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The Hero of
Light and the
Demon War

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero Believers

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Story
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"MY
KNIGHT,
I'D LIKE TO
SEE SOME-
THING
BIGGER."

Furiae

I MADE A WHALE
WITH WATER MAGIC
AND SENT IT FLYING
THROUGH THE AIR.

FURIAE SURE
WAS ASKING FOR
A LOT TODAY.

STILL, AS
I SHOWED HER
MY MAGIC,
SHE SEEMED TO
CHEER UP—HER
VOICE GOT
BRIGHTER.

"ALL RIGHT,
PRINCESS.
HOW ABOUT
THIS?"

Makoto

Ryousuke Sakurai

Saki Yokoyama

SAKURAI WAS COVERED IN BLOOD, WITHOUT PAYING ANY HEED TO THE MONSTERS AROUND US, I YELLED OUT TO HIM.

"SAKURAI!"

"TAKA... TSUKI...?"





"WHAT'S
THAT
SUPPOSED
TO BE?!"

Noah

Ira

Eir

"OW! OW!
THAT
HURTS!
YOU'RE
GOING TO
SPLIT MY
HEAD
OPEN!"



Makoto Takatsuki

A high school game addict who found himself in another world. As Noah's only disciple, he is determined to full-clear the world to save her.

Characters

Makoto's Friends



Lucy

An elf from Springrogue who is good(?) with fire magic. Makoto's first party member.



Aya Sasaki

Makoto's classmate who was reincarnated as a lamia. She reunited with him in Roses's Labyrinthos dungeon.



Furiae

The Priestess of the Moon who was once captured by Highland. She forged a guardian knight contract with Makoto.



Fujiyan

Makoto's classmate who founded the Fujiwara Trading Company in Roses.



Nina

A beastman fighter. Fujiyan bought her when she was imprisoned as a slave.

Springrogue

The majority of the country is covered in forest. Many elves and beastmen live there.



Rosalie

Lucy's mother, also known as the Crimson Witch. The strongest fighter in Springrogue.

Roses

A country blessed with many water sources. They are militarily behind the other countries.



Sophia

The Priestess of Water and princess of Roses. She gave Makoto the title of hero.



Leonardo

The prince of Roses. Chosen by the water goddess to be the Hero of Ice and Snow.

Highland

One of the leading powers on the western continent.
The largest country in terms of population, military strength, and financial strength.



Ryousuke Sakurai

Makoto's classmate and the Hero of Light. He has a strong sense of justice and is fighting against the demon lords.



Noelle

The Priestess of the Sun and princess of Highland. Sakurai's legal wife.



Grandsage

The best mage on the continent. Fought with Abel the Savior against the Great Demon Lord.



Gerald Ballantine

The Hero of Lightning. Born into one of the five Sacred Noble families. Sees Makoto as a rival.



Janet Ballantine

Gerald's little sister. Captain of the Pegasus Knights.



Saki Yokoyama

Makoto's classmate and Sakurai's wife. A vice-commander within the Soleil Knights.

Great Keith

The majority of its lands are covered in desert.
Citizens excel in combat and the country has a powerful military.



Olga

The Hero of Incandescence chosen by the fire goddess. Enjoys fighting and sees Aya as a rival.



General Talisker

The person in charge of Great Keith's army. Olga's father.

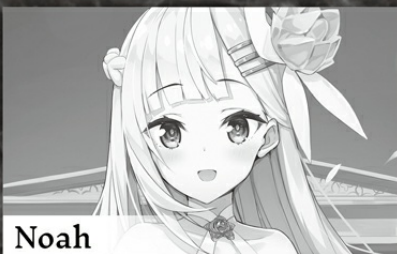


Estelle

The Priestess of Fate. Has the ability to see the future and is thus very popular.

The Goddesses

The Sacred Deities currently rule the world after their victory during the last war.
Seven goddesses have dominion: Sun, Moon, Fire, Water, Wood, Fate, and Ground.



Noah

One of the Titanea overthrown by the Sacred Deities. Currently trapped in the Seafloor Temple.



Eir

The Goddess of Water. One of the seven ruling deities. Despite her bright looks, she's actually a schemer.



Ira

The Goddess of Fate. One of the seven ruling deities. Proposed the Northern Front Plan to defeat the demon lords.

Map

The Demon Continent





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Prologue: Lucy's Magic Training

My head hurts... I drank too much last night.

There'd been a *lot* of parties since we'd come to Great Keith. Maybe hotter climates spurred people on like that.

Last night, Kawakita had asked Fujiyan about his wives and demanded to meet them at some point. I had a lot of fun watching him get overwhelmed. Though I'd barely spoken to Kawakita in our old world, things were different now. It was actually surprisingly easy to hold a conversation with her, which made me wonder how our other classmates were getting on.

It's been a while since I've seen Sakurai. Maybe I should drop in on Highland at some point, I mused while looking out of the window.

Raindrops were currently pounding against the glass. Rain was rare in Great Keith, but my elemental magic had put a slight skew on the weather patterns, so it had been pretty common lately. And, thanks to the stormy weather, there were a lot more water elementals around.

Suddenly, I spotted a red-clothed mage outside. I climbed out of the window to investigate.

"Lucy, what're you doing out here?" I asked. She was soaked through, staff in hand.

"Practicing magic," she replied. "Mama said I had to do it every day."

"It's raining though. Can't you do it inside?"

"If I screw up, I'll blast the place away."

"R-Right..." Yeah, that wouldn't be good. We were staying in lodgings that catered to the royal family of Roses. I couldn't even imagine how much the repair bill would be.

"You could practice when it's finished raining, right?" I asked. "If you want, I can stop it for you."

She looked at me doubtfully as I lifted my right hand to the sky. “Isn’t the Grandsage about the only person who can change the weather?”

“Maybe. I feel like I could do it, though.” Noah had shown me how before, and with the mana from *Right Hand of the Elemental*, it definitely felt possible.

“Ugh...” Lucy groaned. “It’s scary how likely that seems... Aya’s a hero now too. I’m being left behind...” She slumped, twisting her foot on the floor.

“Lucy? You seem kinda down.”

“Am I actually useful?” she asked, sending a nervous glance my way.

Don’t be an idiot... I couldn’t help but think.

“If you weren’t here, then I wouldn’t be either.”

“D-Do you really think so?”

Things had gone well in Springrogue only because Lucy had been there. Thanks to her, we’d managed to make inroads with the Crimson Witch and Freya’s hero, Maximilian.

Lucy was the great-granddaughter of one of the legendary heroes who’d fought with Abel the Savior, and the daughter of a current hero, Rosalie. She’d been schoolmates with Maximilian and was the Priestess of Wood’s sister-in-law. She’d even become the Grandsage’s apprentice in Highland.

Putting it all together like that, she’s part of a really elite family.

Honestly, Lucy probably shouldn’t have had any trouble finding comrades in Macallan. Her self-deprecation and unwillingness to use family connections were probably why, though. She was such an awkward one sometimes...

Well, one of my friends is down, so it’s my job to cheer her up.

“I’m sure you’ll be just as good of a mage as Rosalie. What are you practicing right now?”

“Teleportation. But I just can’t get it to work right...”

Whoa! Teleport! I seem to remember Lucy mentioning something about that...

“You said you’re currently successful around ten percent of the time, yeah?” I asked.

“Yup...” she replied, hunching over farther. “Though, I won’t be able to actually use it in a fight unless I get better.”

Teleport was a really difficult spell, so it was hardly a surprise that she couldn’t cast it right away. Maybe it’d be best to get her mind off it somehow.

“Let’s try together then. I want to see your *Teleport*.” I grabbed hold of her hand.

“Both of us? But I can’t even get it right when it’s just me.”

Still, she gripped my hand back.

“A change of pace is just the thing you need when you’re getting stuck,” I told her.

“Hmmm, maybe... Okay then.” She didn’t seem wholly convinced but was at least ready to give it a try. “Then...here I go.”

Her right hand held her staff, and her left hand squeezed my own. She began to chant the *Fate Magic* incantation.

At the same time, she gathered an absolutely massive amount of mana. *Teleport* was a famous spell, and lots of mages tried to learn it. Despite that, there weren’t many people who could actually cast it. One reason for this was the inefficiency—the spell used up stupidly huge amounts of mana. However, that made it perfect for races like the elves, who were naturally gifted with large mana reserves.

Lucy finished up the chant, and several magic circles floated around us.

She’s got just as much mana as ever... In all our time adventuring, I’d never seen her run out.

“Here goes!”

“It’ll work, I know it.”

“Teleport!”

Immediately, we were enveloped in light, and a moment later, the scene in front of us changed completely. We were now being buffeted by the wind.

“See! It worked!” I exclaimed. “Uh...Lucy?”

“M-Makoto! We’re falling!”

We’d reappeared...in midair. Really high up as well. We were (probably) about a kilometer off the ground, well above the clouds. The land below was getting closer and closer. It was like we were skydiving.

“Ahhhh! Makoto!” screamed Lucy, her voice blending with the rushing wind. “What do we doooo?!”

“You can use flying magic, right?” It was a popular mid rank spell. Comparatively, anyone could use it...anyone who wasn’t a mage apprentice like me.

“I-I’m practicing it, but I can’t really *fly*!”

“Aaah, right.” It probably would have been a good idea to learn that *first*, Lucy.

By this point, her yells were sounding teary. “M-Makoto! We’re gonna fall!”



Damn, my skill is making me too calm.

“xxxxxxxxxxxx (Hey, elementals,)” I called out. Lifting my right hand out in front of us, I cast— *“Water Magic: Water Phoenix.”*

In the blink of an eye, a massive bird of water appeared before us. I tugged on Lucy’s hand and dove onto its back. Hopefully, the water magic would disperse the shock of the fall.

“Wha—? Whaaat?!”

“Sorry, Lucy. I should have done that to start with.”

“That was king rank magic! How can you do that so easily?!”

“Because of this,” I explained, showing my *Right Hand of the Elemental*. Using it, I could quickly draw elemental mana through my right arm.

Now safely aboard the water phoenix, the two of us drifted through the sky over Gamelan. I was looking for our hotel from above, when suddenly, the phoenix lost its balance.

“Whoa!”

“Ah!”

The angle suddenly steepened—it felt like we were about to fall again.

“S-Stop that!” I shouted. I focused my power and managed to stabilize us so that we could avoid dropping. *That was close... Guess I can’t properly command it yet.* “Sorry, Lucy. You good?”

“I-I’m fine. It’s not like you to lose control of water magic like that.”

“It’s harder to use this hand than I thought,” I replied, showing her my glowing blue arm. She frowned at it.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“Nope. Hell, I can’t feel anything at all.”

“Well... That’s pretty worrying on its own.”

“It’s definitely taken a toll on my fine motor skills... But at least I can do this.”

I peered up. The sky above us was covered in gray clouds pattering rain, and I

lifted my hand once more.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx (Elementals, scatter the clouds,)” I said.

They instantly swirled and broke apart in a whirlpool-like movement above us, revealing the sun.

“Y-You did...*that*?” Lucy sputtered.

“Handy, right? I can only do it when it’s raining though—there need to be plenty of water elementals.”

She was silent.

“Lucy?”

Nothing.

When we got back to the inn, I suggested that she give *Teleport* another go...but she declined. Apparently, a passenger’s mana had an effect on the destination. Thanks to my arm, we were more likely to get swept away and end up in the clouds.

It was certainly a tricky spell. Lucy was working hard at her practice and I didn’t want to get in the way, so I headed off somewhere else.

“I’ll catch up to you soon!” she said desperately as I left.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” I replied.

“What, like you do? All the time?!”

Did I? In the end, I wasn’t even sure if I’d managed to cheer her up.

I woke up early the next morning, so I decided to do some training before breakfast. When I uncovered my arm, I stared down at the glowing blue.

It hadn’t gone back to normal since I’d turned it into an elemental.

Though it was *my* arm, I couldn’t move it properly... It felt like I was connected to my own limb from far away, and mana pulsed through it like blood. Just above the elbow, there was a faint red mark. It flashed like a low-battery light, probably because Noah was sealed in the Seafloor Temple.

According to Eir, this was anima. I still couldn't properly make use of my arm or that anima, but...

Have I gotten stronger recently? Yesterday...I controlled the *weather*. I felt my lips form a grin.

Just as I was deciding what to do today, there was a call at the door, and someone stepped inside.

"Hero Makoto! Are you up?!"

Only one person would address me as "hero" in a relatively casual tone.

"S-Sophia? Morning," I said, frantically schooling my expression.

"Oh, you were training." She smiled. Then, her face turned serious once more.

What happened?

"The day when we will launch the Northern Front Plan has been decided," she informed me.

The Northern Front Plan—our strategy for invading the northern continent and attacking the demon lord. This was something we'd discussed several times.

"When will it be?" I asked.

"A month from now... We do not have much time."

Whoa... I'd thought it would be at least three months away. This timeline felt too sudden for a large-scale military expedition. Sophia seemed to catch on to what I was thinking, and she nodded in response.

"I feel the same way. Perhaps something has changed... As of now, all heroes and priestesses have been given word to gather in Highland."

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Finds Out about the Northern Front Plan

“We’re riding those?” Lucy asked.

“Wow!” exclaimed Sasa. “They’re so big!”

The two of them were pointing to a collection of a dozen or so airships floating in the sky above the capital. This unit was called Scarlet Wing, and it was the pride and joy of Great Keith’s air force. It was an impressive sight, to be sure.

“Let us embark, Sir Makoto,” said General Talisker.

“Ah, General. We can get to Highland on my friend’s airship...” As I said that, I noticed that he’d brought a retinue of his subordinates to greet us. It almost felt like we couldn’t escape.

“Our destination is the same,” he insisted. “Scarlet Wing is not only here for you, but for our own hero, Lady Aya. It makes sense for all of us to travel together.”

“Hero Makoto,” Princess Sophia whispered into my ear. “Let us take the general up on his offer.”

I looked over to meet her gaze—her eyes said to give up.

“It is hot here. Let us hurry and depart, my knight,” Furiae said, parasol in hand. She was also glaring up at the sun. Twi was sleeping on Furiae’s shoulder in the shade, and to be honest, I was impressed that the cat was managing to not fall.

“Okay, Princess. Let’s go,” I said. We all quickly boarded the military airships.

A few hours had passed since we’d left.

I was sitting in a big conference room aboard the ship with General Talisker

and the others. Princess Sophia, Prince Leonardo, Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae were all with us. The rest of the seats were occupied by various people from Great Keith's military.

I can't settle down...

I'd have honestly preferred to ride with Fujiyan. He was heading back to Macallan, though—Kawakita would be staying with Chris for the time being since she had no place to live. Macallan was probably the safest place for her. Fujiyan told us he'd catch up after he dropped her off.

"I have information for you all," the general said, staring out at us from the center of the conference table's curve. "Great Keith has been constantly sending large numbers of warriors to gather intelligence on the demon lords' armies."

Oh, that made sense. Had Roses been doing the same? I looked swiftly at Princess Sophia.

"We don't have the people for that..." she replied quietly.

"I see..." The struggles of a weak country, I suppose.

"According to our intel, there has been a change in their forces. Zagan and Forneus are massing their troops."

As one, we all drew a sharp breath. Zagan ruled over the plains of the continent, including the Ash Lake and Phantom Desert. Forneus controlled the entirety of the coast, ruling over the sea monsters. Normally, they would never join forces, which meant...

"Are they planning an attack?" Prince Leonardo asked.

The general nodded gravely. "Most likely."

"The demon army's brass have made moves before, but this time, the order came from the demon lord himself. That has not happened since the war a hundred years ago," one of the knights explained.

"A hundred years ago... When Rosalie became a hero?" I asked.

"That's right—she fought with Highland's hero against Valac," Lucy explained quietly.

This was definitely important news then. I considered what I'd learned about the northern continent in the Water Temple. During the dark ages a thousand years ago, the world had been ruled by the Great Demon Lord, Iblis. Nine lesser lords had served beneath him: Astaroth, the King of Ancient Drakes.

Zagan, the King of Beasts.

Forneus, the Abyssal King.

Goliath, the King of Giants.

Bifrons, the Undead King.

Valac, King of the Flies.

Erinyes, King of Fallen Heaven.

Barbatos, King of Devils.

And finally, Black Knight Cain...Noah's former disciple.

They had ruled the world—each continent in the cardinal directions, the seas between them, and even the floating continent. All of it.

The world had been shrouded in ceaseless black clouds, with the surface dwellers firmly enslaved. Then, Abel the Savior had defeated the Great Demon Lord. This had scattered the other demon lords, and now, only three of them remained on the northern continent. Those demon lords were currently plotting to rule the world once again.

The three of them—particularly Astaroth, who was known as the strongest of them—were the most powerful demon lords. Who knew how well they would fight?

"With that said," the general continued, changing the overall mood, "according to Sól, their movements have been postponed for Iblis's resurrection. Is that not so, Priestess Dahlia?"

"Indeed. Hence why we should strike while the iron is hot."

Naturally, the fire priestess was also part of this meeting. The Hero of Incandescence was at her side, but she was being oddly meek.

"The events on the demon continent concern me," said another soldier. "They

usually aren't ones for subterfuge..."

"The cambions—traitors of mankind in the form of the Snake Sect—have dispersed into the armies. This gathering of troops may have been at their urging. After all, they specialize in that kind of thing."

The labeling of cambions as "traitors of mankind" bothered me, and I used *RPG Player's* perspective switch function to look behind me. Furiae had an aggrieved look on her face. I turned my physical eyes to her, silently asking whether we should say anything. After a moment, she gave me a look that said, "Just stay quiet and listen." This annoyed me a bit, but I did as she wished.

"The Northern Front Plan will commence in a month," General Talisker stated. "This is based on the message from Lady Estelle about how the demons' plans are delayed by over sixty days. The specifics of our strategy will be discussed when all the heroes are gathered in Highland. Does anyone have any questions?"

Silence filled the conference room.

So Iblis's return could be only two months away...

It had been about two years since we'd come to this world. While there'd been a lot of trouble for us on a personal level, the continent as a whole had been at peace.

If I hadn't purposely made my way into dungeons and fought against the Snake Sect, I'd have probably been able to relax and enjoy the otherworld life. But war was on the horizon—a war between the allied races of the western continent and the demons of the northern continent.

Something suddenly occurred to me. *Huh... I'm pretty sure people live on the other continents, right?*

"General, I have a question." I raised my hand like I was back in school, and everyone turned to look at me.

"What is it, hero?"

"Are we coordinating with countries on the other continents?"

There were continents to the east and south of us as well, and I thought that

humans and other races were probably living there. But, since our continent didn't conduct much trade with them, I hadn't found out much about these places in the Water Temple.

"Ah, of course. You are an otherworlder, so you would not know. Yes, we have sent envoys to the other continents asking for aid. However..."

The southern continent was split into three large countries. Highland had sent a representative to the largest empire, but after taking into account the distance between the northern and southern continents, they had declined to participate. Instead, they promised aid in the event that the Great Demon Lord returned. The other two smaller countries followed the empire's example.

Things were even worse in the east—those nations were embroiled in a power struggle to rule the continent. It was impossible to tell who would win, and sending an envoy to any specific country could fan the flames even further. As such, there would be no assistance from them.

"When Iblis returns, he is likely to aim for the west first. We are closest to the demon continent, and Abel the Savior also came from this continent."

"I...see. Thank you for answering," I replied as his explanation wound down.

The western continent definitely felt the demons' threat most clearly. The fear of the Great Demon Lord was still alive and well here. That was why there were hardly any conflicts between the various countries—we all needed to be ready to prepare for war with the demons. The other continents didn't feel as much of the risk though. Ultimately, they would be no help here.

It's a bad situation... I thought as the conference drew to an end.

Several days later, we arrived in Symphonia. The massive castle had been visible from quite a ways out. The castle in Gamelan was large as well, but not on the same level. A statue of Abel the Savior, sword drawn, stood in front of the massive fortress town, and its green tinge made me think of the Statue of Liberty.

Wait, what?

Something felt *really* off. What was it?

“There’s the capital,” Sasa pointed out, leaning over the railing. “I wonder if Saki’s all right.”

I wanted to tell her that being so close to the edge was dangerous, but if she fell, she probably wouldn’t even get hurt.

“Hey, Sasa?” I asked.

“What’s up?”

“Was the statue always that color?”

“Huh? I think so?”

“It feels like it’s different than the last time I saw it...” Maybe I was just misremembering?

“I think I’d notice if it’d changed,” she said.

“Yeah, probably...” Sasa was right. I must’ve just misremembered.

“We will be arriving soon,” one of the general’s subordinates informed us. “There are carriages waiting below. We will take them to the castle.”

He soon led us down to them.

“Think Sakurai’s good, Princess?” I asked.

“Of course he is,” Furiae replied curtly. “He’s the Hero of Light, after all.”

I was looking forward to speaking with Sakurai again. He’d probably be busy with the demon army’s plots, though. Would we have time to talk? I looked out of the carriage at the city streets and saw as many people as ever.

Only humans though. I couldn’t see any elves or beastmen.

Unlike in Roses or Great Keith, there were clear lines between the races in Symphonia. I wondered how that mafia guy, Peter, was doing. The kids in the church in the ninth district were on my mind as well.

I can’t spend all my time worrying about everyone. We’re about to go to war...

Eventually, the carriage reached the castle gates and halted. As I moved to leave the carriage, Furiae called out to me.

“My knight. Disaster shall find thee...maybe?”

“Where’d that come from?”

“I just saw a moment of the future...” she murmured. “But I didn’t really understand it.”

“I really wish you’d quit making me worried,” I griped, staring flatly at her as we passed through the gate along the paved path.

“Stop, Takatsuki,” Sasa said, pulling at my arm.

“Wha?”

“What gives?” would’ve been the next words out of my mouth, but I didn’t get the chance—there was a sudden flash right in front of me. A second later, the ground shook and dust filled the air.

Is it a bomb?! The Snake Sect?!

Hurriedly, I unwrapped my right arm and got ready to fight. When the dust gradually cleared, it revealed a blond swordsman in golden armor. His aura was sparking off his armor.

Oh, it’s you.

“It’s been a while, Hero Makoto Takatsuki of Roseeees!”

He was so loud. Seriously. He didn’t need to shout.

“Hey, Gerry,” I replied after a moment. “You seem...well.”

“C’mere!”

I couldn’t help but let out a noise. *Yeah, he’s just as rude and haughty as ever.* This was the Hero of Lightning, Gerald Ballantine.

“Did you have some business with me?” I asked, trying to keep things low-key.

“You...! ’Course I do! You pulled one over on me.”

“Pulled one over?”

He was approaching me rapidly, a glare on his face. Oh no. The blond hoodlum was coming my way. Scary. I wanna run.

“Brother!” a blonde woman yelled, running up and grabbing his arm before tugging him back.

“Let me go!” Gerald shouted.

“I will not! Why are you being so belligerent?! You just want to talk to him about the demon lord in Springrogue, don’t you?!”

“Don’t tell him that!”

Oh...that’s what this was about.

“I just got lucky there,” I told him.

“Pull the other one!” Gerald yelled. “No one’s been able to do anything about that grave for a thousand years! They couldn’t even get near it! You took out a demon lord first, you bastard! That was your plan from the start, wasn’t it?!”

I could almost hear... Actually, scratch that, I *did* hear him grind his teeth.

“Come on, you’re bothering him,” Janet scolded before turning to me. “My apologies. I had been looking forward to seeing you again, but it seems now is not a good time.” She started pulling her brother away.

“Stop yanking me!” he protested as they moved farther back.

“Oh, right,” Janet said, turning to smile at me before they actually left. “Makoto Takatsuki, please make some time tonight.”

Gerry and I uttered noises of confusion at the same time.

“Ah...Janet? What is it you need...?”

“The hell do you mean, ‘tonight’?!”

“It has nothing to do with you,” she told her brother. “Until later, Makoto Takatsuki.”



She left, dragging her brother behind her. He probably *could* have overpowered her, which meant...she was probably in a stronger position. That was definitely a *meaningful* request from her though. I'd been looking forward to finding Sakurai and catching up. Oh well.

The meeting with the Ballantines had been a surprise, but I figured we should probably head in now. "Let's go," I said, turning to look at my friends.

Three sets of eyes glared silently back at me.

"Umm...guys?"

Furiae and Twi just sighed.

"Aya, he made arrangements with another girl as soon as we arrived," Lucy said to Sasa.

"Yeah. Oh, the pains of being with a popular hero. Sophie, what do we do about the Player of Roses?"

"A grave question indeed. Lucy, Aya, make sure he does not get involved with girls from the other countries."

"Leave it to us!" they chorused.

So...the three of them were all in it together.

Should I say something? No... Trying to make excuses would just cause more trouble.

"The women of Roses are strong," the general murmured in my ear.

"They're not like that in Great Keith?"

"They are rather similar, actually. Her mother is just as spirited..." he replied, gesturing with his eyes to the Hero of Incandescence. Though Olga had been quiet recently, our first meeting could definitely be described as "spirited."

"I suppose they're the same everywhere," I commented.

He laughed. "You might be right."

His words didn't really help my current situation though—Lucy and Sasa took up flanking positions on either side of me as we entered the castle.

The general had a meeting scheduled with the king, so we parted ways after entering the castle.

“Let us meet with Princess Noelle,” said Princess Sophia, apparently wanting to hear her ally’s thoughts first. I had no idea how ties between the different countries worked, so I just nodded. She’d already made arrangements, so we headed toward the meeting place.

“Why, if it isn’t Sir Makoto!” came a call from a burly warrior. He didn’t look human—his skin and other features had a distinct reptilian look.

He was a dragonoid. A familiar one.

“Maximilian,” I greeted. “It’s been a while.” This was indeed the Hero of Swaying Trees. He had a friendly smile that was completely at odds with his fierce stature.

“I’ve already heard rumors about all the wild times you had in Great Keith.”

“All of that just happened. How about Springrogue? Is it still the same?”

“The Demon Lord’s Grave is gone, thanks to you,” he replied cheerily. “The trees giving off miasma are gradually abating as well. I suspect that the Forest of Fiends will be gone in a few decades. Then, Springrogue will be able to develop even further. The village elders are all grateful to you.”

“Oh...the Forest of Fiends.”

Now that Bifrons had been destroyed, there was no source of miasma. As such, the dungeon filled with undead would eventually vanish. I thought back to using *Transform* with Sasa to explore the forest.

In the end, I’d only been in the dungeon once. *I would’ve liked to check it out more.*

A time-limited dungeon... Maybe there’d even be treasure.

Sasa soon interrupted my pondering. “Takatsuki, your face says you’re thinking something stupid again.”

“What do you mean, Aya?” Lucy asked her.

“I bet he was thinking he wanted to go farther into the Forest of Fiends.”

“Can you quit reading my mind?” I asked. How did she know *exactly* what I’d been thinking?

“What? But I was brought up being told to never go near it... What are you thinking?” Lucy demanded.

“As was everyone else in Springrogue...” Maximilian added. “Sir Makoto, I believe you are the only one who will be saddened by its collapse.”

“Hang on! You misunderstood,” I protested. “I’m not upset about that.” He and Lucy were treating me like I was a weirdo.

Just as I was trying to distract them from this silly topic, an angry voice barked an order. “Get out of the way!”

I whipped around to see a group of priests. They were all wearing robes of fairly fine quality.

“There is a limit to the disrespect you can show,” snapped one of the priests. “You stand before His Holiness.”

“It’s the bumpkin from Roses and the animal from Springrogue,” another spat.

“We need not even ask for their assistance.”

These men were well and truly looking down on us, so they were probably fairly high-ranking. We just stepped out of the way so they could move past us. In the middle of the group was an old (but still dignified) man. I immediately recognized him.

It was the pope of the church—the second most important person in Highland.

He didn’t even look our way, just passed quietly on by. Actually, no, he glanced toward us for a brief moment.

As his eyes passed over Furiae and me, his expression twisted in distaste.

Wait? Me?

Furiae shot him a defiant, challenging look.

Your beauty’s wasted on a face like that.

“What’s with him?” she remarked in irritation.

I wondered the same thing. Something must’ve caused it, right?

We watched the group leave the castle.

“The current pope is famed for his attitude,” Maximilian explained. “He looks down on any that are not humans of Highland.”

Such intense elitism.

“I’ve got a bad feeling,” Furiae warned. At this point, it didn’t feel right to just continue chatting.

“Another time then, Maximilian,” I said.

“Of course. I would appreciate having some time to talk properly.”

After that, we parted and headed toward the meeting with Princess Noelle. She met us near the castle training grounds. As we drew closer, I understood why she’d picked such a place.

Her fiancé was here.

As we entered the area, a familiar face greeted us. “Welcome to Highland. The Hero of Light is waiting for you.”

I nodded. “It’s been a while, Ortho.” The leader of the first division, Ortho, was the one to receive us. We’d fought together with him while defending Symphonia against the monster stampede.

Princess Sophia had entered the building to one side of the training grounds—there, Princess Noelle was waiting. We’d been asked to speak with the knights while the two princesses discussed matters.

We’d partnered with the Soleil Knights during our last visit to Highland. Sasa and Lucy were currently catching up with the specific people they’d fought alongside—Sasa had dragged Furiae along with them.

I walked with Ortho through the training grounds. A wide sparring area was situated in the middle of the area, and...

Heaps of corpses were piled up in the ring.

Well, not quite. These people were all still alive at least. They had, however,

fallen in defeat like corpses, breathing only shallowly.

“Enough!” someone yelled. “The Hero of Light wins!”

“This is a mock battle,” the commander said to me, providing an explanation for the strange sight. “The exercise is called ‘The Hero of Light versus a hundred knights.’ It is exactly what it sounds like.”

Well, that was really easy to understand. There was something I just had to ask though.

“Aren’t there more than a hundred of them?” I asked. Even a rough estimate put the body count at closer to two hundred.

“A hundred wasn’t enough,” Ortho insisted.

“Ah...I see.” I’d guessed as much.

Well, it made sense that a force of a hundred men wasn’t strong enough to defeat the Hero of Light. I glanced at the defeated warriors again. All of them were high-ranking knights at the very least. Some of them were even more skilled. Every warrior was clanking around in full armor too. Against them...

“Takatsuki!” called their opponent. The handsome guy caught sight of me and waved. He was wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and not a single piece of armor covered his body. The outfit was about as much as we used to wear while playing soccer in P.E. class.

His right hand grasped a sword made of wood...and ridiculously enough, that wooden sword was glowing like a blade right out of legend.

The ability to convert light into aura... The Hero of Light’s aura was both the strongest sword and strongest shield, and it could turn even that wooden sword into something on par with the strongest of weapons. The aura filling his body meant that actually injuring him was far from easy, and any wounds he did receive were healed in an instant. He had the same legendary skill as Abel the Savior, and there was no time limit to it either, not like Sasa’s *Super Star*.

As long as the sun was in the sky, no one could beat the Hero of Light.

Despite all this power, he was also my childhood friend, joyfully waving to me after a few months of being apart.

“Been a while, Takatsuki,” he remarked.

“Glad to see you’re as OP as ever, Sakurai,” I replied.

We were both happy to see each other again.

“I heard how you defeated the demon lord in Springrogue. *And* how you saved the capital of Great Keith.”

“Don’t say it like that. Makes it sound like I did it on my own.” Rosalie had helped in Springrogue, and Noah had done the same in Great Keith.

“Well, I’m glad that you’ll be part of the Northern Front Plan.”

“Barely, though.”

Sakurai, Gerry, and Maximilian were all chosen by their goddesses, so they were part of the military strategy. Since I was just a hero from a small-time country, there wasn’t much need for me to butt in.

“I doubt you’ll manage to get away with that,” Sakurai teased with a half smile.

“I’ll let you deal with all the enemies,” I said, looking at the heaps of high-ranking knights collapsed on the ground.

He looked somewhat surprised at my words. “You’ll be fighting too, right?”

“I’m just a weak water mage,” I protested.

“You helped a lot in Labyrinthos.”

“There was an underground lake, so I could use the water elementals. I was just lucky.”

“So...you’ll be up if it rains then?”

“I’ll just stop it from storming.”

Sakurai gave a long pause. “You can do that? I heard even the Grandsage finds it hard to control the weather.”

“I can go from rainy to clear at least. But there’s no way I can do the opposite.”

“Tell me more!” Sakurai insisted.

“Well, if I *musssst*.”

At that, the two of us chatted away for a while. I noticed that there were a lot of water elementals around the castle. This was a big difference from Roses Castle. They were likely more present here because of the huge river flowing behind Symphonia. And, unlike in Roses, there were no religious functions here—Highland had a separation of church and state, and the Sacred Deities were worshiped in the cathedral, not the castle. This meant that there were many elementals around the training ground.

Well...there were. They’d been there just a second ago. But suddenly, all of them had just vanished, like the turning of the tides.

I peered around and soon realized why.

“Sakurai, who’s that over there?” I asked.

About a hundred meters away stood a huge warrior. He looked around two meters tall and was even bigger than Maximilian, despite looking like a human rather than a dragonoid. He had blond hair and pale skin, but his musculature seemed rather like a wrestler, so I doubted he was a noble. The elementals had disappeared as he arrived.

“He was recently appointed as the State-Authorized Hero of Highland. I’m pretty sure his name’s...Alec.”

“Have you spoken?”

“Nope. He’s part of the Temple Knights, not the Soleil Knights. Anyone can use the training grounds, so it’s not exactly rare to see him here... I’ve barely interacted with him though.”

“Hmm...”

“We can go over there if you’re curious,” Sakurai offered.

“Nah, I’m not that interested.”

I glanced at my right arm. Bandages were currently hiding my *Right Hand of the Elemental*. However, it wasn’t the elemental mana that had my attention—it was Noah’s anima. The Temple Knight was giving off some power that felt similar. Though, maybe I was just imagining things.

I hope I'm not in the same squad as him... I'd be in trouble without the elementals.

At that moment, the two princesses arrived.

"It has been a while, Makoto," Princess Noelle said in greeting, a sunny smile on her face. She was practically the textbook image of a princess, cute and refined.

"It has, Princess Noelle," I replied. I went to kneel, but she stopped me.

"There is no need for that. You are engaged to Sophia. More importantly, all heroes and priestesses have been requested. Let us go together."

"Of course."

We'd barely arrived in Highland, but apparently, they already needed us. We met up with Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae before Princess Noelle led the way.

The large conference room was already occupied by priestesses and heroes from every country. There were people I knew, and those I didn't. Among the crowd were the royals and highest-ranking nobles from Highland. I spotted General Talisker as well.

Alec, the new hero, was nowhere to be seen.

The leader of the meeting stepped up onto a raised area at the head of the room. "Everyone, your attention please. I will be explaining the Northern Front Plan now. However, first, His Holiness has important news."

I wondered what it could be. Everyone in the room seemed to stir—I suppose no one else expected this speech either. The pope we'd passed earlier stepped up onto the raised area and peered at me coldly. For several seconds, he was silent. Then, he slowly began to speak.

"There is a disciple of a wicked deity among us," he declared solemnly.

Twin noises of confusion sounded in my head—one from me and one from Noah.

Goddess...we're in trouble, aren't we?



Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Follows a Wicked Deity

“A thousand years ago, the demon lord Cain killed many heroes,” the pope stated gravely. “The goddess he served was a foul wicked deity who craved the world’s destruction.”

This is definitely bad... I thought, a trail of sweat running down my cheek.

Y-Yeah, Noah stammered. *I thought Eir had dealt with things concerning the Sacred Deities.*

Her voice sounded seriously confused and concerned. Actually, where was Eir?

I...haven’t seen her in a while, Noah replied.

What?! Our only hope...

“We are in the final days before the resurrection of Iblis. The wicked deity’s disciple is plotting once more to plunge the world into chaos. And that disciple...is in this very room!”

The first prince of Highland (I think? I couldn’t remember his name) sneered. “How horrifying. This cannot be overlooked!”

“Would you tell us who, Your Holiness?” another asked.

That was it. The finishing blow.

Eir wasn’t here. I could only rely on Princess Sophia...but she was looking at her counterpart, Princess Noelle, who was expressionless. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“Hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki. Speak the name of your goddess,” the pope commanded, prompting everyone to look my way.

Okay, so what to do now? I could either lie or keep silent. The pope certainly seemed sure about my belief in Noah.

Yet, more than anything else...I didn’t want to say any name besides Noah’s.

It doesn't matter, Noah told me. Just say Eir.

Frankly, I doubted that would work here. And to be honest, that wasn't the main problem. *No, the main issue is...*

I stared back at everyone who was looking at me. Sakurai wore a worried expression. It went without saying that so did Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia. Furiae's face was hard, and everyone else was tense.

I sighed at this point and looked straight at the pope.

"I follow the Wicked Deity Noah," I stated in a quiet but firm voice.

The room became agitated. Finally, my secret was out.

"Wicked Deity Noah...the ancient Titan defeated in Titanomachy... How foul. This traitor should be stripped of his title and put to death right now!"

I stared back at the pope. He had a crazed glint in his eyes. I'd thought he might be joking, but it certainly didn't seem that way.

"Wait a moment, Your Holiness. Someone brought that wicked deity follower into the center of the Northern Front Plan," the prince sneered. "There lies a heavy burden with that person. Isn't that right, Noelle?"

Hmm...this...

It seemed like the prince was after the princess, not me. He probably wanted to point out her failings and reclaim his place in the line of succession. Everyone's gazes gathered on her face, which seemed expressionless...

Actually, no, she was smiling in my direction. Slowly, she approached me.

"It's okay, Makoto," she said.

"What about this is *okay*?!" shouted the prince. "He follows a wicked deity!"

Princess Noelle nodded. "He does indeed. He was also given leave by Althena."

Across the room, there were simultaneous noises of confusion. Internally, Noah and I felt much the same.

Noah, why are *you* surprised?

Well, there hasn't been a good word between Althena and me for a millennium.

So, not since the war with Iblis. Man, the Goddess of the Sun is patient...

"Impossible! She would never permit such a thing!" the pope decried.

"Would you like to ask her directly?" Noelle proposed. "She can speak through me after all. If you like, you can ask her 'are your words true?' in person."

"I...I could never do such a thing!" he protested, withdrawing with a pained look.

"Do you have anything to say, brother?"

There was a long pause. "I do not," the prince spat with a scowl.

Princess Noelle smiled. "Well, there you go, Makoto, Sophia."

Princess Sophia slumped back, almost falling before a female knight supported her body from behind.

Wow... A single decree from Althena had pushed it all through. We were safe.

"Th-There shall be no quarreling...with a statement from her." Judging by the pope's tone, he didn't seem to *agree* with what he was saying. "However, there is more I have to say!"

Come on, really?

"That cursed priestess over there will bring ruin upon this world. She should be immediately imprisoned until Iblis has been dealt with!"

What was this man on?!

"What?! Don't play with me!" Furiae yelled.

"Ah...Your Holiness? Why would you say that?" Even Princess Noelle was at a loss. "She was a critical part of the plan to save Symphonia and has been cooperating with us. I have already accepted her presence here."

Princess Sophia spoke up next. "She is in the care of Roses now but has spared no effort to assist us. She has likewise shown no hostility."

“She saved many of my countrymen from petrification in Springrogue,” Maximilian added. “I owe her.”

Whew, they were all on her side.

“That changes nothing!” the pope howled. “We cannot allow the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity to walk free while Iblis is returning! If *she* returns as well, then things would be dire! Above all else...” He paused. “Ira herself says that the moon priestess has a strong likelihood of bringing ruin to this world. The people of Highland know this to be true.”

His eyes pivoted around the room.

Ira said that?

Really?

“It is...a possibility, and only that,” Estelle murmured into the silence. Which meant that it really was something Ira had seen.

No one had a response to her words. The pope looked triumphant.

“Now, Temple Knights! Seize her!”

“Well, that’s a problem,” I said, standing in front of her.

“My knight?”

“Foul apostle! Silence!”

“I can hardly allow you to take her away,” I told him, glaring. “I *am* her guardian knight.”

“A foul apostle and a filthy, cursed priestess—how fitting,” he spat.

Why was he so hardheaded?

He’s pissing me off, Noah growled.

I quite agree, goddess.

“If you insist on defying me...” he said, raising a hand. A collection of Temple Knights formed a circle around us. “We cannot kill the accursed woman. Her retribution will damn us all. Seize her. Even Althena will allow that.”

“Your Holiness!”

The pope ignored Princess Noelle's pleading. He was staring at the gathered Soleil Knights and heroes.

Before I knew it, Sasa and Lucy were by our sides. Princess Sophia and Prince Leonardo tried to get to us as well, but the geezer guardian knight stopped them. The look in his eye said he'd fight alongside us if it came to it.

What would happen now?

"Heroes of the goddesses, Temple Knights, seize her," the pope ordered.

The heroes of every domain bar the moon were here. If they worked together to try and capture us, we'd never win.

But...

"I won't fight Takatsuki. I won't capture Furiae either," Sakurai replied.

"What? Like hell."

"I'll pass."

"I refuse."

The Heroes of Lightning, Incandescence, and Swaying Trees all refused to obey the pope. The heroes of Caol Ilan and Cameron just...watched.

Is no one coming? This pope doesn't seem all that well-liked...

