern sea toward

the continent of Galiat, where Elmahl was located. Uron, the birdkin king, had warned of his arrival via a magic tool, and when Bask arrived at the religious capital of Teomenia, it was heavily defended by the Church of Elmea. However, this was of no use. The holy soldiers were all mowed down, and a trail of blood was led deep inside the church, to where the Great Pope was.

“I’ve been searching for you,” said the lone intruder.

Bask found Great Pope Istahl in a grand hall lined with giant columns. A wide smile appeared on the King of Shura’s face, stained red with blood.

“You must be Bask.”

“That’s right. Oh? What’s that you’re wearing around your neck?”

Bask’s eyes lit up when he caught sight of the shining necklace on the Great Pope’s chest. However, at the next moment, he instinctively realized that this was a trap. His opponent had known that he was coming for the Sacred Necklace, and that the Great Pope wearing it over his robe seemed too convenient. And yet, while he realized that he had walked right into this trap, Bask finally saw what he had been searching for, and its brilliance captivated him.

“As rumored, you don’t seem to respect your superiors very much. Yes, this is indeed the Sacred Necklace you’ve been searching for. You’ve spilled a lot of unnecessary blood for it, haven’t you?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“This is a miracle bestowed upon us by the God of Creation in order to strengthen our healing powers. It is useless for someone such as yourself, who possesses the Asura Talent.”

Bask immediately knew that the words the Great Pope spoke so indifferently were no lie. However, it annoyed him to voice his agreement.

“What? Well, I won’t know until I try to equip it. Hmm?” Bask sensed a presence behind him and put a hand on the hilt of one of the greatswords he carried on his back.

Just as he had expected, a man appeared from behind the pillar he had just

walked past. He was surprised that he had not noticed the man's presence until now.

"Makkaron. You are responsible for certifying this man as a Rank S adventurer and letting him run wild," the Great Pope said to the man who had appeared behind Bask.

"There's no need for you to tell me that, Istahl. Hence, I came here to fulfill my duties," Makkaron, the head of the Adventurer's Guild, responded.

"Two against one? Interesting." Bask grinned fearlessly and placed his free hand on the hilt of the other greatsword on his back.

"Now, now. Listen to me first. If it's a magic tool you want, Bask, we're willing to cooperate depending on what you have to say."

Hearing those words from Makkaron made Bask even more wary. If he had been in Makkaron's position, he would have killed the person he had lured in with the Sacred Necklace without even giving them time to turn around, assuming that person had not noticed his presence. There was no way that Makkaron would suddenly give Bask the advantage.

"Yeah? So you're calling for reinforcements, then?"

Bask said the first words that came to his mind. The only thing that he, who had overcome mortal peril many times over without relying on anyone else, could trust was his own strength and intuition. And his intuition was warning him of a danger greater than anything he had ever faced before. He needed to kill the enemy in front of him before reinforcements could arrive.

Bask bent his knees slightly, lowered his center of gravity, and slowly moved his feet forward. With his sights set on the Great Pope, he took up a stance that allowed him to react immediately even if he was attacked from behind—an action that caused the Great Pope to slowly retreat. The next moment, as Bask realized that his opponent possessed an ability to fight far surpassing that of a common old man, Makkaron nimbly approached him from behind.

"Trying to kill the Great Pope? It seems you need to be punished," Makkaron said.

As the guildmaster general spoke, the Great Pope began chanting a spell.

However, Bask's intuition sensed an even greater danger behind him.

"You die first!"

Bask instantly changed his stance and turned around, using the momentum to unsheathe one of his greatswords and try to cut Makkaron in half.

"Goodness, that was a close one."

Makkaron narrowly dodged the attack and took advantage of the slight opening Bask left when he swung his greatsword, slamming a punch into his side. There was the dry sound of air rushing out of his lungs, and Bask's body was sent flying, contorting into a sideways V.

However, Makkaron was also blown back. Immediately after he struck Bask in the side, Bask, not sacrificing any of his momentum from his greatsword swing, did a half-turn and delivered a roundhouse kick.

"Hrngh!"

"Are you okay? High Heel!"

The Great Pope activated a recovery spell from behind Makkaron.

"Ouch. Doesn't he know to be kind to his elders?"

"It seems like this might be a challenge for us to do alone," the Great Pope whispered to Makkaron.

"We'll just have to manage on our own for a while. Besides, he's an Asura, so his low Endurance is his weak point."

Makkaron, the head of the Adventurer's Guild, had investigated the characteristics of Bask's Talent, Asura. Those with that Talent gained overwhelming attack power and speed, but when equipped with armor, their actions were restricted and they became unable to use their skills well. That was why Bask had been trying to obtain magic tools that were not subject to such restrictions and could provide various additional effects.

"But he must be aware of that. Look at the bag on his waist."

The Great Pope watched as Bask, holding his greatsword in one hand, reached for the pouch at his waist. He took what looked like a healing item from his bag

and quickly put it in his mouth.

“As expected, it looks like it’s going to be a battle of endurance.”

“Neither you nor I is all that young anymore.”

“Don’t put us in the same boat, Istahl.”

Bask, who had been chewing on something while listening to the conversation between the Great Pope and Makkaron, swallowed, and suddenly burst into laughter. His toothy grin and dilated pupils gave off a sinister look that would make anyone who saw him question his sanity.

“Keh heh heh, just as I expected. Pugilist King Makkaron, the God of War who was said to be unparalleled in battle, and Saint King Istahl can still fight together, it seems. Heh heh, this is getting interesting! Don’t let me kill you too quickly, my dear senior!”

Bask was facing down a fellow Rank S adventurer. His opponent had the four-star Talent of Pugilist King and had formed a party with another four-star Talent holder, a Saint King.

“‘Senior,’ you say... You see, Bask, I didn’t become certified as a Rank S adventurer purely through my own strength. Rather, by becoming a Rank S adventurer, I learned that I hadn’t done everything on my own; I was once arrogant but had been humbled by the title. I had hoped you would follow suit.”

As Makkaron said this, he looked with sad eyes at Bask, who drew his second greatsword.

“It’s sad, Makkaron, but it seems like neither you nor I have the luxury of showing mercy to him right now.”

“You don’t have to spell it out for me, Stahl. Phantom Knuckle!”

Makkaron activated his Extra Skill. His body shimmered as if it were wrapped in a heat haze, and then the shimmering gradually grew larger and began to blur the area on either side of him. Before long, five shimmering clones appeared.

“Sacred Necklace, grant me your power. Sanctuary Road!”

The Great Pope also activated his Extra Skill. His body shimmered as if

enveloped in a heat haze, and then he emerged, emitting light. Furthermore, when the Sacred Necklace on his chest emitted a strong light, its glow spread throughout the Great Pope's body. The light emitted from his body also increased in intensity, illuminating the hall as brightly as if they were outside at midday.

Bask continued to grin while watching this situation carefully.

"I see you're going all out from the get-go," Bask said. "Sounds good to me."

"All Protect!"

"Here I come, Bask!"

The moment the Great Pope used a skill to increase Makkaron's Endurance, the five Makkaron clones attacked Bask all at once.

"Rah!"

Bask swung one of his swords horizontally, slashing at the approaching clones. However, there was no response to the attack, and after the three clones that were cut through disappeared, the remaining two clones approached Bask's front and side, respectively. Bask instantly changed his grip on the sword in his other hand, spinning it into a reverse grip and thrusting it with murderous intent at the clone that was flanking him. However, before the greatsword could reach it, the one in front of him jumped toward his chest. Bask tried to hit it with his knee.

"You're still wet behind the ears."

Makkaron's voice came from behind Bask. Immediately after, his fist slammed into Bask's abdomen.

"Hngh! Hyah!"

Bask's face contorted in pain for a moment, but then, with a roar, he used the greatsword that was behind him following his first swing to slash at Makkaron's real body. By then, however, the guildmaster general had already split into five new entities, and Bask's sword only scattered one of them like mist.

"It's a shame. If you were more open to others, you wouldn't be fooled by such petty tricks!"

As he solemnly muttered to himself, Makkaron mercilessly pounded his fist into Bask, who was attacking another clone and left himself open. Bask relied on his sharp intuition to attack, but it was that very intuition that made him unable to ignore the murderous alter egos. As a result, he ended up attacking Makkaron's clones. Even on the rare occasions when Bask's instincts told him where the true body was, Makkaron would simply dodge the dangerous greatsword slashes and purposefully take the kicks. This was done in anticipation that the damage would not be fatal due to his heightened Endurance and that the Great Pope's recovery magic would heal him right away.

A few minutes later, Bask, whose entire body was covered in bruises, distanced himself from Makkaron and returned one of his greatswords in his hands to his back. Then, he used his free hand to take a healing potion from the pouch at his waist and put it in his mouth. With a gasp, he bit down to crush it and swallowed, then choked, coughed, and spit out blood.

Seeing this situation, Makkaron relaxed his stance.

"What do you think? If you're willing to reflect on your actions, your life may be spared."

"H-Hey, I don't think we can spare the—" the Great Pope started.

Bask looked up, wiped the blood staining his mouth with his fist, and grinned. "Not bad! This is the first time I've been beaten up like this. As a sign of appreciation, I'll turn you both into mincemeat! Berserker Mode!"

Bask seemed to have used some kind of skill that affected his whole body. The muscles under his skin wriggled like countless insects, and his skin everywhere from his chest to his stomach, his neck to his shoulders, and his waist to his legs turned bloodred.

"So, you're finally taking this seriously. Hmph!"

Makkaron split into five individuals and approached Bask. The clones scattered to the front, back, left, and right attack all at once, while the remaining one jumped at Bask's head.

"Now that I've gotten serious, you're done for! Graaah!"



Bask swung the greatsword he was still holding in one hand at frightening speed, obliterating the Makkaron clones that were closing in on him. He then ducked to avoid the clone that was approaching his head, spread his hand in front of his face, and caught Makkaron's foot as the guildmaster general tried to kick him in the face.

"Hmm?! Wh-What the hell?!"

The guildmaster general immediately solidified his defense, and as he did, Bask lifted his body above his head.

"Die!"

Bask bared his teeth in a grin and swung Makkaron's body around above him before slamming him down onto the church floor.

*BOOM!*

The impact shook the church, but Bask did not stop there.

*BOOM! BOOM!*

He laughed happily as he repeatedly smashed Makkaron's body into the floor as if slamming a club down. The stone floor eventually shattered and was stained with blood, but he merely used it as a marker of where he should swing Makkaron's body.

"Makkaron!" the Great Pope shouted.

"Here! He's all yours!" Bask threw Makkaron's body, which moved about like a rag doll, toward the Great Pope.

The Great Pope, who remained suspended in the air, realized that this was a feint but was unable to avoid his best friend and held his position. He caught Makkaron's body as it flew toward him, and while his hands were occupied, Bask, who was hiding behind the guildmaster general's body, approached with a greatsword from below. His aim was to cut both the Great Pope and Makkaron in two.

However, his blade was repelled by an expanding wall of air. Instead of moving upward, it was pushed in the opposite direction and sent digging into the floor of the church. Bask bared his teeth and glared at the silver-haired man

who had stepped between him and the Great Pope.

“Olvahs! You made it in time!”

In response to the Great Pope’s words, the silver-haired man—the ebony-skinned dark elven king, Olvahs—answered with a frown.

“Both of you, why are you taking so much time dealing with such a brat?”

He held one of his hands out toward Bask’s greatsword. The reason he had been able to force the greatsword back without touching it was that he had created an air shield with the help of a wind spirit. No matter how unbelievably powerful Bask’s Berserker Mode was, it seemed that he could not cut through the compressed air head-on.

Moreover, Bask’s intuition told him that a strong murderous spirit was approaching from the entrance to the church on his left.

“Graaahhh! You damn braaat!”

