



12

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

The
Strongest
Elementalist
in the World
and the
Goddess's
Wish
Act 1

Full clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with **Zero Believers**



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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.

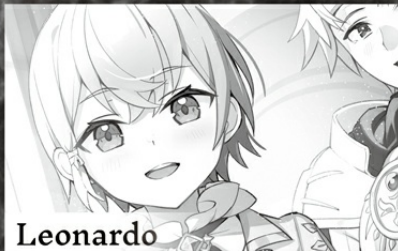
Roses

A country blessed with many water sources. They are behind the other countries in military capability.



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 might, 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.

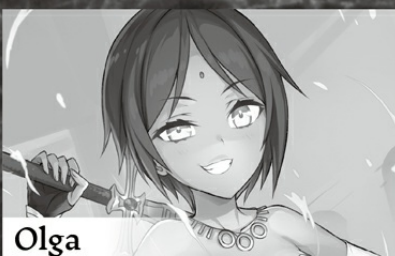


Saki Yokoyama

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.

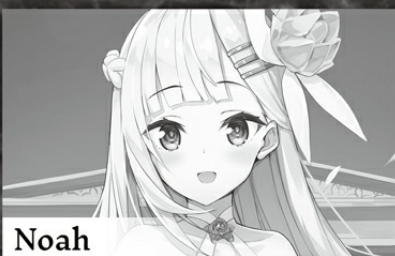


Estelle

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 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



12 the strongest elementalists in the world and the goddess's wish

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Prologue: Reunion

“Ahh... Sir Makoto’s skin... It’s been so long... Haaah... Haaah...”

I was currently undergoing a medical exam on Momo’s estate...but for some reason, her breathing was pretty heavy.

“Um...Grandsage, did I really need to get undressed?” I asked.

She glared sharply at me. “When we’re alone, you’re forbidden from calling me that!”

Damn, I annoyed her. I was scared of calling her Momo in front of others, though. She was one of the highest-ranking people in Highland, so I couldn’t afford to be careless.

“Sure, sure...Momo. So, am I fine?”

“Hmm, well.”

Her cold hands patted around on my skin and I just let her carry on. It tickled, but that was no surprise—I’d been asleep for a thousand years. I’d probably need rehab at least.

“I can see no issues,” she said eventually.

“Right... My body feels kinda heavy, but I can move pretty normally.”

I was in a better position than I thought I’d be.

Of course you are. I guided you in the spell after all! Ira’s voice sounded in my head.

Cold Sleep was no normal spell. It also involved time magic that she’d taught me. In fact, it even stopped time itself... It was crazy.

“Morning, Ira. I’m safely awake again,” I greeted her with a bob of my head.

“Huh? Sir Makoto...are you talking with Lady Ira?” Momo asked, an odd look on her face.

What? Got a problem?

“Well, she taught me how to do the *Cold Sleep* spell.” I wouldn’t have been able to come back to this time period under my own power.

Momo’s expression still remained slightly puzzled. “I would have expected you to talk with that wicked deity you follow first,” she explained.

I jolted at that. *Fuck*. She was the first person I should have been greeting in this era.

“N-Noah!” I yelped, but there was no response. I took my dagger in both hands and knelt in prayer, but even so, I heard nothing from her. “Uh? Huh...”

Had she forgotten about me somehow? Maybe she was sulking? Both seemed possible.

I-It’s okay! I’m sure she’s just busy! Ira soothed.

“Sir Makoto! You needn’t look so sad...”

I’d worried both of them with the look on my face.

“Well, she’s always been kinda capricious,” I said. She’d be in my dreams in no time...probably. “So, Momo, I want to see how things are. How about we go eat while you tell me how history’s gone? I want to see whether things are different from what I expected.”

“Got it! But...are you sure you should be up and walking around already?”

You should rest for a while at least.

Momo and Ira seemed exasperated. *Maybe it would be better to rest first.* I was curious, though—I wanted to know how the world had changed in the past thousand years.

Also, I was absolutely starving. I really wanted some food.

So, I convinced Momo, and we walked out into the town.

“It hasn’t changed all that much...I think. The city, I mean.”

I was definitely not an authority on the country, but the bustling city of Symphonia matched my memories.

There was at least one difference, though.

“There are way more of the other races,” I commented.

Originally, there’d been a significant racial and class divide.

Humans stood at the top, with elves and beastmen clearly below them. That distinction seemed to have lessened. Of course, the relationship between the humans and cambions was still as bad as ever. The disdain toward Nevia was still alive and well.

Actually, that reminded me: Laphroaig was a country again now, right?

It is! The priestess you were guardian knight for is leading the cambions well. They were always a race predisposed toward spells, so they’ve grown into a major nation over the last year.

In a year?!

“Wow... That’s Princess for you.”

She must have been working her socks off.

As we walked, Momo kept telling me about the current situation.

“So it’s been a year since I went back to the past...”

The calculations *should* have allowed me to wake up right after the earlier version of myself traveled to the past.

I-I can’t help it! A year is basically a rounding error when you’ve got all of eternity!

Well, I couldn’t be too demanding. I was back home safe, and that was the most important thing.

There was one big thing on my mind, though.

“Momo, Iblis hasn’t been defeated yet, right?”

“That’s right.”

I looked up at the gray clouds covering the sky. “Those aren’t the *Clouds of Darkness*.”

“No... It seems that his power is not as much as it once was after his revival.”

“Or that he’s making us let our guard down...”

We couldn't be too optimistic.

Suddenly, my eyes froze on something.

"Um... Is that..."

I was staring at the bronze statue right in the middle of the street, and I just couldn't keep silent. Originally, the statue had been of Abel the Savior on his own. But now, it featured multiple people.

The Hero of Light, Abel.

The Saint, Anna.

The Grandsage, Momo.

The Spellbow, Johnnie.

The Holy Dragon with her wings spread, Mel.

All of that was well and good.

But there was another person...holding a dagger.

"Momo, who's that supposed to be?" I wondered.

"Huh? Why would you even ask? That's obviously..."

It's you, obviously.

My cheek twitched. *No way.* That would mean I'd massively changed history...

That little is fine. It's far better than Abel being killed and the Age of Darkness continuing.

"Well, yeah, but..." I guess I really had overdone it. I'd been frantic back in the past, though.

We wandered through the city while I thought about that. It was mealtime, so pleasant scents wafted from the restaurants.

"Shall we go in and get something, Momo?"

"Yes!"

She was currently wearing a robe, and she looked like a childish mage. Hardly anyone would think she was one of the most important people in the country.

That was why I kept speaking to her normally.

The place we entered was a bustling bar. Momo and I sat side by side at the counter. Then, I realized...

“Oh... I don’t have any money.”

I didn’t have any modern coins on me, at least. I was wondering what to do when Momo took out several of her own.

“Bring out your best. Take the change as a tip,” she said.

“Of course! It’ll be right out!” the server said cheerily.

The food really did come out quickly. There was a colorful vegetable salad, some marinated chicken on the bone, and pasta with cheese and tomato sauce.

I picked up my fork and gingerly lifted a bite to my mouth. “So good...”

I savored the flavors. *It’s been so long...* Suddenly, I noticed Momo wasn’t moving.

“You’re not eating?” I asked.

“There’s something I want more,” she said with a grin, her little canines glinting as she looked closely at me.

“Later,” I said after a moment.

“Surrre! ☆”

After all, I could hardly let her start drinking from me in the middle of the restaurant. She’d waited a thousand years for me, so she could have however much she wanted.

I looked around the room as I ate the spiced chicken. As I did, I noticed a picture on the wall. It depicted seven goddesses. Whenever I’d seen it before, there had always been six. Apparently, history had changed even more than I’d thought.

Casually, I looked at the figures.

Althena, the Goddess of the Sun.

Sól, the Goddess of Fire.

Eir, the Goddess of Water.

Freya, the Goddess of Wood.

Ceres, the Goddess of Ground.

Ira, the Goddess of Fate.

Last up was the Goddess of the Moo—

Uh?

“Huh?”

I couldn’t help but stand and stare.

The picture wasn’t quite right, but that was definitely...

“Noah?”

Without a doubt, *that* was my goddess.

“Oh, are you a follower of Goddess Noah as well? She’s been popular lately. She is the Goddess of Beauty, after all.”

Once the friendly server had finished speaking, they left with a smile.

“Uh... P-Popular?!”

Your contributions had her installed as the eighth goddess of the western continent. Did you forget? Ira asked.

Right, Althena had promised that before I’d left. So Noah being the eighth goddess meant...

I never thought I’d see a picture of her up and out in the open... *Especially since she used to be treated as a wicked deity. And following her is popular?*

“Momo, does Noah have a lot of believers?”

“It irks me that *this* is what has gotten the biggest smile out of you since your reawakening... But to answer your question, she is a new goddess, so she has the fewest believers, but that number has been increasing rapidly of late. In particular, she seems to have many believers in Roses. There are rumors that she and the Goddess of Water are on good terms, and Lady Eir apparently agreed with them.”

“Wow...”

She had lots of believers in Roses. When I first got to this world, I had been her only one.

I could feel my chest churn with emotion.

“Sir Makoto, if you’ve finished eating, shall we leave?” Momo asked, tugging at my sleeve as I soaked in my feelings.

“Yeah...”

My stomach was full, and I mostly understood the situation in the present. The next thing on the agenda was to figure out how to get in contact with my friends, who were waiting for me.

There weren’t any phones in this world, after all... *Maybe I should go to Macallan? Lucy and Sasa might be there.*

Actually, maybe Laphroaig, since Furiae’s there.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a yell.

“My esteemed Tackie!”

The call was followed up by someone thundering into sight. Considering the rabbit-eared woman at his side, it was definitely *him*.

“Fujiyan!”

I rushed over to them. This was my best friend—the one I’d come to this world with.

“You have returned! Thank goodness... I’m so glad!”

“Yeah, I just got back. Good to see you, Fujiyan.”

“Mister Takatsuki’h! I’m glad you seem well’h!”

“You too, Nina.” I said to his wife. “I’m surprised you knew I was here.”

“I have been speaking frequently with Lady Estelle.”

Oh, Estelle... That meant that behind the scenes...

Is me! Exclaimed Ira. *I’ve made sure your friends know you’re back.*

Thanks, Ira. I really do appreciate that consideration.

“Hey, isn’t that the boss of the Fujiwara Company?”

“Who’s that he’s talking to? I’ve never seen that man before.”

“Maybe he’s some naive noble?”

“The girl with him was the one who paid.”

“Man, it’s gotta be good to be rich.”

My *Listen* skill was picking up some nearby conversations about us. Apparently, Fujiyan was famous in the nation now.

“Shall we go elsewhere? We’re drawing attention here,” Momo said. Her voice was now lower than it’d been when she was speaking only with me. The weight behind her words showed that she’d gone into full Grandsage mode.

Fujiyan cleared his throat. “My, I forgot to introduce myself. I am an acquaintance of—”

“What’s wron— Huh’h?”

Both Fujiyan’s and Nina’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. They must not have realized who I was with until now.

“We have already paid,” said Momo. “I will teleport us away. Where would you prefer? The castle?”

“W-We have a guest room ready in our offices. Perhaps there?” Fujiyan said, keeping his cool despite the panic.

“Very well. I believe that was in the third district.”

As she spoke, our vision went blurry.



Momo and I were now sitting on a plush, expensive-feeling sofa, snacking on expensive-looking cookies, and drinking expensive-tasting tea.

Fujiyan and Nina had explained a fair bit. Business was apparently booming. Still, I could tell that we hadn’t hit the main topic yet.

“Are we waiting for someone, Fujiyan?”

“They should be here shortly.”

He wouldn't tell me *who* we were waiting for, but I had a pretty good idea. Fujiyan's connections ran deep, and they'd started in Macallan. He ought to be able to get and give information with a fair bit of speed.

I knew him well, and so I knew that he would tell certain people about my return before anyone else.

A bright light suddenly filled the room. I realized quickly that it was someone teleporting, and then, in a flash, they were in the room.

“Makoto...?”

“Takatsuki...?”

I haven't heard their voices in so long...

“Lu—”

Before I could say either of their names, the two girls had knocked me to the floor.



One was a red-haired elf. The heat from her body was something I hadn't felt in a long time, but it was just as warm as I remembered. Her hair was shorter than I remembered, and it was glowing red.

The other girl had dark brown hair. Originally, her hair had been down to her shoulders, but it was longer now. She looked more grown up...kinda.

Their expressions held more of my attention than the changes in their appearances, though. The girls' faces were red and blotchy, and hot tears poured from their eyes.

"Lucy, Sasa, I'm back now."

"Idiot! We've been waiting so long for you!"

"Welcome home, Takatsuki!"

Finally, I'd reunited with my friends.

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with his Comrades

“Makoto...”

“Takatsuki...”

Lucy and Sasa—both acting a bit differently—had pushed me down to the ground. I looked at their teary faces, feeling my eyes warm with emotion, but this was one of the Fujiwara Trading Company’s guest rooms. Fujiyan and Nina were here—obviously—but a certain Grandsage was also glaring unhappily our way.

There was a time and place for this kind of thing, after all. But apparently, that wasn’t something these two cared about.

“Takatsuki... Finally...you’re back...” Sasa sighed heavily and wrapped herself around me.

“Wh— Aya?! No fair!”

Sasa ignored Lucy’s panicked voice and tightened her grip on my head.

I...couldn’t move.

“Mh...”

Then, she kissed me.

Hold on!

I didn’t have time to even be surprised before her lips were already on mine.

“Ahh!” Lucy yelled. “You’ve got some nerve, Aya!”

I’d been almost certain she’d stop it, but she just climbed on top of me too.

H-Heavy!

That word—taboo when speaking about women—floated into my mind. But however petite they were, the weight of *two* women on top of you was always

going to be heavy. Also, it wasn't like I could actually verbalize anything with my lips covered.

“Ma~ko~to~! Hyah!”

Lucy pushed Sasa to the side and took over the kissing.

My mind was in shambles—I couldn't really follow what was going on. They were both...kissing me at the same time?

Oof... How lewd!

Ira, don't just mock me! Help!

How? Just push them off. You're a man, aren't you?

With my lack of strength, I couldn't even move!

“Mmh... Mwah... Makoto...≡”

“Haaah... Takatsuki...≡”

Their long, *long* kisses seemed never-ending. My own vision was blocked by their faces, so I used *RPG Player* to look at the scene from an outsider's perspective.

Yup, I'm being completely assaulted here.

Also, I'd noticed that they were wearing matching bracelets. They were getting along well now.

I was going to be running out of breath pretty soon.

“Enough already.”

Suddenly, my vision was clear, and the burden on my body was gone. I realized I was floating in midair.

“Mo— Grandsage?”

Apparently, Momo had pulled me out with *Teleport*.

The two of them hadn't noticed that I wasn't there anymore, so they were still kissing... *What the hell is going on?*

Sasa was the first to notice. “Huh? Lu? Where's Takatsuki?”

“Oh? Where’s Makoto?”

The two of them pulled their lips apart and turned around, wiping their mouths.

“Get yourselves under control. What are you, cats in heat?!” Momo demanded, her voice unhappy and low.

“Guh, Grandsage.”

“Oh, it’s her.”

The pair grumbled. Fujiyan tried to play mediator—he clapped his hands.

“Well, it has been some time since the three of you last saw each other, so I suppose you got rather carried away. Let us all calm down and—”

I let out a sigh, thinking that things were finally about to settle. But then, I felt a chill run down my spine.

“Elementalist...”

Momo’s voice was low. It’d been a while since she’d called me that. She’d probably gotten into the habit from Mel.

“Wh-What is it? Grandsage?”

“I hunger.”

“Well, if—”

“Hand over your blood.”

“Right now?!”

In front of everyone?

I didn’t have time to panic before she was tugging at my collar. Instantly, I could feel her cold breath on my neck.

“What?!”

“Hold on!”

Both Lucy and Sasa yelled.

Fujiyan and Nina exchanged troubled looks, but neither made a move to stop

anything. Had the two of them known Momo was a vampire?

Well, Fujiyan had his *Mind Reading*, so it was probably fine. He was wearing an exasperated look.

Momo latched on to my neck with a small noise, and I could hear her swallowing my blood. I'd been intending to let her drink as much as she wanted after waiting a thousand years for me, but...

"Um... Why are you stripping me...?"

Her small hands were running over my body, undoing button after button.

Momo...when'd you get so obscene?

Lucy's and Sasa's looks were painful as well. She was *still* drinking, quiet noises emanating from her throat with each swallow. It was slow, though. Maybe she was purposefully keeping her drinking speed down.

She's taking her time...

I just let myself relax—she could do what she wanted. The room was filled with an awkward tension. A minute passed. Then another.

Lucy was the first to lose her temper. "How long are you gonna keep that up?!" she demanded.

"Get off hiiim!" Sasa exclaimed as she tried to peel Momo off of me.

"Let go, you brats! Don't get in my way!"

If you went by outward appearances, Momo would be the brat...

"You too, Makoto! You're all messing around with her!"

"So you like little girls, Takatsukiiii?"

"Don't call me little!" Momo snapped. "Your chest isn't any different."

Lucy snorted. "Pft, it's not worth arguing."

Momo and Sasa glared menacingly at her.

"Umm, everyone, calm..."

I trailed off while trying to get everyone to relax—I'd heard a bit of a disturbance.

“xxxxxxxx! (Kyaa!)”

“xxxxxxxx? (Angry?)”

“xxxxxxxx. (Angryyyy.)”

“xxxxxxxx. (Scary, scary.)”

“xxxxxxxx. (Oh no, oh no.)”

“xxxxxxxx. (Ruuun.)”

The water elementals were getting noisy. Huh? Suddenly, the room’s temperature dropped sharply.

“l-It’s cold’h!”

“What in the...?”

I heard Fujiyan and Nina gasp.

The arguing from the other three cut off suddenly as well. Everything went oddly silent. I looked toward whatever had shaken the elementals.

A woman was standing there. She had long, blue-tinged hair and deep blue eyes. She was wearing a fairly simple dress, but it just highlighted her natural beauty.

This was the Priestess of Water—Princess Sophia Eir Roses.

She was currently looking toward me—and Lucy, Sasa, and the Grandsage around me.

Her eyes were as cold as ice.

“Oh?”

That was the only word she spoke. The temperature dropped even further.

Fujiyan and Nina were shaking. I couldn’t let things carry on like this.

“xxxxxxxx,xxxxxxxx. (Water elementals, warm it up.)”

I sneakily increased the temperature of the room before either of them caught a cold.

“Is that Hero Makoto over there?” she asked, prompting the three girls to

rapidly move away.

“I-It’s been a while, Sophia,” I greeted her clumsily.

She giggled. “I heard from the goddess that you had just awoken. It seems you have wasted no time in enjoying yourself.” Her voice might have been gentle, but there was definitely no laughter in her eyes.

No one said a word.

“Whatever is the matter?” she asked with a smile, her voice gentle. “Please, continue.”

“I-It’s fine. Yup, just fine, Sophia.”

“Y-Yeah, we can talk with Takatsuki later.”

“R-Right. Sir— I mean, Elementalist, come to my estate later.”

Momo vanished with a *vwoop*.

Oh, she ran away.

“I see. In which case, Hero Makoto, come this way.” Sophia grabbed my hand.

“Wh-Where are we going?”

“To Highland Castle,” she replied, tugging at my arm. “There are a great number of people waiting to see you again.”

“Good luck with the reunion, Makoto!”

“Come back soon, Takatsuki!”

Lucy and Sasa waved me off, apparently having no intention of coming along. Knights from Roses were waiting outside the door.

The guardian geezer was looking as spirited as ever. “Sir Hero! You look well!”

“It’s been a while,” I replied.

“Let us go, Hero Makoto.”

I didn’t have time to enjoy a proper reunion before I was pushed into a carriage.



The carriage clattered along. Sophia and I were the only two inside. Silence filled the space as we progressed toward the castle.

We were sitting opposite each other, and the princess had her gaze focused out of the window, watching the scenery. Well, she was taking periodic glances my way, so I doubted the scenery was really holding her attention.

“Um... Have you been well, Sophia?” I asked hesitantly.

There was no reply for quite some time.

I waited patiently. After a long few moments, she responded quietly. “Fool. You made me wait.”



Suddenly, she stood. It might not have been the most unsteady of rides, but we were still in a moving carriage. Before I could even tell her to watch out, she'd thumped down next to me. The carriage wasn't huge, so our shoulders were touching whether we wanted them to or not. She wrapped her arm through mine and grabbed hold of my hand tightly.

I looked at her, and she looked right back at me. Our noses were almost touching.

The sounds of our breathing mixed in the air, and I could feel her warm breath on my face.

Neither of us said a word.

Slowly, her face came closer to mine.

Her sapphire eyes drew me in, and before I knew it, she'd pushed me down.



"Your face is red, Sophia," I said as we stepped down from the carriage.

"How are you so calm?" she demanded.

The vast Highland Castle was towering in front of us. It had been about five minutes since we'd left the Fujiwara Corporation's property, and the carriage had been the site of much "spoiling" from the princess.

She let out a small sigh to calm herself.

I kinda wanted to tease her a little. I glanced behind us and saw that her knights were standing a short distance away.

Since these were the grounds of the castle, it was probably safe enough for them to be somewhat far back.

"You were so bold, Sophia. To think you'd use a carriage to— Mph."

She glared harshly, rapidly covering my mouth with her hand. Her face had flushed red again.

"Would you be silent?" she asked after a moment. Her eyes promised death if I wouldn't shut up.

“Suuure.”

One of the castle guards opened the huge door and we passed through the entrance. I’d walked the path several times, but I still wasn’t used to it.

“Who’re we meeting, by the way? Princess Noelle?” I asked.

“It would be good if she could find the time... There are others though, no? People who want to see you, that is.”

Several faces floated up in my mind at that. *People I’m close to in Highland, huh...?*

“Makoto Takatsuki!” someone called out suddenly.

A golden figure was closing in on me.

“You’re back!”

“Gweh!”

A female knight charged into—ahem, *embraced* me quite forcefully.

She had blonde hair that practically sparkled, and she wore shining golden armor. I knew of only one female knight who was quite so striking.

“It’s been some time, Janet.”

“Oh my, you needn’t be so formal. I want to know everything!” Her tone quickly shifted to something more commanding. “Come to my room.”

This was one of the pegasus knights, Janet Ballantine. She was both the sister of Gerald—the Hero of Lightning—and a young lady of one of the most noble families in the country. She hadn’t been a fan of mine at first, but we’d gotten closer during our adventure in Springrogue.

She’d grabbed on to my hand and showed no sign of letting go.

“Janet, we already have a destination. You will have to wait,” Sophia said, interrupting our conversation.

“Oh, Sophia, you’re here? I hadn’t noticed,” she said rather challengingly.

There was a short pause.

“Perhaps your eyes are going, then?” Sophia asked. “Maybe you should resign

from your position in the scouts.”

“I simply didn’t notice since your dress is far too plain. My apologies.”

“Oh my, I suppose I can expect no less from someone wearing such tasteless armor.”

“You simply have no sense of value.”

“I could say precisely the same back at you.”

The two began to chuckle pointedly, their eyes boring into each other.

Ack, this is going to cause a proper feud between Roses’s royalty and Highland’s most noble family! A cold sweat pricked at my neck.

Janet then turned to me.

“This is bothering Makoto Takatsuki.”

“That will not do.”

The two of them stopped their glaring, their expressions immediately smoothing out.

“Let’s leave the joking here,” Janet said. “I *do* want to hear what’s gone on, though.”

“Of course. We are planning a celebration for his return tonight in the Fujiwara estate. I shall send a messenger later.”

“Very well. Let us talk in depth later, Makoto Takatsuki.”