"Hah! Lost your popularity?" asked Furiae.

Hey, Princess! Don't provoke him!

The pope ground his teeth but then began to sneer. "Fools... I have a card of my own to play. Alexander!"

Suddenly, several magic circles floated around him. There was a flash of light, and a huge man appeared. He stood over two meters tall and was solidly built, with white armor covering his form.

This was the new State-Authorized Hero of Highland, Alec—or apparently, his full name was Alexander. I couldn't tell where he was looking. His eyes seemed vacant.

"Hero of the Sun! Show your power!"

The huge man said nothing, just nodded. He looked in our direction with a placid expression. Then...he began to glow in all colors of the rainbow. A moment later, I felt horrifying amounts of pressure.

I couldn't help but grunt—wind blasted around the room, and it was like being consumed by a maelstrom of mana. I wouldn't have that much mana, not even if I used *Synchro* with Lucy. It...was like the power of the giant...or when Eir had possessed Princess Sophia. This amount of mana exceeded the bounds of mankind.

The Highland prince yelped, falling to the ground. The nobles that never fought were much the same. Gerry's dad had a pale face but was still standing, arms folded. Well, they *were* a combative family. Furiae looked pallid as well, but Lucy and Sasa had stepped in front of her. Sakurai—along with the others—had drawn their swords, ready to fight.

They were all on our side. I was thankful, damn thankful...

Is this really the place to have a full-on battle, though?

We were inside Highland Castle. Everyone in the room was among the highest-ranking figures in the country.

It seemed insane.

"C-Cease, Hero Alec! This is not the place!" a noble yelled in fear.

"Hero Alec! Stop this at once!" Princess Noelle called.

The hero paid no heed to either of them.

"Good!" The pope let loose a vicious cackle. "Seize the Priestess of the Moon!" He definitely seemed set on seeing his plan through.

I placed my hand on the bandages around my arm, ready to use *Right Hand of the Elemental*.

But then...

"Alexander. Stop this," a voice said coolly.

The room fell silent—everyone lost their train of thought. Not one person spoke. This order had come from someone overwhelmingly strong.

“R-Right,” Alec said, obeying *this* command over all the others.

Estelle, the Priestess of Fate, said nothing more. Even the pope was dumbfounded.

An awkward feeling hung in the air.

“I believe we should call this meeting to a close,” Princess Noelle suggested. At this point, none of us were in a state to discuss things. People began leaving the room in small groups.

Staying too long in Highland might be dangerous...

The pope had it in for me and Furiae. Who knew when we might get attacked by the Hero of the Sun?

Estelle, though... The power she’d exuded had been overwhelming. It’d felt like standing in front of Noah or Eir. *No way...*

There was a lot on my mind as we left Highland Castle.

“What was *with* him?!” Furiae cried out.

The meeting was over and those of us from Roses were in another room in the castle—barring Princess Sophia, who had said she was going to talk to Princess Noelle.

“Guys...are we going to be okay?” Lucy asked. She was usually much more strong-willed, but now her voice seemed uneasy.

“We’ll be fine!” Sasa said assuredly. “Takatsuki and I’ll protect us all if it comes to it. Right, Fuu?”

“You always have been strong,” Lucy commented.

“Right...” Furiae murmured. “My thanks, Warrior.”

Both of them regained something of a smile at Sasa’s comment.

It’s my fault... I lamented. Following a wicked deity really put us in a bad position here. Should I have negotiated better beforehand? Not that it seemed like the pope would be all that willing to listen to reason...

There was a knock at the door. I tensed up, but it was Janet that entered, wearing golden armor.

“What is it?” I asked. We’d agreed on meeting tonight, but it was currently only just past noon.

“That was...a disaster,” she said with a slightly dark expression. Oh. She must have heard about the meeting. “I imagine today has been an ordeal, so we should reschedule... Still, we fought together in Springrogue, and I wanted to say that I am on your side.”

With those parting words, she turned to leave.

“Wait a minute,” I said hurriedly, grabbing her arm.

“Oh? What do you need?” she asked with a puzzled look.

“There’s somewhere I want to go. Would you mind accompanying me?”

Janet Ballantine was—in the knight order she was part of—nothing more than the commander of the pegasus knights. However, she was a daughter of the Ballantine family, one of the five Sacred Nobles. With Princess Sophia absent, no one else was as highly ranked.

“I do not mind...” she replied in confusion.

“What’s up, Makoto?” Lucy asked.

Sasa eyed me suspiciously. “You’ve got another weird idea, don’t you?”

“My knight...” Furiae sighed. “You intend to go gallivanting *now*?”

I couldn’t just leave them with nothing, so I gave a simple response.

“I’m going to go see Estelle.”

Literally everyone in the room turned to me with exclamations of shock.

“Are you sure you should have left your companions?”

It was a little while after we’d left, and Janet had fixed me with a concerned look.

“It’ll be easier to talk if I’m on my own,” I replied.

Even so, the three girls had been *very* against me seeing her.

“Really? Considering what literally just happened...?” Lucy asked.

“I’m coming too!” Sasa insisted. “I’ll beat up that Alec guy if he attacks!”

“My knight, your affiliations are known! Lie low!”

They all had severe looks on their faces.

Still, I’d managed to convince them to stay behind. Janet and I were now walking through the city, heading for the estate where Estelle was staying. The highest-ranking nobles in Cameron all had estates in the area.

“But... Well, I admit I wasn’t there, but was the priestess on your side?” Janet asked me uneasily.

“Who knows? She and I did meet in Cameron...”

The pope had sicced the Hero of the Sun on us. He was definitely an enemy, and trying to reason with him would likely do us no good. In comparison, Estelle seemed more neutral.

However, there was something I had to make sure of. To do so, I needed to bring along someone with a high position in society. I’d planned on asking Sakurai or General Talisker, but the daughter of the Ballantines was more than sufficient.

“We are here,” Janet informed me. “This is the Berkley estate—the biggest noble family in Cameron.”

“It’s huge...”

The estate was conspicuous even amongst the others in Symphonia. The gardens were enormous and contained statues set atop gargantuan fountains. *This place must employ an army of gardeners.* I didn’t even want to think about how much maintaining the space must cost.

“I made an appointment,” Janet told me. “Let’s go.”

“Right. Thanks.”

We stepped through the gate onto the grounds of the estate. Janet gave her name to the guard and we were let through without issue. Considering her social standing, this made sense. A butler soon led us inside.

When we arrived at the reception room, an exasperated voice greeted us.

“Makoto Takatsuki. You are as incapable of remaining still as I had heard.”

It seemed that the priestess was waiting for us.

“Lady Estelle, I thank you for taking the time to see us on such short notice.”

“It is not a concern, Janet. Still, are you certain in your choice of companion?”

“I would not be with him if I disliked him.”

“I see...” replied Estelle. “Well, there is no accounting for taste.”

Guys, could you stop talking like that right in front of me?

The priestess chuckled teasingly, apparently having noticed my expression. She folded her arms, looking down at me, and then asked, “What is your business here?”

For a moment, I remembered being in the Temple of Time with her. I took a breath.

“Did Ira state that the Priestess of the Moon, Furiae, could bring disaster to the world?” I asked. That was the most pressing question I had.

Estelle didn’t reply though. She remained silent in apparent thought, and I waited for whatever she had to say.

The priestess before me could hear the voice of Ira, the Goddess of Fate, who was said to be capable of viewing the entire world’s future. As such, there was significant meaning in waiting for what Estelle might say.

But...she said nothing.

“Lady Estelle?” Janet interjected after a while. “I would like to know as well, please.”

We both waited patiently, and eventually, the priestess began to speak.

“There are seven goddesses that rule over the elements of this world. Do you know that there is an exception among them?”

Janet and I gave her confused looks. *Well, this has nothing to do with our current situation*, I thought.

“It has everything to do with it,” Estelle replied. “Just answer.”

“Do you mean Naya?” Janet asked.

“I do. Naya is a god of an outer world, not this one. She is a different type of god.”

“I didn’t know that,” I remarked after a moment. The temple hadn’t taught us much about moon magic or its patron goddess. They’d just assumed that we didn’t need to know.

“Ira’s future sight is fundamentally tied to the Sacred Deities,” Estelle explained, “so she cannot see the future of Naya’s priestess.”

“Wait, so...”

“So Ira said that the possibility exists,” she finished for me. “The moon priestess *could* bring ruin.”

Hang on... Ira might be unable to see Furiae’s future, but that alone isn’t enough evidence to suggest that she might cause harm.

“Lady Estelle?” Janet spoke up critically. “The calamity in question—”

Estelle bluntly cut her off. “Is killing the Hero of Light after Iblis’s resurrection and once more allowing darkness to rule the lands.”

Janet’s eyes widened in shock. I assume my face looked pretty much the same. Eir had said something similar—she’d mentioned that there was a good chance we could lose the fight against the demons. But hearing it so plainly from the Priestess of Fate...

“I-Is there...any way to avoid such a future?” Janet asked shakily.

Estelle gave a small smile. “The future can be changed,” she stated firmly. “That is why I am here. Bringing the Northern Front Plan forward is one of the opening moves for victory. Things will not go as Iblis hopes.”

“Oh, so you’re the one who suggested it,” I remarked. I’d been sure the plan had come from someone in Highland.

“It is all for the triumph of mankind,” she said with a gentle smile. Her countenance seemed to be filled with an almost godly affection. “I can still see the future of the Hero of Light’s death. However...I cannot see who does the deed.”

“Can’t see it, huh...?”

Now I understood how everything connected. The details surrounding his death were obscured to Ira. That made it very likely that the culprit was someone associated with a god other than the Sacred Deities.

Naya...

“Still, Furiae and Sakurai are on good terms,” I pointed out. “I really can’t see her doing something like that.”

Estelle gave a mocking snort. “Friendship between men and women can often turn to bloodshed as passions inflame.”

“This isn’t a soap opera...”

“It’s similar.”

“Really...”

“Ah...what are you two talking about?” Janet asked, interrupting our back-and-forth. Well, it made sense that she wouldn’t know about soap operas. The real question was...how did Estelle know?

Estelle kept her focus on me and asked, “Are you convinced?”

“Not exactly... By the way, what’s the chance that *I’m* the killer?” She’d been focused on Furiae being the perpetrator, but objectively, wasn’t I under suspicion as well? After all, Noah’s previous disciple “The Black Knight” was famed for killing heroes.

“Noah’s weak disciple in this era couldn’t even put a scratch on the Hero of Light,” Estelle replied. “Besides, you can’t even wield a sword, can you?”

“You are correct...” I admitted after a moment. It was true—I wasn’t strong enough to properly swing a sword about.

“Above all else, Typhon tricked Noah a thousand years ago,” she continued. “It would be the height of foolishness for your goddess to ally with Iblis again. Though, it wouldn’t be the first time she did something inane.”

“Don’t you think that’s going a bit far?” I asked.

Noah, she’s really going off on you.

Grrr! What's with that?! Smack her!

Calm down, goddess.

“So it’s not me who hurts Sakurai?”

“Indeed. Plus, my sis—*Eir* has an eye on Noah in the Seafloor Temple. If she acts suspicious in any way, we will know immediately.”

“I see...” I murmured, giving pause. The way Estelle was acting...and how she was speaking...

“Regardless. Everything I do is for victory over Iblis. If you understand, leave already.”

Well, she was certainly trying to usher us out. I just had one last thing to check...

“Janet, let’s go.”

“Have you two finished your conversation?”

I nodded, and the two of us stood up from the sofa together. I turned back to the priestess. “Thank you for your time, Estelle.”

“We appreciate you talking with us,” added Janet as she and I headed for the door.

I set *Calm Mind* to 100%.

“Ah, there was something else I wanted to ask,” I said emotionlessly, turning back to face Estelle. “I heard that Ira was jealous of Noah’s beauty. Is it true?”

“What?! Not a chance!” Estelle yelled. “Noah’s just talking out of her—” She quickly cut herself off with a pained look, seeming to realize something.

“I see... Then Noah was just telling a joke. I’ll mention it the next time we meet.”

“Tell her that it’s impossible for Ira to be jealous of her,” Estelle snapped.

“Um... What was that?” Janet muttered, tugging at my sleeve.

Instead of answering, I pulled Janet with me toward the door. “Let’s go. Excuse us.”

“What? Wait...”

Janet and I discussed the conversation as we walked.

“The Hero of Light being defeated...could it be true?” Janet asked nervously.

“I can’t really imagine Sakurai losing.” And I definitely didn’t *want* to imagine an old friend dying.

“Well, let’s trust in Ira. She definitely seems like she’s trying to act against Iblis.”

“Well, you and Estelle certainly seemed close in the latter half of your conversation. I also didn’t understand what the two of you were talking about right at the end.”

“You didn’t?” I replied noncommittally, keeping things vague since I couldn’t explain properly.

The two of us kept walking slowly through the noble area of the town. Suddenly, Janet grabbed hold of my arm.

“Incidentally, Makoto Takatsuki. Would you be willing to accompany me for a meal?”

“Wha?” I’d wanted to get back and talk with everyone as soon as possible...

She glared at me. “You cannot have meant to simply use me for an introduction and then leave me!”

“O-Of course not,” I stammered, shaking my head. It didn’t feel like I had much choice in this matter.

“Excellent.”

“Let’s find someplace.”

“Of course.”

She pulled me along by the arm to a high-end restaurant. It was probably somewhere she frequented because as soon as they saw her face, they showed us to the best seats in the house.

“Wait a moment,” she said before vanishing into an interior room.

What was that about?

Janet was gone for a few minutes before returning. She now wore a noble's dress. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

She had a whole new outfit ready to go back there? Why had she changed in the first place?

I was slightly nervous and let Janet order our meals. We waited for the food, and as she looked at me, smiling, all I could see was a noble girl from a good family. *Well, I suppose that does describe her...*

"So, Makoto Takatsuki."

"Wh-What is it?"

She was resting her cheek in her hand and smiling teasingly. I felt my heart skip a beat at how different she seemed compared to her usual no-nonsense knight attitude.

"I decided that if I am to marry, it will be to someone stronger than my brother."

There was a pause.

"You don't have many candidates, do you?" I asked.

Her brother was Gerald Ballantine, the Hero of Lightning. He was third in the rankings of heroes. The Hero of Incandescence—Olga—was second, and Sakurai—the Hero of Light—was first. Other than heroes, there was the Grandsage and the Crimson Witch Rosalie... They were both women. The ladies in this world were definitely strong...

After considering all that, I jokingly remarked, "I guess Sakurai's your only option."

Her face twisted in a scowl. "Don't mock me. He took Noelle from my brother... Besides that, I wouldn't want to marry the same man as her."

"Sorry," I apologized. That comment had been thoughtless. Before Sakurai, she and Princess Noelle had been like siblings, but they were more distant now. It was kind of sad.

“Ordinarily, someone of my age would already have a fiancé...” she murmured somewhat tiredly. She’d been picky about who she would marry, so she was still single, but her parents had probably piled on the pressure... Still, I’d heard similar stories back on Earth. I guess all worlds are the same in some ways.

She giggled. “People call me the Spinster Knight behind my back because of it...”

“I-I’m shocked at that...” It was pretty impressive that anyone would have the balls to talk about one of the Sacred Nobles like that.

“There are foulmouthed people everywhere.”

Incidentally, the foulmouthed person she referred to was the commander of the second flight of the pegasus knight division—Janet led the first flight. A pegasus knight had to have a light body, so inevitably, they all ended up being women. There was a strong rivalry between the two flights.

Working with only female coworkers...was a scary thought. I shuddered internally.

“Incidentally,” she said in a cheery tone, lightening the mood, “there’s a man right in front of me.” Her gaze became heated. “And *he* has won against my brother.”

“It was just a rough match...” I replied. “He didn’t have his sword either, so it doesn’t count.”

“It does. Rough or not, you won. He doesn’t know the meaning of restraint, and you still bested him.”

“I really wish he’d *learn*.” I’d gotten a proper beating. Gerry was way too reckless.

“Makoto Takatsuki,” she stated firmly.

“Yes?”

“I am fond of you. Become my husband.”

I was silent for several long seconds.

“Pardon?” That request had come out of left field...

Janet had asked me to be her husband.

Whew. Not bad, you Casanova!

Noah...what do I do?

Hm? Whatever you want.

Urk... Still, this wasn't something I should have my goddess decide—it was my own problem.

“If you join the Ballantine family, you will gain vast territory. Though I will be there to manage it as well, so you needn't concern yourself. You can keep adventuring as a hobby, or even spend your days playing around. Ah, and I do not mind you having other women. Naturally, Lucy and Aya are welcome as well.”

She was speaking like it was a rehearsed statement, barely pausing to breathe. It certainly sounded tempting, particularly the “playing around” part...

But...

It was then that *RPG Player* kicked in.

Is the “Janet's Husband End” good with you?

Yes

No

There you are RPG Player—it's been a while since you last gave me a choice. And, to answer the question...that end definitely isn't okay! Pick more serious issues! I protested mentally.

I took a slight breath in. “I apologize, but I am already engaged to Princess Sophia,” I explained, offering a reason for the refusal.

Janet didn't stop smiling though. “That is not a problem. I will talk with her.”

I stared. “What?”

I hadn't expected *that*. Seriously...where had it come from?

"So, if Princess Sophia agrees, there will be no issue?" she pressed.

"Wait, no..."

This was terrifying. She was just going along like I'd said yes. *Come on, RPG Player! What use even are you?!*

"The food is here. I know the head chef, so I had something special prepared."

And now she'd changed the subject like everything was settled!

"Janet, uh—"

"Lady Janet, Sir Makoto," greeted the server. "Allow me to explain your meals. Today, we have..."

He'd just launched into it! And ultimately, the meal went on without me doing anything. Considering that this place was frequented by a Ballantine, the food was amazing.

After eating, I left for the inn. Janet had followed me like it was only natural, and she'd walked really close the entire time. Once we arrived, I had to ask her to back off a bit.

I gingerly opened the door and said, "I'm back..."

"Makoto! Finally!" Lucy called.

"It's awful!"

The moment I opened the door, both Lucy and Sasa rushed over. What had happened?

"Princess Noelle and the Hero of Light have arrived," Lucy told me.

Sasa nodded, adding, "Fuu's making things bad!"

"She is?" I hurriedly followed the two of them.

"Furiae... You should not be so close," Princess Noelle warned.

"Oh? Well, he did come to see *me*. Do you have a problem?"

"He is my fiancé. Get away from him already."

“Controlling women aren’t well-liked, you know?”

“What did you...?”

Chaos reigned in the room. Princess Noelle had her arms crossed as she scowled at Furiae, who was smiling with a hand on Sakurai’s shoulder. Furiae was clearly teasing the princess.

“Come on, Furiae,” Sakurai pleaded. “You two got along in Cameron.”

“Ryousuke...why are you on her side?” Furiae demanded.

“Well, I’m not really on her *side*...”

“That princess of yours sees me as someone who’s in the way—just like her pope does. Tell the truth.”

“Calm down, Furiae,” Sakurai soothed, carefully trying to mediate. “She isn’t like the pope.”

What are they playing at? Sakurai should know better.

I sighed and walked over to them.

From what Lucy and Sasa had said, this had all started when Princess Sophia had brought Princess Noelle back to the inn. Sakurai and Furiae had then started butting heads with her. From Princess Noelle’s perspective, it seemed like she’d witnessed an affair her fiancé was having. Furiae was still annoyed at the pope, and since Princess Noelle was part of the church, this argument had broken out.

“Hey, Sakurai!” I called out with a wave. He had been so cool against Alec, but he’d always been a bit like this during conflicts between women.

“Ah... My knight, you’re back,” Furiae said, reacting before Sakurai. She dropped her palm from his shoulder and put both hands behind her before taking a step away.

“Please, try not to tease Princess Noelle too much,” I implored.

“Fine, fine. It was just a joke anyway.”

I really wanted Furiae to not have such a poor impression of Princess Noelle, who’d been a lot of help to us.

Sakurai and Princess Noelle then turned to me.

“Makoto, you have certainly had a day,” Princess Noelle remarked.

“Thank you for your help earlier,” I replied. She’d covered for me when my goddess had been revealed.

Her gaze moved to my side.

“Janet, you were with Makoto?”

“Ah...well. I supposed it has nothing to do with you...”

The conversation between the two of them was kind of stilted. An awkward silence stretched between them for a moment before Princess Noelle turned to me.

“Makoto, Althena has allowed your faith. It is only natural considering your deeds in Springrogue and Great Keith. If anything, His Holiness is acting strangely... He used to be such a kind soul...”

However gentle he was, he definitely didn’t seem inclined to suffer any wicked deities now.

“Where were you, Takatsuki?” Sakurai asked. “Rumors are swirling that the pope sent the Temple Knights after you. You probably shouldn’t be out too much.”

Oh. This was the first I’d heard about that.

“I didn’t know...” I admitted. “I’ll just use *Transform* while I’m in town. Thanks, Sakurai.”

He looked concerned at my response. “No, I said you shouldn’t *be* out...”

Furiae then interrupted us. “My knight, how did your conversation with Estelle go?”

Princess Noelle and Princess Sophia looked at me wide-eyed.

“You went to see her?!” Princess Noelle asked.

“After all that happened...”

I shrugged. “It was a worthwhile conversation.”

I explained what we'd talked about, with Janet adding comments as we went, so it should all match up. Though...Janet was standing just a bit too close.

"Hmm, so Ira cannot see my future," Furiae murmured with an indescribable expression.

"That's good, though," Sasa pointed out. "We know Fuu wouldn't do something like that."

"I mean, personally, I'm more worried about Sakurai," I added. I hadn't been sure about the details before talking to Estelle, but I relayed what she'd seen.

I should have expected that he already knew—it was probably why the country was so desperate for him to have kids.

"You don't need to look at me like that," he said. "*Fate Magic* isn't absolute. And, it's actually useful for *avoiding* bad futures."

"Yeah..." I said, peering at my strong but good-natured childhood friend. "Still, be careful."

"Don't worry, Ryousuke, Makoto. The full strength of Highland will change the Hero of Light's fate!" Princess Noelle proclaimed.

She really loves him, huh?

"Speaking as a fate mage, it would be better to not," Furiae sniped in from the side.

"Fuuri? How could you say that?!" exclaimed Lucy. She seemed just as against the idea of doing nothing as I was.

"Princess?" I asked, turning to Furiae. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Changing the future is not as simple as it sounds. If the possibility of his death is high, then it would be better to let him perish and then resurrect him. That sun priestess over there should be able to cast the spell. If we can do that, then we don't need to *change* the future."

"Hmm, so we can think about it that way as well..." I nodded, impressed. It made sense.

"I think the same. The Grandsage is concerned that changing the future will

have too much of an influence on other things.”

So Sakurai was on the same page. Adding in the Grandsage’s perspective certainly made it more convincing... Maybe Furiae’s plan was the right one?

“N-No! I can’t let you die...!” cried Princess Noelle.

Furiae scoffed. “You just don’t get it. Keeping him alive could make things even worse.”

Princess Noelle wanted to change the future while Furiae wanted to follow what was foreseen. I could certainly understand both sides... Oh, I guess they were fighting again. Just like a cat and a dog...

Sakurai, you can deal with the rest, I thought. Man, being a popular guy sure was tough...

Right, that was everything we needed to discuss. Now that I’d given my report, I could get back to my training.

Makoto, Noah chided, *stop pretending you forgot the most important part of it.*

Whatever could you mean by that?

“Incidentally, Hero Makoto, Janet,” Princess Sophia said, striding forward from where she’d remained silent.

“Right, Sophia... Uh?”

She grabbed hold of my arm and pulled.

“How long are you going to link arms?” she demanded.

“Ah.” Damn it. I hadn’t noticed Janet put her arm through mine again. Princess Sophia put her arm through my other one and pulled.

“Is there a problem?” Janet asked with a cool smile. She still hadn’t let go of my arm.

“There is. Get away from him.”

“My. I *am* Janet Ballantine. Princess of Roses or not, you have no right to give me orders,” she replied, wielding her family’s influence without mercy.

“Hero Makoto is part of that family.”

“I asked him to join the Ballantine family earlier today. He gave a favorable answer.”

I heard several cries, not just from Princess Sophia, but from Lucy and Sasa as well. They all glared at me. This was bad!

“Wait a minute! You’ve got it wrong!” I argued. “Janet, tell them what actually happened!”

There was a pause before Janet reluctantly corrected herself. “Makoto Takatsuki refused because he has a fiancée.”

The three girls breathed sighs of relief.

“So, I shall take my time and make him fall for me. It will definitely happen.” Janet grinned.

Hang on a minute!

“The Hero of Roses will not bend for you,” Princess Sophia declared with an icy look in her eyes. “And regardless, I will not allow it.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Janet replied, a fierce smile still on her lips.

She had said she’d talk to Princess Sophia...but don’t tell me... *Is she going to use the Sacred Nobles’ influence...?*

“There has been an increase in rampaging monsters within Roses recently,” Janet said. “Great Keith and Highland have provided support until now. We knights have been dispatched to Roses frequently to assist. However, with the recent increase in military activity against the demon army, that has not been possible. I suppose you have instead hired adventurers to fill that gap, but their rates are high. Is it not a strain on Roses’s treasury?”

That came as a shock—I hadn’t known anything about paying adventurers. “Sophia...is that true?” I asked.

“It is,” she replied after a moment.

“Well, as far as money is concerned, Fujiyan—”

“In truth...we have already borrowed quite an amount from Lord Fujiwara.”

Seriously?! They'd already done that, but it still wasn't enough...

"If Makoto Takatsuki and I were to marry, the North Cardinal Knights would be more easily able to act. There is a considerable distance between our lands and Roses, so I suppose a detached unit would be best. The cost could be deferred as well. With the increase in monster activity, I believe that would be the best solution."

I could understand what she was saying. Though I was an amateur as far as politics went, the implications were beyond me, but judging from Princess Sophia's thoughtful expression, it looked like a reasonable suggestion.

"Of course, I do not expect an immediate answer. Still, considering your citizens...I'm sure you can imagine."

There was another long pause.

"I *can* imagine," Princess Sophia admitted. The look on her face was that of a politician thinking of her citizens... This wasn't a conversation I should be involved in.

"Hey, Makoto," Lucy said, pulling at my sleeve. I turned—she and Sasa were both staring coldly at me.

"Wh-What is it?"

"You're acting like this has nothing to do with you," Sasa said. "They're talking about something that could pull you away from home and toward Jen."

Huh. That was an odd nickname for Janet.

"Nah," I replied. "Janet said I could keep adventuring."

"Hmm, why *you*, though?" Lucy asked.

"Apparently, she'll only agree to marry someone stronger than her brother," I explained.

"There's barely anyone who fits that guideline..."

Yep, that was exactly the problem.

"Oh, that's good, then. She doesn't have actual feelings for you!" Sasa exclaimed.

Janet jolted at that.

This...was a familiar conversation...

“Wait just a moment, Aya. There is something I need to say.” Janet turned around to look at me again, face reddening. “I...love you!”

The other three seemed completely taken aback by the outburst.

“Makoto Takatsuki...” Janet murmured, putting a hand on my cheek and smiling temptingly. “There is a room in the Ballantine household for you.”

She certainly hadn’t acted like this when we’d been riding on the pegasus!

The sound of grinding teeth filled my ears.

“I have a reply for your earlier statement,” Princess Sophia declared.

“Eh?”

“I do not need the knights’ help! Get your hands off him at once!”

Janet stared back defiantly at Princess Sophia. “You should know...making policy based on jealousy is poor leadership.”

“I have no doubt in my decision.”

“This isn’t going anywhere,” I muttered. It wasn’t going to end well, was it?

“Just get away from him, you Spinster Knight.”

Sophia?!

The look on Janet’s face changed. “You hardheaded priestess. That’s why the otherworlders run.”

Princess Sophia’s expression grew even sharper.

“Be silent.”

“Why don’t you make me, Sophia?”

They were practically nose-to-nose.

How’d this even happen?

“Okay, Sophie. Let’s all calm down,” Sasa said soothingly, tugging the princess away. I then heard Sasa whisper, “You’re an idiot, Takatsuki.”

“Come on, Fuuri, this way,” Lucy said, pulling on Furiae, who’d stuck her tongue out at me.

I exchanged glances with Sakurai. He had a really miserable expression on his face, but I was pretty sure I looked just the same.

Pathetic, Noah told me. Of course, she was right.

Things were peaceful for a while. Janet had made arrangements to send some of her knights to Roses. Apparently, when she’d asked her brother—the North Cardinal Knights’ commander—he’d told her to take as many as she wanted. Gerry was being manly!

Also, General Talisker had pledged his country’s support to me, and Maximilian had promised help if I ever needed it.

Sakurai joined me for a meal, along with Fujiyan, and the three of us chatted about old times.

As far as our problems went...

“Oh, you’re here again, Spinster Knight.”

“Good day, Stonehead Priestess.”

Janet and Sophia were constantly at loggerheads. They didn’t *fight*, just argued about how the knights were to be used.

It gave me chills listening to them... They kept arguing with me in the middle.

Lucy and Sasa were constantly grumbling as well.

“You haven’t been with us much lately, have you?” Lucy asked. “We’re lonely.”

“We can train together!” Sasa suggested. “I’ll make the time!”

So, I gave up on some sleep to deal with everyone. My old training came in handy—pulling all-nighters gaming had helped me master the skill of *Sleep Resist*.

Don’t go too far, Noah warned me. *It’s bad for you*.

R-Right. Sorry for worrying you.

Even with all the strife, my companions were still making sure that the pope didn't interfere. They'd even all gathered together, and I sincerely appreciated it.

Then, one morning, a knight from Roses came running in, gasping for breath.

"Zagan and Forneus's armies have invaded the western continent!"

The war had finally begun.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Heads to Laphroaig

“What?! The demons are attacking first?!” The prince of Highland screeched demandingly and stamped his foot on the meeting room floor. Was this posturing just hiding his unease?

Everyone else had tense looks on their faces. Upon the notification that the demon armies were amassed and invading, all heroes, priestesses, royalty, and nobles were gathered once more. Furiae couldn’t get involved again, so she’d remained at the inn. Sasa and Lucy were staying back there to protect her, so she was probably safe.

Princess Noelle then spoke, and the tension in her voice was evident. “Estelle, I need to confirm something.”

“What is it?”

“Iblis has not yet been reborn, correct? You are sure of this?”

“I am,” Estelle answered calmly. “The demons seem to be rushing somewhat.”

“I cannot fathom it,” the Grandsage commented after a moment. She was propping her chin up on her hand and wearing a bored expression. “What need have they to rush?”

“Who knows what goes through a filthy demon’s mind? This is an opportunity, though. It splits their fighting strength. Astaroth is not participating.” Estelle’s face was as unbothered as her voice, almost like the invasion was no big deal.

“Astaroth... Well, that is fortunate,” the Grandsage replied. “The city would fall in a night if he really tried.”

At those words, the atmosphere grew even heavier.

“The strongest demon lord...” General Talisker murmured solemnly. “He’s said to be beyond even Abel the Savior’s strength...”

“People put him on par with Iblis...but that must have been an exaggeration of history,” one of the Sacred Nobles suggested jokingly.

“Astaroth is not involved!” snapped another. “To the point at hand—do we truly have no strategy against Zagan and Forneus?!”

Estelle turned to gather the room’s attention. “On that note—”

Before she could finish, the first prince interrupted, voice dripping with hatred. “Could you not foresee this, Lady Estelle?”

“Prince Gaius,” she said coolly. “I *did* foresee this. However, I disclosed information to the bare minimum number of people in order to avoid needless chaos. His Majesty, His Holiness, the Grandsage, Princess Noelle, and the commander in chief of the Soleil Knights are all aware.”

Her calmness made sense now.

“So I wasn’t worth informing?” he sneered, lips twisting.

Estelle grinned impudently back.

“This invasion was foreseen. Iblis is not among our enemies—at this point, he has not returned, so that is naturally the case. Now is our chance to remove at least one of the three demon lords. My future sight has seen how the army will move. Commander Owain, General Talisker, I ask the two of you to collaborate on a strategy.”

Impressed murmurs buzzed among the group. A strategy based on foresight was certainly a heartening idea.

“I would like to hand this meeting over to Commander Owain to discuss said strategy. However, before that...” Estelle turned to Princess Noelle. “Lady Noelle, I offer you a piece of advice—take the Saint’s Trial immediately. You will pass as you are.”

“But...I cannot leave the capital in this current situation... Besides, I undertook it half a year ago but was unable to receive guidance from Althena.”

In their brief conversation, I’d picked out a phrase I hadn’t heard before. I turned to Princess Sophia by my side. “What’s the Saint’s Trial?” I whispered.

“You know that one of Abel the Savior’s companions was Saint Anna, correct?”

She was the Priestess of the Sun to begin with, but after overcoming trials from Althena, she became a saint who saved Abel. Princess Noelle has taken those trials several times—”

“But hasn’t passed them yet?”

Princess Sophia gave a small nod.

Princess Noelle was next in line to the throne and was high up in the church as well. She must have had just as much work as (if not more than) Princess Sophia, but she was still undertaking trials...

“Can’t another priestess do it?” I asked. Surely someone like Estelle could complete the trials rather than piling yet more onto Princess Noelle’s plate.

“The saint has to be bound to the Hero of Light,” replied Princess Sophia with a shake of her head.

Ah...yeah. Estelle won’t work then. It had to be Princess Noelle, who shared a bond with Sakurai.

While she and I were talking, the meeting had moved on to the next topic. Talk of the trials must have been postponed.

“I shall now discuss the forces of our alliance that will meet the demon lord’s army,” came a deep, carrying voice. This voice belonged to Owain Bladnoch, the commander in chief of Highland’s armies.

“Firstly, Sir Sakurai, Grandsage, please head to the north of Cameron, to the Begg Coast. Zagan’s main force should be there.”

He’d dropped that important information out of practically nowhere. I was just thinking about how I couldn’t ignore it when I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Highland and Great Keith are having their strategies presented in order. Roses will likely be last,” Princess Sophia murmured into my ear.

Militarily, Roses was the weakest, so we would present after everyone else. That meant I’d probably be called upon last as well.

“Wait! Why must the Hero of Light sortie in the opening moves?! He should be in the capital while the advance forces whittle down the demons’ numbers!”

cried Prince Gaius.

Well, I suppose it's a sensible question, I thought as I watched him. Honestly, I agreed—wasn't it too risky to use our trump card right away?

"Our enemy will think the same thing," Estelle answered. "They will not imagine that we would place the savior's reincarnation in the first wave of forces. Zagan would ordinarily be behind all of his troops...but not now. We cannot let this opportunity pass."

There was a pause.

"And if Zagan is absent?" the prince asked.

"He will be there. My foresight showed that clearly."

"So we need not necessarily—"

"A careless warrior will merely strengthen our enemies. Additionally, if the demon lord is injured, he will retreat and hide away. From what I have seen, this is our only chance to deal a fatal blow to Zagan."

A much longer pause followed.

"Very well," Prince Gaius conceded, seeming convinced. Once fate magic and future foresight came out, arguing was pointless.

Owain eyed the group once more. "Are we done? Very well. Next..."

The commander continued relaying his instructions for a while before someone spoke up. "I have a question. We know Zagan is approaching from Cameron...so who will stand against Forneus?"

The voice belonged to the Hero of Lightning, Gerald Ballantine. His tone was serious, a far cry from his usual posturing. *If only he were like that the rest of the time...*

"I'll beat him back wherever he shows up! He has a water alignment, so my *Thunder Sword* will work well. I'll crush him!"

Never mind... There's Gerry.

"Have you already forgotten your loss against the elementalists, boy?" the Grandsage taunted. "Water magic can kill you as well as any other."

“Shut it, hag! I’ve grown since then!”

In response, the Grandsage reared back and kicked him to the floor. *Right after calling him “boy” too... We’re in the middle of a meeting—what are they even doing?* Also, since she’d mentioned an elementalist, some people had started looking my way.

“Sir Gerald,” Estelle said, breaking into the argument. “We cannot defeat Forneus here.”

“What? Why?!” he screeched, still sprawled on the floor where he’d been kicked.

Gerry, maybe you should get up first?

“Forneus will not truly invade the continent,” explained Estelle. “Monsters under his command will attack the coastal cities and then return to the sea. I have not foreseen anything on land.”

“He is a diversion,” the commander continued, taking over. “The likely goal is preventing a true alliance of our forces. Lady Estelle has only seen his army attacking coastal towns.”

“Sir Gerald,” said Estelle, “you will proceed to the location with Forneus’s closest ally. Is that acceptable?”

Gerald was silent for several seconds before eventually growling out a sharp, “Fine.”

At his assent, the commander went back to the force distribution. “Prince Leonardo, the Hero of Ice and Snow, will accompany the army of Springrogue...”

That was a relief—we could relax since he’d be with Maximilian and Springrogue’s army.

“And that concludes assignments,” Owain said, folding up the paper he’d been reading from. “Any questions?”

Huh?

“W-Wait a moment!” Princess Sophia exclaimed. “Roses has another hero!”

“Fool!” spat the pope as he glared in my direction. “We will not rely on a wicked deity’s disciple. He’ll slit our throats in our sleep.”

The commander turned to him. “I personally think that this is not a situation where we should be leaving strength on the table.”

That’s some mild support at least...

“Commander, are you trying to make some kind of point?!” the pope demanded.

There was a long pause, and finally, the commander murmured, “I retract my statement.” The pope was the commander’s superior, so it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. The only one who would be able to speak out would be...

“Sophia, is the king not here?” I asked. This had been on my mind for a while. He was above all others in Highland, but I’d barely ever seen him.

“His Majesty is...unwell,” she replied. “He likely will not be present...”

Was there something going on? Regardless, the king’s voice was obviously something I could not rely on. As far as things stood now, I was pretty much out of the war.

I guess at this point, that might count as lucky...? I could escape from the danger of the battlefield.

Estelle then addressed the meeting room. “Your Holiness, he *is* a hero of Roses. Playing games with our fighters is a waste—give him some border region. There will be many monsters regardless, so he is perfectly suited for the front lines.”

There was no way that Estelle was going to get through to him. After all, she was just a foreign priestess.

“Very well.” Surprisingly, the pope folded like a cheap suit.

So...I was heading off to war as well...

“Then the Hero of Roses will be going to...”

The name Owain said was not one I’d heard before. I’d have to ask Princess Sophia or Lucy about it later. Finally, though, the meeting was over.

Princess Sophia had things to discuss with Princess Noelle and the others, so she remained in the castle. I headed back to the inn and filled the girls in on what we'd be doing.

"Cornet? *That's* the town we're going to? Sure!" Sasa replied cheerily. Nothing had happened while she was staying here, so she'd gotten kinda bored.

"Cornet? Isn't that...?" Lucy mumbled. Something seemed to be bothering her about it—she turned to look quizzically at Furiae.

When I'd told Furiae everything, she had folded her arms with an odd look.

"Princess? What's up?"

Furiae didn't respond to my question, and Lucy answered instead.

"Makoto, Cornet isn't a town... The most prosperous city in Laphroaig was called Cornet, but nowadays..."

She trailed off, not finishing her sentence. Furiae sighed deeply and then picked up from where Lucy had left off.

"She's right. Cornet isn't a town—it's a ruin. It...is where I was raised."



"Noah?" I asked.

She'd brought me to her space the night before we were set to head off for battle. As always, she exuded a divine glow. Next to her was Eir, shining just as much and wearing a blue dress.

I made my way over to them.

"This is a disaster, Makoto." Noah had her hands on her hips and wore a rueful smile.

Eir, on the other hand, was waving her arms in the air. "It's awful, Mako. Awful!"

So...who to respond to first? Well, *my* goddess, of course.

"Noah, I got outed."

She and I had similar reluctant smiles on our faces.

“The people you’ve helped were on your side though,” she replied. “It’s all thanks to you.”

Noah was right... The Soleil Knights, the people from Springrogue and Great Keith... They hadn’t turned on me, not even when they’d found out about my goddess. It was all worth it.

“Well, that’s thanks to your guidance then,” I told her.

She giggled. “That’s right—praise me more.”

Noah sure was cute when she asked like that.

“It wouldn’t have even been an issue if you’d become my believer,” Eir cajoled, her tone unhappy.

Whoops... Guess we’d ignored her.

“Hmph. That’s what you get,” Noah replied.

Ack, she’d start sulking at this rate.

“Eir, what’s ‘awful’ about the plan?” I asked.

“The war! The army wasn’t supposed to attack now!”

“Huh?”

“They weren’t?”

Noah and I were both taken aback.

“Irrie’s gone off somewhere,” Eir complained.

Oh? “Ira isn’t around?” I asked.

“Nope. She and Naya were both absent during our last meeting... Naya’s never there, so that’s fine... Althena was pissed though!”

“What do goddesses discuss at meetings?” Noah asked.

I was curious too.

“How to win the war, obviously,” Eir replied. “We’ll get less reverence points if the demons win! That’d be the worst!”

Eir had worded that seriously...but it didn't seem like it was to them.

"They're immortal, Makoto," Noah explained. "They don't care all *that* much about mankind or demons that aren't even a millennium old. It's all pretty much a game to them."

"Not true." Eir pouted.

That was definitely the face of someone caught out. So this was just a game to the gods?