A bestial roar made the church’s pillars tremble, and then a gigantic figure approached with tremendous speed. It slammed its shoulder into Bask’s arm like a massive hammer.

“What the— Gh?!”

Immediately, Bask abandoned the greatsword that had dug into the floor of the church and tried to defend himself, but his opponent was a split second faster. He was blown away in an incomplete defensive posture and collided with one of the pillars.

“Oh, Yoze! You made it too!”

The Great Pope descended to the floor and, while still healing Makkaron’s wounds, looked up at the beastman and rejoiced.

“Hmph. You’ve gotten old, Makkaron. You’re certainly not holding up your title as the God of War.” Yoze, the current Beast King of Albahal, called out to Makkaron while keeping his eyes on Bask. “I’ll let Olvahs apologize for us being late. It’s that asshole’s fault for being so slow to get moving.”

“Unlike the rest of you, I do not fear looters,” Olvahs stated. “Even if I wouldn’t normally go out of my way to attack them, if they sneak into my

village, they won't leave alive. In any case, I'm glad that you two are safe."

Apparently, the Beast King had convinced the dark elf king to come by saying that if something was not done, it would only be a matter of time before Bask destroyed the dark elf village as well. That was why, Yoze explained, it was best to defeat him before that happened.

"My country isn't afraid of brats like him either. But the people who live in Garlesia are making a fuss and asking us to get revenge for them."

Countries that had been attacked by Bask, including Lehmciel, ruled by Birdkin King Uron, relied on Albahal. The Beast King had accepted Makkaron's invitation because he had seen it as a good opportunity to show his power to other countries.

"What happened to Nenebee and Gressa?" the dark elven king asked. "If we had golems and magic, this wouldn't be so difficult."

Makkaron, whose wounds had healed, slowly stood up and responded.

"Those two are no longer with us."

Hearing that, a slight gloom appeared on the dark elven king's face. Nenebee, a golem user, and Gressa, a wizard, had once been friends of the four of them.

Makkaron did not miss the slight change in the dark elven king's face. He reached into the pocket of his tattered jacket and pulled out a dirty adventurer's ID card. It was one with a gold emblem on it. Makkaron looked at it for a moment, then narrowed his eyes nostalgically.

"The hell? That's useless garbage," Bask said, his voice coming from the pillar he had smashed into.

"You don't seem to understand the true value of this."

Makkaron's words caused Bask's eyes to light up.

"Huh? What do you mean? I don't need to just hold on to that thing? If I can use it properly, it'd make me stronger?" he asked with a bit of eagerness, but Makkaron quietly shook his head.

"This is proof that I was with my friends in our party, Majestic Wind. All life on this planet, not just humans, is supported by others. That fact gives me

strength.”

He put the dirty adventurer’s ID back in his pocket, then bent down and braced himself.

“Bah. That’s it? Then it’s trash after all.”

Practically spitting out those words, Bask drew the greatsword he carried on his back and held it at the ready.

“Yoze. Your son has succeeded the beast throne, right?”

“Yes. I have granted some of my power to Muza, but I am still the same as usual.”

After responding, the Beast King looked up to the sky. “Beast God Garm, lend me your strength! Beast Mode! Graaah!”

Following his loud roar, the Beast King’s gigantic body swelled further, turning him into a bipedal lion over three meters tall. Bask looked up at the Beast King, who was moving toward him while letting out a beastly roar, and smiled, narrowing his dilated eyes.

“Awesome! This is so fun! Looks like there’s something worth killing, heh heh!”

Then, just as he took a casual step, he jumped at the Beast King’s chest and raised the greatsword he held in both hands. The Beast King’s fist, equipped with orichalcum knuckles, struck the side of the blade, deflecting the thrust. When Bask realized that his stabbing attack had failed, he swung his sword and blocked the Beast King’s follow-up punch with it, at the same time searching for an opportunity to attack.

It was then that the voice of the dark elven king echoed. “Great spirit of the swamp, give me power! Bottomless Swamp!”

Bask caught sight of the dark elven king out of the corner of his eye. The floor of the church turned into mud from beneath the man’s feet, and he was shimmering as if enveloped in a heat haze.

“Huh?! What’s happened to my legs?!”

When the mud reached Bask’s feet, parts of it rose up like tentacles and

tangled around his ankles.

“Raaah!”

“Hrngh!”

For a moment, Bask was glued to the spot, and the Beast King and Makkaron did not miss their chance to attack him. They threw a flurry of fists at him, and even when he shook off his muddy restraints, they quickly chased after him and continued their assault.

Eventually, Bask was cornered against the wall of the church. He pressed a Flower of Muellerze against his abdomen, which had been torn by the claws on the Beast King’s feet, but the healing effect was insufficient. He would not stop losing blood.

“Damn it!”

“Looks like you’ve run out of recovery items.”

Calmly assessing the situation, the dark elven king, who served as the brains of Majestic Wind, looked to the Beast King and Makkaron to deal the final blow.

“Wait. This man can still change his ways.”

“Have you truly gone senile, Makkaron?” the Beast King objected. “It’s hard not to realize that this guy has reached the point of no return. Even if you spare his life here, he will only end up shedding more blood as a result of his own greed.”

The dark elven king nodded silently at the Beast King’s words. Makkaron looked at the Great Pope, but he, too, shook his head. His trusted friends’ decision helped him make up his mind. By then, however, Bask had decided to withdraw.

“Heh heh heh. I wanted that necklace, but if I die, it won’t do me any good. Hrah!”

Bask slammed his elbow into the wall behind him, causing the stone wall to crumble and leave a gaping hole. The group of four hurriedly tried to chase after him, but he quickly crawled through the hole and emerged in the corridor outside the hall. He smashed the wall of the corridor in front of him with a kick

and exited into the outer courtyard.

“You flee now, Bask?!”

The angry voice of the Beast King, whose body was too large to fit through the hole, coming from behind him was all Bask could hear as he ran straight through the silent courtyard. He slashed the wall separating the courtyard from the outside with his only remaining greatsword, then slammed his shoulder into it.

Beyond the wall was the top of a hill overlooking the religious capital of Teomenia, and at Bask’s feet was the edge of a cliff. If he took one step, he would drop more than ten meters headlong to the loading ramp surrounding the hill.

“Bask! Wait!”

The moment Bask heard Makkaron’s voice, he took the final step without hesitation.

When Makkaron’s group of four arrived in front of a hole in the outer wall of the church, they saw that Bask’s bloodstains stopped in front of it. And when they peered far below, they saw new bloodstains that had been left behind. They entered the loading ramp from the stairs in front of the church and headed to that location, but apart from the numerous bloodstains, they found no trace of Bask.

“Istahl, stop the departure of all magic ships and blockade the city. Don’t let him escape.”

“Of course.” The Great Pope nodded deeply at the Beast King’s words.

\* \* \*

Bask had escaped before Teomenia was locked down. However, he was still deeply wounded and had run out of recovery items. It would not be possible for him to return to Teomenia, which was guarded by holy soldiers, so he fled into the nearby forest and hid in a convenient tree hollow. He spent several days there without eating or drinking.

“Damn, I’ll kill them all eventually.”

Bask, who could have died on the spot just from his fall, had escaped the city while losing blood from a wound in his stomach that had never closed. It was only thanks to his incredible life force, more akin to a beast's than a human's, that he had managed to get as far as he had.

However, when Bask finally lost too much blood and started to lose consciousness, his wounded animallike senses picked up on the presence of someone approaching him. He gripped his remaining greatsword while his other hand pressed down to prevent his internal organs from protruding out of the wound in his stomach. If he did not kill these pursuers, the Beast King and his party would soon be arriving next.

As he held his breath and waited for the moment the enemy was closest so he could attack, he saw an upside-down face peering in from above the entrance to the tree hollow.

“What?!”

Bask immediately tried to thrust out his greatsword.

“Wait a minute! I’m on your side. Now put away that terrifying thing!” the upside-down face said in a childlike voice.

“Who the hell are you?! I don’t have any allies!”

Even though Bask was shouting insults, he instinctively knew that this person was not his pursuer and was inwardly relieved.

“Then I’ll be your ally from now on, so please don’t attack.”

As the person spoke, their face flipped over to reveal a clown-like man wearing a mask standing at the entrance to the tree hollow. Although his hands were raised to his face to indicate that he was unarmed, Bask did not trust even unarmed opponents.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Heh heh. My name is Kyubel. I came to help you. So, come on! Put down your weapon!”

“To help?”

“It’s more like a solicitation, to be precise. If you come with me, you’ll be able

to fight against strong enemies and get your hands on amazing weapons and magic tools. Of course, I'll heal that wound as well."

"Huh? I don't understand. How does that benefit you at all?" Bask said as he looked for an opening in his opponent. In doing so, he came to the unquestionable realization that this playfully dressed opponent, contrary to his appearance, had no openings to speak of.

"I am the Strategist of the Demon Lord Army. There's a plan I would really like to put in motion, but for it, I need someone as powerful as you."

"I don't like groups," Bask spat, remembering the four people who had cornered him as well as all those who had interfered with his life.

"Your help will only be needed when the plan requires it, and there's no need for you to worship the Demon Lord. He said so himself, and I don't worship him either."

"Give me some time to think it over."

The moment Bask said that, the man who called himself Kyubel took a quick step back and suddenly started screaming.

"Heeey!" Kyubel hollered. "I found Baaask! Someone! Anyone!"

"You son of a... I'll kill you!"

Bask rushed out of the tree hollow, his face red with anger, but his cornered beast's senses registered the footsteps of those approaching who seemed to have heard Kyubel's voice.

"So? What now? They have already contacted Makkaron and the others using magic tools. Will you stay here, or...?"

Bask looked at Kyubel. He could not tell what the Strategist concealed behind the mask was thinking, but his intuition told him that Kyubel was not lying.

"You better not be lying to me," Bask finally said.

"Of course not."

"Hmph, I guess that's interesting too. I was just thinking that the human world was getting to be troublesome."



If the Demon Lord Army became troublesome as well, Bask would just kill them all and leave.

“We’re comrades, then.” Kyubel held out his hand.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll go along with your plan. But in exchange, you’re going to make me stronger.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

Soon after, holy soldiers located a huge tree with a hollow in it, but only bloodstains remained inside. Bask was nowhere to be found.

## Side Story 4: Supreme Commander Ardoe's Loyalty

Ardoe, the Supreme Commander of the Demon Lord Army, walked quickly through the halls of the Demon Lord's palace.

He had short-cropped hair and the purple skin typical of the demon race, and stood two and a half meters tall, wearing a long cloak that reached down to his knees. As the cloak embroidered with the emblem of the Demon Lord Army fluttered on his back, his lean body could be seen underneath.

When demons passing through the halls saw him, they stopped where they were and stood at attention until he had passed by and the emblem on his back was no longer visible. This was not only because Ardoe was the Supreme Commander of the Demon Lord Army, but also because he was a high-ranking demon god and the head of the Six Great Demon Gods, an operational unit under the direct control of the Demon Lord. There were very few demons who did not tense up in front of him, as he truly was the Demon Lord's right-hand man. In fact, when Ardoe swiftly walked by them as he frowned without providing even a passing glance, the other demons were terrified. What could have possibly occurred that made even the Supreme Commander look so discontented?

Eventually, Ardoe arrived in front of the door he was heading to. He called out to the two high-ranking demons guarding it.

"Is Director Shinorom here?"

"Supreme Commander, sir!"

"Of course the director is here!"

The high-ranking demons saw murderous intent on Ardoe's already frightening face and managed to open the door even though they were on the verge of fainting.

Ardoe entered the laboratory belonging to Shinorom, the head of monster soldier research. Near the entrance, there were magic tools that appeared to be

research equipment, as well as the limbs of dismembered monsters and humans. There was still a path through this mess, and Ardoe followed it without slowing down.