I let out a sigh. *This is the first I’m hearing of a celebration.* Then again, it was Fujiyan we were talking about—he was quick with this sort of thing. He’d probably suggested it in private.

I’d be grateful for a proper event to welcome back an old friend, however, there was one thing bothering me.

“Will Gerald be there?” I asked hesitantly.

If he was going to attend, then I could count on him bombarding me with questions about the battle all night.

“Unfortunately...he is on the front lines in the far north.”

“The front lines?”

“The first defense for when the armies attack from the demon continent. There have been several heroes constantly manning the location since Iblis’s return.”

“I...see.”

Once I asked for specifics, they told me that he was there along with Olga—the Hero of Incandescence.

Which meant...

“So I’ll soon be heading there too?” I was, after all, Roses’s State Authorized Hero. Things were about to get pretty busy.

Both Princess Sophia’s and Janet’s eyes grew wide.

“Oh, you really know nothing of the current situation,” said Janet.

Sophia nodded. “Indeed, I intend to explain things to him soon.”

I couldn’t follow what they were talking about. Had I said something odd?

“Until later, Sophia.”

“Indeed, Janet. Another time.”

The two of them exchanged soft smiles. It was like they hadn’t just been fighting.

“You’re close to her?” I asked after she’d left.

“Indeed. We received a loan of knights from the Ballantine family against the monsters in Roses. In exchange, we have lent our priests. There has been a strong connection between our families as of late.”

“Huh.”

I remembered hearing about that before.

“We also speak often of you,” Sophia added.

“Y-You do?”

What on earth were they discussing about me? I wanted to know, but I was also kinda scared, so I didn’t end up asking.

Suddenly, she fixed me with a steady stare.

“There is something I should tell you.”

“Yes?”

I waited tensely—her voice sounded so serious.

“Makoto Takatsuki... Currently, you are not a hero.”

“Huh?” I asked after managing to pull myself together.

That was a real shock... Had I been *fired* as a hero?

Hardly, Ira retorted.

So she was listening?

“Once you left for the past...there was a need to explain why you could not act as Roses’s hero. However, we could not publicize the time travel. You were therefore said to have sustained severe wounds in the battle against Demon Lord Zagan and were unable to fight. At that point, you were considered an Honorary Hero rather than a State-Authorized Hero.”

“Honorary?” That sounded like I’d retired forever, right? Why would they do something like that?

Heroes are a symbol of their country’s strength. Of course their citizens would be worried if one vanished into nowhere. They needed some kind of explanation.

I nodded at Ira’s reasoning. I’d been hurrying off to the past, so hadn’t wrapped my head around it, but the people left behind had their own things to deal with.

Honorary Heroes aren’t considered in active service, so you have no obligation to participate in the fight.

Oh, that made sense. Now I understood what Janet meant. There was no need for me to go to the front line.

That said...

“I ask to be sure...but would you become our hero once again?” Sophia asked, looking up at me. “I promise you the best treatment Roses can provide. Your standing and riches will be whatever you desire.”

“Hmm... Is there an issue with me staying honorary? I mean, I’ll be fighting either way.”

“Um...You do realize there is no need for you to force yourself to fight him, no? You aren’t an active hero currently.”

Ira had said the same thing. I already knew my answer, though.

“Well, I came back to fight.”

“This man...” Sophia muttered to herself. “Very well, I shall make preparations for you to return to active service. Publicly, we will say you were rendered unconscious and unable to move, so wait for the time being.”

“Sure,” I said cheerily.

So I still wouldn’t be heading to the front lines immediately. I was curious, though. Thinking of Roses reminded me of something.

“Noah’s influence has been spreading within Roses, right?”

“It has. Goddess Eir gave her permission...and above all, she was the goddess you believed in. Goddess Althena recognized her officially as the eighth of the faith. We could hardly refuse her.”

“Thank you,” I said earnestly.

“I have done nothing to deserve it. Incidentally, have you spoken to her yet?”

“Not yet,” I murmured somewhat unhappily. I had been sure she would speak to me as soon as I woke up.

“I see. This is from Lady Eir, but...she wanted you to talk about her selection of a priestess and hero.”

“Noah’s picked a hero and priestess?” I said, reeling from the shock.

Well, it kinda made sense. She was recognized across the continent now, so of course she would have. My apostle role was separate. Eir had Prince Leonardo as her hero, and Princess Sophia as her priestess.

I wonder who Noah chose... Would we get along? I really hoped our personalities wouldn’t clash.

“No, Hero Makoto. She has refused to make the selection.”

“Huh? Refused?”

“Yes... Lady Eir is somewhat angry at her refusal to carry out her duties as the eighth goddess.”

“What’s she playing at...?”

Had she always been so clumsy as a goddess? No, she was definitely just acting that way—Noah was actually pretty put together.

Unlike a certain other goddess...

And which goddess would that be?

Not you, right?

You’re lying! I can see my face in your mind!

I offer my most sincere and deepest apologies.

“Please then, Hero Makoto.”

“Right, leave it to me.”

I’ll ask Noah about it when we meet up, I decided.

The princess’s expression changed at that point. “Incidentally, have you already heard of Lucy’s and Aya’s exploits while you were away?”

“No, they attacked me as soon as they saw me.”

She sighed. “I see. Roses was unsettled after losing a hero, but Lucy and Aya picked up the slack. Aya is currently orichalcum rank, while Lucy is platinum and a saint-rank mage. Their party is known almost universally across the continent.” Sophia sounded awfully proud.

“Huh...? Orichalcum and saint-rank?”

In a single year?!

“Judging from your expression, that’s the first you’ve heard of it. They are famed as the best party in Roses—the Crimson Fangs.”

“The Crimson Fangs...”

S-So cool. That was way better than my alias in Macallan. *They called me the Goblin Cleaner!*

I wonder if I'd be able to join Lucy and Sasa...

Aren't you the party leader? Ira asked.

My rank was low, though... And I wasn't an active hero...

"Um...why do you look so upset?" the princess asked.

"I was just thinking about how everyone's grown so much while I've been gone."

"Your accomplishments have been far more impressive...you realize that, no?"

I couldn't help the desire to get my title back and get rehabilitated. I wanted a cool name like the Crimson Fangs.

You know that's their party name, not their name, right?

Forget the little things!

Still, Lucy and Aya had become so impressive. At that point, another member of our party came to mind.

"That reminds me, how's Prin—Furiae?" She hadn't been with Lucy and Sasa. I'd figured she was probably focusing on restoring Laphroaig.

Hope she's doing well as a saint...

At that, Princess Sophia turned meaningful eyes on me. "If you were surprised about Lucy and Aya, you'll be even more surprised about Furiae."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—"

Sophia was interrupted.

"Makoto!"

"Takatsuki!"

The two people who'd called out my name immediately knocked me to the floor.

You get pushed around a lot, don't you?

Excuse me... My strength is a grand total of 3.

The average for a ten-year-old...

Isn't it your fault that my stats are so low?

It's not my fault—it's your luck's fault.

Rude! Aren't you supposed to be the *Goddess* of Fortune?!

I looked up at the ceiling while we had the discussion.

Two handsome faces looking down on me. One was beautiful, and tears were streaming down his cheeks. The other was more masculine, and his eyes were shimmering with unshed tears.

Seeing them made me think that men crying could be somewhat charming.

"Prince Leonardo, Sakurai, I'm back," I said, greeting my colleague and childhood friend.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Reels

“Ha ha, sorry, Takatsuki. I got a bit carried away,” Sakurai apologized.

“It’s been a while, Sakurai. But I’m back now.”

“Even Goddess Althena said it would be unlikely for you to return. I’m so...so glad...”

He had a smile on his face, but his eyes were red. It would be mean to mock him for it, though.

“Makoto... I’m so happy to see you again,” said Prince Leonardo.

“I haven’t seen you in quite a while. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Before, the only way I could have described him was as a cute young girl. But in the year since I’d seen him, he’d gotten taller. He now looked like a handsome, androgynous boy.



“I’ve still got so far to go. I’ve gotten better with my holy sword, though! Hopefully I can show you.”

“I’d love to see,” I replied.

Sakurai nodded. “Leo and I have been practicing swordplay together for a while.”

“It’s thanks to Ryouzuke that I’m so much better with my blade.”

It seemed like the two of them had gotten fairly close. *Two handsome guys together? They almost seem like a boy band.*

“Welcome back, Takatsuki!” someone said as they clapped me on the shoulder.

I turned to see a female knight standing there. “Good to be back, Yokoyama,” I said.

Saki Yokoyama was one of Sakurai’s wives—she was from our world as well. She’d been considered the best-looking girl in our class.

“Did you see Aya yet?!” she demanded. “She cries about you every time I talk to her!”

“Yeah, I have. And yeah, she cried.”

“Right?! You’re not allowed to be away from her again!”

“Yeah, I don’t intend to.” I almost staggered under her onslaught. “You seem happy, though.”

She grinned broadly and then giggled. “Look at this. Isn’t it pretty? Ryouzuke bought it for me.” An engagement ring on her left ring finger gleamed in the light. She seemed more mature than before. Was that what being about to get married did to a woman?

“It suits you.”

“Thanks. You’re buying one for Aya!”

“Y-Yeah, I will.”

She wouldn’t let the conversation go.

“Saki,” Sakurai interrupted. “He’s probably tired. He only just got back, y’know.”

“Fiiiine,” she said.

Thank the gods for that lifeline. Still, where did they sell rings like that? I doubted they’d have them in armorers or equipment shops. Maybe I could ask Fujiyan to order one.

Well... You should at least look for an engagement ring on your own, came an exasperated voice in my head. It was Ira.

I couldn’t get Fujiyan to do it?

No, you can’t. Are you listening? That kind of thing happens once in a lifetime, so it’s special to girls... she advised.

I let it wash over me. Right, wasn’t she the goddess of love?

Hey! Listen properly.

I’m listenin’.

Suddenly, someone else spoke up. “Oh, is that Hero Makoto over there?”

“Hm...was he not gravely injured against a demon lord?”

“I’d heard he lost an arm and a leg.”

“Well, I heard he had already died.”

“He certainly doesn’t look injured.”

“Maybe it’s just a look-alike?”

“But...he seems so close to the Hero of Light... Who else could it be?”

People were starting to crowd around us. It was less about me catching their attention, and more about them wondering who was chatting so casually with Sakurai since he was the Hero of Light. Being injured was one thing, but *someone* had gotten carried away—were they really saying that I’d lost an arm and a leg or outright died?

Apparently, a hero vanishing caused all kinds of rumors.

We ended up getting surrounded and bombarded with questions.

I'd been worried about how to answer, but Princess Sophia interrupted and helped. I really appreciated it, especially with how much I struggled with crowds.

We spent two hours greeting powerful and influential people in the castle—that was the main reason we were even here.

Of course, it would take some time to get me back on the active roster. Currently, I was supposed to be an honorary hero due to my injuries against Zagan.

Princess Sophia was busy with a conversation with the prime minister—at least, that was who I assumed it was—a little distance away.

“Lady Noelle is busy, so she is unable to grant an audience today,” I heard.

It looked like we weren't going to be meeting her today. Well, there wasn't much getting around it, what with her position.

Princes Noelle... Shining golden hair and sapphire eyes. Thinking of her inevitably reminded me of someone else with the same looks.

“Makoto, I want...”

Anna's face filled my mind. I remembered her like it was yesterday, but she had actually been around a thousand years in the past. It was ancient history. I'd been able to reunite with Momo, but Anna was...

I couldn't help but get misty-eyed over it. *No, none of that.* Calm Mind, Calm Mind.

The princess had finished her conversation and come back over, apparently having made an appointment to see her peer.

“I apologize for the wait. Shall we return to the Fujiwara Corporation?” she asked.

“I appreciate it, Sophia,” I said to her.

“It was nothing too strenuous,” she replied with a slightly tired smile.

I felt kind of bad for making her do extra work, and it must have shown on my face.

“If it bothers you, you can keep me company,” she whispered into my ear.

The carriage ride back was the site of much spoiling.



Once we’d returned, Princess Sophia said that she had other business to attend to and left.

She was a real workaholic. She’d be back for the celebration later, though.

“Hey, hey, Makoto, let’s go see Fuuri!” Lucy cheered.

“Right, Fuu was lonely without you too!” Aya joined in.

I’d barely gotten through the door before the two accosted me.

“Sure, let’s go.”

The celebration Fujiyan was holding for me was tonight, so we had time. And I really did want to go say hi to Furiae. She’d been worried for me before I’d left for the past.

“Grab my hand,” Lucy said, holding out her right hand.

“Kay?”

I wasn’t entirely sure what her plan was, but I did it. Sasa was doing the same on her other side.

“Right, *Teleport*.”

“Huh?”

My vision blurred and then went white. A moment later, I was looking at a beautiful city street.

“L-Lucy...that was incredible.”

She giggled. “I’ve gotten better, right?”

I was honestly blown away. While I was recovering from the shock, I looked around.

The buildings weren’t any that I’d seen in Highland before, and the people walking around were all wearing robes. Was this just an area with a lot of mages?

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Highland’s ninth district,” Lucy answered.

“The nin— Wait, we’re in the *slums*?”

It looked like night and day from the last time I’d seen it. It’d been an area full of criminals, the mafia, and cambions. The buildings had all been practically falling apart. I couldn’t even see anyone sleeping rough on the street.

“It’s great, right? It’s changed so much in just a year.”

“Fuu worked so hard to make it somewhere the cambions could live peacefully.”

“Whoa...”

I looked around, seeing the new face of the district. Furiae did this? Well, I guess she was a priestess...or now, a saint. I was still curious about one thing, though.

“Hey, Lucy. Why’s she here rather than Laphroaig?”

I’d thought she would’ve been focusing on reviving her own country.

“Um, well—” Lucy began, only to be cut off.

“It’s Lucy!”

“And Aya!”

“The Crimson Fangs are so cool!”

“Who’s that guy with them?”

“Maybe their bag carrier?”

“He doesn’t look like he’d be able to carry anything, though.”

Kids had started to crowd around us. And...I was getting insulted before even saying a word.

“Hey, don’t call my boyfriend a bag carrier,” Lucy complained.

“He’s my husband.”

The kids all looked shocked at that.

“I thought your guy was amazing?” one of them asked.

“People said he was super strong.”

“He barely has any mana.”

“How strong can he really be?”

None of them looked convinced.

“Hmph, Makoto, show them what you’re made of.”

“Takatsuki’s always using water magic. He’s really great!”

The two of them were talking me up, but...

“It’d be a pretty bad idea to use elemental magic in the street like this...” I said.

So, what should I do?

Suddenly, mana filled the air. “Is there a problem, my liege?” someone asked. It felt like the whole street was underwater—it was *that* hard to breathe.

The cambion kids’ mouths snapped closed, and the other people on the street turned to look this way. Even Lucy and Sasa lost their smiles.

One of the kids somehow managed to speak up. “M-Mister...who’s that?”

“She’s an Undyne.”

They all went wide-eyed in shock. *Heh, cute.*

Dia giggled. “I’ll do anything my liege asks. We could even engulf this whole town in water for a few minutes if you’d like? Do you understand how amazing he is now?”

Her tone was teasing, but the ridiculous amount of mana bearing down on the kids seemed to have made them forget how to breathe. Also, the *things* she was saying had made them go pale.

“Rein it in, Dia,” I told her.

“Of course, my liege.”

Her mana wicked away at my words. The kids finally seemed able to relax.

“Wow, mister.”

“Lucy and Aya’s boyfriend is something else.”

“Miss, why’s your skin blue?”

“How’d you make friends with an Undyne?!”

The end result was a deluge of questions. Still, I’d managed to keep Lucy’s and Sasa’s dignities.

“Hey...Makoto?”

“Taaakaaatsuuukiii?”

Hm? I felt a chill run down my back.

“What’s up?” I asked, turning to face them.

“Who’s that woman?” they asked in unison.

Huh? Hadn’t they already met Di— No, they hadn’t. “She’s an Undyne who helped me in the past, and—”

“You got another woman!” Lucy yelled.

“You idiot!”

“Th-That’s not it!”

“My liege, I do not mind waiting, but at least pay attention to me when I’m summoned,” Dia said, wrapping her arms around me. She either didn’t know or didn’t care that the mood had soured.

Hey, I didn’t summon you! You just turned up.

It took quite a while to explain it all to Lucy and Sasa.

We walked through the district for a while until we came to a big estate. This was apparently the embassy to Laphroaig, and Furiae was staying there.

“Oh! Lady Lucy, Lady Aya! Welcome,” the guard greeted, smiling as he saw them. *They must know each other.*

“Hi.”

“We came to see Fuu!”

“Go right on— Oh, who is this man?”

A look was enough for him to send Lucy and Sasa in, but it seemed the same didn't hold true for a stranger like me.

“The State-Authorized Hero of Roses, Makoto,” Lucy explained.

“Fuu's guardian knight, Takatsuki.”

“I-It's you?!” the guard exclaimed, his expression changing immediately.

“Please wait a few moments! I'll get my superior!”

With that, he vanished inside.

There were two gate guards, and the other was looking at me with interest.

“What is it?” I asked, since it looked like he wanted to say something.

“I apologize! I...just never thought I'd meet the real you.”

The *real* me? It looked like he had an impression of me, then.

“You know who I am?” I asked.

I was pretty sure any information about me would've come from Lucy or Sasa, and so it would be way overblown.

“From Her Majesty, of course!”

My brain stopped for a second. *The queen of Laphroaig*... For a second, Nevia's face came to mind, but that definitely wasn't who he meant. This was the present. Laphroaig didn't have royalty.

It wasn't even a country, which meant...

“Aww, you found out.”

“We wanted to surprise you.”

Considering the way they were talking, there was only one explanation I could think of.

“Did Princess become the queen of Laphroaig?” I asked.

“Yup. Shocked?”

“Fuu’s the queen!”

“Whoa...”

It definitely was a surprise. Furiae was a queen... It kinda suited her.

“Can we meet a queen without an appointment, though? How am I supposed to greet her and...”

“What are you talking about? You’re part of her party.”

“Fuu doesn’t mind the little things.”

The two of them laughed off my worries.

Well, that at least made sense. The first thing I wanted to do was tell her I was back. Then I wanted to hear what had been going on straight from her mouth.

Several minutes later, a man wearing pretty expensive-looking clothes came out, flanked by a guard on either side.

There was no sign of Furiae.

“Apologies for the wait. I heard that *Honorary Hero* Makoto Takatsuki of Roses was visiting,” he said, his eyes and voice hard. There was no sign of friendliness to be seen.

“It’s been a while, Havel,” Lucy said. “How’s Fuuri?”

“Hey, Havel. Is Fuu in?”

The two must have known him, since they spoke with a lot of familiarity. Havel, though...I knew that name. I was pretty sure it was the name of one of Furiae’s friends in the country’s ruins. His clothes were so different that I hadn’t even recognized him.

“Lady Lucy, Lady Aya. It has been some time. I appreciate you making the effort to visit,” he said, voice softening as he spoke to them.

It didn’t look like he was acting—it seemed more like he really did respect the two of them. Unfortunately, that made how he was looking at me stick out all the more. When his eyes were directed at me...there was no warmth in them at all.

“Are you the Honorary Hero of Roses?” he asked. He acted like he didn’t

know me, even though we'd met before.

Lucy and Sasa were both staring at him oddly, apparently surprised by how he was acting.

"Yes, I'm Makoto Takatsuki," I replied.

"And your purpose here?"

"To see Pr—I mean Furiae."

A crease carved itself into his brow as I spoke. "I would appreciate you refraining from referring to her in that way. What would the purpose of this meeting be?" he asked, his tone businesslike.

The purpose behind it? Well, that was hard to explain. Only a few people knew about the duty I'd been given. There was a chance he hadn't heard about it from Furiae.

"I was actually on a dangerous mission from the gods and came to let her know I'd come back safely."

That wasn't wrong.

"Very well. I shall inform her of your safe return. If that is all, please leave."

And that was the end of it. He didn't seem inclined to let us meet.

"I *did* want to tell her personally," I said after a pause.

"Lady Furiae is busy. She lacks the time."

The conversation wasn't going anywhere. Lucy and Sasa joined in with the explanation, and we kept trying for a while, but he wouldn't let us in, and eventually, we had to leave.

"What's with him?!" Lucy demanded a while later.

"He was acting weird, right?!"

"He's usually trying to get on our good side!"

"We helped the country with that ancient dragon attack, and this is how he acts?!"

“He was crying and thanking me when I saved his friend from a chimera!”

“He’s got no manners!”

“Aya! We’re not helping him again!”

“Yup! I’m with you. If he asks, we’ll tell him no!”

The two of them were spitting mad. Which honestly meant that I wasn’t.

He—Havel—was apparently Queen Furiae’s aide. As high-ranking adventurers, Lucy and Sasa had been a lot of help in restoring Laphroaig, so he was usually overwhelmed by them.

Which made how he acted today all the weirder.

“Hmph. Well, whatever. On to the next plan, Makoto!”

“Right, we can go see Fuu whenever we like.”

They’d gotten everything out of their system, so they weren’t as angry now.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Lucy’s and Sasa’s faces turned mischievous.

“We can just *Teleport* right into her room!” Lucy said smugly.

“You’re so cool, Lu!” Sasa cheered her on.

I had no words. Wasn’t there a problem with that?! Lucy was starting to think like her mother. Sasa was apparently not going to act as the voice of reason either—the two of them were getting excited.

Oh well. I guess...

It definitely looked like we’d be able to go see Furiae.

“AlIIII riiight! Let’s go right now!”

“Hold up, hold up,” I said, hurriedly stopping her.

The kids questioning us, along with the discussion outside the embassy, had taken up a lot of time. The party Fujiyan had arranged was going to begin soon. I couldn’t be late when it was specifically for *me*.

The three of us headed back to his place.

Fujiyan had—through his company—bought out a whole hall to host a huge party for me tonight. The event was to celebrate my return, which meant I was showing off that I was safe to lots of people. However...

Th-There are more people than I expected... I'd anticipated a dozen people I knew—maybe thirty or so at the most. But there were over ten times that number here. There were literally *hundreds* of guests.

Princess Sophia and Fujiyan had used their connections to invite everyone in the capital—whatever country they hailed from. There was a reason for this, of course.

I'd asked Princess Sophia to reinstate me as a State-Authorized Hero, and the most efficient way to show everyone I was hale and hearty was a party like this. Since I was the one who'd asked to go back in time, I couldn't complain.

Still, I was impressed they'd managed to get so many people here on such short notice.

I was sharing drinks with the who's who of the world and getting questioned about our victories against Zagan and Bifrons. I needed to be careful and not mention anything from the past, but even my noncommittal responses were well received.

At this point, about two hours had passed since the start of the party.

So far, I hadn't managed to speak to anyone I actually knew.

I wonder if I can sneak away for a break...

The polite smiles and tactful phrasing had exhausted me, so I used *Stealth* and sneaked off to a balcony, away from the center of the celebration.

I'd pretty much finished greeting everyone that Princess Sophia had invited. That was my job done...hopefully.

I was starving. The food was set up as a standing buffet, so you couldn't really dive enthusiastically into a meal. Plus, the leftovers were apparently just getting thrown away. It felt like a waste.

A thousand years ago, this spread would have fed the entire population of Labyrinthos. My time in the past had taught me one thing—food was

important.

All right, time to eat!

I was just about to head back in—with *Stealth* still active, of course, and pile my plate high, but suddenly, I was interrupted.

“Hi, Makoto.”

“You look wrecked, Takatsuki.”

“I feel it too,” I answered Lucy and Sasa. They must have spotted me. *Stealth* wasn’t going to do much against those two.

They were all dressed up and they looked really cute. Lucy was wearing a scarlet red dress that had a low neckline—it showed off her chest. Sasa was in an aquamarine gown with a slit up the side. It was rather daring, despite the cute and floaty silhouette. There were a lot of beautiful women attending, but the two of them stood out above the rest.