I also wanted to comment on another point.

"Eir, I met Ira."

"Wha?" This time, it was Eir's turn to look confused. "No way... What are you on about? That's not possible."

"Well, I'm not *certain*, but I'd say she's probably possessing Estelle."

"Why do you think that?"

"While Estelle and I were talking, she spoke like she was the goddess."

"Huh... Not bad, Makoto. Still, what's she planning?" Noah wondered.

Eir laughed. "Not a chance. I'd definitely notice..."

Suddenly, Eir cupped her hands and...gazed into them?

"It's her *All-Seeing Eye*," Noah explained. "It's about a hundred-million times better than your *Clairvoyance* skill."

"That number's too high to really make sense of..." I muttered. Humans couldn't understand the true power of the goddesses.

"Ah!" Eir yelled. "No way! She's doing it?! And all the time?! Althena forbade that kind of thing!"

"Is there something wrong with a goddess frequently possessing her priestess?" I asked. Surely it was a good thing to have a goddess close at hand for emergencies.

"Divine law forbids direct interference, and constant possession doesn't really count as mere guidance. If the wicked deities and Titanea did the same, then all

the progress we made after Titanomachia would vanish.”

“Oh...” It was more serious than I’d expected. Was Ira going to cause an issue?

“Eh, it’ll probably be fine,” Noah said dismissively. “She got past your curious looks, so she’s disguising herself well.”

“What do you mean by disguising?” I asked.

“A goddess usually leaks anima when descending through their priestess. You didn’t feel any of that, so she’s managing to hide it.”

“Not that it’s easy to do...” Eir grumbled. “Ugh! I’m gonna have to go talk to her!”

Suddenly, she was gone. Noah and I were the only ones left.

Noah peered at me steadily. It wasn’t her usual joking expression—she seemed sorrowful and serious.

“Hey, Makoto?” Even her voice sounded concerned.

“Wh-What is it?” *Have I done something?*

“You’re using *Calm Mind* now. Stop turning it up to 100%.”

“Huh...? It’s that high right now?” That was weird. I’d been trying to be careful and not use it too much.

“You’re doing it subconsciously. It’s probably because of this,” she said, snapping her fingers and uncovering my elemental arm, which was glowing blue. “You’re probably still afraid of failing that elemental conversion and being taken over. That’s what makes your skill act up.”

“I...thought I’d gotten much better with it.” It’d seemed easier to use my arm after training with it daily. Maybe I’d overestimated things.

“Right, but that’s why your feelings are slipping away,” she remarked sadly. “Janet’s confession didn’t do anything for you, did it?”

“That’s not—”

I cut myself off. In the end, I couldn’t deny it. Janet’s sudden proposal had been a shock. Her argument with Princess Sophia had been concerning as well.

Still, I felt a chill at how little it'd affected me.

"Um... Is this bad?"

"It's because you're using the skill at 100%. You feel nothing. That can be useful, and it can make you stronger, but if you feel nothing, you're no longer human."

Her serious expression was enough to make me shudder.

What should I do...?

"Well, I've already taken precautions," she said.

"What?"

She put her hand over the small red mark on my arm. "My anima is stopping the transformation from progressing. You can relax—don't use *Calm Mind* most of the time, okay?"

I peered at the mark again.

"That's what it's for?"

"It is. Your arm won't go back to normal, but it won't get worse either. My anima is maintaining the status quo."

"I...see." I touched the mark myself. The slight heat of it felt like the warmth of her affection.

"Well, I can also control you through it as a last resort...but Sacred and wicked deities alike would be on my case if I did that, so I won't."

"Thank you, Noah," I said, bowing deeply. It seems like I'd ended up constantly relying on her.

She giggled. "It's fine. Depend on me more. If anything, you don't ask *enough* of your goddess."

"That's not true," I protested. "I am being sent off to some ruins though, so I probably won't get to do much for the war effort." I was kind of sad about that—I really did want to help out.

Noah frowned angrily at me. "You should be thanking Ira for that. If she sent you to the front lines, you'd happily prance on in, wouldn't you?"

“No, I wouldn’t. But I *do* want to see a proper demon lord.”

Lucky Sakurai...getting a battlefield with a demon lord...

Noah must have heard my thoughts because her expression turned hard. “I. Said. No! ‘I want to see a demon lord,’ indeed! They’re not tourist attractions!”

“I just want to peek from a distance. I mean, this is another world... That makes sense, right?”

“Wow... There’s no saving you.”

She didn’t look entirely in agreement with my stance.

“Noah—I won’t try it. I will focus on safety in my adventuring from today onward.”

“Liar,” she teased, poking me in the forehead.

“I should be getting up soon,” I said. “I’ve got a trip to Laphroaig to make.”

“You do. Take the opportunity to relax while you can.”

I bowed to her and then stirred awake.



We were currently traveling to the ruined city of Cornet. This time, we were journeying in carriages—after all the trips aboard Fujiyan’s airship, this method of travel felt really slow.

I peered out of the window. Accompanying us were mounted knights, infantry, mages, and support staff. All personnel were members of the Soleil Knights. And the person leading them was...

“Sir Makoto, I have heard that this is your first expedition with the military. How are you faring?”

This question (and an accompanying smile) came from Ortho, the commander of the Soleil Knights’ first division. I’d fought alongside him against the stampede in Highland. Owain or Sakurai had probably assigned him to me because we’d worked together previously, and I felt really grateful for his presence. Speaking with new people was really hard for me!

“The trip’s been nice, but...is it really acceptable for us to have such a large

carriage?”

“How could you even ask? The carriage has been requisitioned for two heroes *and* Rosalie’s daughter. Of course it’s grand—that’s only natural.”

I suppose that’s just how things were. Ortho held command of the army, so after we finished talking, he headed back to the center of the formation. In our huge carriage, I was sitting opposite Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae (who had Twi on her lap).

“Waheyy, I’ve never ridden in a carriage before!” Sasa cheered, chattering like a child.

Ladies and gentlemen, the State-Authorized Hero of Great Keith... I had a feeling that no one would believe that upon first meeting her.

“Wait, this is the only time you’ve been in a carriage?” Lucy asked her.

“Yeah! I’ve only traveled on airships and pegasi before now.”

“Neither of those counts as normal!”

“They don’t?”

The two of them were making a fair racket. It was like they were off on some school trip. Meanwhile, Furiae remained utterly silent. She didn’t even open her mouth and just stared out of the window.

She’d been sort of *off* since we’d been assigned to Cornet.

“You seem down, Princess,” I said, worry evident in my tone. I’d actually offered for her to remain in Highland with Princess Sophia, but she’d been even less willing to stay in *that* country. It made sense—the pope was definitely someone to worry about.

There was a long silence, and then Furiae spoke in a mumble. “Being a priestess, I was always around so many believers. Almost all were cambions with nowhere else to go.”

The word “cambion” brought the Snake Sect to my mind...but that wasn’t the case here. The cambions she referred to were not villains, but persecuted citizens, the same as the people living in the slums of Highland.

“When I say ‘believers,’ I’m talking about those who follow Naya, not the Typhon-worshippers of the Snake Sect. I told my people to run when the knights from Highland captured me. And I told them not to search for me.”

Lucy, Sasa, and I listened quietly.

“I’m sure they have been, though. As Priestess of the Moon, I was practically their idol. Some of them probably think I died and have been grieving...but all I’ve been doing is taking it easy abroad.”

“Fuu...” Sasa murmured. Lucy and I couldn’t even manage a word.

“I don’t even know how I can face them,” Furiae admitted with a self-derisive snort.

“You just need to show them how well you’re doing!” Sasa exclaimed.

“That’s right,” Lucy agreed. “You haven’t done anything wrong!”

I nodded. “And we’ll help you look for the people you know.”

All three of us were of the same mind. Ortho would surely be willing to let us have some leeway—he was an understanding guy, so he’d look the other way. Figuratively, at least, he’d be paying a lot of attention.

“We can’t just do as we please while in the middle of a march,” Furiae protested. “But...” She paused for a moment to think. “I guess...okay, I’ll think about it.” She smiled, and there was a bit more liveliness in her expression now.

Things were much brighter in the carriage after that, with the three girls mainly carrying the conversation.

That night, once we’d gone as far as we’d planned, the formation stopped to make camp. Our journey was progressing well.

“I can’t sleep...” I mumbled. I wasn’t used to traveling by carriage, especially when surrounded by so many people I didn’t know. Everyone else had drifted off quickly though...

I suppose I usually stay up late training.

Lucy and Sasa were wrapped around each other in one of the narrow carriage beds, snoring softly away. Actually, why were they even using the same bed?

There was one for each of us... They'd sure gotten friendly.

Well, I guess I will get some training in after all.

I activated *Stealth* to make sure I didn't wake the pair of them up as I left and then exited the carriage. I nodded at the Soleil Knights on watch as I headed off to find some water for training. Not a single cloud floated in the sky. The full moon would likely be in a few days, so the road was lit up fairly bright.

Beneath the moonlight's glow, I saw a dark silhouette.

Huh? Is that a person?

I peered at the figure and soon recognized Furiae—her long hair and dark dress practically melted into the night.

Concern filled me since I didn't want her to wander off on her own. However, before I could call out, she turned around. She'd noticed me as well.

"Hello, my knight." She looked at me, hands linked behind her back. Her gaze was soft, different from the usual half-glare she usually wore. The moonlight gave her an ethereal air, like she was a flower that would fall apart at the slightest touch.

"What's up, Princess?" I asked. I wondered whether she was still mired in regret about leaving the other faithful in Laphroaig.

She didn't say anything and just let her gaze wander. Was she finding it hard to put her thoughts to words? I just waited quietly.

"If..." she began. "If I really was the Witch of Calamity...a person destined to bring disaster to the world...what would you do?"

Her phrasing bothered me. "Is the pope still worrying you?" I asked.

After all, he was practically the head of the Sacred Deities' organized faith, and he had decried Furiae as an enemy of the world. Even Ira—despite her usual foresight—was unable to see Furiae's future.

It must be bothering her. Knowing this, I responded to her question as brightly as I could. "The future's not set in stone, y'know?"

"Nor is it so easily changed," she countered.

“Besides,” I continued, “Ira can’t see your future, so no one knows what it will be anyway.”

“That’s...right...”

I could tell that she really wasn’t doing well. It wasn’t just coming back to Laphroaig—it was the abuse she’d endured in Highland as well.

Really...I’m a useless guardian knight...

I tried to think of something else to say that might cheer her up, but she spoke up first.

“If...if I were to become an enemy of the world...would you still be my guardian knight?”

She was usually so haughty, but this question was full of trepidation. Her watery eyes had the same uneasy look as when she’d first told me to become her guardian knight.



There was only one answer I'd give to that question.

"We'll match, then."

There was a long pause.

"What?" she asked flatly.

"You'll be an enemy of the world. I already am one because I follow a wicked deity," I clarified. "We'll be enemies of the world together!"

"You're so..."

I'd thought it was a pretty clever response, but Furiae looked like she'd just asked for a cold drink and I'd brought her a piping hot cup of tea.

Uh? Was that the wrong answer? Damn it! Is this a side effect from *Calm Mind* again?

You know Calm Mind has nothing to do with being able to read the mood, right? Noah chimed in mentally.

Come off it, goddess. That makes me sound like someone who can't take a hint.

That's exactly what I was implying...

Who knew what Noah was going on about?

Hey!

"No matter," Furiae said. "Sorry for the odd question." It seemed that her usual cynical attitude had returned. She folded her arms and gave me a fierce grin. "So, my knight. Even if I become an enemy of the world, keep protecting me," she demanded.

"Sure thing, Princess."

It was a promise spoken more like small talk under the moonlit sky.

"Nrow."

Twii soon came twisting around her legs.

"Oh, you want to be on my side as well?" she asked, stroking the cat's chin and earning a purr for her troubles. Twii was her cat in all but name at this point.

“Whose familiar are you supposed to be?” I grumbled.

“My knight’s, of course. Why else would she cozy up to your mistress?”

I was silent for a second. *So that’s how the pecking order works.* Twi and Furiae were both above me in that hierarchy. Got it.

“I will head to bed soon. What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll get a few hours of training in first.”

“Keep it in moderation.”

After leaving me with that warning (which was rather similar to Noah’s) she headed back to the carriage.

Several days passed the same way, with the carriage progressing during the daytime and us relaxing at night. And after those several days, we finally arrived at the ruins of Cornet.

Laphroaig had been—at least a thousand years ago—a prosperous country. The Moon Palace situated in the capital was said to have been the most beautiful in the world.

Why had this country prospered in the dark ages of the demon reign?

It was all due to the country’s princess, the Witch of Calamity. She had been in league with Iblis. At the time, this had been a secret—Laphroaig had been known as a miracle country, one that had escaped invasion for unknown reasons.

The witch had pushed through policies of harmony between humans and demons...by way of intermarriage. She’d pushed for the birth of more cambions—children born between mankind and demons—to improve race relations. These children had been intended to serve as links binding the two races together.

However, this method had been ill-chosen.

She had used her *Charm Magic* to force the issue without agreement from either race, and many unions had taken place without either side desiring them. Her wicked deeds had been later exposed by Abel the Savior, and upon Iblis’s

defeat, Laphroaig had been thoroughly dismantled. At that point, the huge numbers of displaced cambions had become refugees.

The Witch of Calamity's infamy had abated little, even after a thousand years. And today, this land was the home of many cambions.

It was the ruined country's capital—Cornet.

"So this is where you grew up, Fuu?" Sasa asked. "Hmmm..."

"It's kinda...plain," Lucy said.

Both of them had chosen their words carefully.

I peered around. "There's nothing here." That was my first impression of the place. Occasional mounds of rubble that might have once been buildings were strewn about. Otherwise, though, it was just open land.

"Everyone here lives underground," Furiae explained. "The merchants of Highland and Cameron come through on the surface."

"Eh? Why does that matter?" Sasa questioned.

"Because they're searching for cambion women and children to enslave," Furiae spat. "After all, we don't have rights."

"Th-That's awful...!" Sasa cried out.

Furiae's words weighed heavily on us. Frankly, I didn't know what to say.

"H-Hey!" Lucy exclaimed, breaking the silence. "Back when I was small, I was told I couldn't leave the forest. They want elves for slaves as well. Especially cute half-elves like me, apparently."

"L-Lucy?! You never mentioned that before!" I shouted.

"Oh, didn't I?" she asked.

I knew she'd joined in to try and change the atmosphere, but her admission had been alarming. Was the Great Forest really that dangerous? Besides all that...man, this world was scary!

A dark silence filled the air, broken only by Twi meowing. That was when Ortho arrived.

“Sir Makoto, do you have a moment?” he asked.

“S-Sure. What is it?” *Phew, a topic change.*

“We will be making camp now. This evening, we will have a remote conference with the capital via communication magic. Please join us for that meeting. Feel free to do as you wish until camp is made, but if you are traveling farther away, please tell someone first. Also, there is a beach beyond the Moon Palace, but there is a strong possibility that Forneus’s army will attack, so keep a lookout for monsters and demons. Additionally...the chance is relatively low, but the Snake Sect may take the opportunity to strike, so be on your guard for that as well.”

That’s...a lot of warnings. Actually being at war really ramped up the tension.

“Understood, Ortho,” I replied.

“Until later,” he said, swiftly moving away. A massive tent was being constructed in the distance. Ortho gave instructions to his men, and I considered going to help, but these knights were professionals. I’d probably just end up getting in the way.

Which meant...our party had some free time.

And here I was, expecting some form of supervision... A thought had occurred to me during the journey: it was mostly the church and nobility who were so averse to the wicked deities and the Priestess of the Moon. By contrast, the knights didn’t seem to care all that much.

So, what to do with this windfall of free time?

I looked toward Furiae suddenly. She shot me a questioning look in return.

“What?”

“You know the area, right? Show us around?” I requested. When you were in a new place, it was always best to ask the locals.

“Okay. I suppose that’s fine,” she answered, turning and leading our group off.

“Fuu, you walk too fast!” Sasa protested.

“We’re coming with you, Fuuri,” said Lucy. “Heading off alone is dangerous.”

Sasa and Lucy hurried right after her, and I followed behind them, keeping *Scout* up. Very few buildings were still standing, but remnants of a paved road were obvious along the ground.

Furiae strode along that broken path without hesitation.

“Nothing has changed at all,” she murmured. “Not that it’s much of a surprise.”

“Really?” Sasa asked.

“Really. I grew up in these ruins for over a dozen years...” Furiae then giggled. “I’ll never get tired of the sights.”

There was a sense of enjoyment lurking under her words, so maybe she was cheering up a bit.

“I always felt like it wasn’t quite fair, seeing Highland and Roses... Everyone lives out in the open, but my people were hidden away like moles.” She giggled again. “Every time I witnessed happiness from those who’d never had to drink from the mud...I could have happily killed them.”

Nope, not cheery! Too much darkness in her heart...

“H-Hey...” I stammered. “Princess Noelle is against the class system as well, so maybe there’ll be less discrimination once she takes the throne.” I’d heard someone mention that fact at some point.

“I wonder about that,” Furiae replied. “She talks about removing the discrimination against elves and beastmen, but that doesn’t mean she thinks the same about cambions. Besides, the church doesn’t even see cambions as people.”

“I’ve...heard that before,” Lucy said darkly.

Highland was certainly infested with severely discriminatory views. Remembering how the pope acted, I could definitely imagine how deep those views went.

“Besides, how can you rely on that woman?!” Furiae snapped angrily. “My knight, from the moment she was born, she’s had everything handed to her. I

don't want to hear any more about the Priestess of the Sun!"

I don't think she's had everything since birth... I thought. After all, she'd originally been third in line to the throne. And in fact, she'd only risen up in succession after becoming betrothed to the Hero of Light—Sakurai. She was merely half of the pair. Until then, she would have been aiming for the pope's position and training herself as a priestess.

Princess Sophia had called Princess Noelle a far better person and a hard worker, so I'd formed that image of her as well... Still, this wasn't the time or place to mention it.

"I won't bring her up again," I assured Furiae. Then, changing the subject, I asked, "By the way, where are we heading?"

"There," she answered, pointing. A smallish hill rose up from the landscape in that direction—a large pile of stone bricks sat atop it. Though it definitely counted as ruins now, the bits of architecture that remained certainly looked the part of a once-great building.

"That's where the Moon Palace used to be. I lived underneath it," she explained.

At that, we descended.

"Huh, there's so much space under here," Sasa commented.

"Were they once secret passages?" Lucy asked.

They both peered around with interest. We were currently in a wide, circular area, with many tunnels branching off the hub.

"They were," responded Furiae. "The former palace had practically a labyrinth of secret passages underneath it. They were designed as escape routes for wartime."

"It's kind of like Great Keith's capital," I remarked as I recalled searching the underground passages for the Snake Sect alongside the Herald Knight.

They'd used a sacrificial rite in those tunnels to try and destroy the city... *I'll prepare Scout...just in case*, I thought, making sure my skill was ready to go.

It found something instantly.

“Sasa, Lucy! People are hiding over there. Princess, c’mere!” I exclaimed.

“G-Got it,” Furiae stuttered, rushing quickly over to me.

The people hiding were faster, though.

“Don’t resist.”

“Kill the knights!”

“Save Lady Furiae!”

“For the glory of the cambions!”

Suddenly, the figures hiding in the shadows came rushing at us. The person closest to the masked people...was Sasa.

“If you want her to surv— Gauh!”

The leader seemed to have decided that Sasa looked pretty weak compared to the rest of us, so he’d tried to grab hold of her...and was sent flying.

Sasa had a blank look on her face and held her right hand out in front of her. I hadn’t even seen her throw the punch.

The rest of the attackers stopped all at once.

Yup, she’s our strongest, I thought toward the leader.

“Are they from the Snake Sect?” Lucy wondered. She held her staff over her head, along with a rumbling ball of fire five meters in diameter. It was always intimidating to see Lucy’s fireballs. A hit from one wouldn’t even leave bones behind—I was sure of it.

“Makoto, I’m going to fry the lot of them,” she growled.

“Sure. Leave the leader behind, though. We’ll take him back to Ortho.”

“Okey dokey!” she cheered with an impish wink. Our whole exchange was obviously a joke.

The massive fireball started billowing as Lucy poured more of her ridiculous mana reserves into it. It’d probably take out the whole palace if she let it fly...and we’d also be buried alive if she did.

More, and more. She just kept pumping mana into the fireball she'd never launch. The air grew drier, fragments of mana burned in the air, and it became harder to breathe.

The people attacking us must have been absolutely terrified.

Suddenly, the man Sasa had sent flying let out a cry. "W-Wait! If you're going to kill us, just kill me! Please, let the others go!" he pleaded.

"Oh, you seem familiar..." Furiae mused, stepping from out behind us. "Havel, is that you? What are you doing?"

"Lady Furiae! Ahhh...to think the day would come that I could see your face again! Our comrades will save you! You need only wait!"

These guys...

"Friends of yours?" I asked her.

"They are... My knight, mage, if you would wait a moment?"

In answer to Furiae's request, Lucy let her spell fizzle out. She really had gotten so much better with magic. "I never thought I'd see the day her spells were so reliable..." I mumbled.

"What? Makoto! Seeing you so choked up over a fireball isn't exactly comforting!" Lucy chastised.

"What're we gonna do with *them*, Takatsuki?" Sasa asked, pointing to the masked group.

"Lady Furiae!"

"Priestess!"

"M-Meeting you again—"

"Is a blessing."

The group had removed their masks and were kneeling on the floor around the princess. Some of them had been moved to tears, and their voices shook as they all but prayed to her... What on earth?

"Princess, can you give us an introduction already?" I asked, waving at her.

“How dare you speak to her in such a way!” the leader—Havel—boomed.

“What did you say?” Sasa demanded, activating *Menace*.

They all yelped, and Havel fell back to his knees. The others shrunk back as well.

That was a lamia queen’s *Menace* for you... Properly terrifying!

“Wait a while, my knight!” Furiae commanded.

“Sure thing,” I answered before settling in to do just that. As far as I’d seen, we probably didn’t have to worry about them hurting her.

Lucy, Sasa, and I waited for the others to finish talking. I just observed them vaguely.

“Hey, Makoto... Have you realized?” Lucy whispered meaningfully into my ear. “They all look...”

“Yeah, they’re all cambions.”

The people around Furiae all had horns, red eyes, or the like—demon features. They were just like the cambion children we’d met in the orphanage in Highland. These people were all *visibly* related to demons. Also, I’d thought they were all men at first, but there was at least one young woman among them. What kind of relationship did these people have with one another?

Furiae spoke with them for a while before leaving them behind and coming over to me.

“I am sorry, my knight. They follow Naya as I do, and they wanted revenge on the Highland knights for taking me away. Can you let their behavior pass...?”

“Hmmm...”

Well, technically, they *had* attacked us. Because Sasa was so strong, it hadn’t really been an issue, but if they’d gone after Lucy... Actually, no, she would’ve managed something—she’d grown pretty strong recently.

I was the weakest in close combat. Now, how to answer?

“The punishment for a cambion attacking someone is death...without exception...” Furiae added.

“What?!” Sasa exclaimed in shock. I was on the same page—that was pretty extreme.

“*That’s* why you want me to let it go?” I asked.

“W-Will you?” she asked, a clear expression of fear on her face. She must have been close to them. “I...lived with them when I was young. I certainly do not want to see them killed.”

“So you’re childhood friends...?” If so, it made sense that she’d want to save them.

I glanced at Lucy and Sasa.

“You can decide,” Lucy said.

“I see no problem with that,” Sasa remarked. “No one got hurt.”

“If you two say so,” I replied before turning to Furiae. “I didn’t see anything happen.”

“Y-You’re sure...?” she asked.

“Yeah. Though, make sure they don’t attack the Soleil Knights again.”

“Thank you, my knight.”

If one of my childhood friends—for example, Sakurai or Sasa—were in danger of dying, I’d definitely do my best to save them. I would never be able to just watch them get executed. Of course, I couldn’t exactly imagine either of them being in danger... If anything, *I* was the one most at risk.

“Thank you, Lady Furiae... And our apologies to you all.”

Her acquaintances all bowed their heads. Though, I had to admit, none of them *sounded* like they were childhood friends with her. I suppose it must have been because of how important her position was to them.

“B-But!” One of them spoke up. “You call him your knight...is he your *guardian* knight, Lady Furiae?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Why?! We would lay down our lives for you!”

“That’s right! He barely has any aura or mana! I doubt he can protect you!”

“Please! Come back to us!”

They practically had their heads to the floor as they pleaded with her.

Guys, can you not just dismiss me like that?

“My knight is the Hero of Roses. He also defeated Bifrons in Springrogue.”

There was a collective noise of confusion and surprise.

Did I really look *that* weak?

“The warrior that blasted Havel away is Great Keith’s hero.”

This time, the group uttered words of understanding.

Oh, so you can accept that one?!

“You saw the mage’s mana earlier. A hundred of you wouldn’t be enough to defeat them. And besides...if I chose a cambion as my guardian knight, Highland’s Temple Knights would slay them where they stood.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Guh. You, what’s your name?” the leader—Havel—asked me.

“Makoto Takatsuki...”

“Makoto Takatsuki...an otherworlder, then?”

He was all up in my face. The man had silver hair and dark skin. His features were fairly handsome, but his red eyes and the horns on his forehead betrayed him as a cambion.

“Please...look after Lady Furiae,” he murmured, almost glaring as he bowed his head reluctantly.

“I will.” Not that I needed him to tell me that.

“Lady Furiae, I am unsure how much assistance we will be, but should you ever need it, all of Laphroaig will stand with you.”

After those parting words, the man signaled the others with a look, and they went to leave.

“Wait,” Furiae called out to them. “The demon lords’ armies are heading to this continent. Did you all know that?”

“Yes, we did...but this is still the only place we have left,” Havel replied with a saddened smile.

“I...I see. Take care.”

The cambions bowed once more before vanishing down one of the passages.

At least we managed to avoid a pointless fight. Something’s still bothering me, though...

I’d probably get accused of not reading the mood because of it...but well, we were at war.

“Um...Princess?”

“What is it, my knight?”

“Ah, well it’s kinda awkward to ask, but...”

I was trying to decide how to actually word it when she cut me off.

“You’re worried they’re connected to the Snake Sect?”

“Well...yeah.”

“I thought you might be concerned about that, so I used my *Charm* to listen to their intentions. They weren’t lying—they have no links to the armies.”

“Oh, okay.” She always did pay attention, and I was relieved by her assurance.

It was now time to return to the Soleil Knights since I had a meeting to attend this evening. As we headed back to the campsite, I felt a poking at my shoulder.

“Say...my knight?” Furiae asked, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

“Yeah?”

“What if I was lying? What if they *were* working for the demons?”

“Were you?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Then I trust you.”

Her eyes widened.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Some woman’s going to take advantage of you like that!” she shouted, avoiding my look.

I didn’t understand how I’d pissed her off.

“Look how red Fuu is. What’d you say to her?” Sasa teased, taking her place.

“Nothing really,” I said.

“Hmm.”

“Do you do it on purpose?” Lucy asked. “Or is it all natural?”

She must have overheard our conversation.

“What’d he say?” Sasa asked her.

“That he trusts in Fuuri.”

“Well, neither of you think she’s lying either, do you?” I pointed out. “That’s why.”

The two of them just stared at me oddly for a moment.

“Flatterer.”

“Bane of women.”

Pickup artist.

Now even Noah was getting on my case!

“Shouldn’t we be focused on heading back?” Furiae yelled at us. “You’ve got that meeting tonight!”

Whoops. Definitely didn’t want to be late to that.

And so, we proceeded to the campsite. As soon as we arrived, we were ushered to the big tent in the middle of everything else.

“Wow...”

“It’s the same as in Springrogue.”

Inside, a myriad of images floated in the air. This must’ve been the

communication magic they'd been talking about earlier. I remember that back in Springrogue, the village chiefs had used it to confer with one another.

According to Ortho, it was a standard spell now used by all the nations' militaries.

The largest of the images was of the Soleil Knights' overall commander, Owain. I could see Sakurai by his side, and the Grandsage was there as well...sleeping?

"Now, let us begin," Owain said softly. "To start off this strategy meeting, let us discuss the situation on the demon continent."

"Yessir! I can begin," one of his subordinates responded, prompting everyone to focus on him. "Firstly, the army led by Zagan is..."

He read out what we knew of the armies' positions, strengths, and organization. Everyone listened with serious expressions, nodding along. However, since I'd come from another world, none of it was really sinking in. Hearing different place names and the names of smaller demon races meant nothing to me.

I looked back—Sasa had apparently gotten bored as well and was just stroking Twi.

You're a hero too, you know?

"Lucy, Princess, any hints?" I asked them quietly.

The two of them shook their heads.

"Well...I don't really know anything about the geography of that continent..." Lucy responded.

"I hadn't left Laphroaig until recently, so I do not know."

Guess they couldn't offer any insight. If Princess Sophia or Fujiyan were here, then they'd probably be able to explain...

I'd just have to ask Ortho later.

The knights relayed a *lot* of information on the demon army, and the flow of intel showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

Suddenly, I noticed Princess Sophia in one of the images. She was next to Princess Noelle, so they were probably in Highland's castle. I also spotted Estelle—the Priestess of Fortune—so maybe they were gathering all the priestesses too.

The image of Princess Sophia met my eyes. She smiled slightly, mouthing words. “I wish you luck,” was what it looked like—just some soundless encouragement.

Should I reply somehow? I hesitated but ultimately offered a wave back.

“Hero of Roses! Quit your flirting!”

Guh!

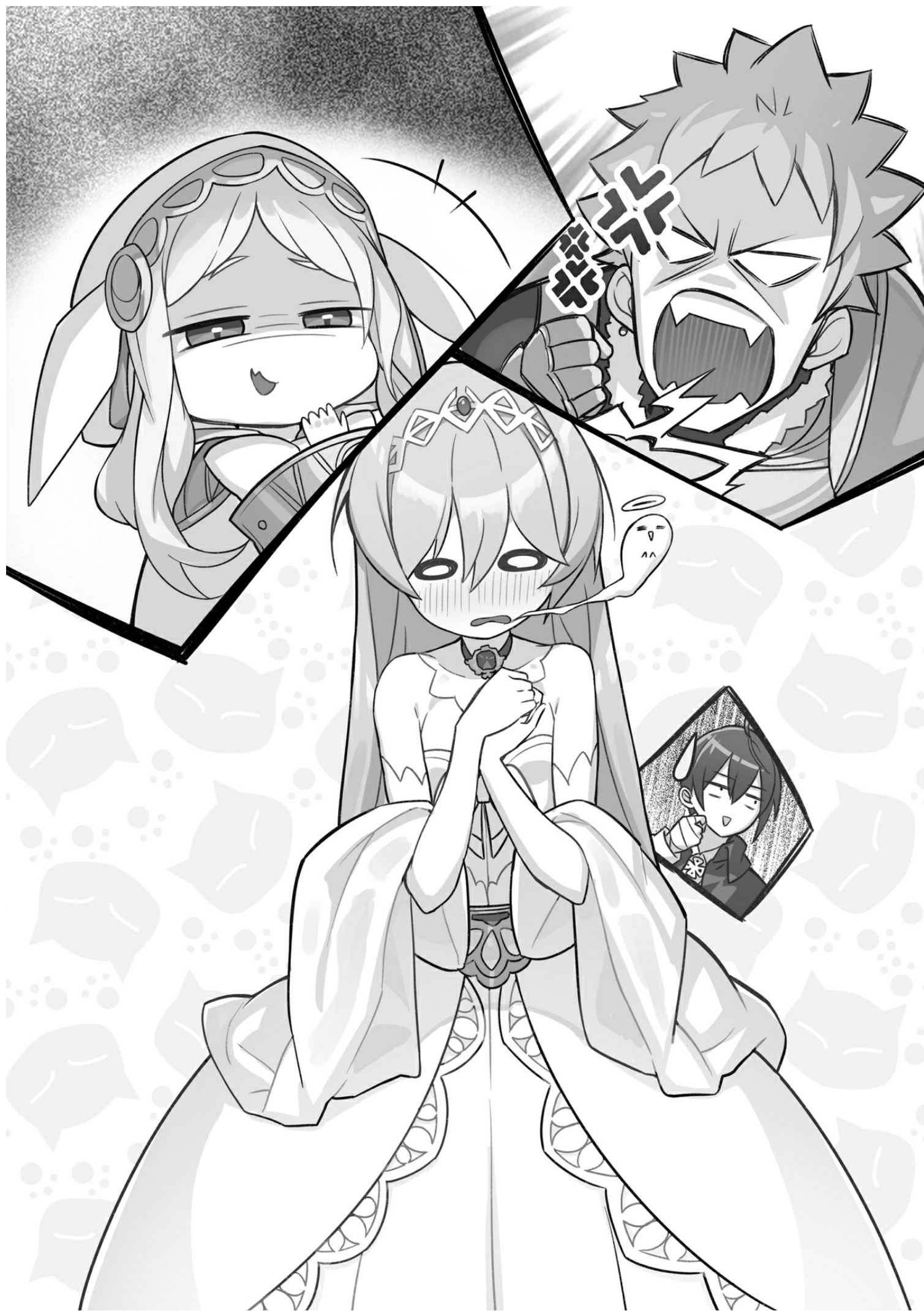
The yell had come from Gerry—the Hero of Lightning.

Everyone looked toward me at once.

“Taking it easy, elemental? If you're bored, why not come down here?” the Grandsage asked with a smirk.

All the gazes I felt upon me were cold...and Princess Sophia's face was bright red.

Sorry, Sophia!



The other princess at her side offered some support. I'd need to apologize properly later.

"What are you doing?" Lucy demanded.

"My knight, are you a fool?"

"Come on, Takatsuki, you've got to listen."

Getting chastised by Lucy and Furiae was one thing...but I didn't want to hear that from Sasa!

"Well, since we seem to be boring people, let us leave the reports there for now."

Even Commander Owain was getting in on it... I'd apologize to everyone later for interrupting the conference.

"Lady Estelle," Owain said. "Please explain our next steps."

"Very well," she replied, stepping forward. "Over the next six days, Forneus's armies will make landfall." She continued speaking fluidly. "The coasts of Caol Ilan, Highland, Great Keith, Springrogue, and Roses will all see incursions. We cannot, however, pay them heed—they are all diversions, traps to divert the Hero of Light from our main forces."

All of the people in the images listened raptly.

"On the seventh night, Zagan will attack Cameron. He is aiming to kill the Hero of Light and weaken the country as a whole. Should he fail at his main objective, using Cameron as the battlefield will still weaken our alliance as a whole."

Cameron was the center of our logistics—crushing it would hamper us considerably.

"That makes sense," General Talisker said after a while. "Yet, this course of action seems far more prudent than we would usually expect from the demons."

"Precisely, General. The plan came not from the demons, but the cambions. The archbishop Isaac, to be exact, of that damned Snake Sect."

“Those parasites...we should just wipe them all out, Snake Sect or not!” That excessive comment had come from the bishop.

I heard a “tch” from Furiae. She can’t have been pleased to hear the bishop’s remark. I offered her a silent apology, hoping she wouldn’t make a scene.

Weird, though...

If what Estelle said was correct, would Laphroaig not be attacked?

Said woman looked my way, and as if reading my mind, spoke up. “Ah, right. The armies will go to the ruins of Cornet as well. There are only cambions there anyway, but it would be rather bothersome if they established a base on the continent, so drive them off if you would, apostle of Noah.” Estelle—or more accurately, Ira—sounded bored as she relayed those instructions.

“I understand.” Did she really need to say “apostle” like that...?

“Do you truly?” she countered. “The aim of our battles is to crush Zagan’s army. Then, to prepare for the return of Iblis, we must keep as much of our strength as possible. Pointless battles are out of the question. Wicked apostle, you are known to readily run into danger, so do I make myself clear?”

She was speaking like she’d been watching over me, and I guess she had been... “She” being, of course, Ira.

“Tomorrow, around ten thousand sea monsters will arrive in Laphroaig. They will likely remain just out of range, provoking you.”

“Tomorrow?!” I exclaimed. *That’s so soon!*

“However, you cannot go out to fight them. These monsters are skilled in ambush, so they may even attack some of the country’s citizens... We cannot afford to lose fighters. Leave them be.”

I heard a short, aggrieved noise from Furiae at the cool instruction.

“But of course. Cambions are worth less than insects. There is no need to waste our resources on them.” That statement came from the bishop’s mouth, but the majority of people present agreed.

Bastards...

I knew I had to say something. But just before I could, Furiae turned to me.

“Hold, my knight,” she whispered.

“Princess?”

“You are in a bad position now that they know your allegiances. Do not make any more trouble!”

“But—”

“Do not!”

Well, if Furiae was going to insist...

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said to Estelle on the screen.

The priestess nodded in satisfaction. “Good.”

“That wraps up our meeting. If there are any changes, report at once,” Owain announced, addressing the whole group.

Thus concluded the strategy meeting between the six nations. The images flickered out one after another. However, I really wasn’t at ease—I needed to relax.

I’ll just do some training once we’re released.

Once all the images had disappeared, Ortho called out, “Hero Makoto,” stopping me in my tracks.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You need not worry about the cambions.”

Furiae and I looked questioningly at him.

“Princess Noelle instructed us to protect the citizens of Laphroaig without distinction. Commander Owain is of the same mind.”

“He is?” Neither of them had said anything against the priestess or pope earlier...

“Our positions mean we can say nothing against His Holiness, but the final decisions in military matters rest with the commander. Princess Noelle wants to remove the racism, and he agrees with her. We will protect the people of

Laphroaig,” the man asserted strongly.

So that’s how things were behind the scenes.

The first division that Ortho led had many of the veterans and older knights within its ranks. It had seemed a bit weird for them to be defending Laphroaig, but now the order made sense.

“That’s good. Right, Princess?”

The question hung for a moment before Furiae answered. “It is. She intends to treat the cambions fairly.”

Despite her assent, she had a conflicted look on her face. Was it because Princess Noelle was involved? Whatever her misgivings with the sun priestess, Furiae had to be grateful for what she was doing here. Regardless of the reasoning, that was one less thing to worry about.

I tried to walk away again, but Ortho grabbed my hand.

“Ortho?” I asked.

“We aren’t done yet, Sir Makoto,” he said, his grip tightening. “These meetings will determine the future of the continent. I must ask that you focus on them.”

“R-Right...” He was definitely correct.

“You seem unfamiliar with the geography of the demon continent and the races making up their armies. I will explain them for future reference. Do you have the time now?”

After a beat, I said, “Yes, of course.” Waving at Princess Sophia during the meeting definitely hadn’t gone down well with this military man.

“Right then—Lucy, Sasa, Princess, you too!” I announced.

“What?!” they all complained.

Hey now, I don’t want to do this all on my own!

In the end, we had to sit through the lecture for several hours before we could leave.

“Enemy sighted! Ten thousand strong!” came a yell from the Soleil Knights on guard.

“Estelle was right,” I mused.

“Just as predicted,” Ortho replied gravely.

We were standing on the coast behind the Moon Palace. The enemies were finally close enough that we could see them with *Clairvoyance*. Sea monsters were slipping in and out of sight in the distance. Each one of them was about as long as a fishing boat.

“Sir Ortho! Deployment on the beaches is complete!”

“Of course. We will follow Lady Estelle’s directions and not engage on their terms. They are trying to provoke us.”

“And if they attack?”

“Let them get as close as possible. Do not allow them to make landfall,” Ortho ordered.

“Understood!”

“What are we doing for the night watch?”

“An eight-hour rotation, twenty-four hours a day. The shifts have been distributed to the squads already.”

“Good. Now, the next thing...”

The tense conversation between Ortho and his subordinates carried on for a while.

I thought back to the lecture yesterday. My misunderstanding that sea monsters wouldn’t cause problems on land had been corrected—just because they were based in the ocean didn’t mean they couldn’t come onto the beach as well. They spent most of their time in the water but could remain active on land for several days.

In other words, where we were standing right now could become a battlefield.

Once more, I gazed out at the open expanse of water in front of us. *It’s been a*

while... I thought. The last time I'd been near the ocean was when I'd tried to reach the Seafloor Temple.

The important thing was...that the ocean was awash with water elementals.

"Hmm..." I folded my arms in thought.

"What's up, Makoto?" Lucy asked, propping her head on my shoulder and pressing her cheek into mine. I could feel her warmth on my skin.

"There are a lot of water elementals here," I replied. I'd never seen so many in one place before.

"Huh, are there? Can you see them too, Lu?" Sasa had jumped onto my back, slinging her arms over my shoulders from behind. I could feel her soft frame pressing against me.

"I can't," Lucy replied. "I don't have a high enough level in water magic."

"Hmph. You're a mage, though, so you should be able to see them if you train. You two are so lucky," Sasa griped.

She and Lucy were chatting away, leaning closer and closer to me as they did.

"Guys, you're a bit—"

Before I could finish, Furiae interjected.

"Stop clinging to my knight so much!"

The two girls yelped as Furiae grabbed them by the scruffs of their necks and lifted them like cats.

Furiae was pretty damn strong...

"Say, my knight, perhaps we should go back to the tent?"