*Blub blub.*

After a while, he could hear the sound of bubbles bursting. His path was blocked by transparent tubes, lined up at equal intervals like pillars in a temple. The tubes were filled with some sort of liquid, and in one such tube was a human body whose lower half had been replaced by that of a giant scorpion. In another, a human face was embedded into the head of a giant salamander, and elsewhere, other bizarre fusions of humans and animals could be seen submerged. Bubbles spouted from the bases of the tubes, rose around the fusions, and burst at the surface.

Ardoe ignored the tubes, walking past them before coming to a halt in front of a particularly large transparent cylinder that sat in the center of the laboratory. Inside was a fused body featuring the heads of both a man and a woman, as well as two sets of limbs. Unlike the other fusions, however, this one's muscles were trembling and blood vessels were constricting all over its body, making it appear to be alive.

In front of the tube was a small demon man surrounded by several assistants. The back of the white coat he wore was bent, his white hair was greasy and disheveled, and wrinkles and spots spread all over his face. Yet his large eyes shone brightly as he gazed at the stone tablet with glowing letters that was attached to the base of the transparent cylinder. The expression on his face as he touched and stroked the tablet was somehow childlike.

"There you are, Director Shinorom."

Ardoe's voice echoed in the dimly lit laboratory, but the old man in the white coat, Director Shinorom, did not seem to have heard him.

"I'll just do this, then this, and that! Perfect! What?! Th-These numbers! Magnificent!"

Unlike Director Shinorom, who continued to scream with excitement as he compared the letters floating on the stone tablet against the parchment spread out before him, the assistants had gone pale. They were terrified of the

extremely imposing Ardoe.

Ardoe could clearly feel blood rushing to his face, but in an effort to calm his anger, he let out a long sigh. He then took a deep breath, his toned chest doubling in size as he inhaled.

“Ahem! It seems that you didn’t hear me, Director Shinorom!”

When he raised his voice, the very air in the laboratory seemed to tremble. The transparent tube in front of him shook, small bubbles forming as liquid overflowed from the rim.

“Huh?! Wh-What’s going on?!” Director Shinorom was so surprised that he almost jumped. He covered both of his ears with his wrinkled hands, and his mouth literally dropped open as he shouted in alarm. He looked behind him and smiled when he saw Ardoe. “Oh, if it isn’t the Supreme Commander. What brings you here?”

“The Demon Lord is waiting,” Ardoe replied, explaining the purpose of his visit.

His closest subordinates had already gathered at the Demon Lord’s throne for a regular strategy meeting, but Shinorom, who was scheduled to give an important report essential to their strategy, had not arrived. As such, Ardoe had taken the initiative and come to pick him up.

“Oh, is that all? Ramon-Hamon’s adjustment seems to be going well, so please leave me be.”

“‘Is that all,’ you say?!”

For a moment, Ardoe could not understand what the other man was saying. Eventually, however, the meaning of the words began to sink in, and his anger rose as they did. His fists clenched and the muscles from his wrists to his elbows undulated like ropes. *How relieving it would be to beat down this old man*, he thought.

The Demon Lord was the object of his absolute loyalty. Just hearing the Demon Lord speak to him moved him; so much so that he felt like his heart might stop. Not only had this old man not responded to the Demon Lord’s summons, but he had even gone so far as to treat that summons as a trivial

matter. Such an action was inexcusable when done by a high-ranking demon, and Director Shinorom was no such thing; he was a mere normal demon. Ardoe glared at the rude old man, thinking that he should be sentenced to death on the spot for his disrespect.

However, the director in question, Shinorom, did not seem to mind Ardoe's angry gaze at all and proceeded with his adjustments. His attitude made Ardoe even angrier, but the Supreme Commander took another deep breath and tried to calm himself down.

Director Shinorom was undoubtedly one of the key figures in the Demon Lord Army's operations. His interests had led him to research and develop various equipment and magic tools, and he had also achieved remarkable results in strengthening monsters. Not only that, but he was also skilled at transformations and was able to blend in with humans in order to carry out the Demon Lord Army's operations. He was able to do everything from arranging armed uprisings among the lower classes to setting the stage for internal divisions within nations.

This man had been praised by the Demon Lord himself, who proclaimed the Demon Lord Army to be a complete meritocracy and had a policy of results over loyalty, which in a way silently condoned Shinorom's unbecoming behavior. In addition, he had been granted the title of Director of Monster Soldier Research. With this position came facilities to use at his discretion, ample funds, and even subordinates.

*It would be easy to kill him. However, the loss that the Demon Lord Army would suffer from his death would be immeasurable.* After repeating this over and over in his mind, Ardoe finally calmed down. It was impossible for him to do something that would be detrimental to the Demon Lord he so greatly respected.

Ardoe decided to make small talk with Shinorom for the time being. "Anyway, did you refer to this figure as 'Ramon-Hamon'? Could this be the Demonic Deity siblings I sent for the experiment a while ago?"

"That's correct. Look at this increase in numbers! We've finally succeeded in creating a Greater Demonic Deity!" Director Shinorom pointed to the glowing

text floating on the stone tablet as he shouted happily.

“I see. Splendid. So, when can they fight on the front lines?”

“It won’t be long. Their MP is still unstable, but that will just take some adjusting. I want to see their battle data as soon as possible!”

There were over a hundred Demonic Deities that belonged to the Demon Lord Army, but there were fewer than ten Greater Demonic Deities. If it was possible to artificially create such a rare Greater Demonic Deity, then this mad scientist, Shinorom, had accomplished yet another incredible feat.

Ardoe had to accept that he needed to put a stop to his murderous intentions.

“Then please tell the Demon Lord about this in your own words. I don’t think anyone other than you can provide a detailed explanation of this matter.”

When Ardoe said this, Director Shinorom agreed, saying, “That’s true.” Then, he ordered his subordinates to make adjustments and record the numbers, and left the laboratory.

Ardoe followed Director Shinorom back the way he had come and into the room with the teleportation device. When they entered, they saw a cube-shaped object floating on the floor where the teleportation magic circle was installed. The teleportation device spoke in an uninflected voice.

“Supreme Commander Ardoe, Director Shinorom. Where are you headed?”

“To the tower of the Demon Lord’s palace.”

“Understood. Please stand inside the magic circle.”

When the two figures entered the magic circle, the lines that drew it emitted a pale purple light.

“Magical power of Supreme Commander Ardoe and Monster Soldier Research Director Shinorom confirmed. Transfer to the Demon Lord’s tower has been permitted. You will now be teleported. Have a safe trip.”

As always, once the overly polite announcement of the teleportation device

was over, a curtain of purple light rose from the outer edge of the magic circle. This was the operating process of the teleportation device developed by Director Shinorom, in which equipment with a magic circle at its core performed teleportation magic. As a result, even those who could not use teleportation magic or who simply did not have the MP necessary for it could now teleport without the need to use any MP, though movement was limited to between devices. There was no doubt that the creation of this device had expanded the Demon Lord Army's range of activities. Ardor believed that if they could expect further, similar developments from Shinorom, then it was for the best that he not be killed.

By the time the curtain of purple light had risen above Ardor's head and returned to the outer edge of the magic circle, he and Director Shinorom were in the tower's teleportation room. Stepping outside, they walked down a passageway whose walls and floor were pure white. In the direction they were heading, a number of demons moved against the walls to open a path while holding a saluting posture. Demons came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, so the passages were wide and the ceilings were high.

What Ardor and Director Shinorom were heading toward, however, was an even vaster space. On top of being extremely spacious, its walls, ceiling, and even pillars were pure white, making it hard to see the room's boundaries when relying solely on vision. It gradually distorted one's sense of perspective, making it appear larger than it actually was.

Monsters and demons of various shapes and forms were gathered in that white space. They were fierce warriors with Rank S abilities, and each of them was a general who commanded more than ten thousand monsters.

In the center of the room was a huge staircase leading to the Demon Lord's throne room, where he was waiting. Shinorom, who dared to ascend the stairs that even high-ranking demons did not readily climb, was joined by Supreme Commander Ardor. The fact that he was a normal demon was the true embodiment of the meritocracy that the Demon Lord had embraced.

In the throne room, Kyubel, who was the Demon Lord Army's Strategist, and Ardor's five fellow Great Demon Gods were already waiting for the two of them. So too was the Demon Lord, the master of this tower. He sat on a high

throne and glared at the others, while Kyubel waited at the foot of the throne. There were several steps leading from their position to the floor of the throne room, and fanning out in front of those steps were the seats of the Six Great Demon Gods.

On this day, farther in front of the throne was an altar-like structure and a prostrating, pale-skinned Demonic Deity wearing purple robes. Ardoe, who served as the Supreme Commander of the Demon Lord Army, remembered the appearances and names of its most important figures. As such, he immediately recognized that this Deity was Gushara, the man who had transformed into a human in order to carry out undercover work for one of the Demon Lord's plans.

"You're late. I've been waiting for you." The Demon Lord spoke in a calm voice. He did not seem at all angered that he had been kept waiting by Ardoe, who was sent to fetch Shinorom.

"I apologize for my tardiness. I was listening to Director Shinorom's research results. The Greater Demonic Deity synthesis experiments are showing signs of success."

Ardoe had omitted that he was late because of Director Shinorom. He believed that what he reported to the Demon Lord should not be based on a personal grudge, such as tattling on anyone, but should instead be information that would prove useful for the Demon Lord and the Demon Lord Army.

"Oh, that's wonderful. Shinorom, if it's successful, can we expect mass production?"

"It's difficult as it is now," Director Shinorom replied instantly. "There aren't enough Demonic Deity stones for mass production, and there's a limit to the Demonic Deity stones produced by the workhorses. In any case, we need a new specimen."

"I see."

The Demon Lord did not seem particularly concerned about Shinorom's frank way of speaking. He gave a silent nod, then looked at Kyubel, who was kneeling at his feet. Kyubel nodded and suddenly stood up.



“Well then, now that everyone is here, I will tell you about the progress of the daemon resurrection plan,” he said.

The purpose of this convocation was to share information about the Demon Lord Army’s goal of resurrecting the daemon that had been sealed away in the distant past. The Demon Lord Army had been secretly preparing for this plan, which they wanted to prioritize over attacking and destroying humanity, and it had entered a new phase.

“We all know that among the conditions for the resurrection of the daemon, preparing the sacrifice and fodder was a challenge. But the preparations are finally complete!”

Among those listening to Kyubel’s remarks, only Gushara remained facing the floor. By being included in the daemon resurrection plan, his position was higher than that of other Demonic Deities, but he was still the lowest ranked among those gathered here.

“The result is that support device over there,” Kyubel said. “Director Shinorom, are the support device activation experiments going well?”

“Of course. We will place the divine vessel in the hollow of this altar and collect human lives,” Shinorom, the creator of the altar, answered.

“The collection target is ten million people, correct?”

“That’s right. Any fewer and we won’t be able to bring out the original power of the sealed daemon god. I spent years of research making these calculations, so there’s no doubt about it.”

When Director Shinorom finished his report with a sigh, the Demon Lord opened his mouth. “So, Gushara. Are you ready to collect the fodder?”

When the Demon King called out to him, Gushara lowered his head even farther, almost hitting his head on the floor as he answered.

“Of course! Our numbers exceed one million, Demon Lord.”

Over the past several decades, he had established and grown a religion called the Church of Gushara in the southeastern continent of Galiat. He had attempted to expand into the Garlesian Continent in the southwest as well, but

it had not gone well, as he had drawn the anger of the Beast King of Albahal.

“That’s not nearly enough.” At the Demon Lord’s words, Gushara’s body began to tremble.