Still...

They look so grown up. I thought, looking at their dress-clad bodies. They’d both gotten a little taller and their figures had developed. It was like going to a school reunion and finding out your classmates had grown from girls into beautiful women.

“What’s up, Makoto? You’ve got a weird look on your face.”

“D’you feel sick, Takatsuki? Let’s go rest somewhere.”

Both of them were looking at me with concern, so I told them the truth about what I was thinking.

“The two of you got gorgeous while I was away.”

They let out surprised noises as their jaws dropped.

“Wh-Where’d that come from?!”

“You turned into a womanizer!”

“No...I ain’t...” I protested. *Their looks might have changed, but the way they react sure hasn’t.*

“It made me really happy you said that, though,” Lucy said.

“Yup. Lu and I went and got our dresses together. That neckline’s shameless, though.”

“Where d’you think you’re touching? Look at how much leg you’re showing off.”

“Hey, don’t push it up! My panties’ll show!”

Those two were playing around again. Two girls being so touchy-feely with each other was definitely good for the soul.

Lucy and Sasa had matching bracelets sparkling on their wrists. *They really are close, huh?*

Lucy turned to me while I watched them cheerily.

“So how long were you adventuring in the past?” she asked.

“You look pretty much the same, so maybe half a year?” Sasa suggested.

“Oh, well, about that...” My appearance hadn’t changed as much as theirs had, that was for sure. I hadn’t explained about that, though. “I was there for three years.”

“What?!”

“Huuuuuh?!”

C’mon, you two. There’s no point in me using Stealth when you yell like that.

“W-W-Wait a minute!”

“*Three years?! You mean you’re three years older than us now?!*” Sasa demanded.

“Well, probably two, actually. A year’s passed here as well.”

I’d been there a long time after the fight against Iblis. It’d ended up taking two years to go around all five continents.

“Why do you still look the same?”

“Have you even aged...?”

They didn’t look grossed out, at least, but both were staring at me like I was

some weird creature.

How should I explain...?

“It is an aftereffect of Goddess Ira’s miracle,” a young girl cut in. “When Sir Makoto was sent to the past, his apparent age was fixed.”

Despite her young looks, her voice was confident and carried well.

“Estelle?” I asked.

“Indeed. It is an honor to speak with you, Sir Makoto Takatsuki,” she greeted gracefully.

The cold looks and tone I’d usually seen and heard from her were nowhere to be seen. Instead, she was smiling adorably at me.

Then, her small hands took hold of mine.

“Uhm?”

“Ahh, this is wonderful. Lady Ira spoke of you almost every night. She talked of how incredible your exploits in the past were. I’ve wanted to speak with you for so long... Do you have plans tonight? If you come to my room, I can offer you the greatest hospitality from Cameron.”

“Hold it right there! No one said anything about that!”

“What do you mean, aftereffect?! Is Takatsuki going to be stuck like this forever? That’s not fair!”

Lucy and Sasa pulled Estelle away from me. It seemed they weren’t exactly focused on the same things, though.

Forget that, though... Why’s Estelle acting like this? Well, I suppose every other time I’ve seen her, Ira’s been in control, so this is the first time we’ve actually met.

“Oh? Well, I shall yield tonight to the two of you. Perhaps another night, Sir Makoto.”

“I don’t care what night it is!”

“That’s right! Not even *you* can get away with that!”

Estelle shrugged. "You both know I won't give up, don't you?"

I couldn't get a word in edgewise, so I just spaced out.

"Yo! Takatsuki! Good to see you again!" someone cheered. They clapped me on the shoulder.

"Huh?"

I turned and saw a Japanese face framed by bright blonde hair. Her features were beautiful, and her eyes were alight with life.

She's...a gyaru! Wh-What's a gyaru doing in this world? Hang on, forget about that!

Introverts and gyarus were like night and day. I needed to run away.

"Takatsuki...?" the girl asked, looking confusedly at me as I backed away.

Now that I looked closer, she seemed familiar.

"Wait, Keiko Kawakita?"

This was one of my classmates from our old world. She was Sasa's best friend and had ended up as a slave in Great Keith before Fujiyan had helped her out. She'd been dark-haired the last time I'd seen her, but it seemed she'd gone blonde again.

On that note, apparently they had hair dye in this world. I hadn't known that.

"Wha... You forgot me...?" She looked completely shocked.

Crap. What do I even say?

"Oh, my esteemed Tackie," Fujiyan interjected. "Is this where you were?"

"Good evening, Mr Takatsuki'h."

He'd come by with his wife.

"Michio!" Kawakita wailed. "Takatsuki forgot me! Isn't that awful?!" As she played up the crocodile tears, she hugged him.

Whaaaaat?! Um, Kawakita?! You may be friends, but his wife's right there!

The wife in question, though, looked completely unbothered.

"It was probably your hair, no'h? He probably just didn't recognize you because it's blonde'h."

"It can't be! I had blonde hair at school. That's why I thought he'd notice."

"Well, the dark hair definitely suits you better, at least in my opinion'h."

"Hmm, well if you say so, maybe I'll go back."

The two of them were having a cheery conversation...but Kawakita was still holding on to Fujiyan.

Wh-What's going on...?

"You seem confused, so allow me to explain," Fujiyan said apologetically.

"Lady Kei and I have actually gotten married..."

"Married?!"

Fujiyan and Kawakita were married?

It'd only been a year, so that was pretty sudden. Actually, she'd pretty clearly been after him in Great Keith. They were *married*, though...

Nina had been his partner from the start. Was she okay with this? Nina must have noticed my glance because she came closer.

"You don't need to worry'h. Our husband is the greatest merchant in Roses. Two wives would not be enough. This is just adding another successor'h. Chris is at home with the kids, so she couldn't come'h. She wanted me to let you know'h."

My brain ground to a halt at that.

Successors? Kids? Fujiyan had *kids*?

It's pretty normal in this world. Not having anyone in line to inherit his empire would be a bigger problem, considering its size, Ira chided.

I reeled in shock.

R-Right. This was normal, then?

You could get going on that as well.

Don't be ridiculous... Everyone's changed a whole bunch while I was gone.

“Takatsuki!” a voice pulled me back to earth. “This is where you were. We were looking for you.”

“Sorry we’re late.”

A happy couple pulled me away from my spacing out. They had the crest of the Soleil Knights sewn into their clothes—Sakurai and Yokoyama.

“Oh, you came,” I managed to reply.

“You seem down,” Sakurai commented. “What happened?”

“Fujiyan showed me how much more of a man he is...”

“Fujiwara did?”

“Yeah. I haven’t managed anything in comparison.”

“You saved the world!” Sakurai protested. “What are you talking about?!”

Oh right... Sakurai had kids too, didn’t he? Why was I the only virgin...?

Uh, well...you could change that whenever you like. If you wish, I could guide you to freedom from that tonight? Who will you have first? Sophia? Maybe Lucy or Aya?

Ira was going crazy.

Will you accept the goddess’s guidance to—

I didn’t even let the selection show up before I turned it down. I could do that on my own.

Reeeaaally?

Don’t make fun of me. I’m a man. I can do it when it counts! Probably...

“Oh, Saki, Keiko!” Sasa interrupted the stupid conversation. She’d spotted her friends and dragged them into some girl talk.

I wondered where Lucy was, but soon saw her chatting happily with Florna, who’d joined Estelle. Right, Florna was Lucy’s sister-in-law, wasn’t she? I’d caught sight of the Priestess of Fire earlier as well, so they were all here. I

hadn't seen the Priestess of the Sun, though.

"Oh, is Princess Noelle not here tonight, Sakurai?" I asked casually.

His eyes widened. Had I said something weird?

Fujiyan read my mind and jumped in to help.

"We had yet to tell you, but Lady Noelle has become the queen of Highland."

"The queen?!"

"She's Queen Noelle now."

She's already taken the throne? The king had still been going strong the last time we'd met.

"The previous king abdicated in response to the country's recent defeat... Oh, pardon me, Sir Sakurai."

"It's fine, Fujiwara. Maybe we wouldn't have lost if I had been stronger."

"No, it was a problem of strategy. Astaroth was stronger than we imagined."

"Him..."

That was the demon lord that'd seemed completely fine while I was using Ira's anima to cast divine magic.

"Did you get hurt?" I asked Sakurai in concern. He *looked* fine, but then again, Highland had plenty of skilled healers.

"There were no problems," Fujiyan assured. "Sir Sakurai was able to defeat the demon lord Forneus alone."

"You defeated a demon lord on your own?!"

No way. Did they realize how hard it'd been to defeat Bifrons back in the past when he was in his prime? Sakurai's Hero of Light skills were definitely way stronger than Anna's.

"I thought Forneus usually stayed underwater? I heard that this made him the hardest to defeat." I hadn't actually come across him in the past. Peace had been achieved without fighting him.

"Yeah, everyone thought that Forneus would never show himself...and then

one day, his army struck Laphroaig.”

“Saint Furiae—or Queen Furiae, now—foresaw it, and we were able to defeat Forneus!”

“Huh...”

That made sense. I really wanted to hear about that from her directly. Naturally, though, Furiae wasn’t at the party.

“I wonder when I’ll get to see Furiae,” I muttered without meaning to.

“She’s missed you,” Sakurai said.

“Indeed.” Fujiyan nodded. “She asked after you each time I was selling goods in Laphroaig.”

The two of them had gotten the chance to meet her recently.

I’d missed her too.

It seems pretty unlikely that Nevia reincarnated into her. After all, Furiae was helping to defeat the demon lords. Nevia would never have done that.

The three of us chatted for a while longer before others from the Soleil Knights grouped up around us.

“Sir Takatsuki! Are you recovered now?”

“It will be an honor to be able to fight alongside you again.”

They weren’t the only ones who spotted us—some of my classmates that I didn’t know so well had joined the group.

“Hey, Takatsuki. All healed up?”

“What’s going on with you and Aya? Tell us!”

“Brother!” my friend Peter from the mafia yelled. He pulled me into a painfully tight hug. “I’ve missed yoooo!”

Fujiyan invited the mafia?

For a while, I was bombarded by people I knew. Eventually, all of them moved on.

Lucy and Sasa both noticed how tired I was getting—they flanked me.

“Makoto? The party’ll go on all night. Are you heading back?”

“Takatsuki, you look tired. How about us three slip out?”

I was supposed to be the guest of honor. I couldn’t leave early.

“Don’t worry, Hero Makoto,” Princess Sophia told me. “You must be tired, so you should rest.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes, it will be fine.”

Everyone that was left partying was apparently going to want to make connections or talk business. *Yeah, they’re not going to need me.*

I took the girls up on their offer and headed for the hotel—Fujiyan had made a reservation for me.

It’s been a long day...

And yet, I’d only just gotten back from the past.

I was glad everyone was doing well, though. I hadn’t managed to see Furiae personally yet, but judging by what everyone had said, she was working hard.

Sakurai’s OP strength was still just as OP, so he should be pretty helpful against Iblis. We were quite mighty in this era as well. There were strong fighters from every country, starting with Momo. We had the adventurers from the guild as well.

That reminded me—Sasa had hit the highest adventuring rank, hadn’t she? Lucy was a saint-rank mage as well. On top of all of that, Lucy’s mother, Rosalie, the hero of Springrogue, would probably help.

Meanwhile, on the enemy side, the only demon lord left—other than Iblis—was Astaroth.

Ga ha ha! We’ve won. I won’t even need to do anything this time! I thought, collapsing onto the bed.

I’d had so much to drink. It wasn’t long before I passed out.



Right after I fell asleep, I found myself in a completely white area.

It was a dream that wasn't a dream. This was the divine realm, enveloped in soft light.

How long had it been since I'd come here? It had me feeling all nostalgic.

"Makoto, you're back."

My body shook. Her voice was like music in my ears. I could smell something floral.

The divine feeling I got here was the same as when we'd first met. I felt even dizzier than I had back then. Goose bumps rose on my skin, and I couldn't muster up a single word. Even using *Calm Mind*, my heart was pounding.

"I've fulfilled my duty and returned, Noah."

Before I knew it, I'd dropped to one knee and lowered my head.

I was back.

Back in front of Noah, finally.

As my chest warmed in joy, I heard an odd *clink*.

I looked up to see Noah.

Uh?

She wore rings with massive gems on the fingers of both hands, several necklaces around her neck, and lots of gems attached to her clothes. It was like looking at a Christmas tree.

This was odd—she had made herself even more beautiful than before, but the lack of taste in everything she was wearing made it more disappointing than anything.

"Huh? My believers offered it all to me...does it look weird?" she asked, scratching at her cheek. She looked kinda awkward.

It made sense, though. Having more believers meant she got a whole bunch of offerings.

"N-No..." I said, swallowing an agreement.

I used *Calm Mind* to make sure it didn't show on my face as I sighed mentally. This was like becoming one of the nouveau riche...except for goddesses.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with His Goddess

“You’ve returned, Makoto.”

The goddess favored me with a loving smile. She glowed with divine light.

“It’s been a while, Noah,” I said with a quiet bow. I glanced up at her. Her clothes were covered in gems of every color of the rainbow. There were way too many. Every time she moved, I could hear the jangle of metal on metal.

Yeah... Nouveau riche for goddesses... I thought.

“I can hear you, Makoto,” she told me with a sidelong look.

She was reading my mind like it was nothing again. I might as well have said that out loud.

“Well, with how beautiful you are, you don’t need the gems,” I said.

“Hmm, is that so? Not bad,” she said with a somewhat pleased look. “Right, here you go, then.”

She snapped her fingers.

“Ahh!”

A huge amount of something started raining down on me. Wait, were they the gems and jewelry?

Noah now looked the same as she usually did, and there was a pile of her accessories strewn all around me. Wait, she was giving them all to me?

“Um... Your believers gave you these, right? Are you sure?” I asked.

“It’s fiiine. After all, as my apostle, you’re my proxy. Everything that’s mine is my apostle’s, and my apostle’s words are my words.”

“An apostle’s that big a deal?!”

I’d always been her only believer, so I’d never realized.

“Yup. If you told one of my female believers to come to your room tonight, they’d do it. They’ll do anything you say. Want to try it?”

“No!”

That was scary. Also, Lucy and Sasa would kill me if I did that.

“Well, whatever.” With that, Noah darted closer. “I’m glad you’re back. I’ve got so many believers, and it’s all thanks to you!”

“R-Right. I’m glad you’re happy.”

I felt kinda nervous—it was the first time we’d met in three years.

“And you’ve been all over the place, even though you only just woke up.”

“Eh, it’s been ages since I’ve seen everyone,” I said. “It was a lot of effort, but it was fun.”

“Well done. You should take more care of yourself, though.”

Her voice was soft and loving. Hearing her speak like that made all of my nerves drain away.

“So, by the way... Am I...your apostle...your believer again?” I asked.

Noah blinked at me, and then immediately burst out laughing. “You’re such a worrywart!” She pointed at a sheet of paper.

That was my Soul Book. When’d she get it?

“Goddess Noah’s Apostle,” I read. I heaved a sigh of relief. *I’m her believer again. Though I’m not her only one like before, I’m still one of them.*

That made me remember Princess Sophia talking to me earlier.

“Oh right, you haven’t chosen a hero or priestess?” I asked.

She was the eighth goddess of the religion—one of the official goddesses of the continent. Surely she should be appointing a priestess to unify her believers and a hero to protect them from their enemies.

“Hmm, I’ll do it eventually,” she said disinterestedly.

“Are you sure? We’re on the verge of the final battle against Iblis. If your hero fights...”

“It’s fine. After all, I have you.”

I fell silent. It was kinda embarrassing that she had so much faith in me.

“Can I be Roses’s State-Authorized Hero again? If you need more believers, then I’ll do anything I can...”

Heroes and priestesses were charged with spreading their goddess’s faith. If our faith didn’t have either of them, I’d have to pick up the slack.

“I hate micromanaging. Don’t sweat the details and just do what you like,” she replied.

“Right.”

That was Noah all right. It was like I’d never left. She was always so laissez-faire with pretty much everything.

“More importantly,” she carried on, her voice getting more serious, “you shouldn’t focus entirely on Iblis. The mortal races in this period aren’t a monolith.”

I didn’t reply immediately. “What do you mean?” I finally asked after trying to figure it out for myself.

We were all allied and about to challenge Iblis together. And despite that...we weren’t all together as a monolith?

Noah smiled meaningfully, probably in answer to my thoughts. “There is no end to mortal greed...” she murmured.

“Greed?”

“The mortals have a plan—they’ll decide who will be the next leader of the continent based on *which country* contributes the most against Iblis.”

“Highland’s the leader of the continent, right?”

“And that’s started to chaaaange,” she trilled. She launched into an explanation.

There were three main reasons that Highland’s influence was dropping. The first went without saying—their defeat against Iblis. The second was that Queen Noelle was abolishing slavery and the strict hierarchy that they’d had. She’d

taken a position against it, and her policies since her coronation had been focused in that direction. The nobility and church were fundamentally opposed to that system changing, so there was some internal instability within the country.

“And the third is other countries rising,” Noah said, flicking a third finger up.

“Other countries...like Great Keith?”

They were a militaristic nation and the second most powerful on the continent. I guessed they’d gotten stronger than I remembered? Apparently, my assumption was wrong though, because Noah grinned.

“Bzzzt, nope! The correct answer was Laphroaig and Roses.”

“Wha?” I managed after a long pause. Those were the *last* two names I’d expected to come out of her mouth. Laphroaig had only existed as a country for a year, and even I knew Roses was weak.

“Whatever else you can say about Laphroaig, Furiae’s working hard at it. A lot of the cambions that were hiding throughout the other countries have gone to help her as well.”

Now that it had been officially recognized as a country, it’d gathered a pretty large population, it seemed. I guess it’d count as a rapid expansion of manpower.

“On top of that, Saint Furiae and the Hero of Light working together to defeat Forneus has made a big difference. It’s given the country a real voice.”

“Huh...”

Right, they’d said Forneus had attacked Laphroaig, hadn’t they? I could understand how beating him so soundly would increase their status.

“But what about Roses?” I asked. “It’s got a small territory, a weak army, and not much in the way of resources either, right?” On top of that, its goddess—Eir—hated fighting.

“Firstly, Springrogue said they’d follow Roses’s policies. The reason for that...well, it has to do with you. Can you guess?”

If it had to do with *me*...

“The stuff with Bifrons?” It’d been me that had stopped Bifrons’s resurrection in what had previously been the Forest of Fiends.

But that on its own was enough?

“It looks like the Forest of Fiends going away was a big part of it. The elders felt an obligation and wanted to reward the State-Authorized Hero of Roses.”

I had no words. This had all blown up way more than I’d realized.

“Great Keith’s position has dropped a bit as well. That’s because of you too.”

“What happened there?” I’d stopped the comet from hitting the country, but my name hadn’t been connected to that publicly.

“After demolishing their tournament, Aya went back to being an adventurer of Roses. She didn’t renew her position as State-Authorized Hero of Great Keith.”

“Sasa resigned from being a hero?”

Right, she hadn’t mentioned any hero stuff. She’d been busy enough as an orichalcum rank adventurer.

“Great Keith’s strongest fighter effectively defected to Roses, so they lost a lot of face.”

“That’s scary.”

We might’ve made some enemies...

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Noah clarified. “The general seems to admire you a fair amount.”

“He...does?”

General Talisker, the leader of their army, *had* been at the party yesterday. Apparently the joke about canceling all of his appointments to come see me hadn’t actually *been* a joke. He’d asked really in-depth questions about what’d happened in the past, and he hadn’t been unfriendly at all. I hadn’t thought I’d scored that many points with him.

“Everyone wants a piece of you,” Noah cheered, teasing me. “You’re making me so prooouud!”

You're gonna make me blush.

Either way, now I knew what had been going on in the present.

The two of us kept talking for a while. It'd been so long since we'd spoken, and there was so much to talk about.

I told her about my concerns back in the past, and we talked about Demon Lord Cain, the Black Knight. I mentioned how we tried to beat the Seafloor Temple together, and about fighting the other demon lords and Iblis.

Noah listened to it all with a smile on her face.

Suddenly, I remembered something.

"Oh, speaking of all that."

"What is it?" Noah asked.

"Do you know who Nevla reincarnated into in the present?"

She hummed, putting a finger to her cheek in thought as she tilted her head. Ira had told me she didn't know. But maybe Noah...

"I don't know."

"Oh, okay then..."

Well, that was that, then. I'd just have to keep looking. Was she really one of the people I'd already met? Maybe that was actually a trap, and it was someone I'd never even seen before.

As I worried about it, my surroundings started to warp. I was going to be waking up soon.

"Oh, right," Noah said casually. "Even if the whole world becomes your enemy...I will be your ally, okay?"

"Huh?"

That had come out of *nowhere*. It was a weird thing to say. I'd been the one believer of a goddess who'd been originally treated as a wicked deity. Now, though, she was an official goddess in the continent's pantheon, and she had a huge number of followers.

I had other people I could rely on too—Lucy, Sasa, Princess Sophia, and the Grandsage. Did it make sense for me to lose all of them as allies?

“What do you mean?” I asked eventually.

Noah just laughed weakly. “Essentially, that no matter what happens, you can talk to me. You believe in me, right?”

“Of course,” I answered immediately. Her guidance and the elemental magic skill she’d given me had brought me this far.

“If you’re really in trouble, count on me. *I’m* the one who’s guided you so far, right? You should be relying on me, not Ira!”

With that, she vanished. I didn’t even have time to reply. My vision went white, and I realized I’d woken up.

What was that last thing supposed to be about? I needed to rely on Noah, not Ira?

Maybe I haven’t been showing her enough faith?

If that was the case, I’d have to pray to her more. Noah was the only goddess for me.

Still, that last bit of conversation had been weird.

“Even if the whole world becomes your enemy?”

Those words refused to leave my mind as my eyes opened.



When I woke up, there was a big pile of precious gems next to my pillow. So *she really did give them to me*. Something was drawing more of my attention though.

“Mmmm... Sir Makoto...”

I felt a weight pressing on my body. There was a *person* on top of me. This person had white hair and wide red eyes—there was no way I’d mistake her for anyone else.

“Momo...what are you doing?” I asked.

“Good morning, Sir Makoto,” she answered with a grin.

She didn’t carry herself with any of the usual dignity she had as the Grandsage. Somehow or other, she’d crept into my bedroom. *Well, I guess with Teleport, it’s not exactly hard.* Waking up to find that she’d sneaked into my bed had been a common occurrence a thousand years ago.

There wasn’t really anything to worry about, so I put a hand down on the side of the bed to get up and wash.

Squish.

My hand landed on something soft...softer than I’d expected.

“Hm?”

“M-Makoto?”

I looked and found that my hand had fallen on Lucy’s chest. She had a slightly red face and an indescribable expression. Apparently, she’d crawled into my bed too.

She looked between Momo, who was on top of me, and my hand, which was on top of her breast. She was probably trying to decide which to comment on first. Eventually, she turned to Momo.

“Why are you here, Grandsage?”

“Hmph, you’re here too, red-haired mage.”

Lucy and Momo exchanged inscrutable looks. Regardless of anything else, there were too many people in this bed—it definitely wasn’t built for three.

“You two, would you get outta—”

“Morning, Takatsuki! I made break...fast...” Sasa’s eyes went wide. “Hey! Lu! What are you doing?! And you too, Grandsage?!”

Sasa had come into the room wearing an apron—she dragged the other two out of the bed as soon as she spotted them. *It’s been too long.* We all had breakfast together, then someone from the Soleil Knights came to collect Momo. She’d dipped out of some important meeting, apparently.

“Grandsage! Please return to the castle!”

“No! I will remain here!”

“You cannot! Queen Noelle personally instructed that you are to attend!”

“No!!!”