We'd actually been told by Ortho to wait—we were supposed to be on hand if the monsters attacked. I'd wanted to see the beasts for myself, so we'd accompanied the knights.

Furiae was sneaking glances at the monsters as she suggested we leave. It made sense that she'd be bothered by an army on her homeland's borders.

"Let me down already!" Lucy protested.

“Fuu! Let us goooo!”

Both of them were kicking their legs in the air. Again, like cats.

“Put ‘em down, Princess. Also, just give me a minute.” I wanted to check something, so I lifted my right hand toward the sky.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx (Elementals, elementals,)” I called...prompting clouds to swirl into being and start to disgorge water. Even more water elementals gathered around us, and huge amounts of mana started to coalesce in my hand. It felt like enough to cast several king rank spells.

“My knight...did you just change the weather?” Furiae asked, somewhat aghast.

Lucy stared worriedly at my arm. “M-Makoto, that mana...”

“Wah! Cold! Hi-yah! Hi-yah!” Sasa was batting away every drop of water that got near her.

Whoa...

The air shivered, and the sea seemed to rise a little higher in response.

It was going well. I had plenty of mana...

Makoto, Laphroaig doesn't have much influence from the Sacred Deities, so there are more elementals there than in other places.

That makes sense, Noah. It was good news—I could have a steady supply of mana even without using my arm.

“A-Ah...Sir Makoto? What in the...?”

I realized that Ortho had come over. I looked between him, my hand, and the distant monsters. Then, I remembered the worried look on Furiae’s face.

Before I could give it a second thought, the words tumbled from my mouth.

“Ortho, do you mind if I get rid of that army?”

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Fights the Demon Army

◇ First Division Commander of the Soleil Knights, Ortho's Perspective ◇

Several days ago, we held a meeting among the commanders of the Soleil Knights.



"I'm coming in."

"Grandsage?!" Commander Owain cried out as a legend appeared in our meeting. "What brings you here today?"

The Grandsage was the descendant of one of the heroes that saved the world a thousand years ago...at least, publicly. In truth, she was the actual hero from back then—she was a guardian of Highland, and as a vampire, she'd been alive for over a millennium. Even we, the leaders of the Soleil Knights who were the greatest fighting force in the country, could not hide our nerves when she was so close.

"Nothing major," replied the Grandsage. "There's just something I'd like to ask, and a favor I want."

"And that would be...?"

This was a rarity. The Grandsage usually had no interest in authority or politics. In fact, I had no memory of her ever giving someone an order, so this odd occurrence likely had something to do with the war. *What could she possibly want?*

"Who is accompanying the elementalist from Roses?" she asked.

"I-I am!" I said quickly. "Commander of the first division, Ortho!"

I hadn't even considered that her request might have something to do with me. She peered over in amusement. "Oh? Now isn't that taking it easy? They're

sending one of our aces. Shouldn't you be heading to the main battle?"

Commander Owain took up the response smoothly. "Naturally, Sir Sakurai and I will be taking care of that. Laphroaig is far from safe though, and is said to be home to many of the Snake Sect. It needs a careful hand on the reins."

"I suppose so. First commander?"

"Yes?!" I responded nervously.

"About the elementalist...if he wants to mess with the army, let him do so."

Her request was not something I would've ever expected. I was silent for a moment before finding my voice again. "What do you mean by that?"

"Grandsage, you are aware that we are to prioritize the preservation of our forces in these battles, no?" asked Commander Owain. He apparently had the same doubts as I did. Hero or not, we could not allow Makoto Takatsuki to just do as he pleased. While he might've wanted to fight against all the monsters, we still needed him to align with our strategy.

The Grandsage answered his question with one of her own. "You've heard about him stopping the comet in Great Keith, haven't you?"

"Well, General Talisker has reported on that, but..."

There were many people who doubted the story—how he'd prevented the massive comet from wiping out the whole capital. Still, I had personally seen him use water magic to take out five thousand ancient monsters all at once, so I could believe it.

"He's worth more than ten thousand monsters," she continued. "Not utilizing his strength would be foolish, no?" The Grandsage usually had a scowl on her face, but it'd been replaced with a smirk.

Conversely, Commander Owain's face was severe. "Hmm, but..."

Her request was completely at odds with our current strategy. Besides, allowing a wicked deity's believer to do as he wished would also invite the pope's rage.

At that, I broke into the conversation, offering both of them a suggestion.

“If you will pardon me, Grandsage? Allowing just Sir Makoto to do as he wishes will foul our military discipline. Could we class his actions otherwise? Perhaps...as secret orders from yourself?”

“Ortho, that would—”

But the Grandsage cut off Commander Owain. “I don’t mind. If the others get rowdy, then tell them you *had* to follow my orders.”

I’d honestly thought that my request might be futile, but she’d agreed almost instantly.

“His Holiness will not accept that,” Commander Owain pointed out. “Complaints alone would be one thing...but, Grandsage, this could also be seen as you interfering in the military structure and attempting to create a faction of your own. I am aware that you dislike such bothers, so are you still willing to support this?”

His concerns were rather valid. The nobles and clergy in Highland would be far from welcoming of new influences.

“I don’t care,” she said flippantly. “Their foolishness will be silenced by the results. The elementalist can manage it.”

I could feel the utter certainty present in her voice. Why did she put so much faith in a foreign hero?

“You have a rather good opinion of the Hero of Roses,” Owain remarked, putting our feelings to words.

“Hardly. The little Hero of Light over there could take on a hundred thousand. The elementalist isn’t quite at that level yet,” she responded curtly.

Everyone’s gazes gathered on the Hero of Light, who commanded the seventh division of the Soleil Knights. He took in the stares for a moment, then modestly said, “I have never fought against that many foes, so I cannot really comment.”

Regardless, it was clear that he thought he *could* take on that many. And I quite agreed.

Though, the Grandsage was apparently not pleased with this response. “Come on, don’t be so wishy-washy. Abel fought against an army of one million

a thousand years ago.”

She was probably talking about the legendary battle—Abel and his four-man party had defeated a million soldiers in the demon lord’s army.

“Grandsage...” Commander Owain said mildly. “That was back in Abel the Savior’s time period. Our scouting has shown us that there are currently no enemy forces of that caliber.”

“Hmph, I know that. Anyway, the elementalists’ magic will be useful on the battlefield. Don’t play around, just use it. I’ll take responsibility.”

As soon as she finished speaking, she vanished with a *Teleport*.

Silence reigned in the room for a while before Commander Owain broke it.

“Ortho?”

“Yessir?” I asked, straightening.

“Follow the Grandsage’s orders—do not restrict the Hero of Roses. However, if it seems like the hero will have a large impact on the strength of our position, give your own orders as commander of the first division. The army of Roses is under the Soleil Knights’ command. He likely won’t disobey any such orders.”

“Yessir! Understood!”

If our commander in chief had made the decision, then I’d abide by it.

“Still... I wonder what she is thinking,” someone mused.

“That rumor...might be true.”

I had heard the gossip about her as well.

“Hey, Sir Ryousuke, is the Hero of Roses her lover?” the sixth division’s commander asked, smirking. He was young and fairly close to Sir Sakurai, so he could easily inquire. Though...this was not exactly the appropriate place to do so.

“Nah...I don’t think Takatsuki’s the Grandsage’s lover,” said the Hero of Light with a reluctant smile. Sir Sakurai would know best since he and the Hero of Roses were fairly close, and had been even in their old world.

It must just be a rumor. Still, it was unusual for the Grandsage to weigh in on

things like this. The other commanders were all confused as well.

“You shouldn’t just take town gossip at face value,” Commander Owain stated firmly. “Our intelligence department has only reported them meeting three times. You can take that to mean there is no such relationship.” The commander glared out across all his men, and with that, the speculation was quickly put to an end.

So he’s already gotten evidence. Well, as the leader of the Soleil Knights, he needed information as well as strength. It was not an easy role.

Commander Owain cleared his throat and moved the topic back to the task at hand. “Now, part of the strategy has changed, so let us confirm the Northern Front Plan.”

We all nodded. However, several days later, this exact issue would come up again.



A storm of mana wreathed the Hero of Roses as he looked out across the sea.

“Ortho, do you mind if I get rid of that army?”

Things had gone just as the Grandsage had predicted.

“Sir Makoto...have you forgotten Lady Estelle’s words? We need to avoid fighting in general. We need to be ready for Iblis and maintain our strength,” I stressed, invoking our strategy.

“We do,” he replied, “but the monsters don’t think our magic can get to them. If we attack first, we won’t take any losses.”

I paused for a moment. “And...you can reach them?” Judging by eye, the monsters were about as far away as Highland’s capital was wide. There were barely any mages who could attack at such a long range, even in the Soleil Knights.

If it was possible, then eliminating them would be ideal, but...

“That mana will not be enough against ten thousand soldiers of the demon lord,” I told him.

Sir Makoto had borrowed vast amounts of mana from the elementals, but the monsters lurking in the sea were the direct subordinates of Forneus. Though the mana surrounding him was greater than any of our mages, it would still not be enough against the demon army. That was my judgment as a commander.

“Of course not,” he replied carelessly. “That’s why I’m going to get ready now.”

“What?” I couldn’t comprehend what he had said for a moment. *Th-That’s not your full power?*

While I was lost for words, he stepped toward his companions. Then, he spoke to the Priestess of the Moon. “Princess, I could do with a hand to get rid of them. Do you mind?”

“I don’t...but how?” she asked with a doubtful look.

He took her silken hand in his. “*Synchro.*”

I didn’t understand what he was doing, but his companions seemed to be in the same situation.

“Makoto?”

“Takatsuki, what are you doing?”

“You’ll see in a minute,” he replied. “There she is. Hey, Undyne.”

It was like I’d suddenly been punched in the gut—it felt as if a cold sensation was slicing through my spine, as if I were standing in the middle of a blizzard after the aura around me was blasted away.

Wh-What the...?!

The moon priestess’s face looked pale as well.

“M-My knight! Please warn me if you’re about to summon her like that!”

“Ah, sorry, Princess,” he said with a laugh, scratching his cheek. “Undyne, keep the mana down would you? Just touch my right hand a bit.”

He seemed to be speaking to the empty spot at his right.

“xxxxxxxxxxxx.”

Guh?!

I was sweating buckets and could feel my knees knocking. No, there was definitely some sort of force present. I couldn't see it, but it was there. I couldn't even react to the horrifying amounts of mana. The other knights had started to make their way over to see what was going on, but they'd all frozen in place.

The sea was roiling with waves. Damp cloudy fog, almost a light drizzle, wrapped around us. The oddest thing was that the rain was only falling *here*—the sun still shone upon the distant scenery. Even more mana started spiraling around Sir Makoto as the air and land started to shudder.

I wouldn't even be surprised if some cataclysm ripped through our camp.

"Sir Makoto! What are you doing?!" I asked, frantically containing the scream that threatened to pour from my lips.

"Huh? I was just going to use a spell to drive them off."

There's no point! If the monsters had any intelligence, they would have turned tail the second they felt this ridiculous mana. No, they wouldn't even need intelligence, just instinct. They'd be able to sense the mana's pressure and their own impending doom.

"Well, here I go," said Sir Makoto.

Contrary to his relaxed tone, the pressure in the air made it difficult to breathe. The earth shook, and the air itself shuddered.

"Water Magic: Ice W—" he began, but then he paused and murmured, "Actually, let's use a different name."

"Just hurry up and do it, my knight!"

"Look, Makoto! They're running!"

Lady Lucy was right—the sea monsters, even the demon lord's subordinates, had broken formation.

I told you so! All we needed to do was wait, and they'd retreat.

The Hero of Roses peered out across the waves. "Oh? Damn it, they're getting

away!”

“Sir Makoto?!”

That wasn't the plan! You can just let them go!

“Takatsuki, you’ve made up your mind?” asked the Hero of Great Keith. She was the only other one who’d kept her cool. Her hands were linked behind her back as she looked at his face.

H-How is she so calm in the middle of all this mana?!

“Yeah, I’ve got the spell,” he grinned. The hero really seemed to be enjoying himself. Then, he lifted his right hand and spoke. *What power is he about to...?*

“Eternal Death Blizzard! Death to our enemy.”

I hadn’t heard that name before. The crazed mana knit itself together to become a spell, and in the air, over a thousand magic circles appeared, floating haphazardly. There was no regularity to the structure, just pure chaos.

This spell was the exact opposite of the type Highland mages preferred, where every facet was polished to perfection. No, this was insanity upon insanity in spell form. The infinite mana just forced its existence on the world.

Suddenly, the spell was complete. A moment later, everything in front of me was covered in silver.

“Snow?” I heard someone murmur.

The drizzling rain had solidified into falling snowflakes, and the temperature had dropped so harshly that it almost felt like the seasons had changed.

“What...is this?”

“Wow, it’s so white.”

“S-So cold! Takatsuki!”

The hero’s companions spoke with shaky voices.

“What...in...the...?” My voice was shaking too. I couldn’t parse what I was seeing.

The sea had turned into a frozen plain of ice, extending all the way to the

horizon. It was a white world of death—all of the monsters had frozen in place.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

“‘Death to our enemy’ indeed. You just come out with all kinds of crap, Makoto... Meteo!”

Lucy wasn't happy, but she nonetheless dropped massive boulders on the ice statues. Ice and monster alike shattered with a massive crash.

Currently, we were standing on the frozen sea.

“Urghhh, it's so coooold. Can I go home yet?” Sasa asked, shivering even in a big puffy coat.

Furiae was blowing softly into her hands at Sasa's side as she tried to warm up. Even that casual action was alluring.

“No, Sasa, you can't. You're a hero too. But, Princess, if you're cold, head back.”

“What?!” Sasa cried. “No fair, Takatsuki!”

“It's fine—I'm used to the cold,” Furiae replied. “Besides, I'd feel bad resting all on my own.”

Ortho's loud voice suddenly broke into our conversation. “Wipe the monsters out before they wake up! We cannot waste the chance Sir Makoto has granted us!”

“Yessir!” came the reply from the knights. The other soldiers were also attacking the monster statues.

As for me... I wasn't doing anything.

I might have given it a cool name like *Eternal Death Blizzard*, but it was really just a wide-area ice spell. Though the monsters were temporarily powerless, they weren't dead. The demon lord's subordinates were hardy—once the ice melted, they'd be able to move again. So currently, we were all working together to break the monsters apart before they thawed.

There were over ten thousand statues, so it was pretty difficult work. With my lack of offensive options, all I could really do was watch.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, (Elementals, elementals,)” I called, but they still seemed happy with the earlier spell, so all I got in response was cheering. I’d need more time if I wanted to borrow additional mana.

“There’s just no end to them!” Lucy griped. Yet even while she was complaining, she still fired off spell after spell. Since her specialty—fire—would melt the ice, we were having her use earth magic.

“Sorry, Lucy,” I said. It was rough for us to push all this work onto her.

“Mmm, it’s fine. But you owe me something nice,” she replied, grinning back.

She’s really something...

Then, she seemed to have a sudden idea—she looked at me teasingly. “It’s not fair that I’m the only one casting. Use *Synchro* and join in,” she urged, draping herself over me and placing her staff in my hands.

Her body felt warm against my own.

Synchro.

My hand was on her shoulder, but it went numb as I felt our mana clash. Yeah, that wasn’t going to work.

“Sorry, Lucy. Looks like that’s a no-go.”

She snorted and gave me a sidelong glance. “That’s just ’cause you’re doing it wrong.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and stood on her tiptoes. “*This* is how we *Synchro*.”

She blinked once, then looked into my eyes and drew closer.

“L-Lucy?”

“Come on, Makoto. Mmh.”

The beautiful elf closed her eyes, and her lips came close to mine.

She...wants me to kiss her here?

Well, we couldn’t let our one party member do all the work. And I *was* technically the leader. *Yup, no choice*, I decided. I leaned in, ready to accept her kiss.

Then, I felt (or heard?) the air rumble behind me.

Sasa and Furiae were glaring.

“L-Lucy, we should leave this for emergencies!” I panicked, moving away.

“Ah, 'kay,” she said, looking bored and stepping back. “You wuss.”

Wuss, Noah repeated.

Lucy and the other knights carried on, and half a day later, they had defeated all of the monsters.

“Did you just say that the first division fought against Forneus’s army today?” Commander Owain asked. He was the first to respond to Ortho’s report that evening during the strategy meeting. His voice was calm, but there was a hint of exasperation to it.

“What is the meaning of this, Commander? That isn’t what we had planned,” General Talisker said, tone relaxed.

“Yes. We did face the demon lord’s army,” said Ortho. “The Hero of Roses here was ab—”

“So it’s *his* fault?!” the pope interrupted.

Yeah... Guess that guy just couldn’t wait to complain about the wicked deity’s follower.

“This war will decide the fate of the continent!” the pope raved. “We need to remove the disturbances of the wicked deities! He should be court-martialed and justly punished! Off with his head!”

I saw some of the nobles nodding along. *Justly*? How could that severe punishment be considered justice?

The church and the nobles seemed against me, but what about the people I knew? Olga from Great Keith, Prince Leonardo, and Sakurai all looked like they’d expected my attack. The Priestess of Fate let out a deep sigh.

Suddenly, another voice spoke up. “Wait, pope. Ortho isn’t done. Besides, I told the Hero of Roses he could fight them.”

The pope paused in stunned silence. “Grandsage?!” he roared. “Why would you...?”

“Your Holiness,” Commander Owain said, bringing us back on track. “The Grandsage seems to know something. Ortho, what were our gains and losses?”

The commander straightened. “Yessir! Right away. Ten thousand and twenty-nine monsters were eliminated. Our casualties numbered zero!”

After his announcement, no one spoke. *So...he counted the monsters...*

“Additionally, there were no named demons among our enemies. Lady Estelle’s statement was correct—they were not there to fight us, but to act as a diversion.”

That was the end of his report. Everyone in the floating images just remained frozen, their mouths agape—or else, with doubtful looks on their faces.

The commander in chief was the first to speak.

“Ortho, you said your men faced over ten thousand monsters?”

“I did, sir!”

There was another, shorter pause, and then...

“How were they all defeated with no casualties on our side?”

The other people in the images seemed to be wondering the same thing. They must’ve doubted the truth of the report.

“Sir Makoto’s elemental magic was used to freeze all of the demon lord’s army,” explained Ortho. “We then eliminated the disabled monsters.”

“Is...that even possible?” Owain asked in shock.

“Well, considering that his spell saved Great Keith’s capital, I suppose so...” General Talisker nodded, though he did seem a bit flabbergasted.

I used a different spell in Great Keith though. Guess that doesn’t really matter.

The Grandsage roared with laughter. “I see, I see!” Meanwhile, the pope just glowered hatefully at me. The Hero of Lightning didn’t look too happy either. *Gerry, glaring at me isn’t going to help.*

“So, Commander. What punishment will you give for zero casualties?” the Grandsage asked with a smirk.

“The Hero of Roses’s contribution went against our initial strategy, but the basis for our tactics was always to maintain strength. We had no casualties, and thus maintained our numbers, so punishment can be disregarded,” Owain replied.

“In which case, report on the other areas,” ordered the Grandsage.

“Yessir. The second division...”

That was the start of a lot of boring reports. Most just stated that the units hadn’t fought.

I glanced over at Princess Sophia’s image and saw she wore an exasperated look. I didn’t wave this time, though—I just offered a rueful smile.

The meeting carried on late into the night... Honestly, it was difficult to not just fall asleep partway through.

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

I woke up late at night. Lu slept beside me, and her soft breathing was warm as it drifted over my skin.

That reminded me—we were sleeping together since the tent was so cold.

I sighed.

“Your clothes are a mess again,” I whispered, pulling her collar back up. She never could stay still while she slept. Somehow, she always managed to gradually undress while passed out.

Well, Takatsuki said I wasn’t much better, and Fuu practically pulled a full-on sleeping beauty routine.

Wait... Hang on...

“Fuu?”

I peered over at her sleeping space through the darkness, but she wasn’t there. Maybe she’d gone to the toilet? However, her covers were cold to the touch, so she’d probably been gone for a while—much longer than if she’d just

stepped out for a bathroom break.

“Hmm...”

Curious, I moved over to Takatsuki’s area, which had been sectioned off with a simple cloth. This was a four-person tent, but he was stubborn about guys and girls sharing a sleeping space, hence the partition.

“Yup, not there.”

That was pretty normal. He spent pretty much all the time he was awake training. Still, I was kind of bothered.

Takatsuki and Fuu were both away late at night. Where were they?

“Ack, cold!” The chill of the wind took my breath away as I stepped outside. “This is definitely his fault...” I muttered, bundling up as much as I could.

I headed out through the campground, weaving around the knights’ tents. The moon was the only light source, but I’d grown up in a dungeon, so it was just as good as the sun.

I passed a few of the knights on watch and asked them if they’d seen Takatsuki. None had.

Huh... Just searching randomly seems to be pretty inefficient. At times like this...

I closed my eyes, using my ears, nose, and sixth sense to the fullest.

Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki Takatsuki... Where are you?

It feels like...this direction.

I trusted my dungeon instincts. Gradually, I started to notice Takatsuki’s scent.

Yup, on the right track!

There was an open area a little ways from the camp that had a small spring running through it. Two figures were near the spring—in the moonlight, I saw Takatsuki and Fuu sitting against each other, talking.

T-Takatuski and Fuu are...

I suppressed my presence and watched. They were more than two meters away, so even Takatsuki's usual attentiveness to his surroundings would likely miss me.

They were sitting really close...shoulder to shoulder...

Hmph. They sure were getting along. Suddenly, I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Lucy a few days ago.



"Aya!" Lu exclaimed. "Listen, listen—don't you think Fuuri's been giving Makoto some pretty suspicious looks?! What do you think's going on?"

"Well...she's got feelings for him, doesn't she?" I replied.

"That's right! This is awful!"

My rival and friend was waving her hands around manically, though I was a lot calmer.

"She started liking him ages ago," I said. I'd first suspected it way back in Springrogue.

"No way?! You noticed? You should have told me!"

"Why's it awful, though? He's been all popular with Sophie and Jen. Took you a while to realize, didn't it?"

I sighed. The old Takatsuki who "can only talk to you, Sasa" was long gone. He was a popular hero in another world now...

"Oh, right, you're not that familiar with this world..." Lu mumbled. "Okay, so Fuuri is Naya's Priestess, right? Her priestess is chosen for their beauty—that's been the tradition over the past thousand years. Each and every one of them has been a world-class stunner! Fuuri's really good-looking too!"

"So the most beautiful woman in the world is...after Takatsuki?" I asked.

"Exactly!"

Well, that was a big deal. Still...

"Doesn't Fuu love Sakurai?" That's what Takatsuki had said.

“In the past, sure, but women’s hearts can change.” She looked like she was trying to play the part of some love guru.

Lu, you know you haven’t had a boyfriend before now, right? Well, neither have I!

“So your heart will change as well?” I asked lightly.

“What? Don’t be stupid!” she replied with a scathing look. “Mine won’t, even if yours does!”

“What did you say?” Angrily, I got all up in her face. “Takatsuki’s the only one for me!”

We stood forehead to forehead as we glared, and then, about thirty seconds later, we sighed in unison.

“How many times have we had that argument?” Lu asked.

“Hmm, I gave up counting after fifty.” Though, I had a feeling it’d been more than a hundred now.

“Let’s forget about it. Fighting isn’t going to help.”

“What were we even talking about?”

Lu and I might’ve been rivals in love, but we were currently in a ceasefire. Well...it was more like we were on the same side. After all, Takatsuki kept raising all the girls’ romance flags!

Seriously!

“The problem is how he feels about her!” Lucy exclaimed.

“We can just ask him, you know? We can go right now if you like.”

“N-No way! What if he’s in love?!”

I sighed, giving a small shrug. “You’re a real scaredy-cat at the weirdest times.” Yet, though I might have been feigning calm, I was pretty worried as well.

What’s going on, Takatsuki?



Back in the present...

I looked at Takatsuki and Fuu once more. They seemed to be talking, but gusts of wind shielded their conversation from my ears.

I saw Fuu smack him on the shoulder, and he just shrugged. They really were close...

Mrmhghg...! What are they talking about?

I narrowed my eyes and tried to read their lips, but suddenly...

Fuu turned in my direction. Takatsuki followed suit, then waved. Her face was tense, but he wore his usual easygoing expression.

Had he noticed me from the beginning?

I scratched awkwardly at my cheek before making a big jump over to their side.

“Evening. Takatsuki, Fuu.”

“W-Warrior?!” Fuu sputtered. “How long have you been standing there?!”

“Hey, Sasa. What’s up?”

Fuu was still panicking, but Takatsuki was the same as ever.

“Mm, well, I just wondered where you’d both gone off to. Found you just now.”

Furiae still seemed a bit panicked. “I-I see. Well, I’m done talking, so I’m going back to bed! Goodnight, both of you!”

“I’ll walk you back,” Takatsuki offered.

“No need! The knights are just over there. This area’s safe.” Her face was red as she hurried away. She didn’t need to *run*.

I took a peek at her face as she passed—her hair seemed to sparkle in the moonlight, and her pale skin almost glowed. I was used to seeing her...but even I thought she was horrifyingly beautiful.

Lu had mentioned that the moon priestess was the most lovely woman in the world. She certainly seemed inhumanly gorgeous—it made sense.

What had she and Takatsuki been talking about?

“What’s up, Sasa?” Annoyingly enough, he was acting just like normal.

This man... Now wasn’t the time for that! Did nothing get to him?

“What were the two of you talking about so late at night? Something’s fishyyy,” I muttered sulkily. I was actually a little—okay, a lot—jealous.

He wasn’t bothered though. “I was training on my own before she came out here. I guess she wanted to thank me for saving her homeland. She said I shouldn’t keep pushing myself for her. But, that wasn’t why I did it.”

“What was your reason then?”

“U-Uh. Well, y’know.” He looked away, toward the sea.

Yeah, I think I do know.

“You wanted to try out that spell since there were so many elementals around the sea, right?” I asked.

“Wha?” He looked bewildered, like he thought I was clairvoyant or something. “How’d you read my mind?”

Oh, he even said it.

“I can tell just by looking,” I replied.

“Hmmp.” He didn’t seem entirely happy as he lifted his hand and resumed his training. I was honestly kind of impressed that he still had energy to practice.

“You and Fuu have been talking a lot lately,” I remarked casually.

“We have? I didn’t notice any difference.” His words were a bit blunt.

“Nah, it’s totally different,” I countered. “She used to be all *tsun* all the time.”

“Actually, yeah...she is a bit of a *tsundere*.”

“Yup! Lately, she’s less *tsun* and waaay more *dere*.”

“Even so, she still kicks me a lot.” he griped.

“That’s because you keep sexually harassing her.”

All that groping! Peeking at her underwear! Honestly!

After that, we just chatted for a bit, but I couldn't tell what he was really thinking.

Okay then. Guess it's time to take the plunge.

"So...what if she fell in love with you?"

My heart was a little—*just a little*—faster than usual. But just as Lu and I had discussed, we needed to know how he felt.

His response—

"Nah, that's not happening."

—was just to laugh.

So he really thinks that... Takatsuki didn't realize that she had any feelings for him. He always did have a bit of a blind spot for affection.

"She could have anyone she wanted," he commented.

"Ah, yeah...guess so." I nodded along. Still...I really did think she cared for him. I just wasn't sure whether it was in a romantic sense or not.

Meanwhile, Takatsuki just saw her as a friend for right now.

He's always disliked complicated relationships...

I let out a sigh, soft enough that he wouldn't notice. It seemed like Lu and I shouldn't have been worried.

Suddenly, he changed the subject. "Hey, Sasa, look at this." His voice sounded happy, and he lifted up his blue elemental arm.

It started to shine—a whole bunch of magic circles appeared, floating in the air. The ground shook and the air shuddered. Cloud cover obscured the moon, making the night even darker.

"Water Magic: Cloud Dragon."

I waited in silence for several seconds. "Uh...nothing happened...?"

"Look up," he told me.

"Up? Wait...what?!"

I did as he directed. The “clouds” that had covered the moon...turned out to be four massive dragons made from magic.

“It’s a king rank water spell,” he explained. “You can use it to make it rain or even conjure lightning strikes.”

“W-Wow...that’s amazing.”

“Isn’t it?!” His eyes were sparkling. He seemed proud of the new spell.

I just stared open-mouthed at the dragons. *He’s becoming less and less human all the time...*

Suddenly, there was a big gust of wind from the sea. I yelped, hugging myself against the chill.

“Brrrrr.” Takatsuki shuddered.

It was *too* cold out here, so I’d just decided to head back.

But then...

“*Water Magic: Ice Home.*”

Takatsuki lifted his hand, and less than a second later, there was a building of ice surrounding us. It even had a door.

Wow! He did that so quickly!

The windchill was gone and I was suddenly much more comfortable. It was slight, but even the air felt a bit warmer.

“Takatsuki, what did you do?”

“What d’you think? I used water magic to make it. Should keep the cold out a bit. I even tried using vaporization in here to raise the temperature somewhat.”

“Y-You can do that?!”

That sounded really difficult, and I wasn’t even a magic user...

“Well, if I could use fire like Lucy...then I’d be able to warm you up properly.” Even now, he didn’t seem satisfied with his magic. / thought it was incredible, though.

And, it was awfully cute seeing him apologize for not being a “good mage.”

Suddenly, I realized something—he and Fuu had been alone before, but now it was the two of us instead.

Oooh? This could be a nice situation.

Hmmm? Was this my chance? I could already see Lucy telling me off for getting ahead.

What to do?

Hmmmmmm... Okay, decided! It's better to ask for forgiveness!

"Hey, Takatsuki, time for a pop quiz."

"Huh?" He stared at me in surprise. "Where'd that come from?"

"A young man and woman are standing in a certain place. That place is cold, and the girl is shivering. Now, what should the boy do? Oh—magic's not an option!" As I asked the question, I pushed myself into him.

His eyes went wide for a second. He seemed to notice something, and glanced away.

"A-Ahh, well..." He must've understood what I was going for because he leaned in, even as his cheeks got redder.

"What should he do?" I cajoled, moving my face even closer.

"This?" he asked, hugging me tightly.

Eh heh, so warm! I thought, hugging him back.

"Right?"

"Mmm, half points," I decided.

"Half?" he asked with an odd look.

"Mmh."

I closed my eyes and lifted my chin.

"Ah..." I heard him murmur. His voice sounded kind of tired.

I kept waiting.

Then, a pair of warm, soft lips covered mine. The arms around me tightened,

and I answered in kind. I could hear Takatsuki's heart racing, though I was sure mine was going even faster. I wanted it to go on forever, but after about a dozen seconds, he pulled back.

"Was that right?" he asked with a blush.

"Right," I answered a bit shyly. "Okay, next question!"

"N-Next?" His eyes went wide again.

"We're in the middle of the ice, so how are you warming me up?"

"Ah, well..." he looked away again. He must have been hesitating out of embarrassment since his eyes started shifting through the air.

"Noah... Yeah, but— Ahh, even *RPG Player's* joining in..." I heard him mutter.

While that was happening, I undid the buttons on his jacket. He looked shocked but didn't move away.

"Your answer?" I asked.

He smiled awkwardly. "Right...okay then."

Then, his hand moved slowly to my chest...

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Sasa was right in front of me, watching with bright red cheeks.

She'd been my friend since junior high and had hung out in my room so many times...but it had never been *like this*. We'd done a lot together since meeting again in this world, but we'd never crossed this particular line.

Mostly...because of me chickening out.

"Takatsuki..." she murmured, pressing her chest into me. I could feel her heart racing away, just like mine probably was.

"S-Sasa..." I gulped. But I couldn't call myself a man if I didn't respond here. And in all honesty, *I* was getting worked up as well.

I slowly reached for the buttons on her clothes, undoing them one by one, gradually revealing the pale expanse of her skin...



“Apologies for interrupting your training! Commander Ortho would like you to get some rest since you disabled all the en...e...mies... Uh?”

“Wha?” Sasa and I said in unison, gawking at the intruder.

It was one of Ortho’s knights. He just stared blankly at us. His eyes moved between my askew clothes and Sasa’s face—it was plainly obvious that my hand was frozen on the third button of Sasa’s shirt.

Silence reigned in the building of ice.

“E-Excuse me!” the messenger yelled before turning on his heel and running away.

The two of us were left behind, unable to say a word.

“Hey, Takatsuki?”

“Yeah, Sasa?”

“The Soleil Knights know about this place?”

“Well, the heroes are supposed to be on call all the time, so I told Ortho where I’d be training.”

“Right.”

“Yeah.”

We just looked quietly at each other for a while.

“L-Let’s head back,” I suggested.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

At that, we made our way back to the tent, hand in hand.



One moment I was fast asleep on my bedding in the tent, and the next, I was awake in a vast, empty space.

It seemed that my goddess had called me.

“Hello, Noah.”

She snickered. “My, if it isn’t chance-misser-Makoto.”

“Mako, Sophie’s all lonely! Give her some loooooove,” Eir added with an unhappy look.

I quickly noticed something odd about this situation.

“What are you two doing?” I asked.

The goddesses were under a kotatsu, sitting around a hotpot.

Noah scoffed. “You can see exactly what we’re doing—having a hotpot. Don’t just stand there, come and eat.”

“I got all kinds of food for the New Year’s celebration—including some really nice duck—but I can’t finish it on my own, so I’m having Noah help,” Eir explained.

“But it’s not that time of year...?” I questioned.

“Uh, we’re talking about the divine realm. Not your world.”

I sighed. So even the divine realm celebrated the New Year. The nice smell from the hotpot drew me in, and I cheerfully put my legs into the kotatsu.

I looked at the bubbling pot and saw cabbage, chrysanthemums, carrots, tofu, shiitake, and other mushrooms. All of it floated in a base of mustard and soy sauce. Next to the hotpot, bright pink slices of duck were lined up.

“Here’s your chopsticks, Mako. The duck gets really tough if you leave it in too long, so heat it up *just* before you wanna eat it. The meat is nice on its own, but I’d really recommend having some of the vegetables with it.” Eir was giving a really detailed lecture... Apparently, she was strict when it came to hotpot.

“Eh, don’t worry about it! Just eat the way you want.” On the other hand, Noah was just as easygoing with this as she was with everything else. Her personality was certainly showing.

“Thank you for the food,” I said, taking a single slice of the meat and dipping it through the scalding soup.

Once it’d heated through, I wrapped some of the mustard leaves around it and lifted the bite to my mouth.

Wha?! The meat juices burst in an explosion of flavor. I saw stars—rainbows

filled my vision. My entire mouth tasted of joy and my mind went blank.

Wh-What the hell?! I'd never had such tasty meat!

"Wow, I don't often see you that surprised," Noah commented.

"Well, that's first-class golden duck from the divine realms!" Eir boasted. "Its tagline is 'Heaven in a Single Bite.'"

"Can humans actually eat that?" Noah asked Eir.

"Mako'll probably be fine. Use *Calm Mind* just in case."

"You could have told me that *before* I ate it." It really had felt like I was being taken to heaven. I could practically see the angels tugging at my clothes. The whole experience of having hotpot with the two goddesses was odd, to say the least.

"So, what am I here for today?" I asked while watching Eir add the finisher to the hotpot. I doubted they'd brought me here just to share a meal.

"Hm, what was it? Eir said she wanted to talk to you," Noah replied. She was packing away vanilla ice cream, even though we were in the middle of the hotpot. When I asked why she wasn't having dessert last, she said she always had dessert when she felt like it.

She sure was a free spirit...uh, goddess.

"Right! It's important. It's about Irrie!"

For how "important" the conversation was, Eir didn't stop what she was doing—putting soba noodles in the soup. *Wait, soba noodles?*

"Hey, Eir, don't you use rice gruel to finish off a hotpot?" Noah asked.

"Ah-bah-bah. You have much to learn. Soba noodles are the best for duck hotpot."

"Oh, they are?"

Noah and I looked into the pot with interest. The mix of juices from the duck combined with the soup broth smelled amazing. After a while, Eir portioned out the noodles into bowls for each of us, then topped them with some bright green spring onions and a sprinkle of shichimi.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you, Eir,” I replied, putting my hands together in thanks.

“Mmm! This is great!” Noah exclaimed, diving straight in and slurping up some of the noodles.

And so, the three of us enjoyed our soba. *Ahh, this is so calming... Hm? Are we forgetting something? Weren't we just in the middle of a conversation...?*

“Oh yes, we were talking about Irrie!” exclaimed Eir. “She’s been down in the world this whole time!”

“You spoke to her?” I asked, straightening. I wasn’t going to miss this information.

“Why’s she in her priestess all the time?” Noah wondered.

“Well, she’s still unhappy about the dark ages a thousand years ago. She said that’s why she’s staying down there—she doesn’t want to make another mistake with her precognition. It makes sense since it’s harder to see the future up in the divine realm.”

After she finished speaking, Eir started tidying up the crockery.

“I’ll give you a hand,” I said, moving to help out.

“Don’t worry about it, Mako. You just sit and relax.”

Really? I was supposed to just let a goddess do the cleanup? Actually, this was Noah’s space...so shouldn’t she be doing it?

I looked over at my goddess to see her eating a second ice cream.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing...”

She seemed like she was having fun, so I chose to forget about it.

“Still,” Eir said, “being down there makes it harder to see the big picture.”

“Should she even be doing it?” Noah interjected. “It’s a bit of a gray area as far as the rules go, right?”

Those rules again... Roughly speaking, divine beings were pretty much in

agreement that the gods shouldn't interfere directly in the mortal world. So, as far as that rule was concerned, Ira was probably on pretty thin ice.

"I don't see a problem if we beat the demon lord," I said. If Ira being in our world helped everyone, then that was for the best.

"Sure! It'll be fine," Eir cheered, giving a wink and a thumbs up. "Irrie's all serious, so she'll manage it properly."

"She will?" Eir'd certainty helped me relax. Everything would work out as long as Sakurai, Lucy, Sasa, and the others were fine.

And yet, I heard Noah grumbling. When I turned, I saw that she looked unhappy.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Eir, it feels like you're scoring points. No converting Makoto."

"That won't change anything," Eir replied with a sigh. But Noah still seemed worried, and she got up close to me.

"Here, Makoto. You can have this ice cream."

"No way—that's your leftovers."

Though Noah had just been going to town on it, she now held the ice cream up to me. "What? You won't eat something if it's been in my mouth?! You cheeky disciple. Just eat!"

She grabbed the spoon she'd been using, scooped up some of the ice cream, and— "Hey, don't force it! Mmmph."

—shoved it into my mouth. The cold sweetness spread across my palate. It *was* tasty.

"See! It's great, right?!"

"I would've preferred a new one rather than your leftovers, though."

"What was that?! Here, have another bite!"

"No!"

"You two sure have fun, huh?" Eir remarked, laughing at the pair of us.

At that moment, my vision started going blurry. Time was up, it seemed.

“See you later, Noah, Eir. Thanks for the conversation and hotpot.”

“Bye, Mako! Good luck with the war☆!”

“Don’t let your guard down.”

I nodded in response to their advice. *I’ll have to brace myself*, I thought.

At that point, I passed out.



When I woke up, things were noisy and I could hear an argument nearby. I used *Listen* to check it out.

“Spit it out, Aya! What were you doing with Makoto last night?!”

“Man, Lu, we didn’t do anything☆”

Guh... They were talking about me.

“Liar! I could smell him on you. Besides, I found some of his hair on your clothes! Caught you red-handed!”

“Hawawawa!”

Lucy’s logic was cornering Sasa. *I should get out of here, one way or another. How about...back to sleep?*

“Oh, Makoto’s awake.”

“Takatsuki’s awake.”

Lucy and Sasa reacted at the same time.

How had they known?! My bed was behind a partition!

Damn it. No choice...

“Ah, he’s about to run. I saw it in the future. Grab him,” Furiae said.

“Princess?!” *Don’t use Future Sight for that!*

In the end, they caught me...and we had to admit everything.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Talks with the Moon Priestess

I was alone and training, looking out at the sea, when I heard people call out from behind me.

“My esteemed Tackie!”

“Mr. Takatsuki’h!”

I didn’t even need to turn around to recognize Fujiyan and Nina’s voices.

“Fujiyan, Nina! It’s been ages,” I exclaimed, giving a quick wave. Fujiyan was thundering his way along as Nina scampered at his side.

“Are you alone?” asked Fujiyan. “I have yet to see Lady Sasaki or Lady Fuuri.”

“Ah...yeah, I am,” I answered, thinking back to the events of this morning.



The clandestine meeting between Sasa and me had been exposed. At the same time, so had the kiss. As soon as she heard about it, a tempting smile spread across Lucy’s lips.

“Then I can do the same,” she decided.

“Well, I...”

I didn’t manage to actually *say* anything though, because Sasa answered for me.

“Fine, Lu, I guess so. Don’t go all the way, okay?”

Uh, isn’t that supposed to be my choice?

“Sure, sure. Makoto, it’s embarrassing with the others watching, so let’s go behind the curtain.”

Apparently, no—it wasn’t my choice. Lucy pulled me past the partition in the tent and pushed me back onto my bedding. Then, she straddled me.

“B-Be gentle?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said, her smile taking on a tinge of sadism. “After playing around with Aya last night, you need to learn what a bad boy you’ve been.”