“Demon Lord, there’s nothing to worry about. I’ve given Gushara the incarnation element!” Director Shinorom jumped in to explain. “He is forcing his followers to ingest it. When the support device is activated, it takes the lives of the believers and turns them into daemonic incarnations. The element then multiplies in the bodies of its hosts, and when the incarnation attacks a human being, it infects them, so the person being attacked also dies and becomes a daemonic incarnation. They can act as pawns for the cause at the same time. Ten million lives will be no problem.”

“The incarnation element, hmm? I’m surprised you discovered such a thing.” The Demon King shared his impressions in wonder.

“I’d like to say that it was the result of my genius, but I discovered it by accident while researching how to turn humans into demons.”

“Oh?”

“I named it the incarnation element, but what it does is remove all elements relating to one’s species. In doing so, it makes fusion with the elements of other creatures possible.”

“Does that mean the daemonic incarnations you showed me previously were the true form of these living things?”

Shinorom grinned and nodded at the Demon Lord’s words. “Maybe that’s the case, maybe it’s not. There are still many things that aren’t clear about the principles of the God of Creation. Right now, it’s just a hypothesis.”

When Shinorom was done, it was Kyubel’s turn to speak.

“Now that the preparations for collecting fodder are complete, it’s time to move on to the next step! From here on, failure is not an option!”

Kyubel spun around as if dancing, then struck a pose as he snapped. Seeing this, Ardor felt the anger that he had suppressed well back up.

“Indeed.”

He noticed the anger in his voice and felt Kyubel's eyes on him.

"Supreme Commander! What's with that response?! Are you not aware that the plan has at long last entered its final stage?!" Kyubel inquired, his tone slightly mocking.

"Not aware?! Which one of us is not aware?!" Ardoe bellowed, unable to help himself. "You were the one who failed to invade Rohzenheim and forced us to revise our plan!" Before Ardoe could reach the first step of the stairs leading to the throne, Gandira, one of the Six Great Demon Gods, silently grappled him from behind.

"Hrgh?! Gandira! Why do you interfere?!"

Demon Gods stood on either side of a roaring Ardoe and grabbed his arms. It took three of them to hold him down.

"Grrrr! You too, Vildiga?! Release me! I can't take this anymore!"

The rest of the Demon Gods arrived to calm down the rampaging Ardoe, and the area in front of the stairs leading to the throne became quite a commotion. The Demon Lord observed quietly, Kyubel looked amused, Director Shinorom appeared disinterested, and Gushara watched in dismay.

Eventually, perhaps seeing that Ardoe's excitement could not be contained, the Demon Lord opened his mouth.

"Ardoe, I appreciate your loyalty, but I don't want you to be so furious and enraged all the time."

Even Ardoe, as expected, could not help but calm down at those words.

"I-I'm sorry. Demon Lord."

"Goodness. It's no good to be so hotheaded," Kyubel said teasingly.

"Kyubel, refrain from trying to push Ardoe's buttons," the Demon Lord continued in a chiding manner. "He has a point."

The initial plan was to attract the attention of the gods by carrying out a large-scale invasion of the Mortal Realm the likes of which had never been seen. This would make it easier not only to invade the Heavenly Realm and seize divine vessels, but also for the Church of Gushara to gather more believers.

The Church of Gushara had attracted many people with the promise that becoming a believer would protect them from the Demon Lord Army thanks to the power of the founder, Gushara. If an invasion on an unprecedented scale had then been carried out in a way that allowed only the believers of the Church of Gushara to be spared, many of the frightened humans would try to join the faith as well. In particular, it had been thought that if Rohzenheim, which, like the Empire of Baukis, had shown strong resistance from outside the Central Continent, were attacked and destroyed, it would have a great impact on the inhabitants of the Galiatan Continent to the south. Moreover, they had calculated that even wiping out nearly twenty million elves would not be enough to make God of Creation Elmea reset the current world.

Due to the appearance of Allen and his friends, however, they had been unable to attack and destroy Rohzenheim. Although they had been able to steal a divine vessel, a different plan had been needed to acquire the necessary fodder and gather them into the divine vessel.

“It’s true that Allen did ruin my plans. That’s my bad. I need to reflect upon my actions and be wary from now on.” Kyubel showed no remorse but implied that Allen was undoubtedly an obstacle to their plans.

“Indeed you do,” the Demon Lord responded. “However, Helmios and the golem-piloting dwarves are also a nuisance. Therefore, while we’re gathering on the Galiatan Continent, we shall simultaneously invade the Central Continent and the Empire of Baukis. The humans won’t let their guards down, but if those two continents are attacked at the same time, they won’t be able to touch Galiat.”

“In that case, I’ll be off to the Central Conti—”

Just as Kyubel began to speak, Ardoe interrupted him.

“Wait! I will also take command of the Central Continent. I can’t leave it to you after you so recently failed.”

“I see. Okay, then I’ll be supporting Gushara,” Kyubel replied with a chuckle, and Ardoe realized that he had again been tricked.

“Y-You... That was your plan from the start.”

However, as if sensing Ardor's anger, the Demon Lord immediately interjected.

"It's decided. I'll leave the invasion of the Central Continent and the Empire of Baukis to Ardor. Kyubel will head to Galat and oversee the final stage of the plan. And refrain from any further quarrels going forward. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Yes, my lord."

After the Strategist and the Supreme Commander, the two highest-ranking commanders of the Demon Lord Army, responded, the Demon Lord shifted his gaze to Director Shinorom.

"Shinorom. Is the monsters' blood inheritance progressing? Once the fodder is ready, the next thing that is needed is the sacrifice."

Director Shinorom grinned. "Of course. The conditions for the first stage have already been met. It won't be long until it's completed."

"I see. Soon, then. Heh heh heh."

Ardor and the others bowed their heads deeply as the Demon Lord chuckled and rubbed his stomach in satisfaction.

## Side Story 5: Hell Mode Spin-Off—The Heroic Tale of Helmios (Part 1): The Birth of a Miracle

On the first of January, just before dawn, the city of Teomenia, the religious capital of Elmahl, was covered in pure-white snow. It started falling the night before and showed no signs of stopping even after half a day had passed, leading Teomenia to welcome the new year in a sacred silence.

Of course, the hill overlooking the city and the church atop it were also blanketed with snow. Inside the stone church, however, there was a tense calm unlike that found in Teomenia. The priests had gathered in a room with a fireplace located in a corner of the church. They had been there overnight, looking solemnly toward the front of a single door.

“I hear that another fortress has fallen in the northern part of the Central Continent. The city has been occupied by the Demon Lord Army, and the surrounding land is said to be overflowing with monsters. Though an oracle has come to guide us to salvation, there are those within the Church spreading rumors that this is not the case,” a middle-aged bishop said anxiously.

“Stop it,” an older bishop chided. “Our role is to convey Lord Elmea’s oracles to the people. We can’t be the ones to be so anxious about them. For now, we can only wait for the Great Pope to relay it to us.”

However, the bishop next to him, who was about the same age, took up the conversation in a defiant tone. “No, there *are* reports that the Demon Lord Army is deploying enough monsters to reach all the way from the east side of the Central Continent to the west. They say that weak fortresses will be destroyed by the mere footfalls of the enemies coming toward them. The Central Continent has reached its limit. It is but a matter of time before our turn comes.”

“I doubt something like that will ever happen. Even if it were true, do you doubt the thoughts of Lord Elmea, who is going through the trouble of giving an oracle at such a time?” another priest retorted. However, his voice lacked

conviction as well. Even if he thought the other party's statement was an exaggerated version of the testimony of a frightened soldier, nothing more than hearsay upon hearsay, he could not help but feel uneasy.

There was an unpleasant silence among the bishops.

*Creeeak.*

The sound of door hinges creaking could be heard, and Great Pope Istahl appeared from the next room, the oracle hall.

"Thank you for your hard work, Great Pope."

"So, what did Lord Elmea have to say in the oracle?"

Once the Great Pope had sat down in a nearby chair, the bishops began asking him questions.

"Hmm." Seemingly aware of the anxious eyes focused on him, the Great Pope did not speak right away.

"So it's true. There is no way to stop the Demon Lord Army from rampaging."

"No, that's not the case. Lord Elmea, the God of Creation, has granted us salvation," the Great Pope replied clearly, and all the bishops gathered there began to murmur.

"Th-Then..."

"How will we be saved?"

"Silence!" The archbishop, who was second only to the Great Pope, bellowed, causing the other bishops to turn quiet. The Great Pope took a deep breath and spoke again.

"This year, a hero with miraculous powers will be born. Someone gifted with the ability to vanquish great evil. Do not lose hope."

"Wonderful!"

Everyone in the room let out a cry of happiness. It was a moment of joy so great that the walls vibrated from how loud their cheer was. The anxious young bishop and even the older bishop who had chided him clenched their fists so hard that their fingers turned white and let out sighs of relief. It was as if they

were trying to drive out the unease they still harbored deep in their hearts.

“Lord Elmea did not abandon us! At last! At long last, we have salvation!”

Some bishops were moved to tears because of the amount of anxiety they had been feeling.

“However, ‘this year’ is too vague. We don’t even know where this person will be born.”

“Think about it carefully. Should we know the specific date and location, that information will leak elsewhere. When that happens, there is no doubt that the Demon Lord Army will target that newborn.”

Some bishops immediately began discussing the details of the oracle.

One way or another, the contents of the oracle would be discussed in depth at the church in Teomenia, then shared with the whole world via the communication magic tool provided by the Empire of Baukis. To that end, they would have to assess the details over the next few days and decide within the Church of Elmea how much of it could be made public and to whom it could be communicated.

One of the young bishops looked surprised. “Wait, if they’re born this year...” Seeing this, the middle-aged bishop nodded.

“That’s right. It will take twenty years for this hero sent by Lord Elmea to be able to fight the Demon Lord Army.”

“That’s why Lord Elmea said that we must not lose hope. Until the time when a hero can stand up to the forces of darkness, we must hold on to that hope no matter what.”

The Great Pope told everyone gathered there to steel their resolve.

Currently, the Empire of Baukis and Rohzenheim were fighting from an advantageous position. They were able to do so because the Empire of Giamut on the Central Continent, which was being invaded on the largest scale of any member of the Five Continent Alliance, was somehow holding out. If the Central Continent fell, the dominance of the two northern continents would collapse, and the Garlesian and Galiatan Continents in the south would be directly



attacked by the Demon Lord Army. Were that to happen, the world would end before the hero could play an active role. In order to prevent this from happening, the Church of Elmea's next task was to do whatever it could to help the Five Continent Alliance endure, thus buying time for the hero to mature and gain strength.

\* \* \*

Five years had passed since God of Creation Elmea's oracle telling of the birth of a hero. In the remote Giamutan village of Cortana, a child awakened. He stretched out under the blanket of his straw-filled futon, then jumped out of it. As soon as he did so, however, his body began to tremble.

"I-It's so cold!"

The child had light-blue hair that reached his shoulders and a beautiful, well-formed face, making it difficult to discern his gender at first glance. He left his room and walked down the hallway of the wooden house while cradling his delicate body, clad in slightly oversized clothes, with both hands.

There was a flip-out window in the hallway, and voices could be heard coming from outside. When the child opened the window and looked out, he saw a shirtless man standing by the side of the house, wielding a wooden sword with only his right hand as powder snow fell from the dim sky.

The man was practicing as if he were in real combat—swinging his wooden sword, changing stances, thrusting, sweeping, raising the sword, and taking up a defensive posture as he stepped forward. All the while, thick muscles undulated beneath the skin of his lean, toned upper body, and steam rose from his warm body while he dripped with sweat. His left arm had been cut off just below the shoulder.

The child watched the scene for a while, then quietly closed the window and proceeded down the hallway. He opened the door at the end of it, stepped down onto the dirt floor, opened the lid of the large jar that was there, and quenched his parched throat with some water drawn with a ladle. Then, he took a wooden cup from the side shelf, filled it with water, and headed back down the hallway. He walked past his room and knocked on the door of the room at the end.