The burly knights hoisted her up and dragged her out of the room. Momo could have teleported out if she really wanted to, so I guessed she was more or less willing to do her work. It was a shame we hadn’t gotten to talk much, since she’d gone out of her way to visit me.

I should drop by her place at some point.

“Hey...why is she so attached to you?” Lucy asked.

Sasa eyed me. “Did something happen between you two?”

“Well, in the past...we fought together a bit, I guess,” I answered.

“Reeeeeeally?”

“It doesn’t feel like ‘a bit.’”

The two of them looked *far* from convinced.

Momo and I had actually known each other for 1,003 years. A thousand of them had been spent asleep, though.

The two of them kept up their questioning as we finished our breakfast. We were having some postmeal tea when Lucy spoke up.

“Hey, Makoto, have you got any plans today?”

“Nope, none.”

“Then let’s go see Fuu!” Sasa exclaimed.

To Furiae, huh? I’d definitely like to say hi if we could see her. “That’s not going to be easy, is it?” I asked. “They kicked us out just yesterday. Plus, Princess is a *queen* now.” I remembered the man’s—Havel’s—face. It probably wouldn’t help if we just showed up again.

“Don’t worry, there’s more than one way to meet Fuuri!”

“Yup! We’re great friends!”

“Yeah.”

Lucy and Sasa apparently had a plan. I listened to the two of them explain it.

“We train together with her once every ten days in a public park in the ninth district,” Lucy said.

Sasa nodded. “Fuu spends the whole day sitting down now that she’s a queen.”

“And we told her she’d get fat if she kept it up.”

“She said it’d be depressing to do on her own.”

“Plus, she doesn’t have many friends.”

“She’ll have guards, but we know them so it’ll be fine.”

“Now’s the time we meet up, so let’s go!”

So that’s about the size of it. “I see.” It was a more casual strategy than I’d expected. Actually, I was thinking that Furiae had pretty much turned into a busy office worker by now.

“So the route there is—” I began, moving to check the map I had.

“What are you talking about?” Lucy asked. “We can just teleport straight there!”

“Uh, but we need to go through a checkpoint to—”

“It’ll be fine as long as we don’t get spotted. Off we go!”

With that distinctly Rosalie-esque statement, Lucy grabbed my arm. Sasa seemed familiar with how things went, and she was already holding Lucy’s hand.

“Let’s-a gooo!☆” she cheered.

“Yeah! *Teleport!!!*”

The next thing I knew, my vision blurred and went completely white.



The scenery changed. There was a lot of greenery here, but it was too maintained to be a forest. We were in the middle of an urban area as well.

Is this the park they were talking about?

That was when I realized—

“Lucy? Sasa?”

—that I couldn’t see either of them.

Lucy doesn’t have great precision with her Teleport yet. Your arrival coordinates slipped a bit, Noah told me.

So Lucy messed up the spell... Her control had always been a bit rough.

Forget that, though. Look behind you.

Behind me? I did what she asked and turned around. A person with a familiar face and a familiar voice locked eyes with me.

“Huh?” she murmured.

She had long black hair that reached her waist, and her eyes were like black gems with flecks of purple. She had snow-white skin, and her features were stunning—she most definitely fit the self-proclaimed title of “most beautiful in the world.”

This was the queen of the revived country of Laphroaig—Furiae Naya Laphroaig.

Her eyes were wide as she looked at me. “Ah... My knight?” She looked like she’d just witnessed a ghost.

It’d been three years since I’d last seen her. She looked just as beautiful as ever, but her gaping mouth and round eyes made her look a little lost.

“Hey, it’s been a while,” I said, lifting a hand in greeting.

She flinched briefly, her eyes flicked around, and then...her face smoothed out into an expressionless mask.

“Princess?” I asked.

“Who precisely are you talking to?” Furiae demanded coldly, turning away.

Uh? This wasn’t quite how I’d expected this to go.

Oh my, she’s acting all cold to you now that she’s the queen of Laphroaig, I heard Noah tease me.

What was with her?

Well, she's the leader of a country, isn't she? Her position is far too different from a commoner like you.

Oh...I guess so. We'd traveled together, but now she'd become a queen, while I was just a former-hero commoner. There was a big gulf between us. Maybe there was nothing I could do.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing good," I told her. "See you."

I'd done what I'd come here for—I'd been able to see her again. I was a little sad to be going, but it probably wasn't the best idea to stick around too much longer.

I turned around and made to leave. Because I'd teleported here, I didn't know where I actually was, so I would find a hotel or something first.

"Ah...no, wai..." I heard from behind me. I turned, and Furiae was holding out a hand toward me. I was pretty sure she was going to say "wait," so I stopped walking.

We stared at each other. I had a questioning look on my face, but she didn't say a word. Silence reigned.

"Wh-Why are you staring?! You pervert!"

Furiae moved to cover herself. *What's with her?* I wasn't sure how to react, but then I was suddenly engulfed in a looming shadow. I didn't have a chance to figure out what was happening. Voices shouted from above me.

"Ahhh! Makoto, move!"

"Oh, Fuu!"

Lucy and Sasa fell from the sky and landed on me.

"Guh," I grunted. "C'mon, Lucy." I spat dirt from my mouth.

"S-Sorry!"

Apparently, she'd teleported here...right above me.

Loud voices swirled all around us.

“Lady Furiae, are you safe?!”

“Where did *they* come from?!”

“Arrest them!”

Judging from their stern shouts and general appearance, the people surrounding us were guards. I looked closer and saw Furiae’s aide, Havel.

“What are you doing?! Take them down!” he yelled.

“Yessir! Leave it to— Wait, are they...Lady Lucy and Lady Aya?”

“You want us...to take down Lady Lucy and Lady Aya?”

“No way, no how.”

“They’d take *us* down.”

“You got that right.”

So as soon as the mages acting as Furiae’s guards recognized Lucy and Sasa, they lost their nerve.

“Makoto Takatsuki! To think you would sneak past Lady Furiae’s guards just to see her... The punishment would normally be severe, but we shall let it pass just this time! Leave, now!” Havel demanded harshly.

He *really* wanted us gone. *We met with the queen without permission— should he be letting us go?* His behavior confused me, but it would be a pain if he decided to change his mind.

I was about to apologize and leave, but not everyone was so accepting.

Specifically, Lucy and Sasa lit up in protest.

“Come on, Fuuri! Makoto came to see you!”

“That’s right! You’ve missed him so much, haven’t you?!”

Furiae remained silent.

“Wait! Lady Furiae is tir—”

“Shut it, Havel! Unless you want to eat a *Fireball*!”

“I’ll beat the hell out of you!” Sasa added.

“Pardon me,” Havel replied after a long pause. He pulled back at their threats. Was he *really* one of the leaders of Laphroaig?

“Fuuri! Why won’t you say anything?!”

“What’s wrong?!”

Still, she said nothing.

“We’ll just cause trouble if we stay,” I said, trying to mediate.

Havel’s face smoothed out in relief. “Indeed. We have countless things to do in regards to the Third Northern Front Plan. We have no time to concern ourselves with a retiree! Go back to Roses and soak in their hot springs, you former hero!”

Despite how harsh the tone was, his suggestion was oddly kind. The plan he mentioned drew my attention, though. The *Third* Northern Front Plan, huh? I’d have to ask Princess Sophia or Sakurai for the details.

“Hmph! Makoto’ll be a State-Authorized Hero again soon!”

“That’s right! Then he’ll be a hero of Roses, so he’ll be involved!”

“What?!” Furiae demanded, breaking her silence. Her composed expression had broken apart into shock. I met her eyes.

“Princess?” I asked.

“N-No!” Her expression jolted again as she turned away. She murmured something to Havel, and he looked at me.

“Makoto Takatsuki...you are taking the position of State-Authorized Hero again?” His overbearing attitude had softened out of nowhere.

It wasn’t like I *needed* to answer him. I was considering it when Lucy and Sasa decided to answer for me.

“That’s right! Princess Sophia’s making the preparations now!”

“Takatsuki’s ready and raring to fight Iblis!”

Havel showed no real reaction to that. But behind him, Furiae was shaking.

“There you have it, Lady Furiae,” Havel said to her.

Furiae's response was too quiet for me to hear.

"Makoto Takatsuki, your list of accomplishments is long. Among other things, you defeated the demon lord in Springrogue, assisted the Hero of Light against Zagan, and even fulfilled a duty from Goddess Althena herself. All of these have been great contributions to our cause. Why do you still wish to fight?"

It was a pretty long question from him.

"'Why' isn't exactly..." I could hardly just say it was because there were still more demon lords. I would sound like an idiot.

But Sasa said it for me. "Well, there are more demon lords, so Takatsuki will face them!"

Stop it, Sasa, you're gonna have them thinking I'm stupid. Lucy just nodded in agreement.

"There you have it, Lady Furiae."

Furiae's shoulders started to shake, and I heard the word idiot from her at least once. Surely it was getting pretty annoying for Havel to keep playing messenger for us.

"Perhaps you could speak to him yourself?" he suggested, apparently thinking the same thing.

That same expressive jolt made its way across her face as she turned to me. Her long hair fanned out with the movement.

"Makoto Takatsuki!" she proclaimed, glaring and pointing a finger at me.

"Y-Yes?" I asked, straightening instinctively.

"I will not accept this! In the name of the queen of Laphroaig, I will stop your return as a hero!"

"Huh?" What was *that* supposed to mean?

"Lady Furiae, interfering in the assignments between other countries is outside of your authority."

"Be quiet, Havel! We're leaving"

With that, she strode purposefully away.

What the hell was all that? Lucy, Sasa, and I all exchanged baffled looks.

“My apologies, Sir Makoto Takatsuki, Lady Lucy, Lady Aya.”

Havel’s earlier haughtiness vanished as he apologized—he ran after Furiae.

None of us had a clue what had happened, so we just headed back to the inn via Lucy’s teleport. We were going to have a discussion within the party about what had caused her to act like that.

Not long after, a red-winged bird flew through the window.

“To the two Crimson Fangs! Urgent request from the adventurer’s guild!”

The bird must’ve been enchanted or something, because it was speaking fluently. It held a small roll of paper in its talons.

With practiced movements, Sasa removed the letter and read it.

“Again?” Lucy complained. “I’ll pass.”

“We can’t, Lu. There’s a flock of wyverns attacking a village in Roses.”

“Ah, damn it! That’s one of the things we *have* to deal with! Let’s wrap it up before dinner!”

“Yup! See you later, Takatsuki!”

And with that, the two of them teleported away.

I would have wanted to go too...

I’d asked them about it, but apparently, Lucy wasn’t used to teleporting three people. That was what had caused the issue with teleporting to Furiae earlier. Lives were on the line here, so they couldn’t afford to be late. Hence, I was left inn-sitting.

I was all on my own in the room. I considered going to see Momo. Her estate was within the castle grounds, though. I probably couldn’t go there on my own. After all, I wasn’t a hero anymore.

A knock at the door drew me from my thoughts.

“Come in,” I answered.

“Oh, you’re on your own?” Princess Sophia asked. She stepped through the

door with a surprised look at how empty the room was.

“Are you done with work for today?” I asked.

“No, I still have things to do, but I came to see you.”

“Are you resting properly?” I asked after a moment. She was a real workaholic.

“I’m fine. There are people who have it worse than me... Regardless, I’ve arranged an audience with Lady Noelle. Make sure you’re free tomorrow.”

“That was quick.”

“She wants to thank you as soon as she can. Goddess Althena forced you to go to the distant past completely alone, so she likely feels some responsibility for it. She put a lot of effort into making time for you.”

“Well, I’m back safe, so it’s not really a problem.”

The princess giggled. “I thought you’d say that, but Lady Noelle isn’t happy with leaving things as they are.”

“I see.” Noelle was really earnest about that sort of thing. It made sense, considering she was descended from Anna.

Princess Sophia and I spent some time after that discussing things. It sounded like the Third Northern Front Plan would be put into motion quickly. There was friction over who would take the lead on it, though. Relations between Highland and Laphroaig were particularly rough. That wasn’t a big surprise, considering how much Highland used to discriminate against cambions. Because of that, though, things had ground to a halt.

“There are people saying that whichever country is responsible for Iblis’s defeat will be the next leader of the continent. That would be fine, but there are also rumors of warfare to rule the continent as a whole. Lady Noelle and Furiae wouldn’t go to *war*, but...”

Her voice was low and miserable. People were saying that kind of thing? She had a lot of weight on her shoulders at the moment.

I told her about visiting Furiae. Obviously, she was taken aback at the issue with the teleport.

Also, apparently, Furiae was deeply in debt to Princess Sophia. Roses had been the country to provide the most help for Laphroaig's rebuilding. She couldn't understand why Furiae had been so cold to me.

After we'd been talking a while, she made to leave. "I will see you tomorrow, then." She departed, rushing off, and I was on my own again.

I looked vacantly up at the ceiling, trying to puzzle out Furiae's act. She didn't want me to be a hero again for some reason. "What's she thinking...?" I mused to the empty room as I lay back on the bed.

I wasn't expecting a response, of course. The question should have just faded away into silence.

"Allow me to answer, Master of mine," came a low, carrying voice.

I leaped out of the bed, frantically checking my surroundings. I couldn't see anyone, though. "Who's there?" I asked in a clipped tone, readying my dagger.

"For what reason are you so tense, Master?"

"Huh?"

Listening more closely, the voice was coming from near my feet. Two eyes shone from within the shadow my body cast on the floor. Then, a black creature bounded out of it. A familiar black cat.

"Wait... Twi?"

This was the cat that had become my familiar in Macallan. He'd always been friendlier with Furiae than with me, though.

"Indeed. To think I would be forgotten... How sad." The cat let out a sigh and proceeded to groom his fur. I couldn't manage a single word in response.

"What is wrong, Master? Incidentally, I am famished, so I request some fish."

I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Why are you suddenly *talking* like it's *nothing*?!"

Apparently, the biggest change since I'd gone to the past...was him.



Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Participates in a Strategy Meeting

“My...this is a rather nice ham,” Twi mused as he munched on it.

It was from room service. Unfortunately, fish wasn’t on the menu.

“It’s not too salty?” I was pretty sure it’d be a bit much for his small body. Well, he was a magic beast, so he’d probably be fine.

“That was quite delicious. Mine stomach is sated.”

He patted a paw on his stomach as he spoke. It was cute, but the dignified voice coming from him *really* didn’t fit.

“So? How’re you talking?” I asked.

“I hardly think that matters, Master of mine.”

“I disagree. Out with it.”

“You concern yourself too much with the details... Mine command of the language of man is thanks to the moon princess...”

Twi explained the whole thing. While I’d been in the past, Furiae had been looking after him. When she’d become a saint, she’d gained a new skill. It was generally called the *Saint’s Miracle*.

“So that skill lets you talk?”

“All magic beasts can speak eventually. Ordinarily, it would take over a decade to develop that ability. However, the moon princess shortened that span. Convenient, no?” he answered, grooming himself once again.

A skill to draw out latent potential? Laphroaig had grown enough to stand on an even playing field with the other six nations—that skill must have been part of it. There were a lot of very talented people in the country now.

“I guess my role as her guardian knight will be made redundant, huh?” There wouldn’t be any work left for me to do.

“Ah, yes, Master. That is why I am here.” Twi jumped onto my shoulder. He felt as light as a feather. “The moon princess regrets what happened today rather deeply. She was suppressing her delight at meeting you, but she despairs at the misunderstanding her actions caused.”

“It definitely didn’t look like that... Why was she so cold to me?”

Twi continued, apparently realizing the explanation he’d given wasn’t particularly convincing. “Is that not obvious? She doesn’t want you on the battlefield any longer.”

“Then why not just say that?” Did she need to go out of her way to be so harsh?

“Her lack of openness in such matters is one of her failings. She is doing her best to prevent your return to a position as a hero. If you lack that position, you will have no duty to fight.”

“Why’d she feel the need to go that far...?” Was that *really* why? Had she not just decided to break ties now that she was a queen? Nothing the cat said really seemed logical.

Twi’s and Noah’s voices suddenly overlapped.

“Hah, and this is why we call you dense, Master.”

Yup, typical Makoto...

What’s that all about, Noah? Actually, weren’t you the one going on about how our positions were different?

Couldn’t you tell from how she was actiing?

“You have no insight into the mood...”

Both of them were acting exasperated at me.

Wait, I was worse at picking up on the mood than a *cat*?

The cat in question chuckled. “I shall lend you a paw, Master of mine. With this—*Shadow Magic: Shadow Walk!*”

“Oh?”

Many magic circles filled the air. *Twi can cast such a complicated spell?!*

A hole opened in the air. It was pitch-black and about two meters in diameter.

“Come then, Master.”

“H-Hang on, Twi.”

Twi didn’t even turn around—he just hopped into the hole. His tiny frame was quickly swallowed by the darkness.

I’m pretty sure that’s a high-class spell, right...?

It was a spell similar to *Teleport* that let you move through shadows. Unlike *Teleport*, it only allowed you to go to preprepared locations. Still, it was a rather useful spell.

And he can cast it! I thought he only had the ability to speak... Was he actually some ridiculously high-level familiar?

Where does it go? I wondered. He’d gone without saying anything about that. I eyed the black hole in the air.

It doesn’t seem dangerous, Noah said.

Well, I doubted Twi would take me somewhere I’d get hurt.

Right, in we go.

I jumped into the hole. My vision went black for a second.

Hm?

I soon realized that I was in someone’s room. The first thing I noticed was the light pink color. The carpet and curtains both had cute flower patterns across them—they were probably a favorite of whoever stayed in this room.

It almost seemed similar to Ira’s domain. But of course, this room wasn’t anywhere near as big.

“Bwuh?”

I couldn’t help the dumb-sounding noise that spilled from my lips. My eyes had fallen on a big painting—a portrait—on the wall. The problem...was who it depicted.

The person in that portrait...was *me*.

I looked around the rest of the room. There were a lot more portraits, all of me. They seemed almost *too* good—like they were photos or something.

“Uh, Twi...you know these pictures...”

“Ah, they are called photos, Master. They were taken using a new magic item pioneered by the Fujiwara Trading Company—a camera.”

They are photos! This is Fujiyan’s fault!

When did they get taken, though? I didn’t remember any of this.

They’re pictures of the past taken using Fate Magic, Noah explained. Ira must have helped.

So Ira was involved too... This was practically a pervert’s dream—you could take photos without the person actually being there. What a terrifying invention.

That wasn’t the problem here, though.

“Hey, Twi. Whose room is this...?”

“Oh, you still haven’t realized?”

He looked blankly at me, all but saying that I should have gotten it by now. *So this room belongs to someone I know? Someone I know who is close to Twi...*

There was only one person I could think of. This was *her* room?

I looked around again—my eyes caught on the photos of me once more. This looked like the room of a stalker and kidnapper from an old movie I’d watched. It was a little scary. Actually, a *lot* scary. I really felt like I’d seen something I shouldn’t have. Like I’d looked into the abyss...

Click.

The sound of a turning doorknob came from behind me. The room’s owner was back.

“Huh?” I heard a confused woman say. It was a familiar voice—one I’d heard earlier today.

I slowly turned around.

There was Queen Furiae, looking like she'd come across some terrible monster in the middle of the night.

"Uh? Uh? Wai— No way. Uh? Uh? Wait... Uh?"

She sounded like a broken radio. No meaningful utterance left her lips.

I glared at Twi. What was he playing at? You needed to make sure a room's owner was okay with you barging in. What if she'd been getting changed?

Do you not realize the situation you're in? Noah interjected.

I know. I just sneaked into the queen of Laphroaig's private room. I wasn't exactly an authority on the laws of this world, but even I knew that this was the kind of thing someone could get banged up for.

"Hey, Princess. There's a reason for this..." I said, walking toward her with a forced smile.

I was sure she was going to fly into a rage, but apparently, she hadn't overcome the confusion yet.

"Uh? Huh... Is this a dream? It is, right? After all, this is my room... My knight wouldn't be here..."

"Princess?"

"D-Definitely a dream! Yeah, I've been tired recently. Right! Right! Ahh, what a relief. Don't scare me like that!" She laughed drily, apparently having decided she was dreaming. "Ohh, my knight. I'll wake up as soon as I touch you anyway, right?"

She touched my cheek.

"O-Oh? Why...can I feel you...?" She started squishing and pulling at my face.

"Princess, that hurts."

"N-No way...? You're...real?"

"Twi brought me here."

Furiae's mouth was hanging open—it was definitely not the expression you'd expect from a beauty like her.

She looked at me, then the photos around the room, and then dragged her gaze back to me. Her face drained of color, then grew as bright red as a fresh apple. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

What should I say? Um, um...

"You've got a lot of portraits, huh?"

Are you an idiot?

No, Noah, I just couldn't think of anything I could have said that would be sensible.

Surely there had to be something else.

You say that, but I couldn't help but notice the photos.

"N-No...these are... It's not..." Furiae sputtered. "There's some kind of mistake..."

"C'mon, Princess, calm down," I said, trying to soothe her. Then, the cat culprit jumped in.

"Master, the moon princess goes around and kisses these photos every day. Do you understand the depths of her feelings for you now?"

Both of us reeled at that. *Twì, you're definitely the one that has no sense if you're willing to say that out loud.*

Furiae had recovered some of her calm, but her face soon twisted again. Seeing someone so beautiful be so angry was definitely a sight. This wasn't the time to be thinking about that, though. I couldn't afford to stay here any longer.

"Right, I'll excuse myself, then," I said.

"Hmph, already leaving?" Twì asked. "You could relax here much longer. Only the two of you are here, Master of mine."

"That's the problem." If she called her guards, I'd be arrested right away. Just as I was about to jump into the *Shadow Walk* hole, my arm was caught in a vice grip. Obviously, by Furiae.

Crap. With how low my stats were, I couldn't shake her off.

"M-My knight..."

“Wh-What is it?”

She just looked down, still ruddy-cheeked.

“Princess?”

“I’m...sorry...for earlier.”

“Earlier?”

“When we met...in the park!”

“It didn’t really bother me.”

“It should have, a little at least.”

“Well, it seems like being a queen has been tough on you.”

“Being queen is nothing...compared to your burdens.”

“Is it?”

There was another long pause.

“Welcome home, my knight.”



“I’m back, Princess.”

I finally got to say it properly.

Furiae let go of my arm. Her grip had been tight enough that I was pretty sure it was going to bruise.

“I’ll come see you some other time,” I said.

“W-Wait! Forget about this room!”

“I’ll do my best,” I replied eventually.

“I know! I can take your memories with a curse and—”

“Oops, I need to be back for the others. Bye!”

“Wait! Stop right there!”

Leaving that scary comment behind, I backed away and jumped into the hole. I came out in the same room I’d been in earlier. When I looked back, I saw that the hole had already vanished. Twi must have closed it. I might have ended up getting kidnapped if he hadn’t, so I was grateful. Still, all of that was a huge shock...in more ways than one.

Furiae hadn’t actually changed. Well, she *had*...but she didn’t hate me, at least.

Honestly, you’re probably even worse for interpreting that as her “not hating you.”

Ah, it’s fine, Noah. She’s just a *tsundere*.

I don’t think so.

Yeah, I don’t either.

Either way, I’d cleared things up with her. I’d need to tell Lucy and Sasa about it too. I waited for them to get back while I trained. It was late at night by the time they returned, and they both looked pretty beat up.

I asked what kind of powerful enemy they’d run into and...

◇ What Lucy and Sasa Told Me ◇

“Lu! You need to be more accurate with your spells!”

“And *you* need to get some ranged attacks!”

“I’m the frontline fighter! Ranged is supposed to be your job, right?”

“Aya, we’re a two-person party, so we should *both* be able to do it!”

“But you’re trash at close range.”

“And the only ranged attack you’ve got is chucking huge rocks around.”

“I don’t know how to do anything else!”