That smile made me recall her mother, Rosalie. They were definitely related... But I barely had time to think that before Lucy went after my buttons and peeled open my shirt.

While I was looking somewhat dazedly up at her, she’d cheerfully started shucking her own top.

“You’re undressing too?” I asked.

“I mean, it’s hot.”

I’d seen her wearing nothing more than a towel straight out of the bath, and she was pretty bad at keeping her clothes on while she slept, so a layer or two coming off didn’t really bother me, but...

“I don’t like how calm you are. Off with yours too,” she commanded.

“Hey! You don’t need to take my pants as well!”

“What’s the harm?”

“Quit iiit!”

She was trying to yank off my pants and underwear all at once, so I obviously tried to resist. But she was stronger than me, and my struggling was pretty much pointless. Garment by garment, my clothes were slipping off, and there was nothing I could do about it.

But then...

“Lu, how long are you going to take to undre—? Hey!”

“Aya, don’t get in my way!”

“Don’t! If you’re going that far, I’m joining in as well!”

“You’re the one who started it.”

Sasa let out a noise of indignation. “Still! I’m joining in!”

Since she was now interfering as well, I figured I should probably put the

brakes on. “Come on, guys,” I protested. “You need—”

Suddenly, someone kicked their way through the partition.

“Would you three shut up?!” Furiae shouted. “What are you trying to do in our tent?!” She turned furiously toward Lucy and Sasa. “Girls! Both of you, on your knees! Do neither of you have any shame?! I’ll finally get it through your skulls today!”

“What? But—” Lucy tried.

“Silence!”

“Fuu’s scary...” Sasa murmured.

Both of them knelt, cowed at her angry look. I took the opportunity to pull my clothes back on.

“Uh, what about me?” I asked hesitantly.

“You! Go get some training done!”

“R-Right.” At that, I fled the tent.



“Y-You have my sympathies,” Fujiyan remarked with a pained smile. His *Mind Reading* must have clued him in.

“We should probably greet the others at some point,” Nina commented.

“Lady Nina, I shall leave that to you.”

She nodded, then went bouncing toward the tent. Light-footed as ever, it seemed.

“How come you’re here, Fujiyan?” I asked.

There was plenty of need for merchants during wartime, so I could see how he’d be raking in cash. Still, this wasn’t the main battlefield—we were right on the outskirts. Surely he’d make more money elsewhere?

“How harsh you are. I am here out of concern for my friend. I also thought these would be useful, so if you would, please accept.” As he spoke, he held out a fancy-looking wooden box, probably for a magic tool or something.

I stared at the box. “And ‘these’ are?”

“Open it and see. I would have preferred to offer more, but I could only provide ten.”

I lifted the lid. The moment it cracked open, I felt the cloud of dense mana inside. Ten glass bottles, each holding a dully glowing liquid, sat in the box. They were obviously on another level from what I’d seen on sale...but I couldn’t really tell. After all, I’d barely ever encountered the real thing. Even so...

“Fujiyan...? You didn’t...”

He chuckled. “They are elixirs. You are at war, my esteemed Tackie, and you need at least *some* provisions.”

“Ten?! Elixirs?! Just *one* costs like a million gald...!”

“Unfortunately, the prices have risen since the war began, so they are currently going for 1.2 million. They were rather hard to obtain, so I ask that you plan their usage carefully.”

“R-Right... Of course.” I could feel my hands start to shake at the knowledge—I was holding the equivalent of over *ten million gald*. I quickly snapped the lid shut. “Uh, Fujiyan? How much do I—?”

“They are a gift,” he interrupted. “Considering my lack of combat proficiency, this is all I can do to aid your efforts.”

“Fujiyan...” I murmured. “Thanks. Just, thanks.”

“Think nothing of it,” he replied with a grin.

What a guy.

“So, what’re you doing for the rest of the day?” I asked.

“We will be spending the night here, then heading for Sir Sakurai’s battlefield for a delivery.”

“He’s right on the front lines, so be careful, okay?”

“I have heard that there has been a change of plans—a delay of several days before the main battle is set to begin.”

“Right. According to Estelle, we have a few more days until they attack.” I was

impressed that Fujiyan already knew about that. “Let’s have a meal together then,” I suggested. “I hope the princess is in a better mood now...”

Fujiyan just laughed. “I brought many rare foodstuffs, so let us cheer her up with gourmet treats.”

You could always count on Fujiyan! And so, we headed back to the tent, chatting as we went.

It’d been a while since we’d been able to share a meal, so eating together was great. The discussion mostly centered on Zagan, the demon lord Sakurai was supposed to be fighting. Apparently, not even Fujiyan had much info on the demon continent, so we had no idea how strong Zagan was or even what he looked like. The only thing we knew was that apparently, he was built like a mountain... *What the hell?*

It was a nice reunion with a friend, but the war still managed to put a damper on it. Incidentally, Lucy, Sasa, and I all took two elixirs each, and we left the rest with Furiae.

The following day, Fujiyan and Nina rushed off to their next destination. I decided to go train some more—Furiae followed me as I walked out to the sea.

“My knight, you have been doing little else but fooling around with the girls in your party, haven’t you?”

“It’s not like it’s on purpose,” I protested.

Lucy and Sasa were nowhere to be seen. We’d been up late celebrating with Fujiyan and Nina, so they were probably fast asleep.

“And yet, look at the leer on your face.”

“I’m not leering... Am I?”

You okay there, Calm Mind?

“Are you planning to eventually make a move on me?” she asked with a teasing grin.

Come on, I’m not that wanton.

“Don’t worry, that’s not happening.”

The smile vanished from her face. “Hmm, I see.”

As she turned away, her expression seemed bored, and she fiddled with her hair. Was that not the right answer?

For some reason, neither of us spoke. *I should change the subject, but I can’t think of anything. Maybe I should just call her pretty? But I’d previously gotten told off for complimenting her insincerely...*

Suddenly, a man called out, “Lady Furiae!”

He was a handsome guy with tan skin, red eyes, and silver hair—it was one of the cambions, a childhood friend of Furiae’s. What was his name again...?

“Oh, Havel. What’s wrong?” she asked.

“The women and children have finished evacuating from the areas near the battlefield. There are limits to the tunnels though, so they cannot move very far away.”

“I see... We have no choice, then.”

Apparently, the man was giving Furiae periodic reports. That was some loyalty. *I suppose that’s how special the moon priestess is to her people.*

“You—Lady Furiae’s knight.”

“Hm?” Was he talking to me?

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on her! If she gets hurt, you won’t get away with it!”

“Ah, right. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I’m serious!” he growled with menace.

“That’s enough already, Havel, you— Oh?”

Furiae had started to scold him, but then she seemed to notice something out at sea.

“My knight! Look!” came her sharp voice.

The waves were lapping gently along the beach. Several white clouds were

floating through the sky, and a flock of gulls soared in the distance. Overall, it was a peaceful scene.

“Princess? What’s up?” I was about to comment that I didn’t see anything unusual, but then someone else cried over me.

“Wyverns! And griffins!” Havel yelled.

The base stats of cambions were higher than those of humans, it seemed. I couldn’t see that far into the distance, but he could.

Clairvoyance.

Looking out with the skill, I could finally see them—what I’d thought were gulls was actually a group of flying monsters.

They were closing in quickly. Was this part of the demon army?

“Makoto!”

“Takatsuki!”

The two girls were rushing over. They must have already noticed the flying enemies.

“Lucy! Sasa! Monsters incoming!”

“Those are Zagan’s subordinates!” Lucy cried out. “Since the sea monsters failed to stop us, they must be trying an attack from the sky!”

Sasa nodded vigorously. “The lookout said they have magical blasting weapons—bombs! They’re going to blitz the whole area!”

Furiae and Havel’s faces paled at that.

“What?!” Furiae demanded.

“Lady Furiae! Hurry and run!” Havel exclaimed.

I was in agreement. “Princess, do what he says.”

“There is no need!” she countered. “This is my home, and I’m not going to turn tail and run!”

Furiae was putting on a strong front, but her eyes darted between the flock of monsters and the land around us—this was her country, her homeland, and an

indiscriminate attack would almost certainly take out some of the citizens. *She must be worried.*

“My knight, can you summon that archelemental like you did before?” She thrust her hand out, practically demanding me to use *Synchro*.

“I’m not sure... Sea monsters are one thing, but monsters in the sky might be an issue.” It’d worked last time because our enemies were in the water, but that wasn’t the case this time.

“I can only fight up close...” Sasa muttered, slumping.

“It’s okay, Aya! I’ll shoot them out of the air with fire magic!” Lucy got her staff ready, but would it be enough? There were a thousand monsters. Meteo would just end up as a literal drop in the ocean.

“Lucy, come over here,” I said.

“Okay, but why?”

“Takatsuki, shouldn’t we join up with the Soleil Knights...?” Sasa asked worriedly.

“It’ll be too late. We need to take them down before they reach the land.”

With no time to waste, I put an arm around Lucy’s shoulder and activated *Synchro*.

◇ Havel the Cambion’s Perspective ◇

“Lady Furiae is our hope. One day, she will guide us cambions. As long as you live, you must protect the priestess...Lady Furiae.”

Those who lived in Laphroaig had been taught that from birth. Our priestess was beautiful and divine. Her beauty saved our hearts, even as we were oppressed, driven below ground, and had nothing but dirty water to drink. Her presence bolstered our spirits.

However...one day, she was taken by the knights of Highland.

We despaired, thinking we would never see our beloved priestess again. Some even ended their lives. Days passed without salvation.

But then, she returned.

How good it was to see her safe... We gave thanks to Naya.

We once more had our priestess. And, when she'd reappeared, there'd been a black cat upon her shoulder. Keeping a familiar was impossible in Laphroaig, so it did our hearts good to see that she was now able to indulge in having one. We also envied that it was always at her side. I wanted nothing more than to serve her like that.

That was a wish all of us cambions shared. However, there was one thing we desired more than anything else—we wanted Lady Furiae to be happy.



The demon lord's troops were approaching. My cambion eyes let me clearly see the thousands of wyverns and griffins heading for us. I could also see the explosive magic weapons they were laden with. If those bombs fell, even our underground life would be disrupted...

But there was something else we had to prioritize.

"Lady Furiae! Hurry and run!" I cried.

"No! I won't abandon everyone!"

She wouldn't leave us to our fates—that was the extent of her kindness. *Should I force her? Going against her orders would...*

"Makoto! Let's join up with the Soleil Knights!"

"It's dangerous here!"

I heard her companions talking. As much as I hated those knights, being with them would be safer than acting alone.

"My knight! Can you do something?!"

Even Lady Furiae was speaking to her guardian knight. Why had she not relied on us? Still, his reaction would be the important thing now.

"Hmm..."

A vacant look sat upon his face—it was as if he didn't feel the impending danger at all. What was with this man?! Our enemies would be here in minutes!

"Let's take them down here."

His three companions all uttered noises of surprise. I felt the same way—I certainly didn't understand what he meant by that. What action could he possibly take against all of those monsters?

"Lucy, come over here."

"Eh, why?"

The knight beckoned to the redheaded elf, who meandered over.

"Lucy, I'm borrowing your mana."

"This isn't the time for relaxa—" she began, before cutting off her own sentence with a yelp.

The guardian knight had wrapped his arms around her...and kissed her.

I'm sorry, what?!

What was *with* this man?! Did he not understand the situation we were in?! My conscience forbade me from leaving Lady Furiae to him. I'd have to take her to a refuge point.

I peered at Lady Furiae and her companions.

"Hrmmm."

The brown-haired girl was pouting.

"Ah..."

My priestess was looking at her knight and the elf, jealousy burning in her eyes.

Lady Furiae? Why do you have that look on your face...? Don't tell me...

"Hey! What are you playing at?!" I demanded angrily. This man was just fooling around with a girl while a demonic army bore down on us. There was a line during situations like these, and he was crossing it.

"R-Right, Makoto! That was too sud— Mmph!"

"Just a little more," he mumbled against her mouth, continuing despite her protests.

Seriously...there must be something wrong with him...

“Do you even realize—?!” I tried to shout, but that was as far as I got. The sight in front of me stole the words from my lips.

Countless crimson sparks filled the air.

What...in the...? I glanced around, and soon, the red lights started fading.

“H-Hot!”

“Nrow!”

Lady Furiae’s cat pawed at the glittering motes, and the other girl from the knight’s party—a town girl—seemed to do the same.

The air grew drier. I could feel the heat on my skin, almost prickling. Then, my sharp senses picked up the absolutely obscene amounts of mana in the air.

Wh-What?

I heard Lady Furiae start to mutter in annoyance, arms folded. “Tch, it’s hot. I suppose...this must be the fire elementals.”

“Elementals?” I asked.

“That’s right, Havel. My knight is an elementalist. Just look.” She jerked her head at the man. I looked his way.

“Fireball.”

That was the low rank fire spell. A cambion mage could cast it at three years old. *Why’s he using something so weak?* I wondered, but my question was blown away less than a second later.

The air sizzled—fireballs manifested above us, tens of thousands of them, consuming the empty space as far as the eye could see.

I...just... What?

“Why *Fireball*, Makoto?”

“Because it’s easy.”

“Oh, okay.”

Distantly, I heard the knight and elf talking. He couldn’t be doing it all himself...could he?

“Look! They’re confused!”

The town girl was right—the demon army’s formation had been broken by the sight of fireballs appearing out of nowhere.

“Oops. Can’t let them get away.” The knight’s sleepy look turned into an innocent smile as he lifted his hand. “Let’s surround ’em and roast ’em to a crisp.”

As he spoke, the fireballs slowly floated off to encircle the monsters. Well, they looked slow...but they honestly moved so quickly that it was terrifying. A single person was controlling all of them? Unbelievable.

As a cambion, I could see the mana links between the mass of fireballs and his body. Mana linking was a technique used to control a spell after it had been cast. As your proficiency increased, you could use more links at once...but I had never seen one person controlling so many at the same time.

The monsters screeched as they were immolated in midair. One by one, they started to fall into the waves.

“Ew...disgusting.”

“Man... No mercy, huh, Takatsuki?”

Lady Furiae and the town girl had unhappy looks on their faces. That was all, though—they both seemed to think nothing of the sight. As for me...I couldn’t even speak. The monsters were still falling from the sky. Explosions erupted in the air, maybe from the bombs they were carrying.

Zagan’s airborne battalion, which would have easily wiped out a town...had been completely overrun. So this was the power of Lady Furiae’s guardian knight. I hated to admit it, but not even hundreds of our fighters put together could have accomplished the same thing.

“My knight!” Lady Furiae exclaimed in annoyance. “How long are you going to hold on to her?! Back away already!”

“Right! You don’t need to kiss anymore, do you?!” asked the town girl.

“No way—we can’t stop yet. We need to keep the *Synchro* up,” the elf claimed. “Right, Makoto?”

“Uh, yeah... Well...”

Contrary to the slaughter in the sky, these people were having a carefree conversation down on the ground. For me, though, the talk was utterly horrifying because not one of the knight’s mana links even threatened to dissolve.

Thus, thousands of monsters burned up in the air, and not a single one reached Laphroaig.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

It was time for the regular report meeting.

The first question came from the overall commander of the alliance’s force, Commander Owain. “You fought with an assault squad from Zagan?”

“Yessir!” Commander Ortho replied. “Sir Makoto attacked them when he realized they were on a bombing run.”

“Their numbers?”

“We did not carry out an exact count, but reports place the number at over five thousand.”

“And he repelled them?”

“No—he wiped them out.”

There was a long silence, and then...

“All of them?”

“No enemy managed to retreat. They were taken down by Sir Makoto’s spells.”

Commander Owain frowned, putting his hand to his chin in thought. He didn’t question it more deeply though.

“And our losses?” he inquired after a moment.

“Zero.”

“I see. Very well. I will ask for the details later.”

“Yessir!”

The report was over after just that conversation between the two commanders. I didn't say anything and just listened.

Technically, what I'd done had once again gone against our strategy. Yet according to Ortho, the Grandsage had given us orders to do as we thought best, so overall strategy could be dispensed if it benefited our position.

While that conversation had been going on, everyone had shifted focus to me.

The pope had a wretched look on his face. Estelle—or Ira, rather—seemed somewhat intrigued. Gerry wore a menacing look, and the Grandsage was smirking. Sakurai just smiled reluctantly; Princess Sophia was looking steadily at me, just like a cat would.

Sorry for worrying you every time.

The rest of the reports were the same as yesterday—our troops hadn't fallen for feints, and we'd maintained our strength. But the fact that Zagan's forces were now crossing the ocean meant that we were about to reach the real start of the war. It would probably be two or three days before we fought with the bulk of his troops.

So, with that proclamation, the commander called an end to the meeting.

"Oh, welcome back, Makoto," Lucy said after I returned from the meeting. "I had a nice nap."

Sasa gave a quick stretch. "Good to see you back, Takatsuki."

"Here, Twi," Furiae said, holding something between her fingers. "These are apparently called *niboshi*. Eat up."

"Nrow."

My friends had been napping, snacking, and feeding the cat while I'd been gone. The snacks, including the *niboshi*, had been left behind by Fujiyan. Were cats allowed to eat those? Well, Twi wasn't *just* a cat, so I guessed it was fine.

"Our main forces are going to be fighting soon," I informed them.

Their expressions—as you'd expect—all turned serious. Twi also seemed to

notice the change in atmosphere, and she straightened. Cute.

“I’m gonna get some training in,” I told them.

“What, *now*?” Lucy asked.

“But didn’t Ortho say to rest?” Sasa protested.

That was true—I’d made a show of all that fire, so I could understand where the commander was coming from. However...

“I kinda need to practice a little in order to calm down,” I said.

Could I really just sit around relaxing while Sakurai was about to face off against a demon lord? No, I couldn’t.

So despite my friends’ bellyaching, I headed out of the tent.

I moved through the dimming evening, toward a little spring near the edge of our campsite. That was my training ground. I kneeled down in front of it, holding my dagger in both hands and offering a prayer to Noah, as was my usual routine before training.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, (Elementals, elementals,)” I called out like normal.

They...didn’t respond well. Silence was all I got in return.

Oops... Guess I put them in a bad mood by playing with the fire elementals earlier.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, (Sorry guys, really,)” I said, trying to cheer them up and amuse them. It took a while to improve their moods, and though the work was slow, this was a big part of being an elemental.

I peered up at the sky. There weren’t any clouds today, and the stars were all visible. The moon was huge in the sky.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps and turned around.

“What’s up, Princess?”

“Do you have a moment, my knight?”

Naya’s priestess, Furiae, was standing in front of me.

There was a legend told on the western continent, one far older than a mere millennium—it'd been passed down since before Abel the Savior had existed, and it centered around a princess and a knight.

The story begins in a flourishing little country on the western continent. A witch from the eastern continent arrived there. She was an amazing mage who managed to heal the nation's king—she also soothed the prime minister's heart when his wife passed, and she gave the country's general a pair of magic prostheses after he lost his legs.

Slowly, she ensnared the king, the prime minister, the general, and all the other important figures in the nation. Before people knew it, the country was hers. She squeezed all she could from the citizens so she could live a life of luxury.

The same country had a clever princess. However, when the witch took over, she was driven from the land alongside a childhood friend—a knight. The princess faced many hardships, but she gradually gathered allies, and eventually, she was able to defeat the wicked witch. She reclaimed her country, ascending to become a great queen, and the knight who'd supported her was hailed as a national hero.

In modern times, the tale of *The Princess and Her Knight* was just as popular as the one of Abel the Savior. In fact, the existence of guardian knights at all was due to that story. I loved the tale, though this was probably because the people of Laphroaig didn't like Abel the Savior's tale, so they didn't tell it.

Growing up, I'd heard the story time and time again. There was a certain line in the tale that I adored—something the knight had told the princess.

“My princess. Even should the whole world stand against you, I will continue to protect you.”

It was a line that really hit home for me, considering how the people of the continent reviled me as a cursed priestess. I dreamed of having a guardian knight of my own that would speak those same soft words.

Reality, though, was different.

“Priestess.” “Lady Furiae.” “Naya's Priestess.” “Our beautiful priestess.” “We

shall do whatever you ask.” “We offer you our lives.”

Those were the phrases I’d heard constantly. Yet, everyone around me had been charmed. This was a curse from the goddess of the moon, Naya—all creatures in the world would be entranced by my beauty.

Because of that, every man—and indeed, every woman—was well-disposed to me at a single glance. And though they did protect me, it was because of *Charm Magic* and not out of loyalty...not like in the tale of the princess and her knight. They were just bewitched, and they’d doted on me due to my looks. It’d all felt awfully shallow, so I’d given up on hoping for true loyalty, figuring that reality would never live up to the legend.

Then, one day, I’d met a man: Ryousuke Sakurai.

He was the Hero of Light, an otherworlder. He’d come to capture me but had instead listened to my story, had sympathized with me. He’d even been *friendly* to me. Since he was the Hero of Light, it was difficult for my *Charm Magic* to take hold, but even so, he was on my side.

“Furiae, if you need help, I’ll give it,” he’d said.

“I see...”

It’d made me happy. It’d felt like I was falling in love for the first time. Except...he was the Hero of Light, engaged to Princess Noelle, the future ruler of the biggest country on the continent. He also had a veritable army of other fiancées.

Besides, the people of Laphroaig hated Highland. They would never want me to be bound to Ryousuke, a hero of that despised nation.

In other words, my love had been doomed from the start.

Well, they say first loves never last...

In my mind, I thought I’d been lucky to catch a glimpse of love at all. So, I’d resolved to quickly forget it, to reduce the memory to something sharp and bitter before making it disappear.

But then, I’d met another strange man: Makoto Takatsuki.

He was also an otherworlder. I’d heard his name several times from

Ryousuke, who'd boasted that his friend was an amazing and dependable person. Such praise from the Hero of Light had left me well and truly curious, so I'd imagined an awe-inspiring figure.

When we'd actually met though, Makoto Takatsuki had seemed weak—a thin boy who might fall over with one slight push. Despite being a mage, he had barely any mana. The elf mage and warrior girl in his party were both much stronger.

I'd been...a little disappointed.

Still, he'd technically been appointed as Roses's State-Authorized Hero. I'd convinced him to become my guardian knight so I could escape from Highland, but things had ultimately gone way beyond my expectations.

Makoto Takatsuki was entirely unaffected by my charm.

What's going on here, Naya?! What happened to "all living creatures"?!

Of course, I had only ever spoken to Naya once, and she hadn't answered me. Still, Makoto Takatsuki had agreed. Apparently, he was rather friendly.

However, I'd entirely expected him to find some reason or another to annul the guardian knight agreement once we'd left the country. I was the Priestess of the Moon, the reincarnation of the Witch of Calamity from legend, and hated for the blood of cambions that flowed through my veins. I'd figured my knight would drive me off sooner or later.

And yet...

Makoto Takatsuki, believer of a wicked deity. A half-elf, half-demon mage. An otherworld fighter reincarnated as a monster. Everyone in the party had some quirk or other.

They were all good people though. None of them had shunned me.

I'd soon missed my chance to leave, and before I knew it, I had settled down.

I can stay for a while... I'd thought.

It'd been peaceful. Occasionally, Makoto Takatsuki would dive into groups of monsters or end up petrified. I'd been brought up in the dark underground of Laphroaig, and suddenly, I was traipsing around Roses, Springrogue, and Great

Keith. I was having fun. I'd even used fate and curse magic—despite not liking them much—to foresee the danger that would befall the elf mage in Macallan. I'd run off to save her. I'd saved the elves in Springrogue. It had been difficult, but fulfilling. I'd stayed together with them, thinking that one day, I'd return to Laphroaig.

Recently, though, I had been irritated a lot.

My knight—Makoto Takatsuki—was the likely cause. He couldn't be charmed. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I couldn't even use my *Future Sight* on him. He was my guardian knight, but not at my side. Instead, he was always training or off with some girl.

It didn't matter.

The relationship between us was a contracted one. Just business. There was no need for me to worry about it. No need at all...but seeing him lately had irritated me.

Our army's tactics were designed to avoid needless fighting, but he'd just jumped in anyway. He hadn't listened to what I'd said at all! And then, before I knew it, he'd be off flirting with some girl!

The last bit didn't matter—it had nothing to do with me. Though, actually...maybe I *did* have feelings for him...? Yet, they were completely different from how I felt about Ryousuke.

I was constantly irritated. The mage and fighter were the ones with feelings for him.

So, I decided to ask them.

"Say, both of you—how did you fall for him?"

Both of them looked at me in surprise. My knight wasn't here—he was in a meeting—so it was the perfect chance to figure this out.

"That was sudden," the mage commented.

The warrior looked startled. "Where'd that come from?"

Despite their shock, they indulged my question.

“I don’t mind telling you though!” said the elf. “It was probably when he saved me from a big ogre. Then when a griffin attacked me, or other monsters tried to get me, he always helped me no matter what! That was when I decided that being with him would be nice!”

“I...I see,” I stammered, then turned to the warrior. “And you?”

She’d gotten really excited. She always did when talking about him.

“I guess I’ve felt this way...since we played together? This was in our old world, though. In junior high, I went over to his place a whole bunch, and it felt really calming. We haven’t had much time with just the two of us lately though. Argh, it was such a shame last time! We were nearly there!”

The mage glared at her. “No getting ahead.”

“Right, I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry at all.”

Now they were both pulling at each other’s cheeks. Good friends indeed.

I thought it all over: the mage had been saved, and the fighter had spent a lot of time with him. Neither circumstance fit my case, so that wasn’t any help.

“Mine was way more dramatic!” The mage chuckled, puffing her chest out.

“You just don’t get it, Lu,” said the warrior with a shake of her head. “Falling in love in the midst of everyday life is good. And, I’ve known him longest.”

“In that case, I’ve known him the longest in *this* world. Besides, boys want to save girls. It’s that whole ‘playing the hero’ thing.”

The warrior sighed. “That’s what they call being easy. Unfortunately, it fits you perfectly.”

“What?! Then you must know that Makoto and Fujiwara were talking about how the childhood friend heroine never wins.”

“Those damn nerds... Too bad—childhood friend heroines are from elementary school. Junior high school friends don’t count.”

“Urgh... Your world’s rules are annoying. You’d be a mob-heroine then!”

“You want a fight, Lu?!”

“You started it!”

They were now nose to nose. When we’d first met, I’d always been worried that their arguments would devolve into violence. But now I knew better—this was just them playing. I had no idea what “heroine” meant when used like that, nor could I parse the “mob” thing.

Their world’s jargon was confusing.

“Let’s settle it by sneaking into his bed!” the mage declared.

“You’re on! Make sure you pick some cute underwear.”

“They’ll just be coming straight off though, right?”

“If you’re having *him* take your panties off, don’t you want them to be cute?”

By the time I realized it, they’d gotten *well* off-topic. Actually, what were they even thinking?!

“You know I’m in this tent too, right?!”

They both yelped as I whacked them both over the head. Who knew how far these two would go if I just left them to their own devices? It’d be a problem if they actually went through their plan rather than just joking around.

The two of them stared silently at me.

“Fuuri’s been really serious about Makoto recently.”

“Yeah...she gets real mad.”

“Wh-What?!” I sputtered. “That’s not true!”

I turned away. They looked at each other.

“What do you think, Aya?”

“Well, if she says so. That must be how she feels.”

Guh. It feels like they don’t believe me at all!

“Right, Lu, change of topic—I heard that one of the female knights was thinking about talking to Takatsuki.”

“What?!”

“Well, it was just a rumor...but apparently, she’s got her eye on him.”

“We’re still at war!” exclaimed the mage. “Maybe she doesn’t have her priorities straight!”

“Right!”

The two of them nodded angrily.

You two are just as lovestruck.

At that point, they transitioned into various complaints about my knight. They talked about him missing hints despite how they were constantly dropping them. It looked like they were having a good time.

Still...

Seeing them like this, I was sure that I was different. I didn’t feel that way about him...probably. I was just irritated with him.

A while later, he returned, shared what’d happened in the meeting, and then went off to train. The other two had tired themselves out with their chatter, so they went to sleep.

I...couldn’t.

Was he still training? Maybe he was off with some girl somewhere.

You’re my knight. You should be with me.

I was getting irritated again.

Before I knew it, I’d set off for the spring where I knew he liked to train.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“My knight.”

Furiae spoke, lit by the light of the moon. She strolled around me, her hands linked behind her back. When I turned to look at her, she glanced away. Her face was just as beautiful as ever, but her lips were drawn in a thin line.

She must be in a bad mood.

Well, I was her guardian knight—I’d have to cheer her up.

“Is something the matter, Princess? You seem to be in an ill temper.”

“Stop speaking like that. It’s creepy.”

“Rude...” She didn’t need to be mean.

She glared at me, and I looked questioningly back. But she ultimately said nothing, so I just resumed training. There wasn’t anything else I could do. I spoke with the elementals and used water magic to send butterflies fluttering through the air. She stared at me the entire time.

Though I couldn’t settle down, I kept training. She watched.

“Can you conjure anything other than butterflies?” she asked eventually.

“I can. What do you want me to make?”

“Something big.”

“Sure thing.” At that, I sent a whale swimming through the air. “What do you think?”

“It’s passable. Next...”

She had a lot of requests today, but showing off different spells seemed to cheer her up. Her voice even brightened, so I kept making creature after creature out of water.

I’m pretty tired... I thought after a while. “Shall we head back?” I asked her.

“R-Right! It is rather late.”

It was past midnight by the time we headed back. Furiae hummed as she walked. So she *was* in a good mood again.

“Did you talk about something with the others?” I ventured. She just replied that they hadn’t discussed anything.

We’d arrived at the tent. Lucy and Sasa were asleep, so we’d have to get in without waking them.

Stealth...

“Stop that,” Furiae commanded, hitting me across the head.

“What?” I asked, looking back reproachfully.

“Using that skill to get inside a tent where girls are sleeping feels like a crime.”

“Yeah... I guess it does...”

So, I decided to head in normally. I reached for the tent flap, and then...

“Wait!” Furiae shouted, pulling me by the arm.

“Whoa!”

Her strength (and my pitiful stats) meant there was no way I could stand my ground. She practically tossed me through the air.

“What gives, Prin—?”

Suddenly, a huge figure dropped out of the sky, and the ground shook.

Whoever it was...definitely wasn't human. They were several meters tall.

“Well dodged, Hero of Roses!”

It was a massive talking monster. No—a demon. The miasma and mana surrounding them made me think of Setekh or Sciulli, the subordinates of Bifrons that I'd met in Springrogue.

“I am Lord Zagan's aide, Hayate—Gale of the Ten Fangs! I have come to assassinate the Hero of Roses! I'll be taking your life now.”

That name made my head hurt. “Hayate” already *meant* gale, so there was no need to repeat it. *Also, if you're going to assassinate someone, you gotta be sneakier!*

I didn't have the time to make any of those retorts before the demon attacked.

◇ The Soleil Knights' Base Camp ◇

This time, Lucy and Sasa joined me for the regular meeting. Important figures from all the different countries at other base camps were displayed on magic screens.

“Ortho, would you repeat that please?”

Commander Owain was holding his head like it was aching.



“Yessir! One of Zagan’s subordinates, Hayate of the Ten Fangs, has been taken down!”

“So I didn’t mishear...” The sour look on his face was clear on the magic screen. I glanced around at the other people present, and I could almost hear them thinking, “him again?”

But this time, it hadn’t been me.

Hayate of the Ten Fangs was one of Zagan’s top demons and was apparently known for being accomplished at ambushes. My *Sense Danger* and Furiae’s *Future Sight* had let us dodge him. Though, if Furiae hadn’t helped, I might have been in trouble.

He’d wanted to kill the Hero of Roses. In other words, me. I had practically no hand-to-hand abilities, so getting in close would’ve meant death. I had managed to avoid the first attack, but the second would probably have killed me.

However, the demon’s greatest misfortune had been sleeping in the tent right next to us—Sasa, the State-Authorized Hero of Great Keith. The commotion had woken her up and put her in a bad mood, so she’d come out swinging and yelling, activating *Super Star* instantly. The poor demon had face-planted on the ground.

Though, because he was one of the top members of Zagan’s army, he was still alive after her attack. Except...Lucy’s *Meteo* had immediately followed, silencing him for good. I’d left the rest of the disposal to the Soleil Knights.

Strong demons always seem to come back after you think you’ve killed them.

Ortho explained all of that to the others listening.

“Hm, so it was our State-Authorized Hero, Aya—well done. That demon was skilled in ambush and assassination, so his presence was a major concern to our plans,” General Talisker said.

“You’re welcome,” Sasa said, tone slightly embarrassed.

Olga, at the general’s side, didn’t look amused.

“Well done, Lucy!” exclaimed the Priestess of Wood. “But don’t push

yourself! You're not allowed to pull a Rosalie and try and take on the army all by yourself."

"I wouldn't do that, Florna."

"But I worry. You're too much like her."

"I don't like fighting *that* much."

Their conversation had turned into family talk.

Guys, this is technically a strategy meeting...

"How long are we going to just sit back?! They're just doing whatever they want!"

Whoops, Gerry had finally snapped. Yeah... Waiting days on end for an attack would definitely be stressful.

"Indeed. If we just keep waiting, our bodies will dull," said Olga, the Hero of Incandescence. She'd been quiet thus far, but I knew she must be under the same stress...and the talk of Sasa blasting away that demon had definitely gotten to her.

The others seemed to be affected too—the room was getting noisier.

Then...

"The battle will commence tomorrow."

Everyone froze at Estelle's words.

"Zagan will make landfall tomorrow," Owain restated. "Is this correct, Estelle?" It was only a question in form—more confirmation than inquiry.

The priestess nodded quietly.

So...the demon lord himself was about to attack.

"Then let us talk tactics. Though, our strategy *is* based on Lady Estelle's foreknowledge. So, if you would?"

"Very well," Estelle (or rather, Ira within Estelle) began. "A force led by Zagan will make landfall along Cameron's coast tomorrow, and they will begin destroying nearby towns. Halting travel through Cameron will have a large

impact on our alliance. We, therefore, need to meet them in battle. However, their true aim...is killing the Hero of Light.”

We all listened quietly as her clear voice came through the magic screen.

“They will move slowly,” she continued. “After all, they are trying to exhaust us and play for time. The demons will make a show of the battle, but they won’t engage in truth during the light of day. While the sun is out, they will prolong any fight as much as they can, sending repeated waves of attacks. Then, as soon as the sun sets, Forneus’s army will join them in an all-out barrage. At that point, we will be exhausted, without the full power of the Hero of Light, and we will fall. That is the future I have foreseen.”

No one spoke.

Come on! That’s just us losing... Well, I suppose that’s why Ira was here to predict things. Everyone waited for her to speak again.

“We will therefore outsmart them. They will want to stretch the battle out until sunset, but we must thwart them quickly.” She paused for a moment. “Ryousuke Sakurai, Hero of Light?”

“Y-Yes?!” he replied.

“You will lead an elite force to directly attack the demon lord.”

“W-Wait a moment! Isn’t that too dangerous?!” The protest came from Princess Noelle. I had to agree—it definitely seemed like a pretty risky call.

“It will be fine,” Estelle said. “We will attack at noon, when the sun is at its apex. The Hero of Light will be invincible. Besides, Highland has people who can use *Teleport*, so we need not worry about exhaustion before the battle.”

“I will escort him,” the Grandsage said coolly. Her voice was as calm as ever, which was pretty reassuring.

She’s a vampire though... Can she wander around in the sun like that?

I was a little concerned. She seemed to notice my gaze and gave me a smile, as if telling me not to fret. *Guess I shouldn’t worry.* She was a hero after all, one who’d saved the world, even if it was a thousand years ago.

“We can ensure that there will be several commander-level knights and

orichalcum rank adventurers present. However, will we be able to pinpoint their positions during the heat of battle?” Commander Owain asked. There were over twenty thousand in the enemy army, so finding individual soldiers wouldn’t be easy.

Estelle smiled confidently. “That will not be an issue. They are just as worried about the possibility of their commander’s death, so they will be changing their formation. I will be able to see them, so I will also constantly relay their position.”

“Very well, Lady Estelle,” said Commander Owain. “We will make the judgment call of *when* to attack while on the scene. Depending on the conditions, it could still be dangerous to have the Hero of Light behind enemy lines. We will secure an escape route and then aim for Zagan’s head.” His words were firm, though they held a hint of restrained caution.

“That is fine. Things will not necessarily go well on the first day. I leave the timing to you.”

“As you wish. We shall trust in your information on their positioning.”

Everything now sounded wrapped up. Tomorrow, we would finally engage in the deciding battle.

I was somewhat disappointed that I wouldn’t be able to be there...

“You seem bored, Hero of Roses,” Estelle suddenly said to me.

I jumped. “N-Not at all. I’m listening.”

“Of course you are,” she sighed. “Hero of Roses, Commander of the First Division. The demon lord’s armies will not be present in Laphroaig after tomorrow.”

Ortho and I both asked, “What?” in unison.

“It is hardly a surprise. You crushed ten thousand of Forneus’s forces, then wiped out five thousand of Zagan’s aerial fighters. Additionally, you have taken out one of the Ten Fangs. In return, you have taken zero losses. They will now know that attacking Laphroaig is not worth the effort.”

“I see...”

Estelle—Ira—seemed rather kind today. Maybe because Eir had spoken to her?

“However,” she continued, meeting everyone’s eyes seriously. “Every other location will see a strengthening onslaught.”

Tension rippled throughout the room.

“This is to prevent us from reinforcing the main army?” Commander Owain inquired.

“Indeed. They want to keep our strength as far from the Hero of Light as possible. They are aiming to kill him before he can destroy Iblis.”

I glanced at Sakurai. He looked nervous.

Hey, don’t scare my friend like that! Still, it was important to warn him about the demons’ intent.

Good luck, Sakurai!

“So we’re being attacked as well?”

“Hmph, finally.”

“They will not lay a finger upon the citizens.”

Gerald Ballantine, Olga Sól Talisker, and Maximilian Lagavulin all seemed ready to fight. I couldn’t tell what Highland’s State-Authorized Hero, Alec, was thinking. He had his own screen but was just staring, blank-faced. *He’s with Sakurai, right?* Prince Leonardo’s face was nervous as well, but he was with Maximilian, so I was sure he’d be fine.

There were several points of order, and then the final meeting before the battle was over.

I glanced at my childhood friend once again. His profile looked nervous, and he was talking to Commander Owain about something.

He didn’t seem to notice me staring.

Be careful. Don’t get hurt, I encouraged mentally, watching the image until it vanished.

We went back to our tent and told Furiae what’d happened. She listened

quietly, adding only a muttered “I see...”

I was wondering how she felt, considering that Sakurai was going to be fighting tomorrow. However, she ended up asking *me* if *I* was nervous.

“Well, y’know,” I answered vaguely.

I soon left the tent, telling them I was going to train and calm down. Or, at least, I tried to. Sasa and Lucy stopped me.

“Another demon might attack you.”

“Just sit down and take it easy.”

“It’s fine,” I assured them. “Estelle said they won’t come here anymore.”
Guaranteed by Ira. We could be pretty sure she was right.

So, I trained until the dawn light peeked over the horizon.

The next day was just as Ira had predicted—peaceful. We spent it on edge, and then, nighttime fell...



The room was buzzing even before the meeting started. Screens popped up in dribs and drabs. Some of the faces seemed to know something—they didn’t appear relaxed.

Did something happen?

If it had...then it must’ve concerned the fight. I used *Listen* so I could hear the conversations.

“Is it true?”

“It’s too soon, surely?”

“Unbelievable. It’s going so well.”

Then, I heard someone mutter to themselves—

“The Hero of Light has defeated Zagan.”

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Grows Restless

“The demon lord Zagan has been defeated by the Hero of Light!”

As the meeting began, a young knight excitedly stood and announced the news, which prompted immediate cheers from everyone in the room.

“Just as expected from the Hero of Light!”

“He is truly the savior reborn!”

“We didn’t even suffer many losses.”

“Lady Estelle’s foresight was magnificent!”

“That means our hero and Roses’s hero have both defeated a demon lord.”

“Well, Roses’s just finished off a mostly dead lord. You can hardly compare the two.”

“Indeed. Highland truly does lead the continent.”

“What of the other heroes?”

“Sir Gerald and Lady Olga—the Heroes of Lightning and Incandescence respectively—have both taken out key figures.”

“As is ordained for champions chosen by the gods! They are *true* heroes!”

Those were the snippets of conversation I picked up with *Listen*. I heard a mix of reactions—those genuinely rejoicing, and people who took a more political slant. Out of nowhere, I met Sakurai’s eyes on his screen.

He didn’t actually say anything, but I swore I could hear him thinking, *We did it, Takatsuki!* A bright grin shone on his face, and he didn’t seem overly injured.

I was glad he was safe.

“Good work, Ryoustake. Well done indeed,” Princess Noelle said to him.

“Thank you, Noelle.”

“When will you be returning to Symphonia?”

“Hmm. Well, some of the demons’ forces are still close to the continent...”

Princess Noelle probably wanted to reunite with him as soon as possible, but his response made it obvious that the war was still ongoing.