*Knock knock.*

“Helmios?”

A young woman’s voice came from within the room. Helmios opened the door and went inside.

The room was dimly lit, and the roaring fireplace was warming the area. A slender woman sat upright in her bed, illuminated by the glow of the flames. Her long hair was tied back.

Helmios approached the bed and placed the wooden cup on her side table. As he did, the woman fixed her gaze on Helmios and smiled.

“Here, drink this. I’ll make us something to eat,” Helmios said.

“Thank you. You’re such a kind boy. I wonder who you take after.”

“I’m *your* kid, mom.”

Helmios spoke as he watched his mother, Kalea, grab the cup and take a sip. He then returned to the dirt-floored room, stirred the ashes in the hearth to stoke the fire, and added some wood. He reheated the previous day’s soup. In addition, he placed three slices of bread on the hearth’s grate and toasted them until they began to give off a delicious aroma. He cut slits into one of the slices to make it easier to eat.

Just as he was placing the three slices of bread on a wooden plate, the front door opened and the man who had been practicing swordsmanship in the garden entered the room with the earthen floor. Like Helmios had done earlier, the man scooped water from the pitcher with a ladle and gulped it down.

“Breakfast is ready,” Helmios said to the man—his father, Lucas. His father nodded, propped his wooden sword against the entrance, took the plate of bread from Helmios with his free hand, and went up from the dirt floor into the living room.

Shortly thereafter, Helmios entered the living room carrying a wooden bowl of soup on a tray, which he placed on the table where his father was waiting. He noticed that his father’s gaze was not on him but on the entrance to the living room, so he turned to look as well.

“Hey, Kalea. Are you sure it’s okay for you to get up?”

Just as his father had said, Kalea was standing there. She was wearing a thick woolen cardigan and leaning against the doorway.

“Of course. It’s been a long time since the three of us got together as a family.”

With that said, his mother stepped into the living room. Perhaps due to a lack of strength, however, she took only a few steps before nearly tumbling forward.

“Ah! Mom?!”

Helmios cried out and tried to support his mother, but his body would not move. In his place, his father stepped out from behind him to help Kalea, who had collapsed, with his only hand.

“It’s dangerous,” he said. “Come on, I’ll carry you to your seat.”

“G-Goodness... How embarrassing.”

His father bent down and lifted his mother up with just his thick right arm. His mother looked embarrassed as she was carried straight to the table. Helmios was relieved, feeling his heart grow warm at how close his parents were.

Once his parents were seated, Helmios served them soup from the tray.

“You work so hard. Who do you take after?” Lucas asked.

“You too, dad?! Aren’t you both my parents?!” Helmios’s face was beet red as he spoke. His parents laughed out loud.

“I’m just kidding. But you really are a strange child. Unlike me, you’re very healthy.” Helmios’s mother reached out and stroked his hair, which was the same color as her own.

“Yeah,” Lucas agreed. “It seems there’s been illnesses going around the village lately, but you haven’t caught so much as a cold. Maybe the gods have blessed you.”

“Yeah, Gatsun is stuck in bed. I hope the gods bless him as well,” Helmios said.

Helmios’s mother smiled as he said that.

“Let’s eat.” Upon saying this, she closed her eyes and folded her hands.

“Thank you, Elmea, God of Creation, and Molmol, God of Bountiful Harvests, for our daily bread and blessings.” She offered prayers to the gods before eating. Helmios and his father did the same.

The three of them then began eating breakfast. Helmios’s mother tore her slice of bread and ate it, and his father slurped his soup, put his spoon down, and dipped the bread in it. As Helmios watched this with satisfaction, his mother called out to him.

“Helmios, give me your bowl.”

“Huh? Mom?”

Helmios handed her his wooden bowl, and she transferred the meat and vegetables from her soup into his. He wanted his mother to eat a lot and be well nourished, so Helmios had reduced his own portions.

“But—” Helmios started in protest.

Kalea looked calm yet firm. She would not take “no” for an answer.

“You can’t be a picky eater. You have to eat a lot.”

“Okay...”

As Helmios reluctantly accepted the wooden bowl and started to eat, his mother suddenly covered her mouth and coughed. He and his father watched as she continued to cough, her face growing pale as she did.

“Mom!”

“Kalea!”

Lucas got up from his seat, rubbed Kalea’s back as she coughed, and looked at Helmios. The boy understood his father’s intentions and nodded, then flew to the corner of the room and opened a drawer in an old cupboard. He paused for a moment after finding what he was searching for. But he quickly shook himself free of his hesitation and grabbed the only paper packet of medicine they had before handing it to his father. From there, he ran down to the earthen-floored room.

“Kalea, take your medicine.”

“Huh? But it’s the last one.”

“It’s fine. Just drink it.”

Helmios could hear their conversation through the open doorway as he filled a cup and returned to the living room. His father was waiting for him with the powder ready, and he put the cup on the table. No sooner had he done so than his father handed the water and medicine to his mother.

After swallowing it all, Kalea let out a long breath. Her face remained pale, but she seemed to have stopped coughing. As Lucas once again picked Kalea up with his one hand and carried her to her bedroom, Helmios looked down at the dishes she had left behind and noticed a bloodstain on the side of her wooden bowl. It had come from the hand she had used to cover her mouth.

After cleaning the dishes and wiping down the table, Helmios went to check in on his mother. He was just standing in front of his parents’ room when the door opened and he was met by his father.

“Thank you, Helmios. That’s our boy.”

“We need to get more medicine again.”

“You’re right. I’ll go get it today. The rico fruit peddler doesn’t leave the village until tomorrow, so I have all day free.”

Lucas made a living as a bodyguard for peddlers and couriers. Although he had only had one arm for as long as Helmios could remember, his skill with a sword had never waned, and he continued to receive requests for protection. Starting tomorrow, he would be escorting merchants between towns. The next time he returned would be in a month at the earliest.

Helmios fell silent, and his father’s large hand stroked his head.

“Don’t make that face. Now, you should go outside. If I remember correctly, you were meeting up with your friends, right?”

Helmios unconsciously looked up when he heard his father’s words. “Huh? But I want to stay with mom.”

“Don’t break your promise with your friends. Go out and play.”

His father’s unexpectedly strong words left Helmios momentarily at a loss.

Indeed, he had told his father the previous evening that he would be getting together with friends today. But was it okay for him to leave his suffering mother behind?

“Helmios, I’ll be fine,” Kalea said, her voice from behind Helmios’s father. Perhaps she had been listening to their conversation. “Your Appraisal Ceremony is soon. When it comes, I’m sure you’ll find that you’ve been bestowed with a wonderful Talent. I intend to last long enough to see that.”

“‘Last long enough’...” Helmios felt his chest tighten at his mother’s words, and he could not help but look down. If he did not, he was going to burst into tears.

“It’s okay, I’m here with your mother, so you have nothing to worry about. Besides, your friends are probably waiting for you.”

Helmios could not argue with him. He went back to his room, quickly changed his clothes, and left the house with great reluctance. However, his steps were sluggish, as he was worried about his mother. Cortana Village was small, having only a hundred houses and a total population of three hundred people, so even a child could reach the plaza near the village entrance in about ten minutes.

Five children around Helmios’s age were waiting in the square for him to arrive.

“You’re late! Wait, what’s wrong, Helmios? You look glum.”

The girl with her long hair tied in two pigtails was about to scold Helmios for being late, but she noticed his depressed expression and called out to him with concern.

“It’s nothing, Dorothy. So, I guess Gatsun couldn’t come after all.” Helmios looked around at his companions and noticed that Gatsun, who was sick in bed, was not among them.

“I guess not. So, what are we going to do today?”

Helmios reflexively thought about playing when Dorothy, the daughter of the village priest, asked that question. He had become the de facto leader of the kids his age, and he was always asked for his opinion when no one could think of something they wanted to do. His next thoughts were of Gatsun, who was

not there, and his mother, who was probably asleep at home.

“I know. How about we go get a rico fruit and give it to Gatsun?”

When Helmios suggested this, the children nodded and all at once ran toward the entrance of the village. Leaving footprints on the thinly piled snow, they left the village and headed for a farm a bit away.

It took about thirty minutes for them to reach their destination, which was an orchard full of short trees with long branches that spread out horizontally. Glossy red fruit peeked out here and there on the snow-dusted branches.

“Found them. I’m glad they’re still there.”

The children looked at each other, snickering. Even if they did not realize that the rico fruit grown here was an important source of income for the village, they did know that it was wrong to take these things that adults had put so much care into growing. Helmios and his friends felt a sense of immorality in trying to take them without permission.

However, one of the children noticed something strange and raised their voice. “Hey, look. It looks like the fruits on the lower branches are gone.”

Helmios and the other kids looked around and saw that all the rico fruits were out of their reach. Apparently, they had already been harvested from the lower branches to prevent them from being picked by mischievous children.

“Then I guess we’re riding on each other’s shoulders,” Helmios said, having immediately come up with a solution.

Before they could put it into effect, however, Dorothy whispered to the group. “Everyone, hide!” All the children immediately crouched down on the spot. The six sets of eyes turned to see a man carrying long-handled pruning shears and a basket on his back, walking slowly down the path to the orchard.

“What should we do?”

“Maybe we should give up.”

As the children whispered among themselves, Helmios made a decision.

“This is probably because I was late, so I’ll act as a decoy. In the meantime, work in pairs and pick the fruits.”

“Hey!” Dorothy tried to argue, but Helmios put a stop to it.

“Don’t worry. Pick some for me too.” With that, Helmios started walking away, still hunched down. He circled around to flank the man coming toward the group, then stood up quickly and started running toward him.

When the man noticed this and came to a stop, Helmios started crying loudly.

“Waaah! I wanna go home!”

Seeing the man turn away from the rico orchard to look at Helmios, the rest of the children immediately got onto one another’s shoulders to harvest the fruit. Once they were tall enough and had picked as much fruit as they could reach, they got down from each other’s shoulders and moved on before climbing back up and picking even more fruit.

Meanwhile, the man stared at Helmios with a puzzled look on his face.

“Whose daughter are you? Wait, you’re the village’s—”

Helmios had seen this man, who had just confused him for a girl, before. This was the man who had accused him of stealing rico fruit the previous year.

An awkward silence fell over the two of them. During that silence, the boy carrying Dorothy on his shoulders got caught in the snow and lost his balance. Naturally, Dorothy, who was on his shoulders, was shaken around.

“Hey, what are you— Eek!”

Dorothy’s voice rang out, and the man reflexively turned toward it. Then looked down at Helmios with an expression of realization.

“I saw you last year too! I’m sure you stole my ricos, you little brat!” By the time the man shouted, Helmios had already broken into a run and was kicking up snow.

“I’ve been found out! Everyone run!”

“Helmios!”

“I’ll be fine, so hurry! Whoa!” The man caught up with Helmios and reached out to grab him, but Helmios lowered his body and dodged his hand, then sprinted toward the entrance to the orchard.



The other children took advantage of this opportunity to collect the rico fruit that had fallen to the ground and run in the opposite direction from Helmios. As they left the orchard, they regrouped with Helmios, who had made a wide turn and escaped.

When the children turned around, the man had stopped near the entrance to the orchard. As was the case last year, he did not seem to want to pursue them too far into the field, so he shook his head and returned to his farmwork.

“Well, that went well. Anyway, here’s your share, Helmios.”

Helmios took two rico fruits from Dorothy and put them in his jacket pocket.

“Thank you.”

“Huh? You’re not going to eat them?” Like the other children, Dorothy was nibbling on a rico fruit right then and there, and she wondered why Helmios was not doing the same.

“I’m a little out of breath. I’ll eat it later.”

“Hmm, I see.”

Returning to the residential area of Cortana Village, Helmios and his friends headed for Gatsun’s house. Gatsun’s parents ran a drug store, which was highly valued in this village where there was no doctor. As usual, many people were crowded in front of the store that also served as his home.