“Then learn!”

“You should take your own advice! You do nothing but chuck *Fireballs!*”

“What was that, you musclehead?!”

“Now you’ve done it, butterfinger exhibitionist!”

“You what?!”

“What?”

“You wanna go?”

“Don’t come crying to me!”

◇ Back in the Present ◇

Apparently, they’d defeated the monsters quickly and then spent the rest of the day fighting. *That* was why they looked beat up. How bad must that fight have been?

“Lu, you’re so stubborn.”

“Right back at you.”

With that, they made up, went for a bath together, and then headed to bed. I guess that was how it went when you fought with those you were closest to.

They fell asleep in minutes, so I wasn’t able to talk about Furiae with them.

The next day, I was in a room on the top floor of Highland Castle with Princess Sophia. Waiting for us there was the highest-ranking person in the country.

“I am glad you are here, Sophia. It’s been a while, Sir Makoto.”

Princess Sophia dropped to one knee. “Thank you for your invitation, Lady Noelle.”

I mimicked the gesture and also took a knee. “It has, Pr—I mean, *Queen* Noelle.”

I’d been sure an audience with the queen would be in a throne room or something, but this wasn’t an official event, so we were in a private office.

“You needn’t be so formal, Sir Makoto. It is thanks to you that the world still stands.”

I looked up at that, watching her face. She really was the spitting image of Anna. And she was wearing an even more impressive dress than the last time I’d seen her. I guess it was her outfit as the queen?

Only the three of us were in the room. Two strong-looking knights stood on the outside of the door right behind us. It felt like a careless lapse in security, but it was probably a show of just how much she trusted us.

“My thanks,” I said. “I have somehow returned.”

“Word of you was passed down from our first queen, Lady Anna. We were to give you our thanks.” Queen Noelle bowed her head deeply.

“Umm...”

“Lady Noelle?!”

Both Princess Sophia and I panicked. I’d never expected the ruler of a country to bow to me! Maybe that was why no one else was here.

“I’m just happy Noah’s faith is recognized now,” I admitted.

“That’s right, Lady Noelle, please, lift your head!” Sophia insisted.

“I am fulfilling my duty as part of the Highland royal family,” Queen Noelle said with a kind smile. Her appearance was just the same as I remembered, but I was pretty sure she looked more tired. Well, ruling a big country like Highland must have been tough.

Her boyfriend ought to be supporting her in times like this especially, but...

“Sakurai’s not here?” I asked. I’d been sure he would be present.

“He’s...busy.” Queen Noelle’s expression was dark as she answered. Maybe something had happened?

“Having defeated two demon lords, it’s obvious that he’s the true return of the savior, Lady Noelle,” Princess Sophia said.

From the way she was talking, I could see that history had gone back to how it had been—Anna (Abel?) was considered to be the savior, and the new Hero of Light in this era was Sakurai. The fate of the world rested on his shoulders.

He may have more pressure on him than even the queen... Maybe he wasn’t in a position to be offering support. Either way, the couple was definitely going through a rough spot.

I looked at the Princess of Roses at my side. She had a firm expression as she talked politics with Queen Noelle.

Yeah, she’s pushing herself way too hard as well.

“What is it, Hero Makoto?” she asked, apparently noticing my look.

“You are also working way too much,” I told her.

“I’m fine,” she answered after a moment. She glanced away with a blush.

That prompted a giggle from Queen Noelle. “You have such a good relationship still,” she remarked. “I’m jealous.”

“L-Lady Noelle?!” Princess Sophia floundered before hurriedly changing the subject. “Now that I think about it, you said you wanted to hear about the past from Hero Makoto! Let’s ask him! I haven’t heard the details either.”

“Oh, that sounds perfect. I cannot think of anything better than to hear how you saved my ancestor.”

“It’ll take a while,” I warned. After all, I’d been there for three years, and our adventures had all been jam-packed with twists and turns.

“Yes, I want to hear it all.”

“Please, tell us.”

“Very well.”

I still wasn’t sure it was right to take so much of a royal’s valuable time, but I

told them about everything in as much detail as I could. Princess Sophia gasped in shock and made all kinds of expressions as I spoke. Queen Noelle nodded along the entire time, her eyes sparkling.

They were particularly excited when they heard the stuff about Bifrons. *Didn't Momo tell them this?* When I asked Momo later, it turned out she didn't remember much of it outside of the conversations with me. Unlike me, she hadn't slept for the last thousand years, so that made sense.

I wrapped up the story after a long time. The one thing I didn't mention was my relationship with Anna.

It would be embarrassing to tell the queen since she was pretty much identical to Anna. Also, my fiancée was right next to me. How could I talk about that? I'd simply called us traveling companions, but...

"Hero Makoto. Were you...truly only *companions* with Saint Anna?" Princess Sophia asked.

"Of course," I replied after a pause. "Is something about it bothering you?"

"No, not really." She was looking at me doubtfully.

Wh-Why?!

A woman's intuition is a scary thing, Noah remarked.

D-Did I slip up while I was talking?

Sophie's just that sharp.

It looked like I wasn't going to be able to hide it... I'd have to tell her the truth later. With the occasional cold trail of sweat running down my neck, I elaborated on some of the other events.

About an hour had passed since then.

"Oh, Lady Noelle, the meeting is soon, isn't it?" Princess Sophia asked.

"Ah...it is nearly time, yes. My apologies, Sir Makoto. I will definitely continue this... Well, I want to, at least."

"There is no getting around it—I can see your concern," the princess

commented.

Both of them let out big sighs.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“A meeting about the Third Northern Front Plan,” Princess Sophia answered.

“There must have been a dozen of them so far, but we’ve yet to agree on a course to take...” Queen Noelle lamented. “Iblis is on the northern continent, and our defeat against Astaroth there has left its mark. Honestly, I doubt I am cut out to be queen...”

“That’s not true, Lady Noelle! You are doing so well!”

“Thank you, Sophia. I appreciate you saying that, but a lot of the nobility are saying that my brother would be more suited to the throne.”

The conversation had sapped all the energy from her voice. Of course, there wasn’t anything I could do to help the ruler of such a powerful nation with her worries, but...if there was...

“May I join that meeting?” I asked before I knew it.

I may not know a lot about politics, but I’ve met Iblis and Astaroth. Maybe I can be helpful.

“Hero Makoto, you are not yet a State-Authorized Hero again, so that will be difficult to—”

Queen Noelle cut off the princess’s apologetic denial. “No, Sophia, it may be easier than you think. Take this, Sir Makoto.”

She handed me a silver badge with the image of Althena on it. It was weighty in my hand, and obviously well-made.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The crest of my royal guards. I have a spare, so I offer it to you.”

Both Princess Sophia and I gasped. She’d handed it over like it was nothing...but wasn’t it a really big deal?! Surely the royal guard should be the elite of the elite.

“As my guard, you can participate in the meeting,” she said with a teasing

smile, just like the Princess Noelle I remembered. This was a pretty reckless way of getting me in.

“If you’re okay with that,” Princess Sophia said with a rueful laugh.

I didn’t mind as long as I got to be part of the meeting.

“Let us be off, then,” Queen Noelle said. “We are convening downstairs.”

With that, I’d managed to get a seat in a strategy meeting against Iblis.



The head of the Soleil Knights spoke, his voice echoing across the space. “Let us begin the discussions of the Third Northern Front Plan.”

Currently, we were in a big conference room in Highland Castle. And by “big,” I mean that it was hosting over a hundred people. Movers and shakers from all the countries were packed inside. There were lots of faces I recognized, and lots I didn’t. Momo’s was one I certainly knew. Of course, her face was actually pressed against the armrest of her big chair—she seemed to be sleeping.

There were several magic displays floating in the air near the center of the room. Apparently, it was called a “satellite system” and was connected to the military bases throughout the continent. Because of this technology, there were *several hundred* people involved in the conference. I had a seat prepared for me right on the edges of the crowd.

“The blow we suffered from Astaroth was due to Highland’s failure. We should regain our honor.”

“Precisely, that is why all seven nations should combine their strength.”

“Our country has only just been founded. We lack the capacity to do so.”

“We have heard that Laphroaig has been training large groups of cambions at all hours.”

“Oh? And where did you hear that rumor? I do hope you aren’t sending spies into our lands while acting as an ally.”

“Prime Minister of Laphroaig, we would prefer that you not see Highland as an enemy...”

“General Talisker of Great Keith, you seem to be acting rather spineless.”

“Your remarks cross the boundaries of politeness. Retract them.”

“My apologies, Lady Dahlia.”

The atmosphere within the meeting was awful. The reason for it was obvious: the people of Highland rejected everything brought up by anyone from any place other than Highland.

“Representatives of Springrogue and Caol Ilan, do you have anything to add?” Estelle asked, trying to change the current topic.

“No, we have nothing.”

“Likewise...”

With that, they were back to square one. Those two representatives probably didn’t want to add anything, considering how terrible the current mood in the room was.

“Everyone’s on edge,” I murmured to Princess Sophia.

“It’s been like this constantly,” she replied disparagingly.

The general discussion went as follows: Highland would bring up a topic, then Laphroaig would argue against it.

Highland was a hierarchical country where humans stood at the top. Cambions in particular had been oppressed for years. Laphroaig, on the other hand, was a country made of a gathering of cambions. Naturally, their citizens had many years’ worth of grudges against Highland. Great Keith and Cameron would mediate between the two. Springrogue, Caol Ilan, and Roses—all being fairly weak in a military sense—barely spoke up.

A year ago, Highland would have been the strongest. However, their defeat against Astaroth had drastically weakened their position.

Additionally, the young queen—Noelle—had significant internal pushback from her older brother’s faction. I would’ve thought that, as queen, she could just kick the faction out, but apparently not. Princess Sophia had mentioned her kindness, but it seemed like it was being seen as naivety by the other nations. I was a bit surprised that the strongest country on the continent had changed so

much in the short time I'd been away.

On the other hand, Laphroaig was unified behind its queen, Furiae. She was a saint, and her citizens viewed her almost like a goddess. From young to old, the people of Laphroaig all obeyed her words.

"Rather than just object, perhaps give your own thoughts!"

"We would rather evaluate the situation for a while."

"Such indecisiveness!"

There was a deep fissure between the two nations.

Queen Noelle was listening to the exchange, but she didn't offer any words of her own. I could see the exhaustion under her serious expression. Quickly, I turned to look at Furiae. She seemed to have no interest in the meeting—she just sat, stroking Twi's back and yawning slightly.

Momo, incidentally, was still sound asleep. I was honestly impressed that she *could* sleep with all the noise.

None of them seemed to have noticed I was here. But considering how slowly things were going, there might not have been any point in me joining in anyway.

"How come the people from Laphroaig are acting so high and mighty?" I asked Princess Sophia quietly, since there was nothing better for me to be doing.

Was this really a country that had only just been revived?

"There's not much to be done about it. Their mages were the deciding factor in the defeat of Forneus," she told me.

"Wasn't it Sakurai who actually finished it, though?"

"Forneus usually lurks deep out at sea. Laphroaig's mages forced the confrontation to happen on land. They also temporarily broke the *Clouds of Darkness*."

"Ah, I get it."

Sakurai's *Hero of Light* skill made him pretty much unmatchable, but he

weakened a lot when he wasn't in direct sunlight.

Clouds of Darkness was a powerful spell that the demon lords' armies used. Apparently, only Laphroaig's mages could open them up. I could see how they had such a strong voice now.

The argument was still raging in the meeting at large.

"The other heroes combined can at least buy time against Astaroth. Meanwhile, we of Laphroaig will eliminate Iblis alongside the Hero of Light."

"What foolishness!"

"Only our mages can break through the *Clouds of Darkness*. Besides, our Saint Furiae can see the future. With both her and the Hero of Light, Iblis is nothing to fear."

"I trust you haven't forgotten that Lady Noelle also holds the title of saint..."

"There are rumors among our people that Lady Furiae is the true saint."

"Rumors not worth the air used to speak them."

"Are you so sure? If Lady Furiae's visions of the future save the world, then it will be her name that goes down in history."

"Such a future will never come to pass!"

"Will you be able to say the same once Iblis is defeated? Lady Furiae and Sir Sakurai will bring about a Millennium of Light!"

"Absurd!"

Things had gotten *way* off-topic.

"What's going on...?" What happened to the Northern Front Plan? I poked Princess Sophia in the shoulder for an explanation.

"Since Forneus's defeat, the people of Laphroaig have been clamoring for a union between their queen and the Hero of Light. Of course, he is Lady Noelle's fiancé, so it will never happen, but..."

I could see how a marriage between a saint and the alleged reincarnation of the Hero of Light could get people so worked up. Surely bringing that up in front of Queen Noelle was a bit beyond rudeness, though...?

I glanced at her and could see tension on her face. I would have thought that she'd respond, but maybe there was some reason she couldn't.

Then, the guy everyone was talking about leaned in and whispered something into Queen Noelle's ear. He must have been giving her some support.

Nice one, Sakurai.

Now then, Furiae...was still stroking Twi's back. But when I looked her way...our eyes met.

Man, she's really staring. She'd just now noticed I was here, it seemed. Her eyes shot open at first, but they soon narrowed in a mighty glare.

"Why are you here?!" She didn't actually say the words, but her lips formed them—that was for sure.

"Just sitting in," I mouthed back.

"Really?" She sent me another doubtful glare.

It made me wonder if I'd said something weird. Of course, I didn't have any right to actually contribute to the conversation. I was a *former* hero, after all. All I could do was listen. I'd been warned ahead of time that if I did have something to say, I had to do it through the commander of the Soleil Knights or someone higher.

"Watch what you say, you filthy cambion!"

"And so your true colors appear, you fraud of an elite!"

Things were *really* heating up now. It was more of a fight than a debate at this point.

This is...pointless...

The meeting was far from a collection of allies talking. If not for their common enemy, Iblis, I was pretty sure Highland and Laphroaig would be at war.

How'd this happen...? What was Ira playing at?

Hello, you there? Ira, politics on the continent are getting pretty crazy.

Despite directing my thoughts up to Ira, I received no response. She hadn't spoken to me in the past few days. Maybe she was busy?

Hey, why are you talking to her rather than me? Are you forgetting whose apostle you are? Noah responded instead, but she sounded like she was sulking a bit.

Of course I know I'm your apostle. But it makes more sense to ask Ira about history, right?

I don't need to be Ira to answer those questions. Are you listening? The gods can't directly interfere in mortal affairs by divine regulation. You do know that, yeah? You're a mortal, so you can, but Ira couldn't warp history to something more convenient. So even if she knew things would end up like this, she couldn't stop it.

Oh... What about Naya? Maybe she could help? I'd never met her, but she was the seventh of the goddesses. Now that Laphroaig was a country again, maybe she'd help?

Well...who knows...

Judging from that, it probably wasn't a great bet. *I guess mortal conflicts will need to be solved by the mortals.*

"How long is this waste of time going to carry on?"

"If Highland had defeated Astaroth, it wouldn't be a problem. That was the plan to begin with."

"Can you not understand that this is exactly why we are holding this meeting?!"

"I could say the same to you. You shouldn't make demands of other countries for something you are incapable of yourself!"

"It isn't a demand! It is a petition!"

"Then we refuse."

"If Iblis regains his power, the world will end!"

"Things are different than how they were a millennium ago. There is only one demon lord remaining. There will be no attack."

They were just talking past each other.

Highland wanted to defeat Astaroth and Iblis soon. They wanted their place on the weaker western continent back, and finishing things quickly would further that cause.

Laphroaig hated Highland and therefore didn't want them to lead the continent anymore. However, they were a young country that wasn't strong enough to lead the continent themselves—hence wanting to buy time and strengthen themselves. On top of that, only their mages were capable of breaking through the *Clouds of Darkness* spell that the demon lords' armies used. That gave them a strong say, and maintaining the current state of things was perfect for them.

So overall, neither would compromise. Despite that, though...the main part of their conversation drew my attention.

Astaroth.

The demon lord was the strongest factor in all of this. As long as Astaroth was on the northern continent, we couldn't do anything against Iblis.

My memories of the fight in the past came back. He hadn't fallen, even to what was practically *divine* magic—*Cocytus*.

Astaroth was the strongest of the demon lords, the king of dragons, and the blood of the dragon god flowed through his veins. He was also Mel's dad.

I'd been so tense when I'd gone along with her to visit him at his castle. But while I was there...he'd offered a contest and the title of dragon king if I won.

I definitely remembered that. How had I answered? I was pretty sure I'd agreed and said I would fight him eventually.

That's right, RPG Player activated and offered me the choice of accepting, and I selected "Yes." I wonder if he remembers.

It'd been a thousand years since then, so he could definitely have forgotten.

I hadn't ended up seeing him again in the past. He'd spent the entire time on the northern continent, so while we'd been traveling around the southern and eastern continents, we hadn't had the chance to fight again. Anna and I hadn't gone too hard after the demon continent.

After that, I'd been sleeping for a thousand years, so I hadn't been able to keep the promise. There hadn't been any need to force myself, and maybe I could have just ignored it forever. But...

Facing the strongest demon lord for the title of dragon king... Maybe I should give it a shot? But if I was a State-Authorized Hero, I couldn't just go off and fight. Heroes and their combat abilities were a strategic asset, so I'd definitely be part of the plans.

Right now though, I was a *former* hero. I had no real obligation to hold back for anyone. As an adventurer, I could go traipsing off to the northern continent if I felt like it.

Oh, you're gonna pick a fight with Astaroth? I heard Noah ask in surprise.

Is that a problem?

I'd follow whatever she picked. Would she be against it? I was pretty sure Ira would be. She'd probably yell something like "Are you an idiot?! Work with everyone else!"

Noah, though...

Mmm, why not? Just be careful.

Noah wasn't against it. She was pretty loose with restrictions. I had my goddess's agreement now.

I'd obviously need to explain to Lucy, Sasa, and Princess Sophia. I should probably tell someone from Highland as well.

Momo was the person connected to Highland who I was closest to. Unfortunately, she was sleeping. Sakurai was probably next, but he was sitting beside Queen Noelle—pretty much right in the middle of the room. That would draw way too much attention, so I couldn't really inform him.

I guess the other person I could talk to was... Yeah...

"Where are you going?" Princess Sophia asked as I rose from my seat and made to leave.

"I was just going to chat with Commander Ortho."

He was the commander of the Soleil Knights that I'd fought alongside in the campaign for Laphroaig. He was understanding, and above all else, he'd been in the cathedral when I'd left for the past, so he knew the details.

"Tell me later," she said. She apparently had an idea of what was happening, but she didn't ask for the details.

"It's nearly time to conclude the meeting for today."

"And we still haven't yet agreed upon a policy."

So the conference is nearly over, I thought as I moved to the commander's seat.

I spoke quietly near his ear. "Commander Ortho, I'd like to talk to you for a moment."

"Sir Makoto? Very well. The conference is nearly over, so I can make some time for you afterward."

"That's fine. I was just coming to let you know that I was thinking of heading to the northern continent."

He frowned and gave a short hum. "Sir Makoto, a hero cannot just— No," he said, cutting himself off as he noticed the mistake in his words.

"I'm not a hero right now, so I was going to go as an adventurer."

"I see. Unfortunately, in that case, we cannot offer you any assistance."

"That's fine. You don't need to worry."

"You can say not to worry, but..."

He seemed to be searching for something to actually say in response. But then, Momo popped up out of nowhere to stand next to me. Wasn't she supposed to be sleeping in her chair? Did she hear our conversation?

"An interesting suggestion, Elementalist!" she exclaimed, drawing literally everyone's attention in our direction.

Hey! Don't do that.

"Momo..."

“This is payback for not coming to visit,” she said, poking her tongue out cutely.

“Oh, if that isn’t the former hero of Roses,” someone said.

“I heard he had retired from service due to his injuries.”

“I suppose Roses is just as short of strength as ever, if they’re pulling retired heroes back into the fight.”

“Surely this isn’t the place! He should not be speaking here.”

For some reason, neither Highland nor Laphroaig were happy with me. I found out later that apparently both those against Queen Noelle in Highland, and those who treated Furiae like a goddess in Laphroaig, had a rather dim view of me.

“I ask that you refrain from slandering Sir Takatsuki!”

“Our country owes him a great debt, and we will not stand for this!”

General Talisker from Great Keith, and Florna, the Priestess of Wood, spoke up in my defense. I appreciated it, but their remarks just added to the tension filling the room.

What should I even do in this situation? The fraught atmosphere didn’t seem to bother the Grandsage. She’d gotten really bold.

“Go on, then—say it so everyone can hear.”

I let out a sigh and reluctantly did so. “I’m going to go see Astaroth.”

“Is Roses trying to get ahead and challenge Astaroth?” someone asked.

“No, I was going to go on my own...” I replied.

A chorus of confusion swept through the room.

“That’s suicide!”

“Is he an idiot?!”

“The Hero of Roses is definitely touched in the head.”

“He’s not even a hero!”

That was why I’d been trying to keep it quiet.

“Sir Takatsuki! Are you sane?!”

“Makoto, come back to reality!”

Even though they’d just defended me, both General Talisker and Florna thought I’d lost my mind as well.

Despite how it seemed like the uproar would never die down, Momo—the one responsible for it getting so out of hand in the first place—calmed things.

“The elementalist has actually fought in secret against Astaroth before. It ended...in a draw, I believe.”

Silence fell over the room.

“I-I never heard anything about that,” I heard someone whisper.

No one looked entirely convinced. They probably wanted to argue, but with Momo claiming it as the truth, they couldn’t really do anything.

“It is true. Goddess Ira has told me as much, and I swear it in her name.”

With Estelle’s support, the people refuting the claim backed down.

My success in combat against Astaroth had technically been due to Ira’s mana though—could I really call it a draw?

Either way, this was becoming a really big deal.

“You’re not sneaking off that easily,” Momo whispered into my ear.

“I’ll be fine, surely.”

“You will not! You’ll hide and vanish!”

She knew me all too well.

“T-Takatsuki...”

“A-Are you serious...?”

Despite both Sakurai and Queen Noelle remaining silent so far, even they stood up and spoke. I smiled back at them and nodded.

Then, I glanced over at Furiae. She was shaking with anger and had a *real* glare pointed my way.

“What part of this is ‘just sitting in’?!” she mouthed.

I smiled back, and her glare just got even stronger.

“Sir Takatsuki, Highland will put in an official request, so...” the head of the Soleil Knights, Owain, said heavily.

I’d been intending to just go as an adventurer, but apparently, the formalities were needed.

Either way, I was heading to the northern continent now.

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Gets Lectured

“Umm...”

“What is it?”

“Sophia, are you mad?”

“I am hardly angry, Hero Makoto.”

I was currently in a room in Highland Castle with Princess Sophia. As for what position I was in, well, I was kneeling in front of her. The princess was gazing down at me with cold eyes.

No, it's more of an exasperated look.

“Did you not say that at today’s meeting, your presence would be limited to simply sitting in?”

“That’s what I *meant* to do.”

At least...until partway through. Besides, this was Momo’s fault, not mine.

“Our basic policy has been to cooperate with other nations.”

“I am cooperating.”

“No matter how you look at it, this makes us seem like we’re trying to get ahead!” Princess Sophia argued. “Still, I suppose you *do* have friendly relations with the commander of the Soleil Knights and Sir Sakurai. Perhaps if you can get them on the same page, there won’t be an issue... For crying out loud.”

After that, Princess Sophia transitioned into a detailed explanation of things to keep in mind at the bases on the northern front. I promised myself I’d do my best to remember them. After all, I didn’t want to cause her trouble.

The door suddenly slammed open with a bang.

“Makoto! We’re here! Wait...why are you on your knees?”

“Oh, Takatsuki’s getting a scolding from Sophie!”

“Lucy, Sasa?”

What were these two doing here?

“I called them,” Princess Sophia explained. “You will need to explain it to them, won’t you?”