“Princess, while Zagan himself was defeated, many of his troops still live. We have yet to see Forneus either. We cannot relax until their forces are completely routed.”

After a flash of disappointment crossed her face, Princess Noelle’s expression returned to seriousness. “You...are right. I wish you all luck as you continue.”

“The monsters near Symphonia are growing bolder,” interjected the second prince of Highland, who sounded uneasy. “Perhaps the first division could return?”

Hearing that request, the pope began to mildly rebuke the prince. “Your Highness, the Temple Knights are responsible for the defense of the city. While things are less certain with the Soleil Knights away—”

“Ahem,” interrupted Estelle. “If Highland requires more robust safety measures, then why not ask the Hero of Roses to cut his break short? After all, Laphroaig is no longer under attack.”

“Impossible!” The pope’s tone was filled with overt rage. “We cannot rely on a wicked deity’s disciple! You may suggest it, Lady Estelle, but that cannot be allowed!”

“I shall return,” stated the Grandsage. “The city is currently home to the priestesses. With so many key figures in one place, an attack is quite possible. Fortunately, we’ve already defeated the demon lord.”

“You will return personally?!” the pope forcefully inquired. “You must still be tired from fighting the demon lord! Grandsage, you should not push yourself!”

He seemed slightly flustered—as the pope, he probably knew that she was a demon herself, a vampire, but he was unable to stand against a hero of her pedigree.

“It matters little to me. I can *Teleport* to Highland during the night and be back at the capital within half a day. The Soleil Knights would take days to make

the same trip. That would be fine, but...”

“Is something bothering you?” I asked instinctively, my attention caught by her unusual behavior and oddly hesitant attitude.

“Hmm. Elementalist. The Hero of Light defeated the King of Beasts in this battle. The demon lord looked just like he did when Abel defeated him. While it was definitely the same Zagan from a thousand years ago...he was far too weak.”

“That is simply proof that Lord Sakurai is the savior! He defeated the demon lord in a single strike, just like in the legends!” The prime minister (I think) extolled this notion, trying to contradict the Grandsage. He had been rather excited since the news of Zagan’s defeat.

“I do not doubt Sir Sakurai’s strength, but the Grandsage’s worries concern me. Do you think it possible that this Zagan was a body double?” Owain asked.

Right... That *was* a possibility.

“No,” the Grandsage answered eventually. “There are no other demons with such a body or with that much miasma. He was just as I remember from a millennium ago. Perhaps he was simply old...”

“I understand your concern, Commander Owain. *Fate Magic* allows me to see that the demon lord Zagan is truly gone—he no longer lingers in this world. Without question, the demon lord was defeated today.” When Estelle said this, her confidence was firmer than the Grandsage’s.

These statements combined seemed to relieve everyone in the meeting.

After that, various reports were submitted by everyone else, and in summation, the humans had won every engagement.

A total victory.

“Tch, it wasn’t enough,” the Hero of Lightning muttered.

Well, he seemed as fond of fighting as ever. Olga, Maximilian, and Prince Leonardo had all won their battles as well. *Good, good.*

“We are to remain alert until the army withdraws. If you notice anything, report it at once. Until tomorrow.” Having concluded, Commander Owain

ended the meeting.

“Oh...I see. He defeated a demon lord,” Furiae remarked. It was right after the meeting, and I’d come back to the tent to fill everyone in on the details.

I’d expected her to be happier, but she seemed surprisingly subdued.

“You sure are calm about that news.”

“The Hero of Light cannot lose against demon lords. He needs to defeat Iblis. Everyone else is insignificant.”

I sighed.

The demon lords were *insignificant*? That characterization felt like it was going a bit far, but the Hero of Light *was* supposed to be a trump card against Iblis, so we couldn’t relax yet. On that front, she was right—this was just the opening salvo.

“Hey, when are we going back?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah!” Sasa exclaimed. “There aren’t any more monsters coming, right?”

It seemed that they were both completely ready to head home.

“We’re supposed to be on guard until the demon lords’ armies have completely withdrawn. We’ll probably be here for a while because of that,” I explained.

“Hmm, okay.” Lucy shrugged. “Then I’ll get some training done alongside you, Makoto.”

Sasa nodded vigorously. “Gotcha! I’ll go make some food!”

Considering the lack of monsters in Laphroaig, the first division of Soleil Knights—and my party of course—had plenty of spare time. Sasa used the ingredients from Fujiyan to make some cookies and other snacks for the knights. Since they’d been handmade by a hero, her treats became quietly popular among the soldiers. I tried them too, and I could confirm that they were excellent. She could have easily put them up for sale.

Turning to Lucy, I said, “Let’s go train then.”

“Wait, my knight.” Furiae interrupted, grabbing my hand before we could leave the tent.

“What’s up, Princess?”

“Did the Priestess of Fate have nothing to say? Specifically, about the military movements and Great Demon Lord’s resurrection.”

“Estelle? No. She only said we couldn’t relax until the demon lord’s army retreated...”

Something was definitely bothering Furiae.

“I see...” she murmured. “Well, my *Future Sight* is not particularly precise, so if she said nothing else, it probably isn’t a real issue. Still...I have a bad feeling.”

“We should tell Commander Ortho.”

“Don’t worry too much about it. I’m sorry for keeping you.”

Twi was purring in her lap, and it was an otherwise peaceful scene. Because Sasa was staying in the tent, they’d all be safe, even *if* enemies showed up.

And so, Lucy and I spent our day training.

That evening, when I arrived at the strategy tent, preparations for the meeting still hadn’t finished.

“The communication magic won’t establish a connection?”

“Right... We don’t know why...”

“I apologize! We will have it fixed soon.”

A group of mages was apologizing to Ortho.

“Check the equipment!”

“We’ve inspected it every day! There hasn’t been a problem until now!”

“What about the weather? If a storm has whipped up enough mana, it can affect the signal.”

“A storm wouldn’t knock out communications across the entire continent.”

“And the weather is fine around us.”

“What the...?”

There was a rapid back-and-forth, but no one seemed anywhere near finding a solution.

“What’s going on, Commander?” I asked.

“My apologies, Sir Makoto. I shall send a runner when the meeting starts. Would you be willing to return to your own tent and wait for the time being?”

“Sure, I don’t mind... Our princess said she had a bad feeling. Is there any chance this is sabotage?”

“Lady Furiae? If I recall, she can use *Fate Magic*.” Ortho’s gaze sharpened. “It certainly is a concern. Though, if the demons were capable, they would have disrupted our communications before the main battle. Zagan has already been defeated. This timing doesn’t make sense.”

Despite the reassurances he was trying to offer, he was markedly uneasy.

“I’ll just head back to my tent,” I told him.

“Indeed. My apologies again for the inconvenience.”

At that, I returned and waited.

But the meeting never began.

The next morning, I went over to the strategy tent since I figured they would’ve probably fixed the issues. When I arrived, however, the area was a hive of activity, with the mages still toiling. There were dark circles under their eyes, so they’d probably been working nonstop through the night.

“Still not fixed, huh?” I remarked.

“Sir Makoto!” said Commander Ortho. “It seems that the issues are indeed intentional.” He then launched into an explanation.

According to him, communication magic was, in part, spatial magic. For long-distance links, they needed relays along the route. And yesterday, they’d discovered that several of those relays had been sabotaged.

“What?”

“They were buried deep underground, and their locations were closely guarded. None other than the Soleil Knights should have known about them... We are currently testing to see if we can at least contact Symphonia.”

“Sir Ortho! The connection is nearly established.”

“Got it! Hurry!”

“Sir!”

There was a greater sense of tension than yesterday. We’d defeated the demon lord...but a bad feeling now hung in the air. I waited restlessly next to Ortho.

Suddenly, Furiae burst into the tent. “My knight!” she yelled.

“Princess?”

Sasa and Lucy were close behind—when they’d seen her rushing away, they had likely just followed after. Furiae’s face was pale, and sweat beaded across her forehead. In all the time we’d spent together, I’d never seen her lose it like this.

“What’s wrong, Fuuri?”

“Fuu... You’re paper-white...”

Lucy and Sasa seemed to be taking this seriously.

“Ryousuke is going to—”

“We’re connected!” someone cried out, speaking over Furiae. The spell activated. Estelle’s face was the first thing I saw, with her beautiful silver hair and fine features. Except...her expression was twisted into a grimace, which was a huge contrast to her usual composure.

“Who there can fight right now?!” she demanded.

“The Soleil Knights’ first division and the Hero of Roses,” Ortho answered quickly.

A pause, and then...

“That’s all?”

“It is. Our communication relays were destroyed and we only just now managed to reconnect. What in the world is happening?”

Estelle pressed a finger to her forehead like she was staving off a headache. Then, she peered at us. When she spoke, her voice rang out clearly.

“As things stand...the Hero of Light will lose his life.”

“What?!” I couldn’t help but blurt out. *How did this happen? It came out of nowhere! He already won, didn’t he?*

“What?! Sakurai’s going to die?!”

“No way...the Hero of Light...?”

Sasa was aghast, while Lucy almost screamed. Furiae just stared—her face was still pale and bloodless.

“Lady Estelle,” Ortho said, his voice hard. “Please explain.”

Estelle was silent for another long period. “Well...” When I looked at the screen, I saw that the other priestesses, including Princess Noelle, were behind her. “Zagan’s role has been...passed on.”

Passed on? We all looked at her, confused.

The Grandsage peered at me, and with some irritation, said, “Elementalist, the King of Beasts was succeeded by his child, who inherited both Zagan’s position and his power.” Her face was even whiter than usual. It wasn’t as though she was in a bad mood—no, she just seemed somewhat ill.

“Grandsage, you went back to Symphonia, correct?” asked Ortho.

At the same time, I said, “You seem sick—are you okay?”

She grimaced. “I forced myself to go back quickly...and then this happened. I never would have dreamed that Zagan’s position would be passed on... That must have been why he was so weak in battle.”

“Does succession like that happen often?” I asked.

The Grandsage shook her head. “Not as far as I’m aware. For the last thousand years, it hasn’t happened, not even once.”

So no one could have expected this...

Suddenly, I heard Noah pipe up in my mind. *Makoto. Demons, particularly those on the level of the demon lords, live for a long time. Sometimes even for thousands of years. Though inheriting power might seem a rare occurrence for mortals, it happens rather frequently from a divine perspective.*

What? Then shouldn't Ira have predicted it? I shot a suspicious glance at Estelle. *Come on, Ira! Do this properly!*

"Priestess of Fate, do we have a solution?" the Grandsage asked, as if prompted by my thoughts.

"The bulk of the alliance's soldiers are currently battling the forces led by the new Zagan. While the troops on both sides are equal in number—each around thirty thousand—the demons have a barrier in place that weakens the Sacred Deities' blessings. This barrier is siphoning considerable power away from the Hero of Light. Even my *All-Seeing Eye* is no help... *Fuck!*"

With that final—*wholly* unpriestesslike—exclamation, she slammed her fist onto the table.

"Can we not send reinforcements?" Ortho asked. "I seem to recall that Sir Gerald and General Talisker have troops stationed nearby."

Princess Noelle was the one to answer. "With communications down, we have no way of transmitting those orders. We have sent runners already, but the time they will take..." She trailed off, her voice quivering and full of anxiety.

Ortho did not delay his decision a moment longer—he immediately turned to his vice-captain and yelled out orders. "You! Form a squadron of reinforcements and send them straight to Commander Owain and Sir Sakurai! Gather all the wyvern and pegasus riders! The infantry is to be on standby, and *you* will assume command here in Laphroaig!"

In the rush to communicate his orders, they'd come out rather harsh.

"Traveling during the day draws much on my strength, so I shall rest and then return," said the Grandsage wearily. "Priestess of Fate, how long does he have?"

"The Hero of Light...will not see out the night."

Princess Noelle screamed. “Wh-What?!” I looked back—Furiae stood still with her head down. After her initial burst into the tent, she hadn’t spoken a word.

“Princess, can you see anything?” I asked.

“Yes. Ryousuke’s entrails being feasted upon by countless monsters.” Her voice was as sharp as a blade’s edge. “Would you like more details?”

“I’ll pass.”

Shouldn’t have asked. Why was there no information we could actually use?!

“This must be because of the wicked deity’s believer and the Priestess of the Moon!” shouted the pope. “Their cursed existences caused this! Althena’s protection is absolute, so they must have betrayed us! Commander, they should be arrested and burned at the stake!”

More bad suggestions from the pope. He must’ve been panicking because the Hero of Light was on the verge of death.

“This is not the time...Your Holiness,” Estelle said haltingly. “The Hero of Roses and Naya’s priestess have nothing to do with this. The demon lord’s army simply has someone skilled enough in *Fate Magic* to fool my sight... There is no other explanation.”

“What of it?! Your *Future Sight* is of little use now!”

The two of them were at odds. Though, this really wasn’t the time to be thinking about this.

“Sir Makoto! We will be departing shortly with the wyverns to reinforce the Hero of Light!”

Apparently, Ortho had already arranged his forces.

Will you go with Commander Ortho to reinforce the Hero of Light?

Yes

No

RPG Player was asking me as well...

A choice? Now...?

"Commander, how long will it take for us to arrive?" I asked.

"Normally, a whole day. However, if we push the wyverns and pegasi to the limit, then we can reach them in half that."

Too slow. There was a strong possibility that Sakurai wouldn't make it through the night. Half a day...wouldn't be quick enough.

"I'm going to travel by other means," I decided.

Everyone responded to that with confusion.

"Lucy, I've got a request."

"What? M-Me?"

"Takatsuki...?"

She and Sasa had been watching nervously so far, but now I'd brought them into it.

"Use *Teleport* to send me to Sakurai."

"Is that possible?!" Ortho demanded.

Lucy shook her head.

"I-I can't! I've never been there...and I'm not mama! I can't send you that far!"

"Oh, right." I turned to the commander. "Is Rosalie part of the fight?"

"She is not," he replied. "We sent a request for aid to Canaan, but she was not present..."

Well, she'd said she was heading to the moon, so maybe she was up there? I'd thought she might come back for the war, but we couldn't rely on people who weren't here.

"Lucy, please. Just give it a go."

"I...don't know if it'll work...! But fine! I'll try!" Though she'd been fairly lacking in confidence initially, she now seemed full of motivation.

“Lady Lucy, could you send us as well?” requested Ortho.

Before she could reply, the Grandsage dumped cold water on that idea. “Give it up, Commander. I have aided the elf, but there is a strong possibility that her teleportation will fail. It will only succeed if she works with people she is close to, like the elementalists or the hero from Great Keith. When *Teleport* is used to transport solely another person, it is a great boon to know that person well. It cannot be done thoughtlessly.”

“I see,” Ortho replied after a moment. “Very well. We shall proceed as planned. Let us reunite there, Sir Makoto.”

“Understood, Commander,” I replied.

Our plan was set.

“Go on then, Lucy,” I encouraged.

“Sure. Sorry, can someone get me a map?”

“Yes, Lady Lucy.” One of Ortho’s subordinates quickly rolled one out for her.

“Where is the battle?”

The man pointed. “Here. The coastal region of Dunnet in Cameron. The closest landmark is Nyde Hill—”

“I’ve never been, so I can’t use an image. Just tell me the direction and distance.”

“That will consume an awful lot of mana... It is quite far.”

“I’ll have enough!” she said firmly. At this moment, I was so grateful that we were friends. “Makoto. I’ve never been where the Hero of Light is fighting. I don’t think I can send you to the exact location. No... I’m *positive* I’ll miss it by a margin.”

“Got it.” I nodded. “I’ll deal with it when I get there.”

“Then...here I go.”

Lucy held her staff tightly in both hands. As she did, I felt huge amounts of mana fill the air around us. The chant spilled from her lips.

Oh, Ira, who dwells in the heavens. I pray to you, asking for a miracle...

Teleport was a *Fate Magic* spell. That, naturally, fell under Ira's domain. I glanced over at Estelle. She noticed my stare and looked awkwardly back. *Increase the odds a bit, would you?* I tried to wordlessly communicate.

She can't do that right now, said Noah. Because she's possessing the priestess, she currently has only human-level magic—that means no anima. She can't work miracles.

Oh, okay. That's a shame. We had a goddess right there, but she couldn't aid us at all.

Around us, the air slowly filled with more and more magic circles. The sheer amount of power made my hair stand up on end.

"Incredible...such mana."

"Truly unbelievable... A single person cannot possibly control all of it."

Those comments registered to me as Lucy kept chanting. Actually...I was pretty sure she'd gotten even more mana lately. Was she still growing on that front? My mana stat was still stuck at four... That gap was awful.

"My knight...be careful," murmured Furiae.

Princess Sophia, who was watching through the screen, called out, "Godspeed, Hero Makoto."

"Thanks."

"Makoto..." Princess Noelle's voice wavered. Her hands were clasped together almost in prayer. "Please, take care of Ryouzuke."

"I will."

"You can do it, Lu!" exclaimed Sasa. "And Takatsuki, I'll be right behind you!"

"Nah, you should stay here with the princess and Lucy. You'll need to protect them."

"Hmm...okay. Leave that to me! Take care."

I gave her a slight nod.

“Makoto... Here I go.”

“Right.”

Lucy’s red hair was shining faintly and swaying in the air. No breeze was causing that—it was the mana, swirling around her.

She looked like Rosalie.

“*Teleport!!!*” she screamed, and as soon as I heard her voice, I was enveloped in light.

Subjectively, it must have only been a few seconds. I felt oddly floaty in the white light. I’d lost all sense of direction, and it was like I’d been flung into an infinite expanse. The next moment, my legs thudded into the ground, and my vision returned.

“Cold!” I hissed as a shower of frigid water blasted my face. I was in the middle of a deluge of rain.

“*Water Magic: Flow.*”

I manipulated the rain with magic and managed to get a clear view of what lay before me.

“Huh?”

The first thing I felt was a sense of wrongness.

It was black outside...despite it being morning. It was so dark that it seemed like the sun hadn’t even risen. I looked around. The torrential rain had made it hard to see at first, but I soon realized that the sense of wrongness was coming from above.

I looked up.

So that’s what’s causing it...

Thick, jet-black clouds covered the sky as far as I could see. The rain and wind were heavy, so it felt like I was standing inside a storm. This was what I’d expected, though.

Sakurai, as the Hero of Light, had the power to turn sunlight into mana and aura. This meant, to defeat him, one should blot out the sun. Even a child could

understand that. Hence the expectation that the demon army would bring someone capable of manipulating the weather. To counteract this, I could use my *Right Arm of the Elemental* to control the clouds—or the water that made them up—and clear the sky. If I did, then Sakurai would be once again strengthened by the sunlight, and he'd have the power to defeat the demon lord.

However, the *thing* spreading across the sky crushed those plans.

"Clouds of Darkness..." I breathed.

A thousand years ago, during the era when Iblis and the nine demon lords had ruled the world, the sky had been covered in a blanket of clouds, with the sunlight never reaching the ground. The period of time before Abel the Savior defeated Iblis and cleared the clouds was aptly known as the Age of Darkness. When I'd first been reincarnated in the Water Temple, I'd heard the stories of Iblis's defeat over and over. And though I hadn't seen it in person before, I knew that *this* must have been the spell cast by the Great Demon Lord—the divine rank spell *Clouds of Darkness*. It was famous enough that I honestly had no idea just how many times I'd heard about it in my lessons.

As I looked up, I could feel the eddies of powerful mana swirling in the dark clouds. Could I use elemental magic to blast away such a legendary spell?

On top of that, there was something else bothering me. I closed my eyes and used *Listen*. What I heard was water, pounding into the ground.

The rain was noisy, but that was the *only* sound I heard. Estelle had said there were thirty thousand soldiers on each side. So many people fighting should make the very ground shake; there should be yells and clashing weapons. And yet, I could hear none of it. That meant...I wasn't on the battlefield. I'd appeared somewhere farther away, which was exactly what Lucy had been worried about.

"Noah!" I yelled up at the sky.

Hellooo, you called?

Her relaxed voice calmed me down.

"Tell me where Sakurai is please."

He's about seventy kilometers to the northwest, she answered immediately. Go straight on from a bit right of where you're facing.

"Water Magic: Water Phoenix."

Before she'd even finished speaking, I was gathering mana with elemental magic and casting the spell. The massive bird had barely formed when I jumped on its back and headed in the direction of the battle.

The wind howled and the rain drove down practically horizontal. Above, the sky was ominously dark, like it would never be light again.

We flew on at full speed.

At that pace, you should get there in about an hour, Noah told me, her tone light.

"I've got a few questions in the meantime."

Go ahead.

I took a slight breath in. "Is the Great Demon Lord back?" According to legend, the *Clouds of Darkness* was a spell the Great Demon Lord had used.

Nope, she replied clearly.

"So, the divine rank spell..."

It's not the real deal, she told me. The Snake Sect sacrificed their followers' life spans to do it, I'd wager. I don't think the clouds will last a full day.

"I see."

That was good. Iblis had not yet returned. I'd felt looming dread when I'd first seen the clouds, but it looked like we were up against just a demon lord this time. At least that much hadn't changed.

"Next question, then. Do you think I can get rid of the spell with elemental magic?"

Well, you won't know until you try...but probably not.

"Right..."

That was pretty much what I'd expected, but it was still disappointing. So it

wasn't happening... I'd felt slightly hopeful, but one person couldn't manage against a legendary spell. I glanced down at my glowing blue arm.

The elementals' mana inside was powerful, but would it actually help me here?

My, you're being pretty timid. That's not like you.

Instead of replying directly, I said, "Well...you seem to be in a fairly good mood."

I heard a giggle. *You should know why. Ira messed up, and she's one of the Sacred Deities. Now you're the only one who can save their Hero of Light. I couldn't ask for a better situation.*

"So, did you predict this...?" Had she foreseen this happening?

Hardly. If even Ira missed this, how would I see the future when I'm sealed in the Seafloor Temple?

"Well...I guess..." No one could have seen this coming. "What's happening with Eir?" She was often with Noah, so what did she think about the situation?

She rushed back to the Sacred Deities. Apparently, there's an urgent meeting of the goddesses. Well, it's mostly about how to act after the Hero of Light dies...along with how to deal with Ira.

"They...do know that Sakurai's still alive, right?"

It felt like they were giving up too quickly. Don't just write him off! Was the Hero of Light just a tool to them?

To the Sacred Deities, people down there are just pieces on the board. I'm different though, of course.

"I trust you, Noah." I said this, but I was growing more uneasy by the minute. I'd been pretty damn lucky so far, and nobody I'd been close to had lost their life. Yet the current situation was the worst I'd ever been in.

Ira had said that Sakurai would die tonight.

It'll be okay, Makoto. If things get hairy, you can always run.

"That's...right, I guess."

Noah was kind. She'd given me all kinds of information, so I wouldn't lose—she'd lent me power, so I wouldn't die. I was her one believer, so if I wasn't here, her link to the greater world would be severed. That made me the most important piece on the board for her. But what about everyone else?

Sakurai followed Althena. She was the goddess with the largest number of believers on the continent. Thus, it made no difference to Noah whether he was here or not.

I wanted to save him, though.

When we'd first arrived here and I'd been fretting over my stats being the weakest, Fujiyan and Sakurai had been the only two who'd kept treating me like normal. Even when it hadn't seemed like I'd be of any use to anyone, they'd offered to let me go with them.

Makoto, Noah said softly.

"What is it?"

You're getting too worked up. You need to relax.

"Just telling me that—"

Fine, okay!

A moment later, there was a sparkle of light next to me, and Noah appeared from within it.

"Wha?"

We were beneath the gloom of the clouds and the driving rain. This wasn't a dream—it was the real world—and Noah was sitting next to me.

"N-Noah? How are you here?!"

"Well, I'm not surprised it confused you. This is just an illusion though. I'm not really here, just in your head."

In my head? Like an imaginary friend?

"Not quite. I am actually speaking to you, but from the Seafloor Temple. The body you're seeing doesn't actually exist."

I let out a murmur. She looked completely real...even more than she did

during my dreams.

“So if I tried touching you, I’d go right through?” I asked, reaching out for her arm.

I felt a soft sensation.

“What?”

I flexed my fingers, feeling the supple response of the skin on her arm. She was so soft! How was it even possible?! Was she an angel?!

“Don’t lump me in with the angels, would you?” She pouted, pinching my cheek. “I already said I was the best in the divine realm.”

It didn’t hurt, but I could definitely feel the pinch. “So, is this really an illusion?”

“For mortals, a divine rank illusion isn’t that different from reality. More importantly, how long are you planning on groping me?”

“S-Sorry.”

I hurriedly removed my hand. I would’ve happily kept it there forever...

“I think you’re a bit *too* relaxed now.” She sighed, scratching her cheek. Even that casual act was beautiful.

Still...

“If you can do this, why haven’t you done it before?”

“I usually can’t. The *Clouds of Darkness* are weakening the power of the divine right now. In exchange, other powers can equilibrate—that is, the underworld power of the demons and the power of nature that we Titanea represent. That’s why I can appear in front of you, even if it is just an illusion.”

“Oh, okay.” So her being able to show me this wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“You have about thirty minutes until you reach the battlefield. We should spend the time planning our offense against the demon lord.”

“You know about him?!”

“Not about the new one—not in detail. But I knew the previous, so his child

should be pretty similar.”

That was definitely reassuring.

“First off...”

And so, the two of us spent the rest of the trip discussing countermeasures against the demon lord.

“We’re nearly there,” Noah murmured, standing up after twenty or so minutes of riding the water phoenix.

I certainly had more information about fighting a demon lord now.

“Thank you, Noah. I’m going to go and save Sakurai now.”

“I can’t come with you, so don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“You can’t?” That was a shame—her being at my side was a huge confidence boost.

“Well, I can stand next to you and talk, but you’ll look like a crazy guy talking to thin air.”

“Yeah... Then let’s not.” I don’t want people to see me as some weirdo.

“Bye, Makoto.” Noah patted me on the head and then faded away. I was now alone with the rain once again, though I was no longer feeling depressed.

Fighting was raging in the distance. I could hear it—sounds of yelling and the clashes of metal striking metal. There were also explosions of magic and the rumble of masses of troops moving. I was close to the battlefield now.

I flew toward the noise.

There! I see it!

People were moving in waves. Well, waves of humans were crashing against opposing lines of demons. It wasn’t the mismatch I’d expected, though—the sides seemed about on par with each other. The demons weren’t excessively stronger, and there was a back-and-forth to the fighting.

Though, I was an amateur at war, so it wasn’t like I could say for sure just by looking.

What's that...?

There was some bizarre thing on the battlefield—a dark hemisphere. The thing itself was pitch-black and opaque. I couldn't see inside of it. Was that one of the demons' spells? The mana surrounding it felt awful, which made me doubt that it was on our side.

I didn't know enough, though. I'd need to get up closer and investigate.

While I was examining the layout of the battlefield, I was also checking on the elementals. Either because of the rain, or the clouds weakening the goddesses' blessings, there were a *lot* of water elementals.

I looked out over the battlefield once again.

It's a free-for-all...

If all the demons had been in one place, then I could've attacked them all at once, before the fighting started, like in Laphroaig. Having allies mixed in made that task much harder.

Besides, these demons were the elites of their army. The attacks on Laphroaig had been diversionary, so those foes had been much weaker. Considering how feeble water magic was for offensive purposes, I doubted it would work on these troops.

I felt anxiety crawling its way up my spine again.

Calm Mind.

I needed to stay relaxed, remember what I'd talked about with Noah, and do what I could. Though I had an idea, the problem was when and where to execute it.

Roars battered the air as beasts peeled off from the demon army and came to attack me.

They were...*dragons*?! Two of them—wild eyed and spewing fire. Water elementals would fare poorly against them. Still, whittling down our enemies would be good.

I hesitated but thrust my right arm out.

“Water Magic—”

“Holy Sword: Sonic Slash!”

Two flashes sliced through the air before I could cast my spell, and the dragons’ wings fell from their bodies. They screeched and plummeted to the ground.

Where they had been there was now a knight wearing white armor, riding atop a pegasus.

I recognized her.

“Takatsuki?! You’re here to help!”

This was a classmate of mine—Saki Yokoyama—one of Sakurai’s brides and his second-in-command. *She’s on the same squad as him...so he should be here too!*

“I am. Where’s Sakurai?”

“Save him. Please!”



Her face was openly pleading, a far cry from the firm looks she'd given me the last time we'd met. I could tell just how bad the situation was—she was almost crying.

“Calm down. Where is he?”

“Over there. He's been inside for half a day now... I don't even know if he's still...” She was pointing at the big dome in the middle of the battlefield.

So I'll need to go inside...

“Come on, Takatsuki!”

“Right.”

We moved closer to the black hemisphere. As we approached, the size became more and more overwhelming. It made me think of the Tokyo Dome, but I thought it might've actually been even bigger. As I tried to peer inside, I noticed something strange about the demons and people fighting around it.

Our army—mostly the Soleil Knights—was fighting to protect it.

“Why's everyone guarding the black thing?” I asked Yokoyama.

If Sakurai was stuck inside, then surely they should be destroying it...? Yokoyama had a pained look on her face as she answered.

“The dome traps the Hero of Light inside. Our people can't get through to join him since it's one-way—it keeps him in and keeps the rest of our army out. But the worst thing is that monsters and demons *can* come in and out...so...”

“I see. A conditional barrier. Still, calibrating it *just* for the Hero of Light seems pretty drastic. They did all of this just for him?”

As I listened to Yokoyama's explanation, I sorted through my memories. I'd learned about this in the Water Temple. Barrier magic was used to defend against attacks and corral your enemies. However, the stronger the attack or enemy was, the more mana a barrier required.

That was inefficient, so there *were* conditions that could lessen the mana cost. Simply speaking, the caster could specialize the barrier, strengthening it against specific things—for example, it might strongly repel fire magic but be

weak against water. In this case, one could have an extremely powerful fire barrier, stronger than a neutral one, while using the same amount of mana.

This particular barrier apparently did the following:

Kept the Hero of Light inside.

Stopped mortal fighters and mages from entering (though they could leave if they somehow got inside).

Allowed demons and monsters in and out.

“Shouldn’t it be possible to break with time?” I asked. “Don’t the Soleil Knights have lots of skilled mages?”

“We do, but it’s more complicated than that! The mages said it would take at least two days to break! The barrier is saint rank, so we need someone like the Grandsage or the Hero of Light in the sun.”

“Man, this is bad...”

The Grandsage was still on her way back from Symphonia, and the Hero of Light was sealed away. On top of that, *Clouds of Darkness* were blocking the sunlight.

This was bad...really bad.

“Is Sakurai the only one inside?”

“No. At least a hundred people were escorting him at all times. He shouldn’t be *alone*, but most of the day has already passed and I don’t know whether the rest are...” Yokoyama trailed off ominously.

“Right...”

This was a harsh situation—we couldn’t be optimistic. As we spoke, we flew closer to the dome, approaching that pitch-black barrier. Even this close up, the surface was completely opaque, and I couldn’t see inside.

I was considering launching a spell at the barrier, just to see how it reacted, when Yokoyama moved.

“*Holy Sword: Light Slash!*”

The attack was bigger than the one she’d used against the dragons, and it left

a massive trail of light across my vision. Yet the moment it touched the barrier...it just faded away.

“The attack was absorbed?”

“I don’t know... The mages have never seen this before, and we haven’t analyzed it yet.”

Then should you be attacking it like that? Still, the look on her face was far from calm composure.

A detail she’d mentioned stuck with me.

“You know a lot about the barrier even though you haven’t been able to analyze it yet. Like, you know that it traps only the Hero of Light inside.”

“Well...when it appeared, that Isaac guy from the Snake Sect explained everything. He laughed at us and said, ‘That barrier was made from scratch to contain the Hero of Light! You’ll never destroy it!’ Damn it!”

“Him again...” That guy sure did like to monologue. I hadn’t caught sight of him here yet.

“Takatsuki, you’re a mage, right? Can you...do anything?” She was almost crying—thick patches of darkness pooled under her eyes. *She probably hasn’t slept a wink since all of this happened.*

“Well, maybe if I...”

I approached the barrier, pulling Noah’s dagger from its place at my hip. It was a divine instrument, so perhaps...

I got closer. The water phoenix’s wing brushed the barrier and instantly vanished. *So it does absorb mana?!*

“Whoa!”

My water phoenix collapsed, and just before I fell, Yokoyama caught me. I was now dangling upside down from her pegasus, her hand gripping one of my ankles tightly. *Whew, that was close.*

“Are you okay?!”

“Yeah. Thanks, Yokoyama. Just a second.”

I used Noah's dagger to stab the barrier...but nothing seemed to happen. The blade passed through like it was being swallowed up.

"Huh?"

"W-Wow!" Yokoyama exclaimed. "That thing might be able to destroy it!"

"Hold on. It feels..."

I waved her down some and tried to touch the barrier with my left hand—it passed through soundlessly.

"What?"

"Whaaat?!"

The barrier isn't blocking me?!

"Hey, Yokoyama?"

"Wh-What is it?" Her voice sounded strange. She seemed at her wit's end.

"Isn't this barrier supposed to keep people out?"

"U-Uh... That Isaac guy said it's supposed to block people and keep demihuman fighters and mages out..."

"Ah... Then I must be able to get through because I'm an apprentice mage..."
The official description of my job in my Soul Book was *apprentice* mage. I wasn't an actual mage.

"Wha...? Aren't you...a hero?"

"That's just a title the royal family of Roses gave me. In this world, I'm just an apprentice mage."

"R-Right... Th-That must be tough." The look on her face was rather pitying.

She probably didn't imagine that an apprentice mage could be a State-Authorized Hero, I heard Noah say. Luckily, neither did the person who cast the barrier.

I mean, I *was* a State-Authorized Hero. Didn't they know my job? *Come on, guys...* They should've seen this coming.

It's fine. That means you can get inside.

Well, it does. Still...

“I’ll head in now. You can let go,” I told Yokoyama. I was still hanging upside down with her hand wrapped around my ankle.

“Uh, r-right... Look after Ryouzuke.”

“Yeah, I’ll save him.”

“Be careful,” she said seriously.

I gave her a small wave, and she released me. I fell through the air, and then...

I was swallowed by the barrier.

So dark. I can barely see...

Night Vision.

It was as dark as midnight within the barrier. Still, there were *things* in here. I could see huge masses shifting in the gloom.

Scout.

So many enemies... Every one of them was a calamity. I clocked more than a thousand.

Stealth.

I cloaked myself. I had *no* desire to tangle with them—my primary goal was to find Sakurai.

Listen.

I could hear fighting around me. I didn’t know who it was, but if they were battling monsters, then they were on Sakurai’s side. I moved quietly toward the sound.

Calm Mind: 100%.

I didn’t have the energy to spare on fear as I passed through the packed throng of monsters. There was no time to second-guess—I just avoided my enemies and headed for the fighting. It was gradually getting louder.

There!

I saw a single swordsman fighting—they wore ashen armor and wielded a

black sword. *Who is that...?* Countless monsters surrounded them, and the fighter was holding the monsters back...alone. That was some display of skill.

I got closer and closer, and eventually, I could see them properly.

Sakurai. He was covered in blood from head to toe.

I yelled, headless of the monsters around us. “Sakurai!”

He did not answer. His eyes were empty, almost like he was sleepwalking. The armor wasn’t actually ash gray—it was white. Dried blood had coated every inch. His sword was just the same, smeared in blood. He kept on swinging though, fighting alone against the press of monsters.

“Water Magic: Great Whale!”

I used my *Right Arm of the Elemental*, creating a massive whale out of water and blasting the monsters away from him. It wasn’t an offensive spell, just something that bought time and distance.

“Sakurai!” I yelled again.

There was a long silence.

“Taka...tsuki...?”

Great, he reacted this time!

“Are you injured?!” I asked, running up. As I did, I tried to see how badly he’d been wounded...but he didn’t seem to be physically hurt. All of the blood coating him seemed to have come from splashback.

“How...are you...here?”

“That doesn’t matter! Where are the others?!” Yokoyama had said that his escort was in here with him.

His ragged, hoarse voice seemed to tear at his throat.

“They’re. All. Dead.”

“What?”

“The seventh division...were all new knights. They were supposed to protect me and die in my place. I...*promised* them... I said...we’d all make it out... I said

they wouldn't need to die... But they all stood... Stood as my shields."

I was at a loss for words. That Sakurai was still sane...was honestly impressive.

Suddenly, I could hear footsteps—it was the monsters I'd blasted away, and more besides. Our enemies could come in and out of the barrier as they wished. Their numbers might increase in number...but they wouldn't decrease.

"I'm nearly out of mana," he growled, voice heaving. "Reincarnation of the savior or not, without the sunlight, this is all I can do. If you can get out, you should... You don't need to stay with me and— Mmph!"

"Drink this!" I cut him off, shoving one of the elixirs from Fujiyan into his mouth.

"Guh... What was—? Huh?"

He was shining blue, and I could see his mana returning. *That* was the effect of an elixir.

Sakurai gasped. "My stamina and mana... It's all flooding back..."

"Feeling better?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Okay then! *Water Magic: Great Whale!*"

I blasted the monsters back again. They'd learned from the first time—a lot of them either dodged or just weathered the attack.

"*Holy Sword: Light Slash!*"

Sakurai cut them to shreds with beams of light. It was the same skill Yokoyama had used. *Nice one, matching with your wife.*

"I'm grateful to have my mana back...but I still can't get out of here!" His voice had much more vigor now.

Right...Yokoyama had said that the barrier was saint class. Our desperate situation was still just the same. I thought back to my conversation with Noah and the magic lessons I'd taken in the past—I'd learned a bit about breaking barriers, but the method...was a bit reckless.

Well, let's give it a go.

I let *Calm Mind* drop away, took a deep breath, and called out in Elemanti.
“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. (Elementals, elementals, come forth.)”

The water elementals that had been waiting welled up. They were excited. I lifted my *Right Arm of the Elemental* in front of me, and even more of them gathered.

“Let’s rip that barrier down,” I said, turning to Sakurai.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Fights the Demon Lord

◇ Ryousuke Sakurai's Perspective ◇

Two years ago, my classmates and I all found ourselves in another world.

The Water Temple investigated our skills and found out I was the “Hero of Light.” In the blink of an eye, I became the reincarnation of their savior.

Though the pressure was immense, it wasn’t all bad. Highland offered me the best possible treatment and said I could bring my friends. We would all be state guests, and if I fought as their Hero of Light, they’d guarantee all of our lifestyles. I invited everyone, but anyone who had strong skills decided to go it alone. Even Takatsuki turned me down, which was a shame.

I learned about this new world and was taught how to use a sword and magic. I met so many people. Then, I fought against the demon lords’ armies. The fighting went well—I managed to follow the strategy and defeat the demon lord Zagan. We didn’t suffer many losses either.

Commander Owain ordered us not to pursue. We could not fall back until they retreated entirely, so we had been waiting to see how the situation developed, and then— “The demon lord’s army is still attacking!”

—they descended upon us once more. We had let our guard down, assuming victory over Zagan.

Before we knew it, the seventh division and I were all sealed off in a barrier. It was designed solely to hold the Hero of Light, and it was strong enough that even *my* attacks had no effect. That...had never happened before. Additionally, the sunlight, the source of my strength, was weakening. This was all probably part of their plans. My comrades fell, one after another.

Eventually, I was the only one left standing.

How long...can I keep fighting...?

I pushed doubt aside, swinging my sword over and over.

I could keep going. I could last another hour.

Two hours later—I could fight on through sheer force of will.

At three hours, even thinking was difficult.

At four...I was probably done for.

No one was coming to save me.

My comrades were dead. I'd already used up my restoratives. I couldn't escape from the barrier. Countless monsters surged, attacking me over and over.

My sanity was slipping.

I was no longer swinging my sword out of duty as a hero, but because I feared death. Though I was desperate, I knew—it would be over soon. My thoughts finally faded. I cut down enemies robotically, without thinking. Just when I was about to fall to my knees...

Cold water splashed my face.

An attack?!

And yet, it didn't hurt. There was no malice to it, and water magic was offensively poor anyway. I turned to see who was now standing against me.

Oh...

I felt like crying.

Not an enemy... It was a mage. My childhood friend.

Takatsuki.

"Let's rip that barrier down," he declared with a silly look on his face. He was just the same as ever. That expression was so similar to the one he'd worn back in junior high. He'd helped me then too.

"But...how?"

I'd attacked the barrier countless times. Our army outside with Commander Owain had lots of powerful mages, but even though it had been a whole day, they still hadn't broken the deadlock.

However, his response wasn't an answer to my question.

"Sakurai, grab on to me somewhere."

"What?"

"Come on, hurry up."

"O-Okay." I gripped his shoulders tightly.

"You don't need to use both hands..." he muttered. "Well, whatever."

He lifted his left hand.

"Water Magic: Grand Cascade."

"Whoa!"

The next moment, a huge amount of water fell on the area—it was like Takatsuki had upturned an entire swimming pool. And it just...kept...going. Before I knew it, the whole field was completely covered. W-Were we going to drown?!

"Water Magic: Water Breathing, oh, and Water Magic: Water Talk," I heard. Then, "Can you hear me, Sakurai? Can you breathe all right?"

"Yeah. Wow... I never knew this spell existed."