“Wow, there’s a lot of people here today too,” Dorothy commented.

“That probably means a lot of people are getting sick,” said Helmios.

Helmios and his friends went around to the back of the store. Dorothy reached for the front door, but Helmios blocked her.

“What?” she asked.

“Gatsun is sick. I’ll bring these to him.”

“Huh?”

“Y’know, ’cause I don’t get sick.”

Dorothy nodded, agreeing with him. None of the other kids objected either.

It was already close to noon, and it seemed like the rico fruit alone would not be enough for the hungry children. They decided that they were done for the day and, before dispersing, Dorothy gave Helmios two rico fruits for Gatsun. He accepted them and saw everyone off, then opened the door to Gatsun's house as usual and walked through the silent house to Gatsun's room.

"Hmm? Who is it?"

When Helmios opened the door, Gatsun, who was lying in bed, got up. He was larger than Helmios and had a stocky build for someone his age.

"Hey. I got you some rico fruit."

"Huh... Sounds like you guys had some fun."

Gatsun coughed and looked at Helmios enviously.

"You can come with us when you feel better. It was pretty difficult because we didn't have our decoy."

"Hey!"

"Kidding. This will make you feel better."

Helmios sat down in a chair that he had brought next to Gatsun's bed, quickly peeled off the skin of the rico fruit, and handed the pulp to Gatsun.

"Oh, thank you. Mmm! I've been forced to drink such bitter medicine that my tongue was about to go crazy!" Gatsun spoke excitedly as he ate the rico fruit, which had become sweeter due to the winter cold.

"Can you give me some of that medicine? Mom isn't feeling well."

"Ah. The starry grass one, right? I don't know. Everyone was buying it because it's good for epidemic diseases, and I think they said they ran out of stock."

Helmios was taken aback by Gatsun's response.

"Huh? So you can't get it anymore?"

"Well, if there's no starry grass...probably not. There are monsters living in the mountains to the west, so it's dangerous to go and get it. We'll just have to wait until it gets warmer and the adventurers come."

Starry grass was said to be effective against all kinds of illnesses, but it only

grew in highlands and was not readily available. Near this village, it only grew in the mountains where monsters lived, so it was necessary to ask for help from adventurers.

Unsure of what to do, Helmios peeled another rico fruit, gave it to Gatsun, and hurriedly left the boy's house. Still feeling anxious, he hurried back to his own house, opened the front door, and climbed from the dirt floor into the living room.

"Dad, mom, look! I brought ric—"

His parents were not there, so he walked out into the hallway and headed to his parents' bedroom. As expected, he could hear his mother's coughing coming from within. He hurriedly opened the door and jumped inside.

"Hey, Kalea, pull it together!" Lucas said as he noticed his son. "Ah, Helmios, you're back."

"M-Mom? Mom?!"

Helmios saw his mother coughing violently as his father rubbed her back, a blanket soaked in her blood.

"Look after your mother! I'll go buy some medicine!"

After saying this to his stunned son, Lucas ran out of the room with a sense of urgency.

"M-Mom."

Helmios did not know what to do, but he felt that he had to support her, so he approached his wheezing mother. Kalea wiped her mouth, looked up, and smiled at Helmios, but she quickly turned stern when she saw the rico fruits in his hand.

"Where'd you get those?" she demanded to know.

Helmios wondered for a moment what to do with his hands. Knowing that he should not lie to his mother, he spoke honestly.

"I'm sorry. I wanted you to eat..." the boy confessed.

"Come here."

Helmios obediently obeyed his mother's command and stood by her bedside. Her hand suddenly reached out toward the top of his head, and he instinctively flinched, thinking that she was going to hit him. But her hand gently stroked his head instead.

"You're truly a good child, Helmios," she said. "But no matter how much you need it, you mustn't steal what others have worked so hard to raise. That goes against the will of Lord Elmea, who created this world."

Helmios's mother spoke in such a calm voice that he could not believe she had been coughing up blood just moments ago.

"Growing fruit, using a sword, making medicine, listening to the voice of God—Lord Elmea created this world to be harsh, but bestowed upon us enough power to live by helping each other. That power is what made us grow the rico fruit. Someone worked hard to grow it in hopes that it would help another person. If someone were to steal that fruit, they would be disregarding the grower's power and the Talent that Lord Elmea gave them. It will stop people from helping each other. They'll have no choice but to survive all on their own."

Helmios listened to his mother in silence. Then, he realized that his mother probably would not live much longer.

"If that happens, the wonderful Talent you received from Lord Elmea will be for naught. I wouldn't want that to happen."

Helmios quietly wept at his mother's words. At the very least, he hoped that she would live until his Appraisal Ceremony. What could he do to ensure that, though?

While the two of them were having their quiet conversation, Lucas returned, out of breath.

"Any luck?" Helmios asked, and his father shook his head silently.

"Tomorrow, I'll go to the next village with the peddler as planned. There might still be medicine there," he said slowly, as if trying to squeeze the words out. Helmios sensed more anxiety in his voice than he had expected there to be.

"That's not enough!" Helmios shouted almost involuntarily. "How many days do you think that will take?! I'm going to ask the church!"

“H-Hey! The church is also—”

Despite his father’s protest, Helmios ran out of his house and headed to the Elmean church in the village.

Many villagers were inside the wooden church. From the entrance to the altar where the priest was, there was a line of sick-looking people and their attendants, confirming the story Helmios had heard from Gatsun that they had run out of medicine.

Dorothy, who was handling the line of worshippers, noticed Helmios rushing in and called out to him.

“What’s wrong, Helmios?”

“Dorothy! My mom! She needs to be healed by a priest.”

Seeing Helmios’s desperation, Dorothy panicked and called for her father, a priest. The priest came over from the altar to the entrance of the church and spoke to Helmios.

“You’re Helmios, aren’t you?”

“Please, my mom is in danger. Please come to my house and heal her,” Helmios begged with tears in his eyes, but the priest shook his head sadly.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that right now.”

“Why not?!”

“Look at all these people. They are suffering just like your mother.” The priest’s face turned pale as he said this, and there were dark circles under his eyes. His healing power was not limitless, and he had all but run dry.

Helmios looked at the line of people. He could see the fatigue and pain on their faces. There was no medicine in the village, and there was no hope for healing. Moreover, the priests were also exhausted.

Even if his father went to the next village, it would take him five days to get back. Was there even medicine in the neighboring village in the first place?

Suddenly, his mother’s words came to mind: *“Lord Elmea created this world to be harsh, but bestowed upon us enough power to live by helping each other.”*

Helmios looked up at the statue of Elmea displayed in the back of the church. The statue silently looked down at him.

“Even so, Lord Elmea...!” he said. He turned on his heel and ran home.

After passing through the front door, he picked up his father’s wooden training sword. He lifted it up and found that it was rather heavy, but the weight actually gave him courage.

“Mom, I’ll save you.”

Later that day, after putting Helmios’s mother to bed early, his father announced that he would be heading to the next village tomorrow as planned, saying that it was the only option they had left. Helmios nodded in response and also went to bed early.

The next morning, as the sun peeked over the eastern horizon, Helmios left the house. On his back, he carried a basket for medicinal herbs, and in his hand, he held a wooden sword. He overtook villagers going out to work in the fields, and once he had climbed over the village fence, he followed the wide road heading west.

This was not Helmios’s first time leaving the village. Until now, however, he had always been with his father. Still, he had no worries at all. It was the first cloudless morning in a while, and the air was still cold and dry, but instead of snow, the sunlight was falling and reflecting off the mountain slopes in the distance.

After walking for about an hour on the snow-white road toward the sparkling mountain, Helmios noticed something. As he looked around, he saw that some of the snow that had piled up a little off the road was slowly but surely moving. He readied his wooden sword, remembering what his father had told him: “There are monsters outside the village, so don’t leave the village without permission.”

*Boing.*

What appeared in front of a nervous Helmios was a horned rabbit. It stood up on its hind legs and looked around, its nose twitching, but now there was no wind and it did not seem to catch Helmios’s scent. It started kicking up the

snow and running toward him, then dug up the snow on the roadside, found a new flower bud, and started munching on it.

Seeing this, Helmios suddenly thought that if he brought home this horned rabbit, they would have a truly glamorous dinner. Although he had seen horned rabbits before, he had never thought to try to catch one himself. Today, however, he was willing to try anything. He slowly approached the horned rabbit, one step at a time, careful not to make any noise.

When the horned rabbit looked up, Helmios was one step away. The moment it turned around in a panic, he swung his wooden sword down at its head. He could feel his weapon crush the hard skull beneath the horned rabbit's white fur.

“Gyafu?!”

With a single cry, the horned rabbit stopped moving. Helmios let out the breath he had been holding, and in the next moment, he felt a strange power surge through his entire body.

“Whoa, what is this?” he asked aloud. When he tried to move his arms and legs, he noticed that they seemed lighter. Even the wooden sword moved much more quickly when he swung it.

Curious, Helmios buried the dead horned rabbit in the snow at the base of a nearby tree. No matter how much the sun shone, the piled-up snow would not melt. Thinking he could just dig it up and take it with him on the way home, he continued along the road that led west.

By the time he reached the foot of the mountain to the west, he had found and killed two more horned rabbits. When he had defeated the third one, his body had grown even lighter and he had become able to swing the wooden sword even more quickly. He had not yet learned about leveling up from his father, but he forged onward with high spirits, thinking that it might be a miracle bestowed upon him by the God of Creation to save his mother.

The sun was directly above Helmios when he reached the base of the mountain along the gradually sloping path. Despite having walked a route that would have taken an adult more than half a day to walk in just a few hours, he was not tired at all.

After taking a short break to eat the bread he had brought for lunch, he finally started climbing the mountain path. He walked for a while before entering a forest. The snow had piled up on the tops of the trees and was obscuring the sunlight, making the forest dark and cold.

“Um, if memory serves, it grows at the base of trees and glows.”

Remembering what Gatsun had told him, he searched for the grass that got its name because it apparently emitted light like twinkling stars.

“Oh? That must be...”

A blade of grass peeking out from the thin layer of snow caught his eye. When he bent down to look, he realized that it was not starry grass but a medicinal herb that he had seen hanging in Gatsun’s house.

Thinking he could use it for something, he picked it, put it in the basket on his back, and moved on. In continuing his search, he found plenty more medicinal herbs, but none of the starry grass he was looking for.

“It’s hard to find. Maybe it grows higher up?”

Helmios walked up and down the dark forest, picking the medicinal herbs he found. Before he knew it, he had climbed quite high. Though there was not much wind at the base of the mountain, he found that a strong gust would occasionally blow past him at higher altitudes. With each powerful gale, he heard snow falling somewhere within the forest.

Eventually, he saw a faint light up ahead. His heartbeat quickened.

As he approached the light while suppressing his excitement, he noticed that even though he was in a dimly lit forest, the roots of several trees were clearly glowing. He crouched down at the base of one and pushed aside the snow to reveal blades of grass with tightly curled buds, glittering like stars.

“This is it. The flowers haven’t bloomed yet, but it’s probably okay.”

Just as Helmios was about to reach for the starry grass, there was a sound similar to falling snow nearby. A figure approached him from behind. He quickly turned around, and the figure swung something down at him.

“Whoa!” Helmios managed to dodge the large sword blow, but he was



immediately kicked in the stomach and sent flying backward.

“Gugagagaga!”

A high-pitched laugh echoed around him, and he hurried to his feet. What had attacked him, he saw, was a small, green-skinned figure. In its hand was a rusty sword.

“A goblin!” Helmios had heard about this type of monster from his father. They were said to live in forests and mountains, and they attacked in groups, eating both livestock and humans.