I paused. “Right.” I was heading to the northern continent, so I needed Lucy and Sasa to agree. That was Princess Sophia all right—attentive to every little detail.

“Hm? What’s up, Makoto?” Lucy asked. “You screw up again?”

“Oh, I know what’s happened,” Sasa said. “He must have gotten friendly with a new girl and Sophie’s reading him the riot act.”

“Wha?! Again?”

“Takatsuki just doesn’t learn... We’ll have to punish him.”

“Aya...that’s a scary look on your face.”

“You say that, but you’re gathering mana in your staff as well, aren’t you?”

“The two of you do not need to worry,” Princess Sophia assured them. “This time, it has nothing to do with entanglements with women.”

Lucy and Sasa were barreling headlong into an awful misunderstanding, but thankfully, Princess Sophia corrected them.

Wait... “This time”?

“Oh! I knew I could count on you, Makoto!”

“C’mon, Lu, you shouldn’t doubt him like that.”

“You two...” I sighed, then broke into their skit and explained how I was going to challenge Astaroth on the northern continent.

“Hm, so we’re going to the demon continent.”

“Astaroth... He sounds strong.”

“Sorry, both of you. I should have talked to you first.”

My words were met by blank looks from both of them.

“Why are you apologizing?” Lucy asked.

“Hooray! We finally get to go adventuring together again!” Sasa cheered.

“Lucy... Sasa...”

Even if I hadn’t talked to them about it first, they were all on board.

“We’ve got to get ready, then. Well, technically, Aya and I already have our usual stuff in place, so this time, we just need to collect your gear.”

“Aw,” Sasa whined, “but our stuff’s getting all worn out. The tent’s only good for the two of us too.”

Lucy nodded. “That’s right, now you mention it. The last one got a bit scorched by fire breath, didn’t it? Plus, it’s a bit small for the three of us.”

“We need to get you some underwear too. You’re always sleeping naked, but are you planning to do that with Takatsuki there?”

“Why not?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll end up taking it off anyway.”

“Well, that’s true...”

I have to cut in. “Uh...guys?”

They were going in a bit of an odd direction. Plus, Princess Sophia was starting to look *distinctly* unimpressed. That was when the door slammed open again.

“My esteemed Tackie, I have already heard! That you are heading for the northern continent, I mean.”

“Please entrust the Fujiwara Trading Company with your travel gear’h!”

So it was Fujiyan and Nina who’d popped in this time. Princess Sophia must have sent for them as well.

“Your proposal certainly came out of nowhere, my friend!” Fujiyan exclaimed.

“It just turned out like that.”

“I hardly think that you can call it ‘just turning out like that,’” Princess Sophia sniped from the side.

Once Fujiyan heard about how I'd completely turned the military meeting on its head, he couldn't help but smile. "I see you are the same as you have ever been," he remarked.

"I am?"

"You certainly haven't changed," Princess Sophia agreed.

Apparently, I hadn't.

"Miss Lucy, Miss Aya, this is our latest catalog'h," said Nina.

Lucy browsed through the catalog. "Oh, this magic cottage looks nice. It's pretty big and comfy looking."

"Clothes first, Lu. Cute underwear as well."

"Hmm, then what about these?"

"They're practically string! Waaay too pervy!"

"Aw, no good?"

"You should pick something cuter!"

"Then what do you like the look of, Aya?"

"These! Lu, get a matching set with me."

"They're a bit too frilly and cutesy, aren't they? They're not going to suit me."

"They will! Besides, you show off too much skin as it is."

"This is fine. Besides, it's not like Makoto'll try anything."

"He mi— Actually, no. Takatsuki's a sheep in sheep's clothing."

"He's a stuffy guy."

Nina cleared her throat. "Um...so which will you be buying'h?"

Their conversation's getting pretty rude. Who're you calling a sheepish sheep?

Another bang on the door resounded throughout the room. This was the third time someone had knocked.

"My knight!"

It was the queen of Laphroaig's turn to come bursting in. She looked frantic,

and her demeanor was far from her usual calm.

“Princess? What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s Fuuri.”

“Fuu’s back to normal.”

With all three of our gazes directed her way, Furiae looked away awkwardly. “Sorry about yesterday,” she murmured. “I’m a queen now, and I thought that you getting close to me would just cause trouble. I wanted my knight to be able to have a peaceful life, but...”

Lucy and Sasa finished her sentence, their words overlapping.

“But he’s already getting into trouble.”

“And then he went and jumped into trouble himself.”

“Why?!” Furiae exclaimed.

“I mean, it’s Makoto.”

“That’s Takatsuki.”

“Whyyyy?!” Furiae held her head in her hands.

Yup, she was definitely back to her normal self. I felt somewhat nostalgic as I watched the three of them.

“By the way, when are we leaving for the demon continent?” Lucy asked.

Hmm, well... There’s not exactly a reason to hang around here for too long.

“Well, fortune favors the bold. How about tonight?” I asked.

“That’s pretty quick,” Lucy pointed out. “I don’t mind, though.”

“Me either,” said Sasa. “We’ll have to get ready quick, then. Nina, what do you have in stock?”

“Umm, anything you pick should be fine as long as it’s not a special order’h...”

Lucy and Sasa seemed fine with this.

“Wait, wait, wait! *Tonight?! You’ve got to be kidding!*” Furiae exclaimed, waving her hands around.

“Lady Furiae, this behavior does not befit your status as queen,” Havel said from behind her.

When’d he get here?

“My knight! You’ve only just woken up, haven’t you?!”

“Yesterday, yup.”

“You should take more time to recover!”

I shrugged. “Well, a meandering journey up there’ll be like physio.”

“You don’t need to go to the demon continent of all places! And challenging the dragon king?! Preposterous!”

Guess Furiae is against our plan.

Then...there was a soft knock at the door, and it quietly opened.

“Takatsuki!” Sakurai stepped through the door and smiled. “Whew, you’re still here.”

Yokoyama followed behind him. “You didn’t need to worry about that, Ryousuke. Of course he hasn’t *already* left.”

Furiae then turned to Sakurai. Her voice was cold as she said, “My knight was planning to leave tonight.”

Sakurai sighed. “Yeah...figures.”

Yokoyama looked shocked. “No way?!”

“Well, traveling takes time,” I said, defending myself. “Besides, I wanted to see how things were in this era.”

I’d seen a few changes to history since I’d woken up in the present, and I wanted to see for myself what exactly had changed.

Sakurai and Yokoyama looked aghast.

“Well...I guess this behavior fits you well,” Sakurai decided.

Yokoyama seemed less convinced. “You don’t need to rush off *that* quickly though... Aya, are you going with him?”

Sasa nodded. “Yeah. We’re getting ready right now.”

“You look like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Well, it’s been ages since we’ve been on a trip.”

“A *trip*?! You’re going to fight a demon lord, not stay at a resort!”

“Yup! By trip, I meant *adventure*.”

People told me all the time that I lacked a proper sense of danger, but Sasa was just as bad as I was.

“Lucy, aren’t you going to stop them?” Princess Sophia asked.

“If we left him alone, he’d just go on his own.”

“But you’ve been with him the longest! Surely he’d listen if you told—”

“Nope. Not at all. Besides, it’s not like I can resist him when he asks.”

Princess Sophia sighed. It felt a bit like they were treating me like a naughty kid.

“Ryousuke, stop my knight! You’re childhood friends, aren’t you?!”

“Ah... Actually, I’d be happier if he was fighting alongside us.”

“Idiot, idiot, idiot!” Furiae yelled. She started whacking him. “You could easily take out Iblis by yourself!”

“Ow, ow!”

Heh, they really get along well.

Yokoyama suddenly sidled up and whispered into my ear. “Hey, Ryousuke and Furiae look like they’re having fun. Are you okay with that?”

“Hm? Yeah. It’s nice.”

Since Furiae was acting like this, she probably wasn’t Nevia’s reincarnation. The Witch of Calamity wouldn’t want to be on good terms with the Hero of Light—especially since she died to a hero with that title in the past.

“You’re a weird one, Takatsuki,” she replied.

“I am?” *I could say the same to you.* “It doesn’t bother you that Sakurai is close to other girls?” I asked.

“He’s already got thirty wives. Besides, he’s always been popular, hasn’t he?”

Oh...he has even more wives now... I was pretty sure it’d been around twenty before. *Man, that’s a lot.*

Yokoyama and I were looking at each other with slightly odd expressions when another person arrived.

“Sorry I’m late, Sophia,” said Queen Noelle. “Is Sir Makoto still...” She trailed off and went expressionless as she saw Furiae smacking Sakurai.

Furiae immediately hid behind me.

“What’re you doing, Princess?” I muttered.

“A scary woman showed up, so you need to protect me, my knight.”

“Who are you calling scary?” Queen Noelle asked sharply. “Also, you should behave in a somewhat more queenly fashion. You were barely even focused during that meeting.”

“Well, it was boring. Besides, everyone in Laphroaig hates Highland, so none of your people would listen to me anyway.”

“Even then, doing *something* is the queen’s responsibility!”

“It’d be easier if I just used *Charm* on the lot of them.”

“Lady Furiae...please refrain from such comments,” Havel said.

“I know. It was a joke.”

“That’s enough, Noelle,” Sakurai added.

“If you say so...”

It felt odd watching Furiae and Noelle talk. They definitely weren’t *friendly*, but this interaction was a far cry from the tension I’d sensed between them during the meeting.

I looked to Yokoyama for help.

“Well, the people of Highland and Laphroaig are on bad terms, right?” she began. “The meeting went pretty badly. However, both queens always have a separate meeting in another room—they talk to Ryousuke and me. Isn’t that

right, Ryouzuke?”

“Yeah, we chat about once a month.”

“Huh...”

So the meeting itself had made it look like the countries were on the brink of war, but the actual leaders were on the same page. *What a relief.*

Queen Noelle walked up to me. “Sir Makoto, speaking of that meeting—are you truly intending on venturing to the demon continent? You’ve only just woken up...and I’m sure Sophia will be worried...” Her face was drawn and concerned.

“That’s right.”

I looked at Princess Sophia. She was still expressionless, though her eyes looked slightly cold.

“Um, are you worried, Sophia?” I asked her.

She remained silent, but her eyebrow twitched. *Ack, she’s angry for sure.*

She stalked toward me and then pinched my cheek hard.

“Uh...Sho’ia?”

“If you think I am *not* worried, then that hurts all the more.”

“My apologies for my rudeness,” I said as she let go of me.

“Take care as you travel. Listen to Lucy and Aya.” With that, she spun on her heel.

Queen Noelle started giggling. “You really are close. Oh, you’re still wearing that badge. It suits you...though I’m not sure I should say that.”

“Wait right there!” Furiae interrupted. “What is that supposed to mean, my knight?!”

“Oh, Queen Noelle gave it to me so I could go to the meeting,” I explained.

“What?! Noelle, don’t try and steal my knight!”

“That sounds...rather scandalous. If you don’t like it, give him one of your own.”

“Th-That’s right! Havel! Prepare a crest for my royal guards!”

“Lady Furiae, Laphroaig’s military is made up solely of mages, so we do not have anything designed for knights.”

“Guh... Unthinkable.” She glared at the badge.

Don’t look at me like that! There’s nothing I can do about it.

“Well, I needed it,” I reasoned. “I’m a commoner, so I couldn’t have taken part without it.”

That prompted Princess Sophia, Furiae, Sakurai, Yokoyama, *and* Queen Noelle to look blankly at me. And it wasn’t just them—Lucy, Sasa, Fujiyan, and Nina were looking my way as well. The noise level of the room suddenly dropped as silence reigned.

Why had the atmosphere grown so awkward?

Princess Sophia was the first to speak. “Hero Makoto, are you trying to say that you believe yourself to be a commoner?”

“You mean I’m not?” I wasn’t a hero anymore, so surely I was a commoner again.

Lucy and Sasa, who’d been standing by Nina, walked over to me.

“Makoto...that’s a pretty big misunderstanding.”

“I was thinking that Takatsuki wasn’t acting quite right.”

What’s going on?

Fujiyan must have read my mind because he offered a simple explanation. “You are considered to be a true hero, or a ‘Legendary Hero,’ so you are far from a mere commoner.”

“A *true* hero?”

“Like Lady Rosalie or the Grandsage. Your achievements have elevated you.”

“So...what does that mean?” The position itself didn’t really make sense to me.

“Such a person has no obligations,” Princess Sophia explained. “So, as

circumstances demand, representatives of each country will make *requests*. You are a Legendary Hero of Roses, so you actually have a greater standing than I.”

Wh-What the?! The truth shocked me to my core.

“So, considering I have a higher position, and you had me on my knees earlier...” I murmured.

“Let’s not go over that again!” she yelped. She pinched my arm as her face went red.

“You already have that position, and yet you seem to be seeking even greater achievements by challenging Astaroth alone. That was why everyone at the meeting was extremely taken aback,” Queen Noelle explained.

“Now that Highland’s star is starting to fade, they’re all panicking,” Furiae said harshly, glaring at Queen Noelle. “People are worried that Roses’s Legendary Hero will take all the glory.”

“Surely those of Laphroaig are frantic as well?” Queen Noelle asked back with an offended look on her face.

“Their blatant dislike of my knight is definitely a concern...” Furiae said with a tired look.

Apparently, the people of Laphroaig didn’t like that the position of her guardian knight was taken by me.

But still... Either way, I was apparently some legendary hero now.

The position itself meant I could be fairly self-centered concerning what I said, however, the other countries were now wary of me. *Maybe I should be more careful about what I say in the future...*

As I was lost in pondering, someone interrupted me.

Two people suddenly appeared out of thin air.

“Oh, so this is where you all gathered?” asked the first person.

“This is essentially everyone involved,” said the second person.

The first girl was wearing a white robe, and the other was a short priestess—Momo and Estelle.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Judging from their expressions, they must have something pretty important to say.

“It is about the Witch of Calamity,” Estelle said. Furiae’s face stiffened.

“Now that Iblis has returned, so has she,” Momo added casually.

I recalled Nevia’s smile and voice when she’d told me that I had already met the person who she would reincarnate into.

So she succeeded... Unfortunately, it seemed like she hadn’t met her end in the past.

Nevia, the Witch of Calamity, was the queen of Laphroaig a thousand years ago, as well as Iblis’s partner. She was the final boss that the Hero of Light—Anna—and I had defeated. Actually, we hadn’t defeated her. She’d said she would be back in the present era.

“How do we know?” I asked. “Is it Ira’s *Future Sight*?”

“No.” Estelle shook her head. “Nevia’s unification with one of the Daemons put her in a position where the Sacred Deities are unable to observe her.”

So how did we find out?

“The demons and monsters on the demon continent have once again shown signs of being charmed,” Momo revealed.

“Ah...I see,” I replied, finally seeing the thread. No one else seemed to understand the significance of what she’d said.

“Anyone could do that... Even I could,” Furiae murmured.

I shook my head. “No, you couldn’t, Princess.”

Estelle spoke at the same time. “Queen Furiae, Nevia’s *Charm* skill was on another level to yours.”

“Just a minute!” she protested. “I can charm hundreds of people at the same time, just so you know! You won’t find anyone better with charm magic in our entire country.”

Her words just made me sigh. Estelle and I exchanged looks.

“Sir Makoto,” Estelle said to me. “Tell us just how many people the Witch of

Calamity had under her thrall in the past.”

I turned to Furiae. “Princess, Nevia charmed *everyone* in Laphroaig, and *everyone* on the demon continent—both the demons and the monsters.”

Everyone in the room who didn’t already know let out a shocked noise.

“That’s not...possible...”

“It is. After her fusion with Iblis, the witch Nevia had almost unlimited mana. She specialized in *Charm*, and that was why she was so feared,” Estelle said briskly.

Even Furiae had to fall silent at that. Someone else picked up the conversation, though.

“Say, Queen Furiae—since you are thought to be her reincarnation, I believe you should be more careful with your words,” Yokoyama advised.

Havel nodded. “She is right, Lady Furiae. Take heed and try not to be careless with your statements.”

“I-I know!” Furiae exclaimed, looking away awkwardly.

I still couldn’t help but be hung up on the last thing Nevia had said: I’d already met her reincarnation.

Perhaps realizing what I was thinking of, Estelle smiled softly. “You need not worry, Sir Makoto. I assume you are concerned about how the witch said she would reincarnate into one of your acquaintances. But I want to assure you that this was a lie to sow doubt in your mind. At Lady Ira’s instruction, I gathered all of the private information of your acquaintances and laid bare even their private lives. None of them are the reincarnation of Nevia!”

Almost everyone cried out and looked at her in shock. But as for me, I finally managed to relax.

Whew...thank goodness.

“Nevia is likely within Eden on the demon continent,” she continued. “The charmed demons and monsters are spreading from that location.”

“I see. I haven’t gone to that continent in this era, so I wouldn’t have met

her.”

“Exactly. Is that a relief?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

The two of us laughed together.

“Wait, wait, wait!”

“What’s all that about, Takatsuki?!”

“My knight, Estelle! Explain yourselves!”

Lucy, Sasa, and Furiae all crowded in on me. I looked to Estelle. “Didn’t you tell everyone about how Nevia might have reincarnated into someone I know?”

I was pretty sure everyone should have known because Ira informed them.

Momo murmured to me from my side. “That intel would’ve spread doubts among them, so it was kept as secret as possible.”

“So you helped too,” I realized.

“Well, technically, I *am* really important in Highland,” she said, puffing out her small chest. I stroked her hair.

“Don’t worry, everyone,” Estelle said. “While I mentioned your private information, it was only shared with Goddess Ira, and I was not personally privy to it. She checked things from the heavens.”

“Oh...that’s what you meant.”

“Well, I guess there’s not much we can do, then...”

“It is still less than pleasant.”

So, thanks to Nevia’s activities on the northern continent, no one else was in doubt anymore. There were no worries now, so we could head out as soon as possible.

I felt a tug on my clothes. It was Momo.

“Sir Makoto,” she said. “I assume you are not intending to leave tonight?”

“Yup. I was actually gonna take off right now.”

She let out a big sigh. “Do you not realize why I caused such an uproar when you tried to sneak off?”

“Um...to mess with me?”

“Of course not!” she roared angrily. “A single spell from you can rewrite the map! Even in the past, you changed the weather like it was nothing and called up storms! And on top of that, because you’re pledged to that goddess of yours, Goddess Ira can’t see your future! We can’t have someone like that just wandering around!”

“Ah...right...”

She was *really* angry. Even though I was no longer a State-Authorized Hero, I apparently couldn’t just do whatever I pleased.

“There was also a proposal from Commander Owain’s subordinates to include your actions in the Third Northern Front Plan. The leaders will be up all night finalizing it, so you need to check it over before you leave tomorrow.”

I fell silent, and my gut twisted—I actually felt kinda bad. Was it really *that* big of a deal for me to take on the demon lord?

Momo let out a soft huff of laughter. “Honestly, we’ve been in a deadlock over how to deal with Astaroth for a long time. It is such a relief that you will be taking care of the problem.”

“Momo...”

“Go beat the hell out of him.”

She was kinda all over the place, wasn’t she?

“Aren’t you worried about me?” I asked.

“Worrying about you is a waste of time! Do you realize how much time Anna and I wasted doing that?!”

“You did...?”

“You always pulled something ridiculous—every time!”

Huh. In the past, I’d felt like our whole party was really close, but it looked like Momo and I had different perspectives on what had happened back then.

As we chatted about our memories, I felt several gazes focus on us. Lucy, Sasa, Princess Sophia, Furiae, Sakurai, and Princess Noelle were all staring fixedly at us.

Crap, we just ignored all the people from the present.

“Sir Makoto.” Queen Noelle shot me a rueful smile. “We will prepare you a room within the castle, so please use it for tonight. It seems many people still need to speak with you.”

I could hardly refuse a queen... *Guess we’re staying in the castle tonight.*

“Um, are you all joining us?”

The room we’d been guided to was massive. It could easily hold thirty people. Everyone from earlier had moved here, and we’d started a bit of a feast.

“My esteemed Tackie, we have prepared everything you will need for your journey.”

“If you need anything else, just let us know’h!”

“But it hasn’t even been an hour...” I muttered. The two of them were way too impressive. They’d gotten everything ready in no time at all.

“Furiae, you really need to be more honest,” said Princess Sophia. “Acting as you do just increases the burden on you.”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, it makes you a really bothersome woman, Fuuri.”

They were reeeally raking her over the coals for how oddly she’d acted when I’d first seen her after waking up.

Furiae hung her head. “Right... I’m sorry.”

Queen Noelle watched in shock as Furiae knelt obediently in front of the two of them. “Furiae... Y-You know you’re a queen, right?”

“I can’t help it... They’ve both helped me so much—Aya too. I can’t go against them...”

It seemed like Laphroaig would’ve never gotten off the ground as a nation without the three of them helping. It was a country with vast numbers of

riages, but its queen couldn't stand up to two adventurers or the princess of the smallest country on the continent. The power dynamics here were utterly bizarre.

"Guh! I want to stay too!"

"You can't, Grandsage. You still have work left."

"Sir Makotoooooo!"

"Right then, off we go."

Estelle dragged Momo away. *Apparently, the higher your status, the more people bother you.*

I'll make it up to you, Momo. I put my hands together as I mentally thanked her.

"Takatsuki! Over here!" Sasa called out, pulling me over.

We joined Sakurai, Yokoyama, and Fujiyan in a group of former classmates. It'd been so long since we otherworlders had met up like this. We chattered away about school for a while, and then we got to talking about our experiences in junior high. Sakurai, Sasa, and I were all from the same school, but I found out that Yokoyama went there as well.

"H-How could you forget me?!" she demanded angrily.

"Our wonderful Tackie simply has no room in his memory for things that do not interest him... He also forgot about Lady Kei..."

"Fujiyan! I didn't forget!" I protested. "I remembered her! She just looked so different that I was taken aback!" I didn't want my best friend thinking I'd forgotten what his wife looked like.

Sasa giggled. "That seems like Takatsuki."

"Speaking of junior high," Sakurai said, "do you remember when you helped me with that stalker?"

"Hm?"

I dredged up my memories. Junior high, Sakurai, a stalker... Thanks to those powerful keywords, I located the memory without much difficulty.

Wait, you're talking about that?!

I was suddenly completely sober. *That's right out of the cringe books!*

Meanwhile, Yokoyama and Fujiyan leaped on the topic.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?!"

"What? That is the first I have heard of this!"

No, don't ask! We promised to keep that secret.

"I remember that!" Sasa cheered. "Takatsuki borrowed my clothes. He was so cute when he cross-dressed."

"Sasa?!" I yelped.

Crap, she knows about it too! She must've just remembered!

"Hey, what's this about?" Yokoyama asked eagerly. "That sounds hilarious! I wanna know!"

"Ho hoh!" Fujiyan had *Mind Reading*, and he was grinning... *Don't tell me he saw my memories?!*

"Yeah, Takatsuki definitely was cute..." Sakurai mumbled.

"Hey! Sakurai, why are you—?"

Sakurai got a little carried away and slumped toward me. I grabbed him by the collar.

Hang on... Is he...?

"Sakurai, have you been drinking?" I asked.

"Ah! I'm sorry! I might have poured him some accidentally," Yokoyama apologized.

Sakurai was already asleep and breathing softly. He was just as much of a lightweight as ever.

Whew... At least, the records of my past would now never see the light of day.

"C'mon, Aya, tell us!"

"Um, well, I wasn't actually there, but—"

“Stop it, Sasa!” I shouted.

Somehow, I managed to get through the conversation without giving anything concrete away.

I never thought my past would get brought up like this... Sasa’s sharp ears meant that she could hear every word, and she was grinning at me. Damn, she’s definitely going to ask me about it later.

Thankfully, with Sakurai now asleep, the festivities ended for the night.