I remembered him using the breathing spell in Labyrinthos, but I didn't know there was a spell for talking while underwater. He'd also used a spell called *Grand Cascade* to conjure all this water. That meant he was controlling *three spells* at once. We barely had any mages, even in the Soleil Knights, who could maintain that many at the same time.

"Takatsuki! We've got company!"

Despite the torrent of water, some monsters lunged for us again, seeming barely affected by the spell.

"Water Magic: Flow," Takatsuki cast. He didn't even look. Suddenly, the monsters started spinning...and they were dragged away.

"I wonder how long it'll take to fill the dome," murmured Takatsuki. "The water was summoned with magic, so the barrier's treating it as an attack and absorbing it... Hmm, I guess that's what I expected." He gave a faint smile and

scratched his cheek.

The situation had changed somewhat, but wasn't it still bad?

"What's the point if it's absorbing the spell?" I asked.

"Don't worry, I'm conjuring water faster than it's being absorbed."

"That's...possible?"

"Yup. With elemental magic, at least." He smiled smugly. I remembered that expression from when he used to play pranks at school.

"Time for the next step!"

Next step? What did he mean?

"Water Magic: Abyss."

I felt a chill run up my spine. This was the spell he'd used against the Hero of Lightning in Highland.

"Sakurai. Don't let go."

I nodded. Then, I heard his voice again, albeit being carried by his water magic.

"Water Magic: Ten Thousand Meter Depth."

This world didn't use meters, so it was surely a spell he'd invented. If I remembered right, the deepest part of Earth's sea was the Mariana Trench, which was about eighteen thousand meters deep. So that meant...ten thousand was over half of that. I wasn't exactly a scientist, but I seemed to remember that this depth exerted a crushing amount of pressure—one ton of weight per every square centimeter. No creature could survive that.

I used *Scout* to see how many monsters in the barrier were still alive.

None.

"T-Takatsuki..."

I was worried. This was the fifth spell he was controlling. And considering the scale of *Abyss*...was he going to be able to maintain the mana and keep everything up?

“Over there! More monsters incoming! Nice!” Takatsuki cheered.

Apparently, he was just fine.

We waited in the water for a while, but no monsters actually got close to us.

For the first time in hours, things were peaceful.

“This is boring,” he protested, stretching. He was maintaining *Grand Cascade* and *Abyss*, crushing monsters as they kept coming. *Like it’s nothing...* This level of spellcasting would normally require a ridiculous amount of concentration...

“So...what are we going to do now?” I asked. After all, we *were* still trapped in here.

However, his response wasn’t something I expected.

“I guess just wait for twenty-four hours.”

“Twenty-four hours?!” In my shock, I almost let go of him. That was a whole day...

“Estelle’s prediction was that you wouldn’t last the night. So, if we just make sure you do, it’ll probably change the outcome.”

“But...twenty-four hours...” There was no way he could concentrate for that long.

“I’ve gone three times that long playing a game.”

I was silent. Right... I remember him talking about not sleeping for three days. Apparently, it was true.

“I’m bored,” he whined. “Sakurai, let’s chat.”

“*Here?!?*”

The contrast between this casual demeanor and the absolutely desperate state I’d been in not even an hour ago...was dizzying.

“Do you have any interesting stories?” he asked.

Well, that was *one* way of changing the topic. But it was also typical Takatsuki.

“Uh... Well, I guess I did fight against an ancient dragon in Caol Ilan...”

“Oh, nice! I wanna hear about it!”

So I told him. And after I finished, he told me about the mess in Great Keith. Then, he asked a whole bunch of questions about my fiancées. I asked why, and he replied that he was doing better with women these days, but he wanted advice on how to take things more seriously. I honestly didn't think I was the person to ask, but I obliged.

We passed the time talking, and then suddenly, we heard a snap, followed by a huge cracking sound.

"Takatsuki! The barrier!"

"Oh... That was quicker than I expected."

All around us, the dome was breaking down.

"How on earth did you...?"

His response was nonchalant. "I think I just surpassed the amount it could absorb and overwhelmed the structure."

Apparently, there were two general methods for breaking barriers. The first was to understand how it was constructed and take it apart cleverly. But the other way was the brute force approach—overwhelm it with magic head-on. Takatsuki had gone for the latter.

"I thought it'd hold out for a little longer."

Something was odd about the way he said that. He sounded almost disappointed, like he'd wanted it to put up more of a fight.

"You're up, Sakurai."

"Ah, right."

I soon understood why. Once the barrier completely splintered, Takatsuki's water transformed into a massive dragon and rocketed up into the clouds. It had been a whole day since I'd seen the sky, and now it was covered in dark clouds. Yet, something else drew my eye.

A massive silver beast was standing in front of us.

It was a familiar sight, though the iteration I remembered was much older.

Demon lord Zagan.

From what Takatsuki had told me in the barrier, this version of Zagan had inherited the previous one's power and was now even stronger.

And now, all that power stood right in front of us.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Zagan looked—simply put—like a massive silver lion.

“He's...a bit big, isn't he?” I couldn't help but say.

That was just how large he was—he was probably over a hundred meters tall, which made dragons and giants look like kittens. If I didn't know any better, I'd have called him a *kaiju* rather than a demon lord.

I explained before: Zagan is descended from the Divine Beast of the Earth, Behemoth, said Noah. He's on a different level from monsters and dragons.

That was information she'd relayed before I'd arrived at the battlefield. Apparently, Behemoth had remained in the world even after the ancient war of Titanomachia and had given birth. The beast's descendants had all become demon lords.

That's really making a nuisance of yourself... Incidentally, where is Behemoth?

Noah scoffed and replied, *Sleeping on the demon continent. Just like the last fifteen million years. Don't worry, she's not waking up. On maps, she's called the Hazel Mountain Range.*

She was treated as a mountain range? Leviathan was big enough already...

“Think you can manage?” I asked Sakurai.

“I'd love to say I can...but I only defeated the last one because I was under the sun. So, as things currently stand...”

I peered up. The sky was still covered in dark clouds with no sunlight peeking through at all. We'd need to do something about that.

But then, it happened.

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx”

Zagan's mouth opened. The air vibrated in violent tremors. His voice was pretty much an attack all on its own. The demon lord was speaking in a low,

menacing voice, but— “Sakurai, what did he say?”

—I couldn’t understand any of it. It wasn’t a human language. Naturally, it wasn’t Elemanti either.

“I think it’s the demon language, but I don’t know it either,” he replied apologetically.

The demon lord continued the same way.

Come on! Talk so we can understand you! I had a feeling his words were directed at us. At least Bifrons and Setekh had both spoken our language!

Well, the two of them ruled over the continent a thousand years ago, explained Noah. *Without learning your language, they could’ve never managed the mortals. Zagan here has only ever been on the demon continent, so I guess that’s the only language he can speak.*

Made sense. By the way, Noah, can you speak the demon language?

More or less... Wait, are you trying to make me interpret?

Ah, sorry. Guess that’s not happening.

Oh well. Just this time, you hear?

Nice! She’d agreed.

Okay, so he said this: “Foolish humans. The demons shall rule over the land again, vindicating their honor from a millennium ago.” He just kept on going on with stuff like that. He also challenged the Hero of Light to a duel.

So, nothing important. Also...he considered this trap a duel?!

“Sakurai, attack him while he’s posturing,” I muttered.

“U-Uhhh... Are you sure?” Sakurai hesitated at my suggestion. *Come on, man... There’s a limit to being polite.*

“By the way, I’ve been trying to get rid of those clouds, but it’s not going well. I can control them, but they just come straight back.” I was using my *Right Hand of the Elemental* to control the weather, but it wasn’t working on the *Clouds of Darkness*. I could clear it for about thirty seconds at a time, but that was like a drop in the ocean.

“The day before yesterday when we defeated the last Zagan, I fought alongside Commander Owain, the other commanders, and the Grandsage. But now...” Sakurai looked out into the distance. In that direction, I could see the allied army fighting fiercely.

We wouldn’t be getting any reinforcements. And, though we’d gotten rid of the barrier, they didn’t know that Sakurai was safe. The massive body of Zagan in front of us certainly garnered all the attention—not many idiots would launch an attack at such a lively demon lord.

“So...tactical retreat?” I suggested.

“If only we could...”

We stared at the massive silver beast in front of us. It was hard to tell where he was looking because of his size, but I was pretty sure it was at us.

Makoto! He said that if you don’t reply, he’ll start things off!

Reply how?! Zagan, speak so we can understand you!

“Sakurai! Get ready!”

“R-Right!”

We braced ourselves for his attack. The king of beasts opened his mouth wide. What was he planning...?

Light started to gather in his gaping maw.

No way...

A flash of brilliance burst from his mouth, headed straight for us.

What? Am I dead...? I felt like I’d been thrown into the sun.

“Holy Sword: Explosion!”

But then, Sakurai swung his sword. The two attacks collided in midair and burst, canceling out the other.

“Wow! We might just—” I cut myself off.

Sakurai always looked completely unruffled, but his shoulders were heaving as he gasped for breath.

“Sakurai...are you okay?”

“I can’t regenerate my mana or aura without the sunlight... We’re going to be in trouble if he keeps that up.”

This was bad.

“Let’s hide for now,” I suggested.

“Got it.”

The two of us used *Stealth* to put some distance between us and Zagan.

Water Magic: Mist. I didn’t know whether it would actually work as a smoke screen, but I covered the area in fog anyway. Hopefully, we could use it to slip by and escape.

The beast’s roar echoed through the air. Less than a second later, the ground began shaking like it was about to overturn.

“Takatsuki! Grab onto me!”

“Thanks!”

Just as I was about to fall, Sakurai supported me. We stumbled on, getting farther and farther from Zagan.

Then, suddenly, something rushed into our field of vision.

A wall.

We were encircled by a massive wall.

Zagan wasn’t letting us get away.

He’d been able to conjure that huge wall so quickly. *Hell, that might even put him on the same level as that giant we met in Roses...*

Noah’s voice filled my mind. *Zagan carries the blood of Behemoth, the Divine Beast of the Earth. Just assume that the whole ground is his weapon.*

I appreciate the explanation, but maybe offer a strategy guide instead?

A hero with a goddess’s blessing is the best tool for defeating a demon lord. Your best chance is to rely on the Hero of Light, but...

I glanced at Sakurai. He was gazing back at me.

“I’m going to get us some light for a second,” I said. “See if you can do anything with it.”

“Got it!”

Right Arm of the Elemental.

A hole swirled into existence among the clouds, allowing sunlight to stream through. Sakurai lifted his sword—light gathered around him.

But then...

They’re pushing back!

The clouds were probably made from mana, so I couldn’t control them like I could normal clouds. *I should probably treat them like they’re a spell from another mage.*

However high my magic mastery was, I couldn’t control someone *else’s* spell.

“Takatsuki! He noticed us!”

“Guh!”

The demon lord had his mouth open again, charging another shot of his laser attack.

You’re that damn big and have a long-range attack?! What are you, Godzilla?!

The light flashed.

“Holy Sword: Grand Cross!”

The beam from Sakurai’s sword met Zagan’s attack, and both detonated.

“Whoa!” I yelled as the blast launched me into the air.

“Takatsuki?!”

Sakurai managed to catch me, but this wasn’t going to work. As I was, my presence was a hindrance more than anything else. *Maybe we should try something different...*

Just as I was thinking that, a shadow fell over us. The massive lion bore down, staring right at us. He raised an enormous paw, then let it fall, his wicked claws glowing like magma.

Crap! Sakurai was already in an unstable position after catching me.

We couldn't get out of this. Sakurai seemed to feel the same way—out of the corner of my eye, I saw him readying his sword.

This might not work, but I have to try... Calm Mind 100%. I reached unconsciously for Noah's dagger, hoping that my last-minute idea might give us a chance...

"Hey."

Sakurai and I yelped as a voice spoke from behind us. We turned, but our vision went black for a second.

The same voice spoke again, this time in exasperation. "The two of you are in quite the predicament, aren't you?"

Before we knew what was going on, the two of us were hanging in the air like kittens grabbed by the scruffs of their necks. The ground below us—where we'd been standing moments before—was gone. In its place was a massive, burning crater.

The hell kind of attack was that?! If we'd been on the ground, Sakurai and I would be dead right now. Somehow, we'd escaped by the skin of our teeth.

I recognized this feeling—it was the same thing I'd experienced when Lucy sent me here. However, the mana was dozens of times more refined.

A chantless Teleport.

Across the entire continent, there were very few people who could cast that without the incantation. I shifted and finally managed to look back.

Snow-white hair, a white robe, and gleaming red eyes...

"You came..." Sakurai said in relief. I let out a sigh as well. *Phew, she saved us.*

"Let us defeat him."

I was relaxed by that dependable voice, and when I looked back, I met the eyes of the great mage. However, I quickly noticed something.

"Grandsage... You don't look so good."

She was a vampire, so she was always pale, but right now, she seemed even

more so... Her expression seemed slightly stiff as well.

“That’s what I get for forcing myself back here... Sorry, Elementalist, but I’ll take my *usual*.”

“R-Right.”

I pulled my collar down and offered my throat. She latched on immediately and started drinking... It seemed like she guzzled a bit more, and a bit faster, than usual... I was feeling somewhat light-headed.

“Grandsage?!” Sakurai was panicking. “That’s too much!”

“Phwah! Aaah, a long journey really does add to the taste.”

“Am I just a sports drink to you?” I griped.

She ignored me. “Finally, I feel alive again.”

You’re undead, though, right?

“Grandsage, take some from me as well,” Sakurai offered.

“I’d love to, but...” she said, trailing off.

It’s kinda unfair how she’s only drinking from me... But then, I remembered something. Really...was that it? She’d mentioned that nonvirgin blood tasted bad before, hadn’t she?

“Is this really the time to complain about that?” I asked bluntly.

“Honestly...I tried it once, but it was unbelievably terrible. I don’t think I’ve tasted something so rancid since Johnnie’s...”

“It’s *that* bad?”

Her expression was so serious that I couldn’t say anything more. Besides, it definitely wasn’t the time for this conversation. The *Teleport* had won us some distance, but Zagan still seemed to know where we were...and that the Grandsage was here too.

“Can you fight, Hero of Light?” she asked.

“Well...I think it’ll be tough. I can barely even deflect his attacks.”

There was a long pause.

“I see. Okay then. Leave him to me—you two run.”

“What?”

We weren't going to fight together? From what Sakurai had said, they'd all worked together to defeat the last Zagan. Surely we should do the same this time. Still, this *was* the Grandsage, so maybe she could just take him out on her own...

Leave the Grandsage behind and escape?

Yes

No

RPG Player activated.

The selection floated in the air in front of me. *Leave* the Grandsage... That was an odd way of wording it. My mind caught on that detail.

“Got it. Come on, Takatsuki, we'll just be in the way if we stay here.”

“Grandsage,” I said, momentarily ignoring Sakurai.

“What?”

“Can you win on your own?”

She was silent for a long while, and then said, “I'm not so senile you need worry over me.”

She usually had a casual, competent air about her, but right now, she didn't. Being a vampire, she was rarely outside during the day, but she'd traveled between Cameron and Highland twice within the past twenty-four hours.

That would take a pretty heavy toll on her.

I made no move to run, and Sakurai looked uneasy. “Takatsuki...?”

“Just go!” the Grandsage insisted irritably. “We cannot afford to lose the Hero of Light here. He is the only one who can defeat Iblis.”

Yeah, she's definitely forcing herself.

It almost felt like she was planning on sacrificing herself here. Over the time we'd known each other, she'd helped me a lot—Labyrinthos, Highland, and the list goes on. I needed to pay her back.

“Grandsage, I have an idea.”

“Which is?”

“Takatsuki?”

“What about this?” I asked, launching into the explanation.

“So...that's pretty much it,” I finished up.

“Hmm, intriguing!”

“That certainly sounds...”



Both of them seemed interested. However, the air soon shook again with another deafening roar. Zagan was getting more menacing by the minute.

“He was cautious of my presence at first, but since we haven’t yet made a move, he’s losing his patience,” said the Grandsage, her gaze sharpening.

“I’ll buy you time,” Sakurai promised. “I’m counting on you, Takatsuki.”

The Grandsage nodded. “And I’ll protect the Hero of Light.”

“Be ready in five minutes!” I shouted to Sakurai. “The Grandsage will give you the signal.”

We all knew our roles.

The demon lord roared again, spitting out black flames. They surged toward us like a wall of inferno. In the next instant, our surroundings blurred—the Grandsage shifted us slightly with a *Teleport*. Yet even then, Zagan didn’t stop attacking. Sakurai was still there, right in front, and *he* was the demon’s target.

He was risking his life to buy us time, so I had to work as quickly as I could. I set *Calm Mind* to 100%, then...

Right Arm of the Elemental.

Lifting my hand, I called upon the water elementals in the area. I gathered as much mana as I had when diverting the comet in Great Keith.

“And...of course he’s noticed.”

The Grandsage was right. Zagan had stopped attacking Sakurai. After a slight hesitation, he launched the black flames at the Grandsage and me again.

“Merely a half-baked attack,” the Grandsage remarked before chanting something. A second later, there was a barrier in front of us—it looked almost like a thin mirror.

Zagan’s flames slammed into the wall but then immediately bounced back.

That’s the strongest type of barrier! A reflection barrier! It worked to rebound your enemy’s spells, which would be sent back toward the caster without losing any power. A reflection barrier was one of the most difficult spells to cast, and the Grandsage had whipped it out like it was nothing.

“I need more mana. The only spells I can use are these little cantrips,” she commented unhappily. *Little...?* I was pretty sure that barrier was saint class...

By now, the demon lord had returned his attention to Sakurai. The Grandsage and I were apparently being put off until later.

The Grandsage noticed the shift in Zagan’s attention and said, “I should get in the way a little.” She instantly shot off the king rank fire spell *Phoenix*. The demon lord heaved his massive body out of the way. Sakurai managed to withstand the attack as well.

The Grandsage chuckled. “You damned demon. He doesn’t know whether to keep up his barrage on the Hero of Light or not.”

None of her spells amounted to a final blow for Zagan, but they all caused a decent amount of damage. The demon lord was definitely getting annoyed.

“Done yet?” she asked.

I was still gathering mana, and I paused for a beat, calculating the time. “Three more minutes.” Meanwhile, Sakurai was focused on dealing with Zagan’s assault. I figured that he shouldn’t lose given our current strategy.

And so, the deadlock carried on...until I was ready.

Great! That should be enough mana!

“Grandsage!”

“Finally!” she yelled back in joy.

I cast my spell.

Water Magic: Water Creation.

This spell, which consumed the enormous amount of mana I’d just gathered, was actually low rank. It simply manifested water. Lots of water. Water enough to fill a portion of the sky, higher than even the clouds.

Now, it was time for the next step. “Do something about those clouds!” I called out to the Grandsage.

“Clear,” she commanded, opening up a break in the clouds. It was maybe a touch smaller than the opening I’d made earlier.

“Tch, I never do well with this kind of thing,” she grumbled.

It was enough, though.

Light poured in through the gap. It wasn’t the tiny amount from last time, though—a twenty-kilometer-wide patch of sunlight was now all focused on a single spot.

“I’m impressed you managed that,” the Grandsage remarked. She sounded like she meant it.

My entire focus was on controlling my arm and the spell, so I couldn’t reply. However, peering up, I saw *it*, my handiwork, through the gap in the clouds.

“It” just so happened to be the twenty-kilometer-wide lens I’d made from water.

◇ Ryoustake Sakurai’s Perspective ◇

Making a lens to gather more light was Takatsuki’s strategy. I would’ve never come up with anything like that, and this kind of thinking was certainly not common strategy in this world. Proof of that was how impressed the Grandsage had been with the plan...despite how she seemed to know everything.

“We should, Elementalst. Let’s do it.”

“Counting on you, Takatsuki!”

The two of us were on board.

“Sure,” he replied. He was already ready, and he lifted his blue arm to the sky. I gave his face a sidelong glance and saw that same smile playing on his lips—it was the one he always wore when doing pranks.

But after that, all my attention switched to reaction—I needed to draw the demon lord’s attacks.

Our current situation was similar to before the Grandsage had arrived, but different as well. Now, I was on the defensive with an actual strategy. And since that strategy had come from Takatsuki, I didn’t have any doubts about it.

After a while, the air around me began to brighten, turning blindingly white.

Sunlight was raining down on me.

Here we go!

Light from several kilometers, all focused on me. My *Hero of Light* skill was converting it into aura. This skill—the same skill the savior had once possessed—activated.

The demon lord swung a massive arm with enough force to pulverize Highland Castle. Closer and closer, it barreled toward me. A moment ago, I would've needed to dodge. But now...

"Shield of Light!"

I put my right hand out in front of me and a massive shield appeared. Zagan's paw slammed into it, and the barrier held, easily blocking the attack.

The demon roared again and kept attacking. Towering black flames approached, but none of them reached me.

Sunlight was still pouring down; mana and aura were returning to me. I couldn't let this chance—the chance Takatsuki had given me—slip through my fingers.

I feel hot...

It was almost like I was burning.

I glanced up and saw the massive lens of water focusing twenty kilometers of light down onto me. That light began to warp.

He'd said that I would have a single minute. It was barely any time, but it was enough—I had the energy to defeat Demon Lord Zagan.

I began chanting the spell I had learned at the church, one Abel the Savior had used.

The angels sing their gratitude, filling the heavens with their thanks to the guide. Let us rejoice on this solemn day. Glory to the Goddess most high.

Sword of Uriel.

The sword in my hands transformed into a blade of white flames. Before me, the massive, silver-furred lion shuddered. With a roar, the beast rushed me.

"Sword of Judgment: Sin."

I quietly swung the sword. The blade seemed to hang in the air for lingering moments. Given its slow speed, it seemed that the demon lord would surely avoid it.

But I knew better.

The wind, the shifting clouds, the noise—all of it stopped. The demon lord was quiet and still.

In this instant of stopped time, I was the only thing moving.

The gently shifting sword sheared off a slash of light that raced toward the demon lord. And a second later...

An enormous pillar of light sprouted into the air, branching into a cross.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

What the...? Did it work?

Sakurai had swung his sword, but for a moment, nothing seemed to happen. I thought the attack had failed. Was there not enough sunlight?

But then, my vision went white.

This blinding brilliance was followed by a screech that put my hair on end, and a line of white sheared through the demon lord's body. The flesh on either side of that line separated, slipping against itself and falling. Then, the giant silver lion burst into flames, engulfed in a white inferno.

Wait...h-he's dead? He can't still be alive...right?

My eyes did not deceive me—Zagan, the King of Beasts, was indeed dead.

Even the Grandsage looked dazed. "The Hero of Light...borrowed the *seraph's* power."

"Nice one, Sakurai!" I called out. "Piece of cake for you, huh?"

The Grandsage shook her head. "Don't be stupid. If he could normally do that, he would've done it already. He should be limited to borrowing power from the seventh rank of angels—the principalities—and below. Yet somehow, he pulled through."

So this was Sakurai's absolute strongest attack... *Guys like him sure are on*

another level.

“How high of a rank can you borrow from?” I asked the Grandsage.

“Have you forgotten that I’m a vampire? I can hardly borrow an *angel’s* power. I pray to Pluto. Besides, I’m not particularly fond of divine rank magic you have to pray for.”

“You’re not? Once you get in good with the deities, aren’t those spells pretty powerful?”

“Besides the excessive delays before they actually activate, they are far weaker if you don’t have enough faith. Activating one is a request to the gods in the form of magic.”

“Huh...” I felt somewhat bad thinking it, but that response was typical Grandsage—she was undead, so a lot of her logic ran contrary to the usual order of this world.

“Still...a seraph,” she mused. “However you look at it, that is too high a leap for someone like the Hero of Light to make. I wonder if a goddess interfered?”

“A goddess...”

Eir and Noah’s faces floated across my mind. Eir was fond of messing with things, and Noah quite liked her under-the-table deals. Although, there was also Ira... Her *All-Seeing Eye* had failed, so was she trying to tip the scales in another way?

Either way, the demon lord was dead. *All’s well that ends well.*

Suddenly, I heard the Grandsage utter a quiet, uneasy sound. “This isn’t good. He’s passed out.”

“That’s *really* bad!”

“Give me your hand,” she demanded.

I obliged, and the two of us quickly teleported to Sakurai. We swiftly checked him, looking for damage to his prone body. Then, from overhead, we heard someone call out.

“Ryousuke!”

I looked up. A knight astride a pegasus was heading this way, and it was a familiar one—Yokoyama.

“Is he okay?!” she cried out.

“Fear not,” said the Grandsage. “He just lost consciousness. Power backlash from borrowing the seraph’s strength knocked him out, but he isn’t likely to die.”

Yokoyama sighed in relief. “Okay... Thank goodness.” She turned to me. “Thank you for saving him!”

“You’re welcome. But he ended up defeating the demon lord on his own.”

“You’re the one who broke the barrier. I saw the two of you come out, but I couldn’t fly in close because of the demon lord.”

“We can’t relax yet,” the Grandsage pointed out. “I thought the demon army might retreat once Zagan was defeated, but it looks like they’re ready to battle to their last breaths.”

I stared out at the battlefield—our allied forces were still fighting, and the demon troops didn’t look like they would give up any time soon. Turning back to the Grandsage, I asked, “What should I—?”

She didn’t let me finish. “Take the hero and withdraw. He’s weak right now, so we can’t risk him getting caught up in the aftermath. I’m not sure...” Her words trailed off, sounding listless.

“Are you okay? You don’t look like you’re doing so well.” Somehow, her skin had gotten even paler. “Want some?” I asked, baring my neck.

“You aren’t much better,” she retorted. “You’re swaying on your feet.”

“The bags under your eyes are really bad, Takatsuki,” said Yokoyama. “You look like you’re barely staying upright.”

“Huh? I do?” I hadn’t even realized. Using *Calm Mind* made it harder to notice when I was struggling.

“Get the Hero of Light to safety,” the Grandsage told Yokoyama. “Elementalist...don’t strain yourself. I’ll drive them off.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t push yourself either...” It wasn’t fair for the Grandsage to take all of this on when she looked so frazzled.

“Right! I’ll fight too!” Yokoyama, apparently sensing that we were in peril, had decided to stand with us.

Then, suddenly...

Thud. A massive impact shook the ground. Something had fallen pretty close.

An attack?!

“Ha ha! Here I am!”

When the dust parted, it revealed an elf who looked just like Lucy, cloaked in bright-red aura.

It was the Crimson Witch, Rosalie J. Walker.

I was stunned into silence for a moment before I finally spoke. “Rosalie?”

“Oh? Lucy’s boyfriend? Well, no matter! Let’s defeat that demon lord!” Her raised fist was covered with elementals, and red mana swirled through the air.

“Crimson...he’s over there.” The Grandsage pointed to where Zagan’s body—felled by Sakurai in a single strike—was collapsed on the ground in a heap.

There was a *long* pause.

“Huh?” Her mouth dropped open and her fist hung in the air. “Whaaaa?! I was training in the underworld, but when I heard the war had started, I came running back! What’s going on?!”

“You mistimed it,” I remarked. *Man, it really would’ve been useful if she were here earlier.*

“But I’m all fired up! What do I do now?!”

The way she was complaining reminded me of Lucy. They really were mother and daughter...

The Grandsage scoffed. “Well, if you’ve got power to burn, chase the rest of the demons off.”

“Awww, but cleaning up the small fry is boring!”

“The demon lord might be dead, but there’s still thirty thousand of his army. Though, if you’re scared, I won’t force you.”

“You what?! Who’re you calling scared?! Just you watch!”

Rosalie barely finished speaking before she leaped into the fray, covered in aura. A massive pillar of fire billowed into the air, roaring. Simultaneously, ten king rank fire *Phoenixes* appeared in the sky and dove into the lines of demons. Almost immediately, the relative deadlock of the battle broke apart—our foes’ formation began to crumble.

Soon enough, the demons realized that Rosalie—who was in the middle of the scrimmage—was to blame.

“Kill that elf!”

“Bring down the witch!”

Their generals (I assumed) immediately issued orders, and the demon army surrounded Rosalie.

Uh oh... Even she might be in danger...

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

But then, I heard her high-pitched laughter cut across the air.

“Come, elementals of fire! *Manifest, Fire Giant!*”

A moment later, an inferno consumed the Crimson Witch, flames billowing and coalescing into a towering giant made of fire, with her at the center. Nearby monsters and demons screamed and ran. Our allies were also sprinting away as they tried to avoid getting caught up.

She’s...a natural disaster.

“Lady Rosalie is more like a demon lord than Zagan was...” Yokoyama murmured.

The giant turned to look at us. I had a feeling Rosalie was doing the same from inside the fire.

“Looks like she can hear you...” I whispered.

Yokoyama hurriedly corrected her words. “W-Wow! The demon army can’t

measure up against her at all!”

At that, the giant puffed up proudly. *I guess...that works?*

“You. Take the Hero of Light somewhere defensible,” the Grandsage told Yokoyama. “Make sure you find a healer.” Since Rosalie was trampling the army, Yokoyama no longer needed to fight.

“O-Of course! Take care, Grandsage, Takatsuki.”

With those parting words, Yokoyama arranged Sakurai on her pegasus and flew off. Now, it was just me and the Grandsage.

She let out a breath and almost staggered to the ground.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed, quickly bracing her body. “You did a lot, Grandsage.”

“You weren’t half bad yourself,” she replied. She then collapsed, exhausted, on a nearby rock. I hesitated for a moment before sinking down next to her. Rosalie’s spell—the fire giant—was rampaging in the distance. I could see the demon army running as it chased them.

“What now?” I asked.

“I’ll rest and head back to the capital. The base should have some blood packs, so I’ll get a good drink before I go.”

“You could drin—”

“Elementalist.” She cut me off sharply. “Look at yourself. You’ve used too much magic. Even without counting that giant water lens, you’ve been casting for hours, haven’t you?”

“Well, it took a few hours to destroy that barrier.”

“You need to take more care of yourself. Using this much magic without rest puts a burden on your mana circuits.”

“Got it.”

In all the pandemonium, I hadn’t noticed...but I really *had* been pushing myself.

The two of us sat silently as the clamor of the battle washed over us. I thought we might be in trouble if a monster turned up, but because the demons all

thought the Hero of Light was still with us, they left the area around Zagan's corpse alone.

"So Iblis is next?" I asked, more for something to talk about than anything else.

"Indeed... He will be back soon."

"I see."

What did he look like? According to the legends, he was humanoid, so he probably wasn't huge like Zagan. Those same legends described him as a terrifying mage on the level of the divine.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

"Huh? Nah. I got to see this demon lord up close, but I was wondering if I'd get that chance with Iblis." Though I'd gotten to fight with the main forces this time, I doubted I'd be on the battlefield with the Great Demon Lord.

"You...want to meet Iblis?" The Grandsage looked at me like I was crazy.

Makoto, Iblis is considered the embodiment of fear... No one wants to see him. Don't say that again or you might get mistaken for a member of the Snake Sect. Someone might even interrogate you if you're not careful.

Oh, right. My bad.

"Um, no, that's not it exactly," I said, trying to backtrack. "I just can't allow Iblis to drive the whole world to fear, so I wanted to fight directly..."

The Grandsage paused for a long moment, then muttered, "A perspective from outside of this world..."

"Huh?"

"Your skill. In exchange for not feeling fear, you lose your sense of danger."

"Did I mention that skill? Oh, your *Appraisal* told you?"

"I suppose so."

I was glad she'd been so quick to understand. Still, I was pretty sure that *Calm Mind* wasn't in my Soul Book. I hadn't even realized its full effects and detriments until Noah had told me.

The Grandsage is just that clever, I suppose. Suddenly, I found myself wanting to ask about back then—to hear about the battle between Iblis and Abel the Savior. The details I'd learned in the Water Temple had probably changed a lot over the years, so I wanted to know what the Grandsage had truly experienced.

"Grandsage, I want to ask..." As I spoke, I turned to look at her.

She was breathing softly, leaning against me with an adorable look on her face. Like this, she looked so young, almost like she was only in her early teens. *I'll just have to ask some other time.*

As I decided that, I heard the tail end of a whisper pass her lips. "...oto hasn't changed..."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

She didn't respond. Perhaps she'd been sleep-talking.

After a while, we met up with the Soleil Knights, and the demons were ultimately repelled back to their continent within the day.

And thus, the first battle against the demon army was over.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Visits the Hero of Light

“Sakurai, you there?” I called out.

“We came to visit,” Sasa added.

“Ryousuke,” said Furiae quietly, “are you well?”

The three of us had gone to the royal infirmary to visit Sakurai. Lucy had said she would be too nervous, so she had decided to stay back. The healers had told us where he was, and since it was a private room, we walked in without knocking.

“Ah...” the three of us murmured in unison.

“Huh?” was the simultaneous response of two additional voices.

Sakurai and Yokoyama were in the middle of an embrace.

There was an awkward silence.

“We’ll...come back later,” I said, going to close the door.

“Waitwaitwait!” Yokoyama quickly called out.

“Thanks for coming to visit,” Sakurai said. When he walked over to us, his cheeks were noticeably flushed. I was pretty sure he was supposed to be in bed.

“Shouldn’t you be lying down?” I asked.

“My injuries are already healed.”

Right... His skill let him recover beneath sunlight. *That Sakurai, just as OP as ever...*

“Aya, Furiae, thank you both as well,” Yokoyama said.

“We brought fruit!” Sasa exclaimed. “Want me to peel something?”

“I had nothing better to do,” Furiae replied, as *tsundere* as ever.

“Furiae, your *Future Sight* informed everyone of what would happen. It was because of you that Takatsuki knew to come after me. Thank you.” Sakurai

offered a handsome smile.

She shied slightly. “Well, you helped me when I was captured. We’re even now.” She glanced away.

Yokoyama practically brandished a smile at the two of us. “And Takatsuki arriving saved Ryouzuke. He’s only here thanks to you two!”

“Fruit’s done!” Sasa cheered.

“Thanks, Sasa...” I said, but my eyes widened when I saw the spread. “Huh? You cut these?” They looked just like Sembikya’s products.

“Wow!”

“Can I eat these?”

Yokoyama and Furiae’s eyes were both sparkling.

“I’ll make some tea.” Sasa busied herself with making tea and coffee for us all. Her skills just wouldn’t quit. We pretty much ended up having a tea party, our spirits flying high from the victory.

The three girls were chattering away, but as a guy, it felt kind of awkward to try and join in.

“Takatsuki, wanna get some fresh air?” Sakurai asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

And so, we headed out onto the roof. No one else was here, and we had the place to ourselves. A cool breeze was blowing, tousling Sakurai’s hair around his face. He looked like he could’ve stepped out of some magazine.

“You saved me again,” he said.

“Again?” Had I saved him before? We’d fought together in Labyrinthos and Cameron, but I didn’t think those times amounted to “saving” him. Plus, he was overwhelmingly strong, so it just seemed weird.

“No—back in elementary and junior high.”

“That was so long ago...” I murmured.

I didn’t think he needed to dredge up the distant past, but nonetheless, he

kept talking.

“Oh, right, so back in our first year of junior high...”

“First year? What happened?”

As Sakurai spoke, I dug back through my memories.

◇ During Junior High ◇

The bell chimed and the classroom—no, the whole school—started to get louder.

Time to head back.

I was in the “go home club,” and I didn’t have any close friends. You could probably call me a loner.

It hadn’t been like this in the earlier years of elementary school. People used to invite me to play, but no one had recently. I guess people didn’t just get friends out of nowhere—you had to make them.

There’s no one I can really talk with...

I could spend the whole night discussing games, especially RPGs. But unfortunately, most of my class liked soccer games or party games, ones everyone could play together. No one seemed to like the single-player ones that I did.

Well, whatever, I don’t need to force myself to fit in.

I put my books away and left the noisy classroom.

“Takatsuki! Wait up! Let’s head home together.”

There *was* someone who’d talk to me occasionally. Ryousuke Sakurai. He lived nearby, and we’d known each other since kindergarten.

“Sakurai? Sure.”

“Awww, Ryousuke? You don’t have club activities today, right? You should hang out with us.” Yokoyama—another classmate—spoke over me. She was almost always in the middle of the popular girls’ group, and she was pretty strong-willed, so I didn’t know how to deal with her.

“Ryousuke, you’re inviting Takatsuki today?” asked one of her friends.

“We’ve never really spoken, huh?” added another.

We really hadn’t, so I didn’t know what kind of people they were. I doubted we’d really be on the same page.

“Sorry, guys,” Sakurai said apologetically. “We’re walking home, just the two of us tonight. Some other time.”

They all let out a groan, but I hadn’t even agreed yet. Why was Sakurai talking like it was a done deal?

“Let’s head out, Takatsuki.”

“Uh, yeah...” *Yokoyama, please don’t glare at me like that.*

And so, the two of us ended up leaving together.

After a while, Sakurai spoke up. “It’s been a while since you and I walked home after school.”

“Yeah.” We’d been close neighbors during early childhood. Back then, we’d played a lot together. During the later years of elementary school, he’d grown tall, good-looking, and sporty. His grades were always high, and he got along with everyone, so he’d ended up in the middle of the class.

Meanwhile, I always sat off in the corner. There was a clear and immediate difference between the two of us.

“You’re not joining a club?” he asked.

“Nah. There’s none that really interest me.”

“Why not join the soccer club with me? It’s only for the summer, so they’ll take new members.”

“I’ll...” I paused for a beat, “pass.”

His posture slumped. “Okay.”

Our soccer club was well known for being tough, and I was the least athletic in the class. I doubted I’d be able to keep up.

Speaking of being athletic...

“You’re a first string now, right?” I asked him. I’d heard our classmates talking about it. That was pretty impressive for a first year, and I remembered the girls *squeeing* over it.

“A third year got injured, so I was just lucky there was an opening. You could manage if you tried.”

“Not a chance.”

Even amid my rejection, he was still inviting me—he was also one of the few friends that’d ask me to hang out. But, there was just too much of a difference between us. It was like we were on different wavelengths, and at some point, we’d stopped hanging out. These days, it was a bit of a rarity for him to invite me somewhere so emphatically.

“So, what prompted today?” I asked. “Why’d you wanna hang out?”

“Well... Uh, how do I put it...?”

Sakurai always seemed to be good at everything, but now he was searching for words. Whatever it was must’ve been pretty difficult to say.

“Let’s stop off somewhere,” I suggested.

The two of us swung by one of our usual haunts. Then, we went to a park that was on the way home. We sat on a bench under a wisteria tree, each of us with some croquettes and a bottle of ramune. It was pretty common for me to get this snack since I didn’t have a club to attend after school.

“What do you think? Their croquettes are great.”

“Takatsuki...stopping for food on the way home is against the school rules.”

“Eh, it’s fine. We’re already in junior high.”

“Considering what they said at the shop, you’ve been a regular since elementary school.”

“Guess so.”

“Just how easygoing *are* you?!”

Sakurai was so serious... He probably didn’t break school rules. But I was hungry, so eating wasn’t a problem. There wasn’t any food waiting for me at

home anyway.

“Well, they *are* good,” Sakurai admitted, biting into one.

“Right?”

It was pretty much the cheapest place in the area for snacks. After eating, we chatted idly for a while, just talking about what we’d been up to lately. We might have been in the same class, but recently, we hadn’t spent much time together.

Sakurai was going all social butterfly while I was hiding in the dark, but with just the two of us here, we could talk like we used to.

“Oh yeah, are you going out with Yokoyama?” I asked. She’d been the least happy when Sakurai had said it would just be him and me this afternoon. I’d feel kind of guilty if I was stealing her time with her boyfriend.

“Nah, Saki and I aren’t dating.”

“Hmm, so someone else? Maybe in another class?”

Sakurai was popular. He always had been, but he was getting even more so lately. *He must be with someone.*

“No...I’m not going out with anybody.”

“Huh...really?”

That’s weird. He had a look on his face like he wanted to say something.

“Did anything happen?” I asked.

He suddenly looked up. “How can you tell?”

“Well, y’know.” *Anyone would be able to tell when you’re making a face like that.*

“Well...” Sakurai began, gradually telling me his concerns.

◇ Ryousuke Sakurai’s Perspective ◇

“You’re being stalked?!” Takatsuki yelled.

“Q-Quiet down!”

“R-Right, sorry... Is she here now?”

I peered around to check.

“No. She usually follows me after club, so I should be fine right now.”

“O-Okay...”

Takatsuki looked like he couldn't find the words. Telling him was probably just going to cause him issues, but I couldn't whine around my parents and classmates, so I didn't have anyone else I could ask for advice.

Luckily, Takatsuki had come to help, just like he always did.

“So, what kind of person is she?”

“Uh, I think she's older...”

Well, he was at least willing to hear me out, so I told him what I knew.

It'd started about a month ago.

She'd follow me on my way home after club activities.

Sometimes she'd talk to me or give me things.

She was an older woman.

She had long hair, and I couldn't see her face.

She always spoke really quietly, so it was hard to tell what she was saying.

“Shouldn't you tell the police?” he asked seriously.

I'd thought of that too, but...

“She's honestly just supporting me with soccer. And whenever we speak, she doesn't seem dangerous. Telling the police would...”

“It would mean that her life was over, at least socially,” he finished, understanding what I was getting at.