Helmios lowered the basket he was carrying to the ground and drew the wooden sword attached to his belt. He glared at the goblin and raised his weapon. In this situation, he felt he had no choice but to fight. However...

“Gugagagaga!”

Cackles erupted from all around him. He was surrounded by goblins. While glaring at the one in front of him, he cast a sweeping glance around the area. Through the darkness of the forest, he saw several grinning goblins.

Helmios looked at the glow of the starry grass beneath the goblin’s feet before him.

“Wait for me, mom.”

With that, he imitated the stance he had seen his father take up the day before, thrust out the wooden sword in his right hand, and took a swift step forward.

“Guga!”

The goblin in front of him, not expecting the human child to go on the offensive, let out a cry of surprise. However, it quickly tightened its grip on its rusty sword and stepped forward as well.

Helmios swung his wooden sword and the goblin swung its rusty sword at the same time. When the two collided, the tip of the wooden sword was cut off. Then, the goblin slashed at Helmios himself, who had lost his balance from the force of his swing.

“Guga!”

“Whoa?!”

There was a pain in Helmios’s right arm, and he jumped back, immediately placing his left hand over it. His right arm hurt and his left palm felt wet.

He glared at the goblin. His opponent was standing in the same place as before, grinning broadly. Several goblins appeared behind him, also grinning as they looked at him. It seemed they had no intention of killing him right away. Their obscene laughter and their aura made it clear that he would not be getting away.

Helmios looked at the starry grass again. Even if he were to escape from this place, his trip would have no meaning if he did not return with it. But how in the world could he both get the starry grass and escape from the goblin assault? Helmios racked his brain; the situation he was in did not cause him any fear, nor did the fact that his right arm was wounded. However, he was surprised when the goblin to his left threw a rusty machete at him.

“Wha— Whoa!”

Helmios immediately held up what was left of his wooden sword and took a defensive stance, but the machete never reached him.

“Flying Blade!” Just as his father’s voice reached his ears, a mass of wind struck the machete right in front of him, shattering it into pieces.

“Dad!”

Lucas came running in from the direction the shock wave had come from, kicking up snow as he moved. When he reached Helmios, he raised his short sword and glared at the goblins.

“Are you okay, Helmios?”

“Y-Yeah. But how did you—”

“When I woke up this morning, you weren’t there. The wooden sword was gone too, so I knew right away that you had gone to look for your mother’s medicine. I’m glad I rushed after you.”

“Right. I found some starry grass over there and—”

“Forget that. Let’s get out of here,” Lucas interrupted. Before the goblins

could come at them, he readied his sword and made sure not to give them any openings.

“B-But without it—”

“You’re more important. Kalea understands that.”

His father began to back away while holding up his sword. Seeing this, the goblins moved forward, but they did not try to attack. Helmios understood that this was because they were frightened by his father’s aura, but he also felt that he could not go home without getting the starry grass.

The father and son slowly retreated, looking around, waiting for the right moment to escape from the goblin siege. However, they were looking in completely opposite directions.

Helmios was the first to find his opening.

“Hey!”

By the time his father shouted, Helmios had already started running. He pretended to run sideways, but at that moment, while they were confused as to whether to go toward him or his father, he ran between the goblins that had been eyeing him. A goblin with a rusty sword appeared in front of him when he did, and as it stepped forward, he ran toward the starry grass.

However, Helmios was distracted by the starry grass and did not notice what was waiting behind the goblins.

“Whoa! What the hell are you?!” the boy gasped.

The next thing Helmios knew, he was being held high in the air by a pair of giant hands.

“A-A goblin king?!”

Only when he heard his father’s surprised voice did Helmios figure out that his captor was the leader of the goblins.

“Guguaaa!”

A terrible scream came from beneath his feet, and upon turning to look at the source of it, he saw a group of goblins attacking his father.

“Gugagaga!”

“Shit! Give Helmios back!”

Lucas wielded his sword and cut down the attacking goblins one by one.

As he watched, Helmios felt a mysterious power rise up, just like he had when he had defeated the horned rabbit. At the same time, he felt like the goblin king’s grip on him was getting weaker.

“Hey, you bumbling oaf! Let go of me!” he shouted, putting strength into his arms to try to force open the goblin king’s hands, which were squeezing his body from both sides.

“Gugau?!”

The goblin king was surprised to find that its prey, which he had a firm grasp on, had begun to resist with unexpected strength. In response, it redoubled its efforts in squeezing him. The muscles in its arms bulged as it tightened its grip, but its opponent pushed back with gradually increasing force, refusing to give in.

It was not long before Helmios had created a small gap between himself and the goblin king’s palms. Taking advantage of it, he shifted his left hand and grabbed the goblin king’s finger. A dull *snap* rang out as he broke it.

“Guga?!”

With a hideous groan, the goblin king opened its hands and turned its face upward. Helmios, who was now falling toward the monster, thrust the wooden sword he had been holding in his right hand downward.

“Raaah!”

“Gugaoa?!”

His sword, which was sharper as a result of its tip having been cut off, pierced the goblin king’s right eye and bore into its brain.

The goblin king was dead. Seeing the massive creature slowly fall onto its back, both Lucas and the other goblins stopped moving for a moment.

“Helmios. Did you just pass a Trial of the Gods?” Lucas muttered.

The goblins quickly ran away. From beside the corpse of the goblin king he had defeated, Helmios watched them flee deeper into the forest, making a sound like falling snow as they went.



“I did it. They all ran away. Dad, now...”

Lucas looked at Helmios, who had a vague expression of relief on his face.

“That power... I see. Helmios, you are a Sword Lord. Lord Elmea, you have given this child a wonderful Talent.”

“A Sword Lord?”

Helmios did not understand what his father was saying.

“No matter what kind of Talent you have, it won’t change the fact that you are my precious child. Let’s hurry and get the starry grass, then return to the village. Your mother is waiting for you.”

His father’s words reminded Helmios of the reason he had come here and risked his life fighting.

“Right!” the boy said.

He threw away his wooden sword and ran to the first starry grass he saw, shoved his hand through the snow, grabbed it by its roots, and pulled it out with all his might.

“Yes! Now mom will be okay!”

Seeing his son so overcome with emotion that he had started crying, Helmios’s father took a deep breath and finally smiled in relief.

After that, Helmios and Lucas harvested most of the starry grass that was growing in the area and put it in the basket with the other medicinal herbs. They also retrieved the three horned rabbits Helmios had buried in the snow, then returned to the village before the daylight had faded.

At home, his mother, Kalea, was waiting for them. She heard the front door open and rushed out of the living room.

“Mom, look! We got a lot of starry grass! You can get better now!”

She ran up to Helmios, who was smiling proudly and showing her the contents of the basket he was carrying, and audibly slapped him across the face.

“I’m sorry... Mom?”

The moment his mother's hand hit his cheek, Helmios could sense her worry. Yet he was confused by the way she was holding that very hand and giving him a strange look.

"Helmios passed a Trial of the Gods."

Kalea looked surprised when she heard Lucas's words.

"This boy definitely has a Talent. He might be—no, he is definitely a Sword Lord. Lord Elmea, the God of Creation, has given him an incredibly rare Talent."

"Wh-What? He's not a Swordsman like you?"

While Kalea was stunned, Lucas continued to talk excitedly.

"He's far better than that. Even a Sword Master could never become this strong."

"A-A Sword Lord..." Kalea murmured.

"And even if that's not the case, Helmios is our precious child. We must take good care of him the way we always have." Lucas tousled Helmios's hair with his right hand.

"You're right. My darling boy," Kalea said, bending down in front of Helmios and hugging him gently.

"Wait, what's going on? I don't get it."

Helmios did not understand what was happening all of a sudden, but when he saw that his parents were sobbing with joy, his heart felt full and he burst into tears as well.

Thus ended the first adventure of Helmios the Hero. His Appraisal Ceremony, at which he and his parents would find out his true Talent, was fast approaching.



## Afterword

Welcome to the afterword for volume 7 of *Hell Mode*. Thank you for picking it up.

As you know, in the world of *Hell Mode*, Allen was thrust straight into a new battle as soon as he conquered the Rank S dungeon. Volume 7—this volume—and volume 8, which is scheduled to be published soon, are referred to as the “heretic” arc, and the next one will be the conclusion.

I would like to apologize for the fact that, due to the story and the number of characters, the heretic arc has been divided into two parts, just like the Rank S dungeon arc, which was divided into volumes 5 and 6. Regardless of it being broken up, I wrote a lot of new material, so I hope you enjoyed it.

Speaking of newly written stories, I think I was able to write a lot of interesting scenes, such as the battle between the Guildmaster General Makkaron and Bask, the King of Shura, as well as the various questions surrounding the Great Pope and Pontiff Gushara. I even touched on religion in this volume, including Daemonism and its founder.

Originally, *Hell Mode* was a story about a world where the gods bestowed Talents on people and where there were statuses such as royalty and serfdom. I also wrote about stories between nations that were members of the Five Continent Alliance. There was a wide variety of nonhuman races too, like elves, dwarves, and beastkin.

I never dreamed that the day would come when I would be able to write and share with my readers something so close to the thoughts and ideas I have experienced in my own life. For me, conveying my worldview is the most important thing.

As I write in this afterword, I hope that readers can enjoy the work without thinking too much about it. I would be happy if you could read the story with an open mind, even if it differs from your own worldview or ideas.

Next, as a continuation of the previous afterword, I would like to write a review of the life of Hamuo.

Last time, I think I had just dropped out of university because I had become so obsessed with gaming that I neglected my studies. I fell off the track to use the mass hiring system available to Japan's new university graduates and ended up working part-time night shifts. I remember that when I first told my father that I wanted to drop out of school, rather than being angry, he was very shocked.

I returned home and worked part-time for several years, but my parents didn't say anything. I started searching for a new job, thinking that things would never work out quite right, and I think I kept away from games while I did that.

Perhaps because I was born at a good time, me looking for a job coincided with a large number of baby boomers retiring. The company where I worked part-time was also expanding its hiring opportunities, so I took the recruitment exam.

I was rejected the first year but got a job the following year. I feel like my parents were happy. After all, I remember buying a bag for my mother because I wanted to use my first paycheck to get something for the people who raised me.

Even after I got hired, I still commuted from home because it was within walking distance of my parents' house. When the new employee training was over and I was busy actually learning how to do my job, I heard from my mother that my father was sulking. When I asked her to elaborate, she said that he was angry that I'd only given her a gift with that first paycheck. So, I asked my sulking father about it.

"Dad, is there anything you want?"

"I work on my feet, so I need to wear shoes that are comfortable to walk in."

The reason for his quick response was probably that it's a parent's dream to have their child buy them something with their first paycheck.

Thinking that I'd done something wrong, I went to a nearby Aeon-slash-shoe-store over the weekend and bought a pair to give to my father, who was still working. It made me feel like I'd done something good. I don't think I was able

to repay all of his kindness, but that was how I felt. I recommend that you use your first paycheck to give your parents a gift, or that you go out to eat with them and pay for their meals.

Well, it looks like I've once again reached my word limit. Next time, I would like to write a continuation of the afterword that follows the life of Hamuo.