With the celebration before our departure over, the room fell quiet again.

Lucy and Sasa were sharing the guest room, but there were at least technically partitions set up. The two of them were getting their travel gear ready.

Nina had brought all kinds of new products with her, so the girls were having fun selecting their gear. Both had invited me to choose some things with them, but the constant questions about which pair of underwear was better would’ve gotten on my nerves, so I’d escaped.

There was still time before I needed to go to sleep, so I decided I might as well get some training in.

I summoned Dia near a fountain in the palace gardens. Since I’d told her to keep her mana under control, I didn’t need to worry about her frightening anyone.

“You called, my liege?”

“Dia, we’re going to be fighting Astaroth. We met him once before—do you remember?”

She put her hand on her chin and looked up in thought. “Do you mean the descendant of the dragon gods?”

“Yup, that’s the one. The guy *Cocytus* didn’t work on in the past.”

“I remember him, my liege. He was a powerful enemy back then.”

“Yeah. I promised to fight him again. I hope you’ll help.”

“Of course. Make use of me as much as you want,” she replied with a graceful bow.

Now that I thought about it, there hadn’t been any big battles since I’d come back to the present.

Maybe practicing some elemental magic would be a good idea. Though that’d probably piss Momo off...

“My knight...? What are you doing?”

Her voice broke my train of thought. I didn’t even have to look to see who it was, since there was only one person who called me that.

“Princess? Don’t you need to head back?”

Furiae ignored my question. “Who is that woman?”

Should a queen be so easily distracted? Well, she had someone nearby that was probably a guard.

“Another new woman...” she mumbled. “Maybe I should cast a curse.”

Yikes. I needed to explain things to Furiae now that she was offering distinctly unsaintly suggestions.

“Princess, Dia’s an Undyne. You remember, right?” I used to only be able to summon them when I’d used *Synchro* with Furiae—I’d gotten much better with elementals since then.

“Undyne...? She looks almost human.”

Furiae was right. She’d been a semitransparent blue before, but now she looked pretty much like a normal human. It was no surprise that Furiae had mistaken her for one.

Dia looked right back at Furiae, and her face twisted in suspicion. “My liege...is this the same witch...?”

Normally, no matter who we faced, Dia didn’t flinch—now, though, she was oddly on guard.

“No, she’s on our side. She’s a different person than the moon priestess back then.”

“I-I see...” There was still a hint of fear in Dia’s words. This really was rare for her. Apparently, Nevla had left a really strong impression.

“Say, do I really look so similar to the Witch of Calamity?” Furiae asked uneasily.

“You really do look sim—” Dia tried to say, but I cut her off.

“You’re way cuter,” I said loudly.

Furiae probably wouldn’t be happy about her resemblance to Nevla. Besides, I didn’t really think they looked alike. Nevla was a bit older—she looked like she was in her late twenties.

“I-I-I am?!” Furiae asked, her face bright red.

“That witch didn’t falter, no matter what situation lay before her. You certainly are different,” Dia marveled.

With that, Dia vanished. Furiae and I walked back to the room. She was probably going to say hi to Lucy and Sasa and then leave.

As we walked, Furiae was silent. She’d been like this for a while.

“Princess?” I asked.

There was a long pause, and then she replied, “What?”

“Well, you just weren’t saying anything.”

Another pause. “Does it matter?”

“Well, I guess not.”

Had I said something to annoy her? She stayed silent until we were getting close to the room.

“Makoto,” someone called out. The voice sounded androgynous, like it could be a girl’s or a young guy’s that hadn’t yet broken.

This was Prince Leonardo.

“Yes? What’s up?” I asked.

“Um... I actually wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay. Let’s talk in the room.”

“No! We can’t go in there. Here is fine.”

Furiae considered his serious expression. “Shall I leave?” she asked considerably.

“No, I want you to hear as well, Queen Furiae.”

“You do?”

What did he want to talk to us about?

He hesitated—the prince was silent for a few moments.

“Prince Leonardo?” I pressed.

“What is it?” Furiae added.

We waited for him to speak.

“Makoto...you’re going to the demon continent with the two Crimson Fangs, right?”

“The Crimson Fangs... Oh, Lucy and Sasa? Yes, I am.”

Furiae sighed. “If only I could come too.”

“You’re a queen now, so you can’t,” I told her.

“I know. Still, we used to go adventuring together.”

“Yeah, I miss it... Oops, sorry about that, Prince Leonardo.” We’d gotten off-topic. “Were you worried about something having to do with the continent?”

It would be the first time I would be going there in the present, but I thought conditions should be way better than they’d been a thousand years ago.

He shook his head. “No, not the continent...I wanted to talk about the two Crimson Fangs.”

“Lucy and Sasa?”

“What about them?”

Both Furiae and I were confused. They’d seemed just as energetic as normal. They were Roses’s top adventurers, so they were really reliable. I had no idea what the problem could be.

Maybe they'd been hurt and were hiding it...? If that was true, I'd need to make sure they didn't push themselves.

But that wasn't the case. The next words out of his mouth shocked me.

"There are...rumors that the two of them...are on bad terms."

Furiae and I took a moment to parse that. "Pardon?" we asked in unison.

Intermission: A Risk of a Party Breakup

“Lucy and Sasa are on...bad terms?”

I couldn’t understand what he was saying. The two of them were always together—were they actually mad at each other?

No, no, no. No way.

“I-Impossible!” Furiae exclaimed. “After all, they both have accepted countless requests to exterminate monsters from Laphroaig! They’ve always been together, and they pretty much *breathe* together!”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m thinking much the same thing. They’ve been together the whole time since I got back, and they haven’t acted like they’re at odds or anything.”

Despite that, the prince sadly shook his head.

“The Crimson Fangs are Roses’s top adventurers, despite being women. There are a lot of people who look up to them, and the majority don’t doubt their friendship.”

“Right!” exclaimed Furiae. “Honestly, when the four of us adventured together, they were almost *too* friendly. I felt kinda shut out...”

“Huh? You did?” I asked. I was sure the three of them had been on really good terms.

“I mean, they’re always all over each other. They were together even while they slept.”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

Describing them as being angry with one another when they were like *that*... It had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

Still, the prince’s expression remained sorrowful. “Makoto, Queen Furiae... I just want to ask you if you’ve ever seen the two of them alone together?”

Furiae and I exchanged glances.

“Alone together?” I asked.

“Of course we haven’t.”

After all, if we were there to see them, they wouldn’t be alone together, would they?

“The adventurer’s guild in Roses has often made requests of them. Lucy’s rare acumen with *Teleport* allows her to go anywhere in an instant, and Aya is the only adventurer in Roses of her rank. The guild prioritizes them when there are calamity-level monsters. The two of them accept the quests without argument.”

All of that made sense. Just the other day, they’d dashed off for an urgent request from Roses.

“It is the same in Laphroaig,” Furiae added. “They accept any request we give them. They always travel together as well, and they never seem on bad terms.”

The prince slowly continued. “This is a report from the guild in the capital, but...the two of them didn’t say a single word to each other while they were in the waiting room.”

“Wha?” Furiae and I asked in unison, gaping.

It was a really bad look for a beauty like her, but it wasn’t like I could talk—I was just as surprised.

“That...can’t...”

“I-It’s got to be a coincidence, right? People have those days.”

Our voices were shaking.

“Unfortunately, royal spies and skilled *Stealth* users have confirmed it. For at least the past dozen visits, neither of them has spoken a word to each other while in the waiting room,” Prince Leonardo said.

Hang on, they sent in spies to check? If that was true, it definitely lent credence to what he was saying.

Lucy and Sasa weren’t talking when they were on their own? Really, though?

They didn't seem to be at odds when we were together.

Actually...now that I thought about it, there were entertainers in our old world who were all smiles in front of the camera, but they didn't say a word to each other in the dressing rooms.

On top of that...hadn't the girls gotten into a fight after defeating the monster from that urgent request the other day? When they returned, they were all beaten up.

So...were they really so unpleasant around each other? Lucy and Sasa—the Crimson Fangs—were veteran adventurers now. They were constantly the subject of attention from other adventurers. I could definitely see them acting friendly in public, even if they weren't actually that way in private.

But...I really didn't want that to be true. If it was, the party could be facing a breakup.

No... I really wanted there to be some mistake.

"Th-That can't be true..." Furiae stammered. "Those two... No, I can't believe it!"

It looked like she felt the same way I did.

"The Crimson Fangs have helped Roses a lot. Normally, I wouldn't want to talk about it, but...you are about to challenge Astaroth. We can't leave things in an ambiguous state..."

Prince Leonardo's expression was pained. He'd likely agonized over whether to tell me or not.

"Got it. I understand the situation."

"But there has to be some misunderstanding!" Furiae argued.

"Then...let's go and check on them right now," suggested the prince.

Furiae and I nodded quietly, and then all three of us crept toward my guest room.

Along the way, several of the guards called out to the queen of Laphroaig and the Prince of Roses. They would say something like, "Um...Your Majesty, Your

Highness. I hadn't heard you would be visiting..."

"It's fine. Let us pass, yeah? ☆" Furiae would say back with a wink—aka *Charm*—and they'd just wave us on by. Her magic was just as impressive as ever.

Isn't this...kind of a security risk?

"That skill of yours sure is convenient," I said to her. Being able to settle things peacefully was great.

Prince Leonardo nodded vigorously. "It's incredible, Your Majesty."

Our words prompted her to put a hand on her chin and consider things. A light bulb seemed to go off in her mind, and she stepped right up to me. "So...my knight, what do you feel now?" She asked, her eyes shining gold as she gently stroked my cheek.

It...tickled.

"It tickles," I told her directly.

"Oh, I see." Her expression soured as her eyes darkened again. "How boring. My *Charm* has gotten much stronger, and yet it still has absolutely no effect on you."

"It's not like you need it to, right?"

"Hmph."

While we were talking, we arrived in front of the room. Sasa and Lucy were inside. I'd normally never do it, but this time, I used *Stealth* before easing the door slightly open.

I was sure I'd hear them talking, but...there wasn't a sound coming from inside.

Huh?

I heard Furiae gulp next to me. Slowly, we looked into the room.

Maybe they were sleeping? No, they were both up.

Sasa was getting her things ready for tomorrow—well, actually, she was getting *my* things together.

I appreciated it. I'd need to thank her later.

As for Lucy, she was polishing the staff she used in combat. The best adventurers didn't shirk their maintenance, and I was sure Lucy was no exception. I sometimes wanted to polish Noah's dagger, but the magic on it meant that it stayed gleaming without me doing a thing.

Silence stretched on as the three of us watched the room.

Neither of them said a word. Sasa was flitting around picking up one thing or another. Lucy was polishing her staff, occasionally casting a small flame and then adjusting the staff.

Usually, this kind of scene would include some kind of conversation. The two of them were oddly silent though. It was almost like they were ignoring each other.

"What do you both think?" the prince asked us.

"You were right," I had to admit.

Furiae made a noise in the back of her throat as she muttered something.

"Princess?" I asked.

"I can't stand it!"

She slammed the door open and strode into the room. Prince Leonardo and I followed behind.

"Oh? Welcome back, Makoto..." Lucy's eyes went wide. "And Fuuri and Prince Leonardo?"

"That's a rare combo," Sasa remarked.

They were both smiling, but that made the whole situation seem even weirder.

Why were the two of you not saying a word a minute ago?

"Lucy, Aya! How long has this been going on?!" Furiae demanded.

"Huh? What are you talking about, Fuuri?"

"What's up, Fuu?"

The two of them looked blankly back at her.

“You don’t need to act! We know you’re not getting along!” Furiae exclaimed.

Lucy and Sasa just looked at one another with confusion.

“Aya and I aren’t?”

“What do you mean, not getting along?”

Furiae glared at them. “Don’t play dumb! Why are you even acting it out in front of me?! Weren’t we friends?!”

But despite her questioning, Lucy and Sasa didn’t change how they were acting.

“Prince Leonardo,” I prompted.

“Of course, I’ll explain.”

Furiae wasn’t calm, so he was the best one to rely on here. He set everything out clearly. Lucy’s and Sasa’s faces gradually got more serious.

“There you have it, Lucy, Sasa. So what’s actually going on?”

“Why?! I’ve wanted a relationship like yours all this time!” Furiae cried out. So she *had* liked how the two of them behaved together. Realizing that their rapport was fake had made her lose her cool.

“Wait, wait, wait! You’re misunderstanding,” Lucy sputtered.

“That’s right!” said Sasa. “We’ve always been great together!”

“But just now...” Prince Leonardo started.

“Not talking at all is weird,” I added.

Lucy didn’t panic, though—she just scratched her cheek. “I didn’t think it’d be such a big deal. We weren’t talking because of *these*.”

She showed us her bracelet—it matched Sasa’s.

“What are they?” I asked.

“They’re magic items Fujiwara sold us. They have *Telepathy Magic* cast on them.”

“If we wear them, we don’t need to actually talk out loud.”

“Okay...but *why* are you wearing them?” I asked. I understood the logic behind the explanation, but not why they’d have them.

“Well, we adventure together, right? When we’re fighting strong monsters, being stuck yelling is really inconvenient.”

“Plus, Lu’s magic is too much and she can’t hear me.”

“So we went to Fujiwara for advice and he sold us these.”

“We started out wearing them only when we were fighting, but taking them off and putting them back on was a pain, so we just left them on...”

Huh. So when it was just the two of them, they used the bracelets to talk. “What were you talking about earlier, by the way?” I asked. I needed to know because the whole bracelet explanation could just be something they’d come up with in advance.

The two of them gazed silently at each other. Was there a problem?

“W-We’re not saying.”

“It’s a secret☆”

They looked away.

“Something’s weird...” I muttered. Why wouldn’t they tell us? “I guess they really are hiding an argument... The party may end up breaking up...”

They must have heard that because their expressions changed instantly.

“We can’t break up!” Lucy exclaimed. “We’ll tell you!”

“Urk... We were talking...” Sasa trailed off.

I gulped, waiting for them to carry on.

“About how to make a move on you, Makoto.”

“Lu and I were thinking about forcing things to go further.”

Prince Leonardo, Furiae, and I were struck speechless. The tension fled from my body.

What the hell kind of conversation is that?

Prince Leonardo looked awkward.

“So...the two of you really *aren't* arguing?” Furiae asked hesitantly.

“Of course not,” Lucy replied. “We’re besties!”

“I love Lu!”

“Right, Aya!”

“Yup, Lu!”

The two of them laughed and clapped each other on the shoulders. They were more excited than usual.

The rest of us exchanged glances.

Everything now made sense. Still, their reaction felt kinda overblown—were they really being sincere? My doubt must’ve shown on my face.

“You’re stiill not convinced?” Lucy asked.

Sasa shrugged. “Then we’ll have to show you.”

“Aya? What do you—?”

“Take that!”

Sasa cheered as she tackled Lucy onto the bed. Then, as she was pinning Lucy down...

“Kyah! Aya, what was that— Mph?!”

“Mwah!≡”

Sasa *kissed* her.

“Jeez, Aya. That was too forceful.” Lucy offered a complaint that sounded rather amused before she hugged Sasa back and returned the kiss.

The kiss between the two of them gradually deepened.



Furiae, the prince, and I were struck dumb.

Whoa, what are you two doing...?

Suddenly, I noticed a wine bottle rolling near the bed—they must have kept drinking after the party finished. *So their excitement is because they're drunk.*

“Luuu, you’re such a perv.”

“And you’re so cute, Aya...”

The two of them kept flirting while entwined in each other’s arms.

Maybe they’re lovers? At least we know now that they aren’t fighting.

“See, Princess, they’re still friendly. Isn’t that a relief?”

“This is...friendship?” Furiae asked, her expression conflicted in a completely different way than earlier.

“Awa wa wa... But...they’re both girls...” The prince’s face was bright red. This was probably a bit too extreme for a kid.

Don’t you think you’re too calm? I heard Noah ask.

They’d acted like they were into each other for a while, but apparently, adventuring together had leveled up their relationship.

“Hey, Makotooo, what’re you looking at?” Lucy asked.

“C’mere, Takatsukiiii.”

“It’s all your fault we’re like this.”

“You made us wait too long.”

This was *my* fault?! Well...it had to be. I’d left the two of them behind while I’d been saving the past, so I was definitely in the wrong.

Lucy’s and Sasa’s gazes were heated.

They’re calling for you, Makoto. You need to prove you’re a man, Noah said.

I can’t do that. Just think about how bad it’ll be for the prince’s upbringing if things carry on in front of him.

“Let’s just put them to sleep for now—*Curse of Slumber.*” Furiae forcefully

knocked them out. *That really is a convenient spell.*

Lucy and Sasa—still in each other's arms—breathed softly in their sleep.

The three of us left awake all shifted awkwardly.

"Sorry, I misunderstood..." the prince apologized.

Eh, it was fine. Everyone made mistakes. "Nah, it made sense that you were worried about their friendship," I told him.

"I'm glad we know why..." Furiae agreed.

"Okay." The prince looked up, his face still cherry red. "Then, if you'll excuse me."

He quickly took off, and now, only Furiae and I were left awake.

She sighed. "Well, that was pointless panic. I'm going back to my own lodging. My knight...take care on the demon continent."

"Yeah. Thanks, Princess. Shall I walk you back?"

"My guard is waiting, so I'll be fine..." She shifted as if to leave, but then stopped like she wanted to say something. "Um..."

"What's up?"

"Well, it doesn't really have anything to do with you, but..."

"It's fine, go ahead."

"Naya has been in my dreams a lot recently."

"Huh?"

Naya—that was the goddess who ruled over darkness and curses in this world.

"What has she said? Anything to do with Iblis?"

"No. Nothing useful at all. She just keeps smirking like something's funny. Then she laughs and says something like 'You people are all hilarious!' She's a completely useless goddess!"

Well, Naya had left Furiae on her own for years, so maybe the princess's complaints were inevitable.

“Why tell me?” I asked.

“No reason. But you can talk to the goddesses, right?”

“Yeah...” I looked up at the ceiling. “Noah? What do you think?”

It's unusual. Naya hasn't shown any interest in this world for millennia.

Is there some reason she may be acting that way?

Nothing I can think of stuck down here. Ask Eir at some point.

Does Eir get along with her?

Naya doesn't get along with any goddesses. She doesn't even deal with her faith on your planet.

Right...

“Noah doesn't know anything,” I told Furiae.

“I didn't expect much. Goodbye, then.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She left, her long hair swaying behind her. Naya hadn't interfered with the mortal realm at all, and yet now she was showing up in Furiae's dreams. I was a bit worried, but thinking about it wasn't going to help me.

Maybe I'll go see Momo. I should, at least before I leave Highland.

While I was considering that, I checked over my things to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything.



“Morning,” I said.

“My head hurts...” Lucy grumbled.

“What happened last night?” Sasa asked.

Well, neither of them seemed to be in good shape. They'd had waaay too much to drink.

Before I'd woken them up, someone from the Soleil Knights had given me a brief explanation of the (revised) Third Northern Front Plan. It pretty much just

told me to greet the people at the bases on the front lines when I got there. I was just thinking that this seemed like way too little for me to do, but then, I looked at the document being sent out.

There were around twelve things written on it.

Situation I — Should Makoto Takatsuki's Elemental Magic Spiral Out of Control.

Situation II — Should Makoto Takatsuki Summon Dia.

Situation III — Should Makoto Takatsuki Use the *Right Hand of the Elemental*.

Situation IV — ...

And so on.

The plans themselves had probably been drawn up by Momo. There were things in there that only someone who'd been near me would know.

I'll do my best not to cause her trouble, I promised myself.

"Let's go!" Lucy cheered. She lifted her staff.

"If you would, Lucy."

"Go on, Lu!"

Sasa and I both grabbed one of Lucy's hands.

"Let's go! *Teleport!* ☆"

My vision went pure white. The scenery blurred several times.

Green countryside.

Gloomy forests.

Barren plains.

Mountain ranges stretching into the distance.

I asked later and found out that successive teleportations like this were apparently pretty difficult. Most mages would be out of mana if they tried one.

Lucy looked completely fine as she cast *Teleport* time after time.

"We're here," she said eventually.

The next thing we saw was a huge fortress right in front of us.

“So, this is...?” I began.

“The farthest front against the demon lords’ armies—Fort Blackbarrel,” Sasa told me. So the two of them must have come here several times.

It looked like whoever had built the fortress had used magic to turn the natural mountain range into a fortress. There were several unrefined-looking iron pillars protruding from the craggy surface. The walls also looked like they’d been made using magic—they were thick stone.

I couldn’t see anyone at a glance, but there were probably slits cut in the rock because I could feel sharp gazes raining down.

Someone was watching us.

There was an ominous feeling in the air that had been completely absent from the peaceful capital.

This was how a battlefield felt.

The three of us were on the front lines of the war.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Visits a Forward Outpost

The farthest forward outpost against the demon lords' armies—Blackbarrel—was a sturdy fort built into a relatively short mountain. Looking around, there was a deep moat around it, as well as multiple barricades. These probably wouldn't do much against flying monsters, but they'd likely work at least decently against land-bound monsters.

The rough barricades spread out as far as you could see across the plains. Peppered among them were things that looked like monster bones.

We were standing in front of a hefty iron gate situated a little ways from the fortress. It was firmly shut. I was looking around for how we'd get inside when someone spoke.

"Who are you people?"

The voice seemed to come from nowhere. I couldn't see anyone, but they probably had a watch posted and hidden.

"I'm Makoto Takatsuki, and the others—"

"We're the Crimson Fangs," Lucy said, filling in the blank for me.

Man, that name's still so cool. Maybe I should ask to join...

"We have been waiting for you. Please, this way."

Part of the gate setup must have included a hidden room for a guard. A soldier quickly appeared in front of us and guided us to the main fort.

"Take care. If you stray too far from the path I am taking, the monster traps will activate," the soldier warned nonchalantly as we walked along.

"R-Right."

Well, that was scary... I couldn't just meander around willy-nilly. I started caring a *lot* more about where I was putting my feet.

“Sir Makoto Takatsuki,” our guide said. “It is an honor to meet you again upon your return.”

Huh. I didn’t remember meeting the soldier before, though.

“Where...exactly did we meet?” I asked.

“We were both part of the first Northern Front Plan’s expedition to Laphroaig. I was part of the first division at the time.”

“The first division... That was Commander Ortho’s division, wasn’t it?”

“It was. Seeing your spell freeze the monsters *and* the ocean solid was incredible!”

“That takes me back,” I mused.

Back then, I couldn’t summon any Undyne—I’d managed by using *Synchro* with Furiae.

“A lot of us within the fort admire you, Sir. They’ll be glad to see you. We were all devastated when we heard you were injured against Zagan.”

“Well...sorry for concerning you all.”

“I have to say, we all heard you’d been cursed and would potentially never even walk again because of your injuries, but your body looks unhurt.”

“Ah, well, I’m fine now.”

I hadn’t actually been hurt, so I needed to dodge the question a bit. While we were talking, we reached the interior of the fort.

“This is as far as I can guide you,” the soldier said, bowing before leaving us with a woman wearing glasses.

“We have been waiting for you all, Sir Makoto Takatsuki, Ladies Lucy and Aya of the Crimson Fangs. First, please follow me to the general of the fortress.”

Her uniform was tailored perfectly, and she seemed like an excellent secretary. We followed after her. The interior of the fortress was bigger than I expected, and we passed a lot of soldiers on our way.

“Lucy! You’re here!”

“Lady Aya! It has been a while!”

With their statuses as a saint-rank mage and orichalcum adventurer, Lucy and Sasa were famous here as well.

“We’ll be under your care for a while,” Lucy replied easily. “Good to see you.”

“It’s been a while. You’re not hurt, are you?” Sasa asked.

I was just thinking about how nice it must be to be popular when someone else spoke up.