“Yeah. I don't want to make this a huge thing,”

“If she doesn't seem dangerous, could you just leave it be?”

That would make perfect sense, except...

“She's really kind to me, but when she sees me with Saki and the other girls...” I trailed off for a moment. “Well...she gets really intense and asks about

them.”

“Is that why you’re single at the minute?”

I nodded slightly. I’d had a girlfriend until about a month ago, but I’d broken up with her because of the stalker.

Takatsuki folded his arms and thought, and I soon realized how silly I was being—this wasn’t something students like us could solve. He was right... I should go to the police, or my parents, or at least a teacher.

“Sorry, Takatsuki. I shouldn’t get you mixed up in this. Talking about it helped, though. I’ll go talk to an adult and—”

“Right.” Takatsuki clapped his hands. “So our objective is to get her to stop stalking you without making things too serious.”

For some reason, he looked excited.

U-Uh? Where’d all the motivation come from?

“D-Do you have an idea?” I asked.

“Hmm, not yet, but I’m thinking over a few plans.”

“O-Okay... Just don’t push—”

“Got it!”

He was all fired up. Seriously, what’d brought this on?

“I’m not sure yet...” he muttered. “No continues though, so we need to complete it in one run...”

“Uh, Takatsuki? You know this isn’t a game, right?”

There was a pause.

“Of course I do.”

Was this going to be all right? Well, at least he didn’t seem weirded out by the situation. In fact, he wanted to help—we could think about how to solve it together.

I’m glad I talked to him...

The worried knot in my chest loosened for the first time in a while. I thought I

had a lot of friends, but when the chips were really down, there weren't many people I could talk to like this. *Actually, I think Takatsuki's the only friend I can truly let my guard down around.*

And so, the two of us went our separate ways with a promise to talk again tomorrow.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

I'd gotten home and was in the middle of planning out our strategy when my chat app went off. The message read: "Mind if I bring over a new game to play? Well, too late, I'm here☆"

As I scanned the text, the doorbell rang. When I opened it, I saw a short girl standing there. Her hair was tied in pigtails.

"C-Come in, Sasaki," I said.

Her name was Aya Sasaki, and she was a classmate I'd bumped into while inside a secondhand game store. She was one of my few friends—the only one I could talk to about games. Apparently, her four younger brothers were monopolizing their home console, so she could never play the games she wanted to. This led to her coming over to my place quite a bit.

"Excuse me," she said, already taking her shoes off. She knew my parents got back late from work, so there wasn't any need for formalities.

"You can head up, I'll get some snacks and tea."

"Sure thing," she replied, diving onto my bed. She had futons at her house, so lying on a bed was a rarity for her. Seeing a girl sprawled so happily in my sheets was embarrassing...but I couldn't tell her to stop.

The two of us started playing the new game she'd brought with her. It was called Monster Hunter—MonHun for short. The setting was a fantasy world where people called monster hunters, well...they hunted big monsters.

The controls were a bit awkward, so you needed lots of practice to get used to the gameplay. I wasn't great at action games, but Sasaki liked them, so most of the games we played together were that type. Though, she was a bit of an odd girl because when I *really* wanted to play an RPG, she'd just sit next to me

and watch.

Today was an action game day.

“This one’s strong, Takatsuki,” she said.

“We might need more gear. We could try the last one again?”

“Nope, one more time! I need another go!”

“It’d probably be easier with better gear, Sasaki.”

“That’d be boring!”

We kept on talking and playing. Time passed, and then suddenly, she changed topics.

“You’re friends with Sakurai, huh?”

“How’d you know?” I asked.

“Well, you went home together today. Saki was so jealous.”

“That’s scary.” Yokoyama led the class’s girls, so I certainly didn’t want her looking my way.

“Saki’s not scary.”

“Beautiful, intense girls are all scary.”

Sasaki laughed reluctantly at my kinda pathetic opinion. “If you talked to her, you might find her surprisingly easy to get along with.”

“That’s not happening. You’re the only one I can have a proper conversation with, Sasaki. I’m quiet.”

“You’re funny, Takatsuki.”

She laughed at me, but I was being serious—she was often amused by my responses to stuff. Since I also enjoyed talking with her, I was really happy with how things were between us.

But, well... *I can’t let myself get cocky and assume she likes me.*

Sasaki was popular in class, and though she didn’t stand out as much as Yokoyama, I knew that several classmates liked her. She was nice to me, and I was a gloomy loner, so to me, her personality was almost angelic.

“So, what’d he want to talk to you about?”

“Huh?” How’d she know? Sakurai hadn’t talked about the stalker with anyone else, so she shouldn’t know about that.

“Then I was right!” she exclaimed, not waiting for my answer.

Ah... She’d been fishing for information.

“What was it, then?” she pressed.

“I...can’t say.” This matter was private for Sakurai. Besides, considering the situation, we couldn’t really make it public. He’d trusted me to keep his secret.

Her expression turned serious though. “Saki’s been concerned about him because he seems down. She asked if there was anything wrong, but he just told her not to worry and said that everything was fine.”

Come on, Sakurai—everyone can tell.

“She likes him,” Sasaki carried on. “Wouldn’t you worry about your crush?”

“Well, yeah...”

Anyone could tell how she felt about Sakurai just by looking. Besides, he was the kind to make all sorts of girls fall for him... Maybe Sasaki was one of them?

“Are you worried about him too?” I asked. I probably shouldn’t have. But she just looked blankly back at me.

“What? Me? I don’t really know the guy.”

That...was a relief.

“Takatsuki,” she whispered, getting in conspiratorially close. “Is it a secret no matter what?”

Her big eyes met mine and I froze. If I told her no, I was worried I’d make her hate me. However, this was *Sakurai’s* secret, so I couldn’t just— That was when my phone went off. A text from Sakurai. The message started with the words, “About the stalker...”

D-Damn!

“A stalker?!” she yelled.

Yup... Sasaki had found out.

“Uh...what’s going on?”

She seemed confused, and I’m sure she hadn’t expected to read that. I would’ve loved to distract her, but that wasn’t going to happen—the message had been pretty clear.

It was too late now.

“Sasaki!”

“Y-Yes?!”

“You can’t tell anyone about this, please!”

“O-Okay.”

With that promise dragged out of her, I told her what’d happened. *Sorry, Sakurai.*

“I think he should tell the police,” she said.

We were on the same page there at least.

“Sakurai doesn’t want to.”

“He’s too kind, huh?”

I internally agreed, but that was also one of his good points.

“Hmmm,” Sasaki pondered. “I wonder if there’s any way of solving it peacefully.”

Since I’d already spilled the secret, I decided to ask for her advice. The stalker was a woman, so asking another woman like Sasaki would be best.

“Well... She’s older than us and stalking someone in junior high like Sakurai. She’s definitely bad news.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

There should be limits to popularity, I grumbled mentally. Sakurai was going to have trouble with women in the future.

“Do you have any ideas?” she asked.

“A few.”

“Tell me!”

And so, I explained my plans.

“Uh... Takatsuki? Are you seriously suggesting getting blackmail photos of her around Sakurai? Or...hiring a pickup artist to take her out?”

“No good, then?”

“The first is way too dangerous. And do pro pickup artists even exist?”

“You can find them pretty easily on social media.”

“Those’re definitely scammers!”

Welp, that was the judgment from Sasaki. In all honesty, I wasn’t too confident in those plans either. The two of us went back and forth on it for a while, but neither of us could think of anything.

Then, Sasaki spoke.

“Oh...” she murmured. “That might work.”

“Did you think of something?”

“Sort of, but... Nah, it’s not going to work.”

“Tell me, Sasaki.”

“We’re about the same size, right? You’re pretty slender too... How about this?”

Then, she revealed her plan.

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

The next day, I joined Takatsuki and Sakurai’s strategy meeting about his stalker. We were sitting on a deserted bench on the roof of the school. Takatsuki apparently ate his lunch up here fairly often.

“Uh, Sasaki, you’re friends with Takatsuki?”

“Sorry, I saw the message!”

“Yeah, sorry, Sakurai! But she said she’d help!”

“Don’t worry about it. If Takatsuki trusts you, then so will I.”

H-He really trusts Takatsuki a lot! Sakurai was practically the center of the class, and he got the most attention out of anyone in our whole year. I was a bit surprised that the two of them were so close.

“You can trust her. She’s my only friend.”

Takatsuki wasn’t acting quite the same as usual. His only friend... Was that something you should just say so confidently? Well, I *was* happy he trusted me.

I glanced over and saw the look on Sakurai’s face. “Uh... What about me?” he asked.

“You?” Takatsuki replied. “Well, we’ve known each other since we were kids, so of course I trust you.”

“R-Right...”

Gah, Takatsuki... Sakurai probably wanted you to say that he was your friend too.

Since I couldn’t do anything about that, I just ignored the weird mood.

“So, Sasaki actually has an idea...” Takatsuki said, looking skyward. It was the same expression he’d worn when I’d first explained my plan.

It...was kinda iffy. But I couldn’t think of anything else, so we’d just tell Sakurai and see what he thought about it.

Sakurai perked up. “Oh! What kind of idea?”

Takatsuki still looked conflicted. “Sasaki, can you explain?”

Apparently, *he* didn’t want to tell Sakurai... I guess it made sense.

“Well, this is what I thought of...” I began.

When I was done, Sakurai’s expression seemed just as conflicted as Takatsuki’s had been. He looked back and forth between the two of us.

“You’d, uh, do that, Takatsuki?”

“I can’t think of anything better,” he replied seriously. “We’ll need to make some preparations before we actually do it. I’ll ask someone I know to get us

the stuff.”

“Don’t worry! I’ve already got it all!” I pulled out a tote bag containing the “tools” for the “plan” and passed it over to Takatsuki.

“Do you think this is funny?” he asked me.

“No way...” I quickly turned to Sakurai. “Oh, but make sure you take a picture.”

“Not a chance!”

“Awww.” That was a shame. Takatsuki would definitely look cute. “Oh, what about makeup? You don’t know how, right? I can do—”

Takatsuki cut me off. “It’ll be nighttime, so we don’t need it!”

“Tch. Fine, I’ll follow behind.”

Sakurai shook his head. “You can’t, Sasaki. It’ll be pretty dark when club stuff lets out—that’s a dangerous time for girls to just be walking around by themselves. I promise to let you know what happens, so you should head home.”

Nice one, Sakurai. I could see why he was the most popular kid in our year.

“Okay. Take care, you two.”

Sakurai nodded. “Thanks, Sasaki.”

“It’ll be fine,” Takatsuki said, seeming more relaxed. “The stalker’s a woman.”

“You can’t let your guard down just because she’s a woman!” I countered. “What if she has a knife?!”

“Hmph... I’ve planned for that. Look, I’ll just strap this over my stomach.” As he spoke, Takatsuki pulled out a thick magazine.

Not bad, game brain.

“What about your neck?!”

“I’ll tape it up for defense. Besides, an amateur can’t aim properly with a knife. I just need to be careful about my eyes. I suppose I’ll just do my best to dodge.”

I sighed. “Ugh. I hate to admit it, but I think you’re all set.”

“Of course I am!” He grinned. “No continues here.”

Takatsuki really did enjoy life. Why was he so quiet in class when he was this much *fun*?

“The two of you sure are on the same wavelength...” Sakurai said, drawing back a little. Crap.

“No! I’m not as weird as he is!”

“Rude. But I guess she doesn’t get as carried away as me,” Takatsuki conceded.

Sakurai laughed. “Man, I’m kinda jealous.”

Why?

Well, regardless, my plan was about to be put into action. I told them goodbye, headed home early, and waited in anticipation to see if it would work.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“I hope no one from class sees me like this...”

“Don’t worry,” Sakurai told me. “It’s dark, so they won’t know it’s you unless they get super close.”

Currently, I was cross-dressing. Wearing Sasaki’s clothes.



The wig, hat, and outfit were all things she'd lent me, and since we were similar in stature, I could wear them too. As for *why* I was doing it... Well, her plan was essentially for Sakurai and me to pretend like we were *together*.

This job would be dangerous for a girl, so we couldn't make someone else do it. Since I was a guy, it was better for me to take the role, but this...was way more embarrassing than I'd expected. I'd never worn girls' clothes before, and this was the route to school.

As we walked, I glanced around nervously. *What if we run into someone we know?*

"I'm surprised Sasaki lent you her clothes," Sakurai remarked.

"She's just getting a laugh out of it."

"A girl wouldn't lend you her clothes just because of that."

"What do you mean?"

"You're...surprisingly dense."

We kept talking, strolling slowly down the street. It was past eight in the evening—anyone who didn't have club activities would have gotten home ages ago, and even those who did rarely finished *this* late.

So, we just kept moving slowly forward, waiting for the stalker.

Suddenly, I heard a skittering noise. Someone rushed over.

Is it her?!

I didn't turn around. Our plan was to let Sakurai take the lead and decide how to react.

"Ryousuke!" came a woman's voice.

He'd said she was older, but this voice was younger than I'd expected, almost like a classmate's. It...was familiar.

"I thought you had plans today? Oh, who's this?"

Wait, this was a classmate! It was Yokoyama!

"Sakurai! This isn't what we planned!" I whisper-shouted.

“Hold on, I’ll distract her,” he whispered back.

“I...heard you didn’t have a girlfriend at the moment. Is she...?” Her voice wasn’t as firm as usual. She sounded almost faint.

“No, Saki—this is my cousin. She’s thinking of coming to our school, so she was checking it out. She’s staying at my place tonight, so I came to fetch her.”

“This late?”

Come on, Sakurai, she’s already suspicious!

“She traveled from Chiba, so it took a long time. And she got on the wrong train, so she was even later. Right, Mako?”

Speaking would definitely blow my cover, so I just nodded. The hat and wig were hiding my face, so I figured it should be fine. Also, “Mako” was pretty simple, even for a fake name.

“Hm, so you’re Mako. Nice to meet you. I’m Saki Yokoyama.”

Crap! I had to reply, but I couldn’t talk! What do I do?!

“Sorry, Saki. She’s pretty tired, and shy as well. I’ll introduce you some other time.”

“Right... Sorry for keeping you then.” Yokoyama didn’t look entirely convinced, but she walked off, apparently having decided not to keep questioning us.

“Wait, Saki!” he called, grabbing her arm.

Why’d you stop her?!

“Ryousuke? Wh-What’s up?”

“Take care on the way home. It’s pretty dark, so stay on the main roads.”

“R-Right. I’ll be fine though. I’m used to this route.”

“No! You shouldn’t be heading home alone at this time of night! I wish I could walk you back, but I can’t today...”

“R-Right... Thank you for worrying about me. I’ll use the main roads.”

“Take care. See you tomorrow, Saki.”

“Right, you too!”

Sakurai’s concern caused her mood to completely flip, from sad to elated. *This guy...how much of a ladies’ man could he be?*

“Sorry about that, Takatsuki. We managed to get through it.”

“I thought my life was over...”

Taking deep breaths to calm ourselves, we carried on again. But nothing else happened. Sakurai’s high-rise was already in sight. Today was a bust.

Just when I’d decided to give up, I suddenly heard a clacking sound.

High heels, *tap-tapping* against the asphalt. Someone was approaching us quickly. This time...it was the real deal. The footsteps stopped behind us.

“Good work today, Ryousuke.”

It was a low, woman’s voice. She didn’t seem bright or enthusiastic like either Sasaki or Yokoyama.

“Good evening. Looks like we’re meeting again...” Sakurai’s voice shook.

Meeting again? More like she’d followed him again. She actually *was* a stalker.

“Why don’t you show that girl...your cousin...home, and then we can talk?”

On top of following us, she must have overheard the conversation with Yokoyama.

“Um...” Sakurai fumbled before finding his nerve. “I had something I wanted to tell you today.”

“Oh, and what would that be? I’d prefer to talk alone, though.”

Sakurai had done the setup, so now it was my turn. Would I manage to act properly? I prepared myself, then opened my mouth.

“Sorry, Miss, but I’m not Sakurai’s cousin,” I said in my normal voice. There was no need to pretend to be a girl anymore.

“You’re...a boy? Why are you dressed up like that?” The stalker looked at me doubtfully—I suppose that was her natural reaction to my cross-dressing in

front of her. The next line was extremely important. I'd have to say it...

"Um, I'm—"

Sakurai blurted it out before I could form the words.

"Takatsuki is my boyfriend!"

There was a *long* pause.

"What?" Her eyes were wide.

Yeah...that's about right.



"You just need to be Sakurai's partner!"

That was Sasaki's plan. At first, I hadn't understood what she was getting at.

"Uh, you want me to pretend to be a girl?"

"No, you can just look like normal."

"Like normal? But, uh...we're both guys, you know?"

"Exactly! Okay, so the stalker is a woman, right?"

"Apparently."

"If she knows Sakurai likes guys, she'll have to give up."

"Yeah...that's not going to work," I said, immediately rejecting the suggestion.
"It'll obviously be a lie."

Sasaki kept going, though.

"There are plenty of people like that, even at school."

"Huh? Who?"

"I can't tell you," she replied, keeping the details private.

Well, according to Sasaki, this kind of thing wasn't rare. If the stalker was an adult, she'd probably understand...or so Sasaki said.

"Though...maybe it'd be a good idea to pretend to be a girl at first. She might not turn up if you don't. Then, once she's there, let her know that you're a boy *and* Sakurai's boyfriend!"

“Guh.”

It all felt like a bit much. I wasn't really happy about it, but I couldn't think of any other plan, so we decided to give it a go.



And now, the woman was looking blankly at us.

“R-Really?” she asked.

She bought it? I thought the deception would be obvious. Sasaki was right.

“Really!” Sakurai insisted, his voice serious. Man, he really could do anything...

“Oh...I see. So you're Ryousuke's boyfriend...” Her pointed look made me want to correct her, but I resisted. “Okay...” she muttered. “If Ryousuke is that kind of person, then I would never be able to satisfy him.”

She slumped and turned to leave.

Phew, it's over...

“Wait a minute,” Sakurai called, stopping her. “Why me?”

What're you doing?!

“Forget it... There's no point in life anymore... I just want to vanish...”

“Well, I might not be able to date you, but I can hear you out. We haven't been able to talk properly before.”

The woman seemed shocked. “You'd...listen to me?”

“I can't be your partner, but I don't want to hear you saying that there's no point to life.”

What the hell? Why was he giving his stalker advice?!

Seriously... Is he a saint?



“So, how'd it go?” Sasaki asked.

“Well,” I began, “she apparently had a bad experience with a man that left

her traumatized. Because of that, she's scared of men her age, so she thought things might work out with Sakurai since he's younger. She said she fell for him at first sight when she saw him in town."

"Huh... That's kinda sad to hear."

"They're friends now. He's helping her to get over her fear."

"Uh... Whaaaaaa?!" Sasaki yelled in surprise. Yeah, I agreed—it was pretty shocking. Just what kind of person could help out their stalker?

"Sakurai's *too* friendly, isn't he?" I asked.

"I think you're pretty friendly yourself."

"I am?"

"Yup. It seems like she was a gentle person, but you could have been stabbed!"

I let the silence hang in the air.

"Women only walk around with knives in TV shows and manga, right?" I asked.

"There might be some girls like that who are closer than you think..."

"Scary."

Sasaki and I laughed.



"I remember now..."

That whole ordeal was definitely a *notable* moment from my past...but one I really wanted to forget.

I recalled that Sasa had kept teasing me and asking what cross-dressing was like. And then, several years later, I couldn't laugh about the situation because it felt like Sasa might actually come after me with a knife.

Sakurai smiled. "See, you've always been willing to save me."

"Don't lump your stalker in with the demon lord." Zagan would be spinning in his grave.

Suddenly, a voice called out to us. “Ah! There you are!” Yokoyama had spotted us hanging out.

“Found you!” Sasa cheered.

Furiae cocked her head. “Shall we head back?”

Sasa, you shouldn't be waving fruit knives around...

The sky was a beautiful blue, with clouds drifting through the air. Since the weather was so nice, chatting about the past with my childhood friend definitely hadn't been bad.

This fight had been the riskiest so far, but we'd all managed to make it through.

Our first battle against the demon army...had ended in victory.

Epilogue: The Goddess of Fate

“This is...”

I was in the ever-familiar space that belonged to Noah. I looked around for a moment, searching for her.

There she is. Yet, things were different than normal.

Noah was standing there wearing a white dress, her silver hair shining. Eir was nearby in a blue dress, and her hair glittered gold. However, I spied someone else: a small girl with narrow shoulders.

“Ah, Makoto, you’re finally here.”

“What kept you, Mako?”

“Noah, Eir, you’re both as beautiful as ever,” I replied. “Who’s this?” I was pretty sure of the girl’s identity, but I didn’t want to make a mistake, so I asked.

“Come on.” Noah prodded the girl. “You came all this way to talk to him.”

“You can’t just stay silent, Irrie!”

Ira, the Goddess of Fate—also known as the Goddess of Fortune—was one of the seven Sacred Deities. She was also the war criminal who’d made the Northern Front Plan so difficult.

“Who are you calling a war criminal?!” The petite girl glared at me.

She’s gonna start reading my mind right away, huh?

“He’s right, though,” Noah said.

“Come on, Irrie, aren’t you supposed to be thanking him?”

“Ugh... W-Well.” She groaned and glared. “Hmph. You have my thanks!” After spitting the words out, she swiftly looked away.

That was her attempt at thanking me?

“What’s that supposed to be?!” Eir demanded, rubbing her knuckles into Ira’s

(her little sister's) hair.

“Ow! Ow! That hurts! You’re going to split my head open!”

It definitely looked like it hurt, but was this really how she acted? I’d imagined the goddesses being a bit calmer.

“Well, she’s the youngest of them,” Noah said. “She only just became a goddess.” Before I knew it, she had wrapped her arm around my shoulders.

Noah...is really close...

“So she’s young?” I asked. She truly *looked* like a junior high student.

Suddenly, Ira managed to break out of Eir’s grip and jump over to me. “Hey! Who are you calling a junior high student?!” She righted her balance, then folded her arms and peered up at me. “Phew. Makoto Takatsuki! You did well! Especially considering you’re Noah’s disciple!”

This was weird... Noah was beautiful enough to charm anything, and Eir had a motherliness about her, so she could hold on to people—Ira didn’t seem to have any of that dignity.

“Uh, Mako... I’m actually younger than Noah, so...why *motherly*?”

“Wahhh, I’m being treated like a granny!”

“I didn’t say that! Besides, you make yourself look young!”

“Makoto Takatsuki—as thanks, I will be your ally from now on! You can be grateful!”

Everyone was talking over each other and I could barely keep up with who was saying what. I was, however, curious about something, so instead of trying to parse out their rapid back-and-forth, I decided to ask a question.

“Hey, Ira. Does this mean you’ll help me?”

“I will!” she exclaimed. “I *do* have the most believers after Althena! I’m reliable.”

I knew that already. She was Cameron’s goddess—merchants and adventurers alike followed her, whether they were from Cameron or not. Many people from all over partook of Ira’s fortune.

“So, how exactly can you help me out?” I asked.

“E-Exactly?”

She was clearly panicked. *Guess she hasn't thought of anything.*

“I gave him a relic and his *Elementalist* skill,” Noah said.

“And I got him his position as Hero of Roses. Oh, and Sophie!”

Hey, Eir, you shouldn't talk about Princess Sophia like that...even if I think you are joking.

Ira's gaze roved as she turned over their comments in her mind. After a moment, she seemed to get an idea. “I-I can see the future!” she stammered. “You'll be able to avoid danger!”

I was impressed, but...

“I thought you couldn't see my future because I'm Noah's believer?”

“Th-That's right, but I *can* see the major line of fate. Normally, I only tell Estelle about it! But I'll tell you as well!”

“I see...” Having a goddess by your side to predict the future... It certainly was reassuring.

“Regardless of what she can offer, it's a good thing she's agreeable,” Noah said. “Cameron is one of the bigger countries, so having their goddess on your side isn't a bad thing.”

I nodded.

“Then, Ira, there's something else I want to ask you.”

“Phew... Okay, ask whatever you like!”

And so, I opened my mouth to pose the question that'd been gnawing at me. “Can the Hero of Light—Sakurai, I mean—beat Iblis? He won't die, will he?”

He'd won this time, but we'd also been lucky. The fight had certainly been a close call. Would he have enough strength to go up against Iblis?

Silence filled the space as all three goddesses looked at each other. Then, Ira stepped smoothly forward.

“Rest assured, Makoto Takatsuki. This battle has moved us much closer to victory. And, we have a trump card for if the worst should happen.”

Huh, a trump card. I really wish we'd used it this time.

“So we can beat Iblis?”

“Right!”

Seeing Ira's confident face finally allowed me to relax—she was the Goddess of Fortune, so I knew I could trust her words.



That was how I'd felt at the time. But I should have worried more.

We're in real trouble.

I truly never thought...that it would come to this...

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for picking up volume eight of *Zero Believers*. This volume was about the Northern Front Plan. We were in Highland again for the first time since volume four, and we visited (the ruins of) Furiae's home, Laphroaig. That means we've explored six countries on the continent. I enjoyed writing this volume because it felt like a journey—Furiae has really come into her own as a true heroine.

I also got to add some of Makoto's junior high adventurers. I'd wanted to include the story in the web version, but I ended up abandoning it. It's part of his dark history. And, since his whole class was sent to the new world, it's easier to fit in this kind of story. I really enjoyed it. I wanted to include even more of his classmates, but I'm currently at my limit for those characters.

Finally, I apologize to my editor, N, for always working right up until the deadline. Thank you to Tam-U for the ever-adorable illustrations of the heroines. Hakuto Shiroy draws the manga, which is getting more and more interesting now that Sasa has shown up. I also want to thank all of our readers across the web version, published version, and manga version. I hope you will continue to enjoy *Zero Believers*.

Bonus Short Stories

Chat with a Goddess (Volume 8)

“I’m heading back,” Ira said. Now that she’d given her confident declaration that we could win against Iblis, she stood, stretched her limbs, and moved to leave.

“Oh, already?” Eir asked.

“Hey! We’re celebrating Makoto’s victory,” Noah said. “You should stay.”

The pair of them each grabbed one of Ira’s arms.

“L-Let me go!” Ira protested.

“Come on! Calm down.”

“Over here.”

Then, the two goddesses began dragging their smaller compatriot along.

◇ A Few Dozen Minutes Later ◇

“Why does being the Goddess of Fate make me so busy?!”

Ira was completely...*gone*. Red-faced, she slammed her now-empty cocktail glass down onto the tabletop.

“Oh no... She’s ranting,” Noah remarked.

Eir shrugged. “Well, she’s got a lot of stress built up.”

In contrast to how sloshed Ira was, the other two goddesses were gracefully drinking wine. As for me— “Makoto Takatsuki! Are you listening to me?!”

“I-I am.”

—I was stuck with Ira.

Help!

I looked at the other two, but they just smiled back, wishing me luck with

their grins.

Wasn't this supposed to be a celebration for *me*?!

"Why?!" Ira raved. "I correct it and correct it again, but history keeps changing strangely! What's going on?!"

"Th-That sounds tough."

"Also...! Why's it *my* job to give the mortal races skills?! There are other goddesses, so why can't we split it up?! Right?!" Her pained face now turned toward Eir.

"Well, you're the only one with the right to give skills," Eir pointed out. "It's a cushy job, right?"

I was impressed that Eir managed to smile back and answer so calmly.

"Wait, so you gave me my *Water Magic* and *RPG Player* skills?" My troubles in the Water Temple suddenly rushed back to the fore. *If this fun-sized goddess had given me stronger skills, I would be invincible...*

"Nope, that wasn't Ira," explained Noah. "I might not have mentioned it before, but otherworlders are given skills at random when they arrive—Ira doesn't choose them."

"Yep!" exclaimed Eir. "Irrie investigates them and writes down the explanations in their Soul Books. It's just a coincidence that a lot of otherworlders get weird or strong skills."

"I see..." That was indeed what I'd been told in the Water Temple. Guess I'd just gotten unlucky.

"Bizarre skills just give me even more work..." Ira griped. "And this time there was even a *Class Change*..." Her face twisted, and she was clearly recalling some bad memories.

Huh. There was a skill called a *Class Change*...?

Still, Ira seemed totally run-down. I'd imagined that she would have a way nicer lifestyle—after all, she was the goddess of a rich country like Cameron.

"Well, it's all good," said Noah. "I mean, I was so bored until Makoto came

along.”

“Roses is pretty small, so I don’t have to do much,” Eir admitted.

“Yeah, Eir, all you do is hang around here with me. You should do your job.”

“It’s fiiiine. Besides, you’re lonely.”

“I am not. Go back to Roses already.”

“No way! Dun wanna...”

“You’re such...” Noah trailed off, exasperated. “Well, whatever. What’re we playing, then? MomoTetsu?”

“Sure, a hundred-year match.”

“Again?”

The two of them started setting up their game. They were like uni students with too much time on their hands...

Across the space, Ira was staring at them bitterly. I thought she looked sorta upset, so I poured her a glass of the most expensive-looking drink I could find and then slid it in front of her.

She looked at it, a confused gasp escaping her lips.

“What’s this for?”

“Good work making the Northern Front Plan a success. Let’s keep this momentum going against Iblis.”

A lot of unforeseen things had cropped up, but without Ira’s *Future Sight*, even the initial plan would have been difficult to execute. We really needed her to keep the predictions coming.

She looked blank for a second and was probably reading my mind because the next moment, her expression turned happy.

“Makoto Takatsuki... You’re a better person than I thought.” Red-faced still, she pulled me by the shoulder. “So... Why don’t you leave Noah and become mine?”

“Well...” I fumbled for a refusal. “I...appreciate the offer.” I could hardly

accept it, though.

“Hey! No poaching my believer!” Noah cut in, her sharp ears picking up the conversation.

“I’m her only one, after all,” I added.

“I suppose that’s true,” Ira said, releasing my shoulder.

“Come on you two! Join in!” Eir cheered, dragging us in front of the console. I hadn’t known what to expect...but it definitely wasn’t the original PlayStation.

S-So retro...

“I don’t have time for games!” Ira protested, but eventually, she joined in.

It’d been a while since I’d played a full-length game of MomoTetsu, so in the end, I had a lot of fun.

Keiko Kawakita and Aya Sasaki’s Gossip

◇ Keiko Kawakita’s Perspective ◇

“Takatsuki, do you remember what we did back then?”

“Nope, completely forgotten.”

“Then I’ll tell you *exactly* what happened! Back in junior high—”

“I *want* to forget! Why are you digging into my dark past?!”

It looked like Ryousuke and Takatsuki were chatting happily. Ryousuke could be friendly with anyone, but it was rare to see him actually teasing someone like that. It felt like there was a different sense of distance between the two of them. *They are closer than I remember...*

“What’s up, Saki? You’re staring,” Aya pointed out, peering at my face. She’d come here with Takatsuki. The two of them were even dating now.

“I was just thinking—those two are close. We all went to the same junior high, but I never noticed.”

“Yeah, it’s surprising, right? They seem different when they’re talking together.”

“You’re right... I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ryousuke so unreserved with anyone but Takatsuki.”

Even in our old world, a lot of people had relied on Ryousuke—now, he had the heavy responsibility of being a hero *and* a commander of a knight division. I was used to him being steadfast and ready for action, but seeing him this relaxed was unusual.

He doesn’t even look like that when he’s with me...

Takatsuki was one of his closest friends... So much so that there would be no other to replace him.

“It sorta feels like we can’t be part of men’s friendships like that...” Aya murmured. She then turned to me, concern visible on her face. “Saki, what’s up?”

She’s always so sharp.

“Well... I was really awful to Takatsuki at the Water Temple...” I mumbled.

“Awful?”

I took a breath and began to explain what’d happened. Right after we’d arrived, Ryousuke had invited Takatsuki with us to Highland. But I’d glared at Takatsuki before he could answer, wordlessly demanding that he decline Ryousuke’s offer. I’d thought that an apprentice mage would be a burden since his skills were all so weak. Looking back on it now, I’d been acting so selfish. We’d all been helpless in this new world.

Aya just listened.

Hang on, I realized after a moment. She’s Takatsuki’s girlfriend! This’ll definitely piss her off! I knew I had to apologize, but then I looked at her expression.

She seemed...grateful?

“Oh! So it was thanks to you that Takatsuki and I got to meet again!” she exclaimed. She explained that if he had gone with Ryousuke, the two of them wouldn’t have been able to meet in Labyrinthos.

Which meant...she wasn’t angry at all.

Still...I needed to apologize to Takatsuki.



“U-Um! Takatsuki, I want to talk,” I said, pulling him aside on our way back to the infirmary. Aya had already gone on ahead.

“Kawakita? Sasa said she had something to do, so she already left.”

No! I said I wanted to talk to you!

“Do you mind coming with me for a bit?” I asked. There were a lot of people around the entrance to the infirmary, so I wanted to go someplace with less of a crowd.

“Um...” He seemed baffled. “Y’know, I don’t have any money on me...”

“I’m not trying to take your money!” Why would he even think that?! What kind of image did he have of me?! *He’s a bit of an airhead, isn’t he...? Well, whatever, I can still do what I came here for.*

I summoned my courage and just came out with it. “Takatsuki! I want to apologize for being so awful to you at the Water Temple. I’m sorry!” I bowed my head.

He paused for a long moment, and then...

“Uh?”

So, I explained it again. I was sure he was going to look down on me, or get angry, so I kept my eyes on the ground as I spoke. But when I finished and flicked my gaze back up, I saw him shrug.

“Nah, it was a good thing you stopped me. If I’d gone with Sakurai, I wouldn’t have been able to meet Sasa again.”

Huh. He’d said the same thing as Aya.

“You’re...not angry?” I asked.

“Nope, I’m grateful.” His expression was honest, not simply one of consideration. He must’ve truly felt that way.

Seriously, Aya, you sure are special to him.

“You sure love Aya, huh?” I asked.

“Since junior high,” he admitted.

“H-Huh... Right!” We’d been in the same school, but I hadn’t noticed at all.
“What started it, by the way?”

“Well, she came over to my place, and...”

I’d come here to apologize, and now we were just talking romance. I might have gotten a little overexcited. We spent a long time in conversation before Aya came out, yelling and asking us what was going on.

The Musings of the Soleil Knights’ Commander

◇ Commander Owain’s Perspective ◇

The fight against the demon lord had been teetering on the precipice of disaster, but overall, our strategy had won the day. The Hero of Light, Sir Sakurai, had gained much for Highland with his victory over Zagan.

Yet, I still had one concern: the Hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki.

I’d received a mass of orders and requests from nobles—all were instructing me to bring him over to Highland. After all, he had defeated the Undead King in Springrogue and contributed heavily to the fight against Zagan. No one had influenced the fight more than he had, and the greedy Highland aristocrats would never overlook that. Their plans would see him joining the Soleil Knights and wedding some noble girls.

There was a large problem with that plan though.

Makoto Takatsuki was already engaged to Princess Sophia of Roses, and trying to court the Hero of Roses out from under her would almost certainly invite her displeasure. As things stood, there was already a wide disparity between our two nations. Our military support of Roses would make it possible to annul the betrothal...but that wasn’t my job.

And regardless of anything else, Lady Noelle was close with Princess Sophia, and she was against it.

The same nobles then clamored about using the country's vast wealth to lure him to us. However, Makoto Takatsuki was currently the State-Authorized Hero of Roses. While State-Authorized Heroes were supported in various ways by their countries, the prevailing view was that Roses—being smaller—could not offer as much support as the larger countries could. I had tasked my subordinates with investigating what compensation the Hero of Rose received.

“So?”

“Their support...is almost nonexistent.”

“What?” I asked, not completely understanding.

“While the Roses royal family is paying for his accommodation, the Hero of Roses rarely ever uses the house. He makes no use of expensive weapons or armor, nor has he ever made a request to the Roses royal family for aid. Tempting him financially is likely to be difficult...”

“I see.”

I sighed. If he were a particularly avaricious person, then it might've been possible to get him to Highland, but that did not seem to be the case.

“Was there any *useful* information?”

“Well, there *is* something he's mentioned time and again...”

I perked up in interest. “Oh! Out with it!” *Perhaps this might be the thing to win him over...*

“The Hero of Roses wants to clear the final dungeon, the Seafloor Temple.”

“I...see.” I gave another sigh, this time in despair.

There were three so-called “final dungeons” where mankind had yet to tread. The Seafloor Temple was the harshest. It was exceedingly difficult to stay alive within its walls...or so the stories said.

I was curious about *why* he wanted to beat it...however, with our efforts focused on the Great Demon Lord, we could not spare the forces to aid him.

So there's no way...

But then, more concerns arrived.

“Oh? What’s wrong, Commander? You look troubled.”

“G-Grandsage?! What brings you here?”

Out of nowhere, the strongest person in the country had teleported into the room.

“I have heard some odd rumors,” she stated. “There seem to be plans to bring the elementalist into Highland by any means necessary. Are they true?”

“There are...many who wish for that.”

She scoffed. “I wouldn’t bother. It would be a waste of time.”

“What do you mean? Are you against it?”

“No.” She paused for a moment, then grinned. “Well, you’ll understand soon enough.”

And with that ominous sentiment, she popped away just as quickly as she had appeared.

The Grandsage was awfully fond of him, and yet she was not giving ridiculous orders for me to poach him. What was she thinking...? My headache was growing more and more pronounced.

“Commander, we have news,” one of my subordinates announced as he entered the room.

“What is it now?! If it isn’t urgent, then come back at a later—”

“The Hero of Roses is heading for the Seafloor Temple! I thought I should report—”

“What?!” I demanded, shooting up with a clatter.

“That’s an issue, right?”

“Of course it is! Keep him in the capital until the award ceremony is complete!” I ordered hurriedly.

It seems I can’t predict him at all...

I let out a deep sigh.

The Priestess of the Moon's Irritation

◇ Furiae's Perspective ◇

My knight, Makoto Takatsuki, had defeated the demon lord alongside the Hero of Light. That was something to be celebrated—even I thought so.

However...

"Sir Takatsuki, it is an honor to meet you."

"I spotted your distinguished figure amongst the crowd at a previous banquet...but I did not have the time to talk."

"When will you be discharged? If you are in need of lodging—"

"No, no, I insist you come to me first..."

A group of noble girls from Highland had surrounded him. They all wanted to get in close to the man who had worked so hard to defeat the demon lord.

"I, ah, appreciate the offer..." He was smiling vaguely as he floundered. Since they were all aristocrats, he was trying to turn them down without causing offense.

He can just say it bluntly...

Suddenly, two more women approached the group.

"I apologize, but he is the Hero of *Roses*—please go through our royal family if you wish to discuss matters."

"I cannot imagine that you are all attempting to force him to abandon his prior agreements with the Ballantine family."

With those few words, Princess Sophia and Janet Ballantine drove them off. The noble girls all offered hasty apologies as they fled.

Since the battle, this had been a common sight.

"Thanks, Sophia, Janet." A pathetic amount of relief was evident in his tone.

"Despite your bravery against the demon lord, you are weak to women," Princess Sophia stated. "Perhaps I should spend the rest of the day with you?"

"Now wait just a moment!" exclaimed Janet. "I came here to see him too! You

cannot monopolize him.”

“You can see him whenever. Give up this time.”

“I don’t have that much free time! It’s a lot of work to schedule an opportunity like this!”

“Well, I’m busy being a royal!”

“One of Highland’s noble daughters is far busier than a princess of such a small nation!”

The two of them had begun to argue. Makoto Takatsuki was once again floundering.

My knight, you could stop them in an instant!

The mage sighed. “They’re fighting again.”

“Come on, Sophie, Jen, make up,” added the warrior.

“Very well...”

“I suppose so...”

This was another familiar sight. In the blink of an eye, Makoto Takatsuki was surrounded by women again.

“What’s up, Fuu? You’ve got a weird look on your face,” the warrior said to me.

“N-Nothing!”

Right, it was nothing. I certainly wasn’t irritated at the throngs of women constantly surrounding my knight. His popularity had nothing to do with me. He and I were princess and guardian knight—our relationship was completely business.

My knight suddenly wandered over, an absent look on his face. “What’s up, Princess? You feeling ill?”

“I am not!” I exclaimed shrilly without meaning to.

“Well, you’re definitely not in a good mood...”

My outburst obviously made him suspicious.

“What’s up with her?” he whispered to Lucy.

“Maybe it’s *that time*?”

“Ah, I see.”

Ugh. That definitely wasn’t the problem.

“Hmm, Princess? I might not understand properly, but tell me if you’re struggling. I’m your guardian knight, after all.”

“Makoto?!” Lucy panicked.

“Takatsuki, learn some tact...” Aya sighed.

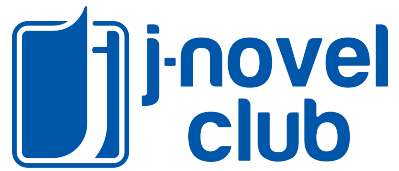
“That’s not it!” I yelled in embarrassment.

I fled the room, and when I finally halted, I slumped over.

He fought so hard... I want to be kind to him... Why couldn’t I be honest with my feelings?

The next time we speak, I’ll be somewhat softer, I promised myself.

Still...it was never going to happen.



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by Isle Osaki

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