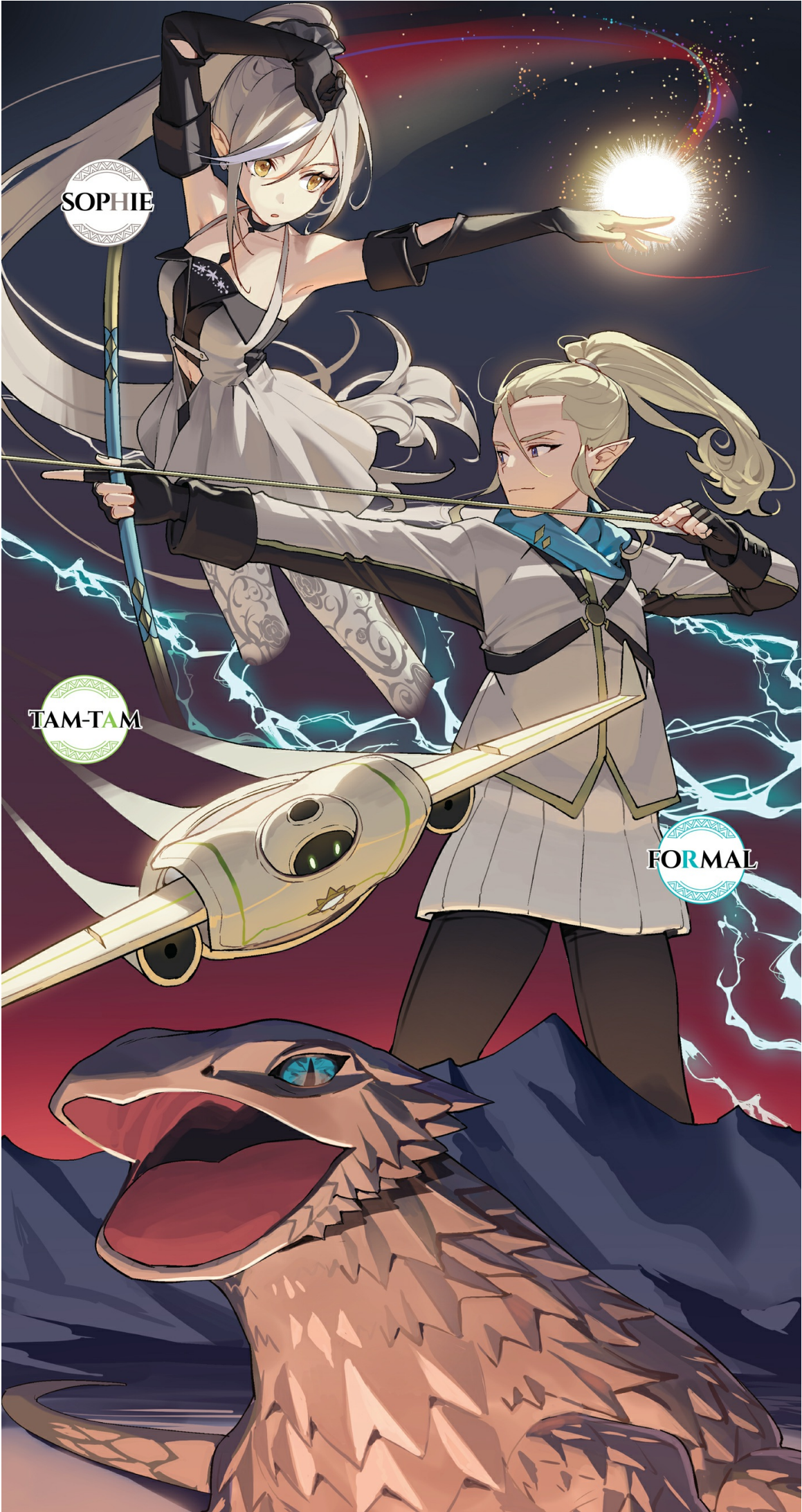
I hope that you will continue to purchase these books as we continue to publish them. Also, there are currently five volumes of the comic version of *Hell Mode* that have been published. I would appreciate it if you would support that version as well.

See you in the next volume!



**"TARGET,  
DEMONIC  
DEITY  
LYCAORON!  
LONG-RANGE  
SNIPER RIFLE,  
FIRE!"**









# Bonus Short Story

## A Study Session between Thomas and Princess Leilana

Viscount Granvelle and his son, Thomas, walked quickly through the halls of the Ratashian royal castle. Outside the hallway window, white snow could be seen falling from the gray sky. Every breath they took emitted a white mist.

Upon reaching their destination, they found the Minister of Internal Affairs waiting for them at a table. In terms of political power in the Kingdom of Ratash, he was third in line after the king and the prime minister. Lying on the table in front of him was a pile of folded parchment booklets.

“I, Butler von Granvelle, and my son, Thomas Granvelle, have arrived.”

After the viscount and Thomas bowed, the minister of the interior rose from his seat and gestured across the table with his hand.

“Please, have a seat.”

The viscount thanked him and took his seat. Thomas sat down next to him.

“I heard you wish to discuss a matter that is ‘vital to the very survival of the nation.’ But why, then, did you ask my son, Thomas, to attend?” the viscount inquired.

“I understand your misgivings. They’re only natural. Actually, this is something to do with your son. You see, the princess is in a very, *very* bad situation.”

“Her Highness Princess Leilana? Thomas, do you know anything about this?”

The viscount could not help but look over at Thomas, who was in a relationship of sorts with Leilana, the Ratashian princess. Ever since they had met at a ball when they were attending Nobles College, where nobles without Talents studied, the princess seemed to have developed a fondness for Thomas. She summoned him from time to time for various reasons. However, Thomas merely shook his head, a troubled look on his face.

“No. I haven’t seen her lately.”

“That’s correct, and therein lies the problem. In the time that Thomas here hasn’t been meeting with the princess—that is, since he left Nobles College... Well, it seems that the princess has lost all interest in studying, even for the Academy’s mock exams. Just between us, this is truly a wretched situation. If things continue, it will look like His Majesty forbade his daughter from pursuing higher education. There’s no telling how the other countries might react to such a rumor.”

In recent times, in order to prepare for the intensifying battle against the Demon Lord Army, the need for Academies was only increasing. The royal families of each country felt that they needed to send their sons, especially those with Talents, to an Academy, even if only for the sake of formality. Were they to not do so, it was commonly seen as an unwillingness to respond to the global crisis.

“I can certainly see how that could be a matter vital to the very survival of the nation,” the viscount agreed.

“We’ve invited prominent instructors from all over the kingdom, of course, but things haven’t gone well. In the end, word has spread among the private instructors, and those we’ve invited have begun to turn us down.”

“But what does this have to do with my son?”

“Right, about that. I’ve heard that Sir Thomas graduated from Nobles College at the top of his class.”

Thomas was taken aback by the minister’s words.

“A-Are you by chance saying that you want me to be her instructor?” Thomas asked.

“Indeed I am. There’s less than half a year left until the exam. I have to ensure that the princess passes, no matter what it takes! In that case, Mr. Thomas, there’s no one I can rely on but you. I hear that you work quickly in the royal castle, completing tasks that would take others ten days in a mere two or three. You are not only good at academics, but also good at practical work, making you the perfect person to deal with this crisis.”



“No, you see, the reason I got good grades was...” Thomas fiddled with the rings on his hands and tried to explain the situation, but his father, Viscount Granvelle, interrupted him.

“Thomas, His Excellency has requested your assistance. It would be rude not to accept.”

“Just as I expected, Lord Granvelle. I see that you have passed on the blood of a loyal subject to your son. Now, here are copies of past exam questions.” He gestured toward the parchment booklets stacked on the table. “Whatever you do, try to hammer all of this into that tomboy princess’s head—ahem, I mean, please have her study hard!”

“Past exam questions? You’re quite prepared...” Thomas muttered.

There were around ten booklets in total. He had no idea how they had been obtained, but it was clear that the kingdom was quite serious about this matter.

“I suppose I can keep my position here,” the minister mumbled to himself with a sense of relief as Thomas took the booklets in hand and reviewed their contents. The older man stood up gingerly from his chair. “I’m counting on you. The future of the Kingdom of Ratash rests on your shoulders.” He then patted Thomas on the shoulder and quickly made his way out of the room.

“Please convey my regards to Her Highness.”

With that said, the viscount also left the room. Thomas, now alone, let out a heavy sigh before leaving the room himself, carrying the booklets with him. When he was a student at Nobles College, he had met with the princess and been invited to her private chambers several times, so he knew the route by heart.

The corridor leading to the princess’s private chamber was guarded by royal knights. They silently moved out of the way as Thomas passed by. Apparently, the minister had already spoken to them.

Upon Thomas’s arrival in front of the princess’s private chambers, her knight escort opened the door. He could hear some kind of ruckus coming from inside, causing his heart to feel heavy and making him have second thoughts. Thinking back, he always found himself caught up in some kind of mess whenever he was

invited into this room.

Despite that, Thomas headed inside.

“P-Princess, please don’t do this!”

“Let go!” the princess cried. “I must hurry, as the instructor shall be here soon!”

Just as he heard these women’s cries, Princess Leilana entered Thomas’s field of vision from his right before disappearing off to his left. She had a long halberd resting on her shoulder, and she was dragging her servants, who were clinging desperately to her skirt, behind her.

Thomas watched in amazement as the princess made her way to the window of her room. She suddenly stopped and turned to her left to look at him.

“Why, if it isn’t Thomas.” Princess Leilana’s eyes lit up as she stared at Thomas and the parchment booklets in his hands. “Are *you* my newest instructor, perchance? Yippee!”

She spun around joyfully where she stood as she brandished her halberd, sending her servants swinging. In stark contrast to the princess, Thomas was disappointed that he had not been told to go home. However, he had made up his mind to put his all into this task.

“That’s right,” Thomas said. “I won’t hold back now that I’ve come this far. Please take a seat. I’ll see to it that you can solve all these past questions the minister has entrusted me with.”

Thomas dumped the parchment booklets on her study table. The table was clean; it was clear that it had not been used at all.

“That’s impossible,” Leilana insisted.

“Impossible or not, you still have to do it. From here on out, you will study five days a week.”

“I’ll die if I study that much!”

“No one has ever died from studying too much. But if that’s how you feel, four days is fine. In exchange, please memorize all of these questions and answers.”

After Thomas finished speaking, Princess Leilana obediently took her seat. One of the servants looked relieved when she saw this and offered to make some tea before leaving the room.

“I have to say, this happened much faster than I’d thought it would. I knew you would come eventually. I heard you’re very intelligent.”

Upon hearing the princess blurt that out in such a cheerful tone, Thomas realized something. “Is that why the other instructors were quitting so often? You figured I would go easy on you and listen to whatever you said?”

The princess stuck out her tongue and adopted a confused expression. “Hmm? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Seeing this, an image of his sister, Cecil, came to Thomas’s mind. He felt his eyes soften. “No. Doing so will do you no good, Your Highness. Now, let’s get started.” He then took out one of the study booklets and opened it to the first page.

“Ugh, this is impossible.”

Thomas had anticipated that the princess would say that. He removed one of the rings he wore on his left hand and handed it over to Princess Leilana.

“With this, you can memorize any number of books.”

It was a ring given to him by Allen that increased Intelligence by 3,000. By merely placing it on one’s finger, one would be able to understand things more clearly, infer the causes and effects of various relationships, and perform complex calculations. Of course, the effect was amplified because Thomas was an intelligent man to begin with, but even if Princess Leilana could not do all that, he figured that she could at least memorize the questions and their answers.

However, the princess seemed to have imagined another intention behind Thomas’s actions. “What’s going on, asking me to wear a matching ring with you all of a sudden? Aren’t you being a tad hasty?”

“Huh?” For a moment, Thomas did not understand what the blushing princess was going on about.

“Well, since I’ve got the opportunity, I suppose I’ll put it on. Tee hee.”

As Princess Leilana happily put the ring on her finger, she seemed to change from a girl who looked like his younger sister to a mature woman who gave off an entirely different impression. Thomas felt a smile grace his lips, but he felt strangely nervous at the same time.

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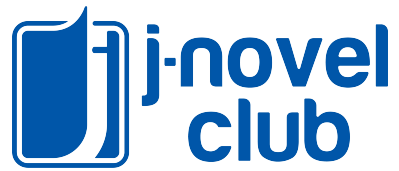
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Hell Mode *The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing* Volume 7

by Hamuo

Translated by Jason Muell & piyo Edited by Adam Haffen

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