“Hey...who’s that guy with the Crimson Fangs?”

“He’s not a soldier, right? Dude’s puny.”

“He’s not Lucy’s or Aya’s man, is he?”

“What?! I won’t allow it!”

“Hey, hey, we knew they had someone they’d given their hearts to.”

“Yeah, getting with them would be a huge challenge.”

“How many people’s hearts have they broken?”

“So, who is he?”

“Well, the only one who could walk in front of them would be the Hero of Roses...”

“Wait...look at his black hair, and that dagger with the weird mana... Could it be...?”

“N-No way...”

“Sir Makoto Takatsuki, the Hero of Roses has returned...?”

“Wha?! Whoa there... Didn’t they say he couldn’t even lift a finger now?”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen him from a distance before... I’m sure! It’s him!”

“W-Wow... We need to let everyone know.”

I was getting a *lot* of attention all of a sudden. Things were getting noisy, and people were beginning to swarm.

“We are heading to the general!” the woman guiding us called out. “Make

way!”

The wall of people parted. The woman might’ve been beautiful, but she was scary too.

Eventually, we came to a grand door on an upper floor of the fort.

“Excuse me, General!”

“Enter.”

“Sir! Go ahead, Sir Makoto.”

“R-Right.”

I slowly opened the door and stepped inside. I’d recognized the voice that had told me to enter. A man was sitting at a desk in gleaming golden armor, his feet up on the desktop.

“General Gerald, I have brought Sir Takatsuki to you.”

“Good work. You can leave.”

“Sir!”

The woman left the room.

This was Gerald Ballantine, the chosen hero of Althena. He was also the holder of the same skill as Anna—*Hero of Lightning*.

Gerald was the leader of the North Cardinal Knights, and the heir to his family—one of the five Sacred Noble families in Highland. Apparently, he was also the person in charge of this fortress now. He’d done well for himself.

His eyes bored into me, and his gaze was just as sharp as it had ever been. His perpetually grumpy expression was just the same as well.

Well...this is gonna be a pain, I thought to myself with a mental sigh.

Despite that, his greeting was far calmer than I’d expected.

“It’s been a while, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“Indeed so...General Gerald.”

“Gerald is fine.”

“It’s been a bit, Gerry.”

“Yes, it has,” he responded after a while.

Man, no comeback. How sad.

“You will be staying with us for a while. I look forward to it.”

“Same here, General Gerald!” exclaimed Lucy.

“Sames!” Sasa said with a grin. “Where’s Olga by the way?”

The girls were much more laid-back with him. Well, they had been here a few times already.

Suddenly, the room shuddered with a great *thud*—Gerald launched himself from his seated position to land in front of me.

How’d he even do that?

“I heard you are challenging Astaroth.”

He must have gotten taller than before because his figure felt even more imposing as he looked at me with a gleam in his eyes.

“I promised to fight him again,” I replied.

“And here I was, thinking you had enough fame and glory to spend the rest of your life playing around. Apparently not. You aren’t satisfied with that, are you?” He smirked.

Uh, that’s not what this is about at all...

“I believe you already know, but I am in charge here,” he continued. “If you head out, leave word. I won’t micromanage you, so do as you like. Oh, but don’t break the fortress though, okay?”

That was far more generous than I would’ve expected, given how Gerald usually threw his weight around. Of course, I’d already looked over the plan the Soleil Knights had spent all night creating.

“I’ll follow the strategy properly,” I told him.

Gerald got a bored look on his face. “You’re going to follow *that* plan?”

“I am—using too much elemental magic will just cause a lot of inconvenience

for people...”

I trailed off, and he let out a heaving sigh.

“It’s...just something the nobles and clergy from our country came up with to stop a foreign hero from getting even more kudos. You can ignore it.”

“It is?”

I hadn’t realized that.

“I already received an order to the same effect. The cowards are scared of you getting more influence. Haven’t you noticed?”

“I hadn’t,” I admitted, internally flabbergasted.

“They treated you like dirt back in the capital,” Lucy commented.

Sasa nodded. “Yup, they could have at least been polite.”

Apparently, the big shots in Highland were trying to shun me.

“They’re all just peace-addled fools playing at warfare. Iblis is back, and they’re still not acting. It’ll just continue forever at this rate.”

“Didn’t Forneus attack, though?” I asked. I’d heard about Sakurai dealing with that.

“The Hero of Light took him out in a single blow, so they’ve completely let down their guards.”

“Oh, I see.” The people in Symphonia definitely seemed to trust the peace they were currently experiencing.

“Plus...the queen’s policies are flaccid at best. She doesn’t condemn even the people speaking against her. Hence all the conflict in Highland... Well, that has nothing to do with you.”

“Queen Noelle...has her work cut out for her,” I remarked.

“Definitely,” he replied. “She should just purge the dissenters.”

Well, that was extreme.

“Whatever,” he continued. “There isn’t much here, but take it easy. If you need anything, ask the woman who showed you here. Of course, the two

behind you have been here time and time again, so they should know the lay of the land.”

“Right. Can we use our usual room?” Lucy asked.

“C’mon, where’s Olga?”

“Makoto Takatsuki will be provided a separate room. We cannot place a legendary hero in the same room as adventurers. You can find Olga yourself. She went out hunting for dragons, so she should be back sometime this evening.”

“Hmph, got it,” Lucy answered.

“Sure, I’ll go looking.”

Lucy and Sasa didn’t change how they acted, even around a general. Gerry didn’t seem to mind.

“Excuse us, then.” I moved to leave.

Gerry called out to me before I could exit the room. “Makoto Takatsuki, you have saved many of the soldiers in the fortress. Make sure you show yourself to them later.”

“Got it.” I remembered that the guard on watch had said the same thing.

With that, I left the office.

“Sir Takatsuki, this is the room we have prepared for you. Please use it as you wish. Here is the key.”

“Thank you,” I replied, peering into the room. It was average—not massive, but also not small. It would probably be around the level of a mid-class room in Macallan.

“Wow! It’s huge!”

“Wha? This is a one-person room—why are there two beds?”

“This is a big room?” I asked.

“It is!” the two chorused.

Apparently, since Fort Blackbarrel was right on the front lines, living space

was at a premium. Most sleeping areas were laid out like capsule hotels, with not much more than a bed. Thinking of it like that made me feel kinda bad for getting special treatment.

“I will take my leave, then!” our guide said with a salute. “If you need me, I will be in the duty room on the first floor.”

She’d offered to guide me around the whole fortress, but since the other two knew the place, I turned her down. She’d looked kind of put out by that. *Maybe she wanted to show me around?*

She departed, and we were left to our own devices. We put our things in the room and then turned to one another.

“Where shall we go?” I asked them.

“Somewhere where a lot of people gather, maybe? What do you think, Aya? The training grounds?”

“Lu, don’t you think the canteen would be better?”

“Right, we’ll be using it either way.”

“The food isn’t *good* though, so don’t get your hopes up,” Sasa warned me.

“It isn’t?” I asked.

We carried on with our chatter as they showed me the way. The two of them were walking around like they owned the place. They’d probably been sent here a lot of times as representatives of Roses’s adventurers. In terms of dragons defeated, Sasa and the Hero of Incandescence, Olga, were at the top.

“What about Lucy?” I asked.

“Me? Well...”

It turned out that Lucy’s spells just blew everyone and everything away, so counting defeats was impossible.

“Lu’s probably got the most,” Sasa mused.

“I appreciate you saying that, but there’s no proof. Well, Makoto’s going to be on top in no time!”

“Right! Takatsuki’s spells will freeze them all.”

“I don’t know if it’ll go that smoothly,” I said.

They’d been frontline adventurers and had made a name for themselves, but hearing their encouragement didn’t bring me much confidence. Maybe it was because I’d been so careful back in the past.

Actually, Makoto, Ira told me you went pretty crazy in the past, I heard Noah say.

Ira’s exaggerating.

Speaking of Ira, I hadn’t heard from her in a while. I wondered what was going on.

“We’re here, Makoto,” Lucy said, bringing me back to earth.

We were in a stupidly huge underground space. Long tables and stools lined the room. Apparently, the meal time was nearly over, so there was barely anyone here eating.

“Are you hungry, Takatsuki?” Sasa asked. “It looks like there’s still some left.”

I looked to where she was pointing and saw someone serving soup and dark bread. We joined the line and got our food, then picked out some seats.

“The bread here’s so dry...” Lucy complained. “You can have as much as you like, though.”

“The soup’s bland too. They must not have done much prep work.”

“Tasty...” I muttered.

The two of them looked at me and simultaneously let out shocked noises.

It really was good, though. Maybe my sense of taste was kinda off.

“Makoto...what were you eating in the past?” Lucy asked.

“Takatsuki...I feel sorry for you...”

Both of them showed me a lot of sympathy. Well, pretty much the only seasoning a thousand years ago was salt.

Ah! I’d evolved to find *anything* tasty!

No... Noah retorted.

Yeah, no.

At that moment someone noticed me and stopped in their tracks.

“Is that...the Hero of Roses?”

“No way... He was paralyzed in a fight against a demon lord.”

“But his face...”

The soldiers gradually started to gather.

“The two next to him are Lucy and Aya, right?”

“They brought a man with them?”

“The two of the all-female Crimson Fangs brought a man with them?!”

“There’s no doubt about it! That’s the Hero of Roses!”

The onlookers were slowly getting more and more excited. Unlike in the corridor earlier, there was no one to settle them down.

Should I...get up and introduce myself?

“Aya! Who is the man next to you?!” one of the soldiers asked, finally plucking up the nerve.

“My husband, Makoto Takatsuki!” Sasa grinned, wrapping my arm in hers.

“Sasa?!”

“Hey! You mean *our* husband!”

Lucy’s comment and my own retort about whether that was an appropriate introduction were drowned under the soldiers’ voices.

“It *is* him!”

“It’s the Hero of Roses!”

“You’re back, Sir Takatsuki!”

“You saved me in Laphroaig!”

“You saved my life during the first Northern Front Plan!”

“I’ll never forget you stopping the stampede in Symphonia!”

“Has the demon lord’s curse healed?!”

“We can finally fight together!”

“To think, I’ll be able to see your elemental magic once again...”

Before I knew it, we were surrounded.

“Uh... Well...”

I was floundering. Lucy and Sasa quickly clapped me on the back.

“C’mon, stand proud, Makoto.”

“They’ve all come to see you.”

“Got it...”

I straightened up. These soldiers had been concerned for me, so I should show them that I was healthy.

After that, I was bombarded with questions. Of course, the soldiers were military through and through, so they’d picked up on the fact that I’d been on a highly classified assignment—they knew not to ask me specific details about where I’d been. Instead, they interrogated me about elemental magic. A lot of the people here had seen my magic go up against Zagan in Laphroaig.

They all wanted to hear about that battle, and they asked if I was still just as strong.

On top of that...

“Hey! Call everyone that’s not on duty! The Legendary Hero of Roses is here!”

“Right, we can ask him personally about what happened when the Hero of Light was trapped in Zagan’s barrier!”

“Do we have booze?! We’re not going to get a better chance for it!”

“There should be some in the store! Bring it all!”

“Won’t the general be angry...?”

“We’ll be fine if we keep it in moderation. He’s been soft recently.”

“That’s true!”

It turned into a party.

There was technically a barrier that prevented noise from leaving the fortress. Still, I didn't think that was the problem here...

Should we be doing something like this on the front lines?

As the noise reached its peak, I heard an angry voice yell out, "What are you doing?!" It was the scary woman who had guided us earlier. Lucy and Sasa managed to win her over, though. Soon, she wanted to join in. Apparently, she'd been there for the first Northern Front plan as well, and she wanted to hear about it.

She could have just asked.

In the end...we partied until late in the night. Still, being soldiers, no one actually drank themselves under the table. Once the celebrations were over, they all headed back to their bunks to get sleep and prepare for tomorrow.

It was only *us* that were drunk. Lucy and Sasa were snoozing peacefully on the other bed in the room. The two of them were popular with the soldiers, so they'd had plenty of drinks poured for them.

That was fun...

I'd managed to talk with a lot of them. It wasn't a bad feeling to know that what I'd done on the battlefield had stuck with them. The soldiers here all feared Astaroth, so having an elementalist like me was buoying their hopes.

I can't lose now, I thought to myself as I fell asleep.



Where...?

The moment I thought I'd fallen asleep, I found myself standing in a fantastical place.

It was Noah's domain, but...different.

Noah was wearing a white dress that was set against her shining silver hair. Eir was there too, with her golden locks and a gorgeous blue dress.

One more goddess was present—she was tall and dignified, and she spoke

happily with the other two.

It was Althena. She was the head goddess of the Sacred Deities and the ruler of the entire cosmos.



The first time we'd met, she'd stared me down with a cool gaze.

The second time, she'd given me an almost pained expression.

And now, this time...

"You're here, Makoto Takatsuki!" she exclaimed, her face blooming with a smile as bright as sunshine.

"Althena? I-It has been some time."

"You needn't be so formal, Makoto Takatsuki. Well done!"

"Thank...you..."

I felt a little nervous being in front of her after so long.

"She wanted to thank you no matter what," Noah said, folding her arms cheerily. "She doesn't have much to dooo."

"Yoo-hoo, Mako!☆ Good work." Eir was as bubbly as ever—she stroked my hair. Yeah, her presence was definitely soothing.

Huh... Where's Ira?

I was almost certain she'd be here, but the diminutive goddess was nowhere to be seen.

"Irrie's up to her ears in work," Eir told me as she read my mind.

Oh, right... Ira was busy?

"That girl... She should really learn how to delegate." Althena sighed.

"Agreed," said Eir. "She tries to do it all by herself and ends up overwhelmed."

So Ira hadn't changed much.

"Makoto, you seem awfully taken with her." Noah pouted. "Are you thinking of leaving me for her?" In a blink, she moved behind me and flung her arms over my shoulders.

"I'd never do that... Um. Your nails are digging in and it hurts. Ow..."

"You seem to be doing nothing but think of her, though."

“Well, she was a lot of help in the past...and I haven’t heard from her recently.”

“Hmph, and that made you feel lonely?”

“No, that’s not— You’re the only goddess for me.”

What the?! Noah was scary today.

“Hmm. Noah, it is rare for you to be so attached to a believer,” Althena remarked.

“Of course I am! It’s Makoto! He’s my prized apostle, and I put so much effort into raising him! He’s completely different from the others!”

“You *raised* me?” It felt more like she’d just left me to my own devices. Well, that *had* let me grow.

“Heh... Your prized apostle. He certainly is impressive.”

“Hey, Althena, can’t we bring him to the celestial realm already?” Eir wheedled.

“Hmm, if Iblis is defeated, that would be acceptable.”

“Hey! Don’t just come out with that!” Noah protested. “You people rule the celestial realm, so he’d effectively become one of your retainers!”

The phrase “bring him to the celestial realm” wasn’t one I’d heard before, and it had me curious. Eir must have heard that thought because her eyes gleamed.

“Interested in that, Mako? It’s where we live, so it’s like a wonderland where there’s no illness, wounds, or even death. It’s the final goal for ev—”

“No death?!” I exclaimed. Eternal life practically meant heaven.

“Oh right, they did call it ‘heaven’ on Earth, didn’t they? Hey, Mako, want to go to heaven?” Eir whispered into my ear. I shuddered.

“Don’t you dare. Don’t be swayed, Mako.”

“What’s the problem, Noah?” Althena asked. “You can join us as well.”

“No! Althena, we’re rivals!”

“You don’t need to be stubborn—let’s be as friendly as we used to be.”

“Hmph! I’m not being all friendly with you!” Noah pouted, turning away as Althena laughed.

They *were* actually being friendly—right in front of me. Althena seemed to want to get Noah on her side, and she’d wanted it badly enough to recognize Noah as the eighth goddess of the Sacred Deities.

While Noah was protesting verbally, she didn’t truly seem against it—at least, not as much as she’d have us believe.

Was this...the end of the long-standing conflict between the Sacred Deities and the Titanea?

Althena and Eir kept up their attempts at convincing her. They started off trying to get her to pick a hero and priestess, so apparently they wanted her to follow their customs.

I just listened.

“Well, I’ll think about it,” Noah said eventually.

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted by the chime of a bell.

“Hm... A summoning because of a harbinger of the apocalypse... Again?” Althena asked, her expression tired.

“Is it universe seventeen, again? Those apocryphals don’t know when to quit.”

“No, it’s the fiends’ territory—the fifty-third this time. They seem to be trying to resurrect the Wicked Deities.”

“Ah, that’s a pain.”

“We defeated them, so they can just stay buried in the underworld.”

The goddesses were rapidly slinging around words and phrases I’d never heard before.

The fifty-third universe? Apocryphals?

“Althena administers many worlds,” Noah explained. “She’s not just looking at this world. You don’t need to worry about it—just know that this isn’t the only ‘other world.’”

“Many...worlds...”

Althena’s responsibilities were even wider than I’d thought. It was more than just “the universe.”

“I don’t deal with *every* little thing,” she clarified ruefully. “The worlds will generally keep spinning. Even without my interference. I just get called for the odd emergency, since I *am* in charge.”

“You could just leave them to it,” Noah suggested. “The strong will survive. That’s how nature works.”

“I could not. The role of the gods is to guide the weak. If we don’t show them the path, the weak will just wander.”

Their opinions were clashing.

I stood off to the side, listening to their argument. I remembered what I’d learned in the Water Temple. Each of their arguments followed the tenets of their respective doctrines: the Sacred Deities and the Titanea.

The Sacred Deities focused on order and devotion. “Ye feeble, follow the teachings and combine your strengths. Improve yourselves and grow.” This was the foundation of their teachings.

The Titanea prioritized freedom and harmony. “Mortals have short lives, so live as you wish, however you should all get along.”

Those two are pretty different. Though, if Noah becomes a Sacred Deity, maybe those tenets will end up changing.

“The way you live is ‘devotion’ itself, so there’s no problem there, is there?” Eir quipped from my side.

“I live freely like Noah teaches,” I answered.

“You live *too* freely.” Eir laughed.

Suddenly, Althena was surrounded by multiple prismatic magic circles.

“You’re going?” Noah asked.

Althena nodded. “I am. At this rate, their world will fall. They need guidance.”

“Well, work hard.”

“Bye, Noah. I’ll be back. If you want to become one of us, let me know anytime you like.”

“I’ll...think about it.”

“Eir, you’re in charge here. Makoto Takatsuki, I am sorry we could not talk more.”

With that, the Goddess of the Sun left. She was a busy goddess too—just not in the same way as Ira.

Afterward, I spent some time talking to Noah and Eir about what I’d gone through a thousand years ago, and then we discussed how things were in the present.

Noah insisted I get my relationship with Lucy and Sasa moving. Eir was urging the same, but with Princess Sophia.

Yup, this is what the present is like. I’m definitely back...

My vision started to blur.

Guess I’ll be waking up soon.

“Goodbye, then,” I said.

“Take care, Makoto.”

“Byeeee, Mako. ☆”

The two goddesses waved as they vanished in a blinding light.



“Huh?”

I’d awoken in my room in Fort Blackbarrel...or not. The entire area was covered in a plush, expensive-looking carpet, with doors and bookshelves scattered around. Books were strewn all over the place. There were also a whole bunch of cute “plushies”—except they seemed to be alive and were rushing about.

Oh... I’d seen so much of this place it was almost tiring.

“Ira...right?”

It was her domain.

“Mh... Makoto Takatsuki...welcome...”

I heard her weak voice. She had dark circles under her eyes, and she lay collapsed over a huge desk.

“You seem exhausted. Are you okay?” I asked.

“Ah, yeah. I’ll have a nap when I’m done with these documents... Huh? Where are they?”

“You hallucinated them,” I said, grabbing Ira’s arm as she felt around for something in the empty space.

I pulled her over to the bed.

“Nuh... Can’t sleep yet. Still...work left...”

I put her to bed as she grumbled. She looked like a junior high student, but the words coming out of her mouth sounded like someone working at a *super* exploitative company, which was really disconcerting. She wouldn’t sleep until she was done with work, which was *really* bad. It was even worse than how I used to pull three all-nighters in a row.

“Sleep, please,” I said to her.

“Muh... Can’t...”

I left her in the bed, and before long, I heard her peaceful breathing. Ira’s face relaxed.

Oh, actually... I’m here because she summoned me, right? What do I do now? Guess I’ll just wait for her to wake up.

I did my usual and used the area to train my *Water* and *Fate Magic*.

A while later, Ira shot up in bed and frantically looked around. “Ah! What time is it?!”

Surely it’s whatever time you want it to be...? You control it, after all.

“Good morning, Ira. You’re working too hard.”

She paused. “Sorry... I didn’t mean to worry you.” She pulled her disheveled

hair into order as she got out of bed. Maybe she was still half asleep—her expression looked dazed.

“By the way, you haven’t spoken to me lately. Is it because you’ve been so busy?” I asked.

Her eyes snapped wide open. “That’s the problem! I *couldn’t* talk to you! Come here.”

I sighed, then moved over to her side and sat down.

So she wasn’t giving me the silent treatment because she was busy, but because she couldn’t connect.

Ira touched the necklace I was wearing. “Hmm...it still has my anima in it. It must be because of Noah’s influence.”

“Noah’s influence?”

“Now that you’re back in the present, you’re Noah’s apostle again, aren’t you? I think that’s what cut me off.”

“Noah didn’t say anything about that, though.” I would’ve thought she’d mention it.

“I told you before—Noah is on the same level as Althena. A young goddess like me is far below them. Noah probably didn’t do it intentionally, but the connection with me was overwhelmed by her anima.”

“Huh. Noah’s amazing.”

“She managed this even while she was sealed. It’s terrifying.”

“So...does that mean I won’t be able to talk to you now?” I asked. She’d been so much help while I was in the past. Losing my connection to her would be disappointing.

“It’ll be fine. Why do you think I summoned you here? Come on, get closer.”

“Uhm... Ah, Ira?”

We were already sitting next to each other, but she was tugging me closer. She pressed her soft frame right against me.

“There!”

Both of her arms wrapped around me in a hug.

Whaaaa?!

“Uhhmm... Ira? What are—” I started to ask, heart racing.

“I’m concentrating, be quiet! I’m reconnecting the manalink between us.” Her voice was serious, so I kept quiet like she’d asked.

Her grip on me was gradually tightening. Despite how small she was, she was really strong.

“Her anima’s still in the way... It won’t work. Makoto Takatsuki, hug me back.”

“U-Uh...”

“Now!”

“R-Right... Excuse me.” I did as she said and placed my arms around her small shoulders. *How tightly should I hold on? It’d probably be rude to squeeze too much.*

“Enough already! Hold me tighter!”

“Riiight.”

Well, apparently I needn’t have worried, so I did as she said. Suddenly, I felt a pulse of something run through my whole body. Then, it felt like I was flushed with heat.

“Whew... The connection’s in place again. We should be able to talk as we have until now.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, moving away from her. I thought I’d had *Calm Mind* active, but...my heart was noisy in my ears. I steadied my breathing and calmed down.

“Is that why you summoned me here?” I asked.

“It is. Problem?”

“No, I’m grateful, of course. But Althena and Eir were at Noah’s place, so you could have come too.”

I froze immediately after the words were out of my mouth, suddenly realizing

the stupidity of what I'd said.

Ira looked at me in exasperation. "You...wanted to do *that* in front of Noah?"

"Well..."

It might have been for the manalink, but I'd spent over five minutes hugging Ira. And doing that in front of Noah?

"I'd be scared of what happened next," I replied.

"Don't say such things."

I shuddered. I hadn't done anything *bad*, but...

"You're going to fight Astaroth, right?" Ira asked. "If you need advice, talk to me."

"Thank you, Ira," I said.

The amount of support she gave me—despite me being an apostle from another pantheon—was impressive. Should she be going so far?

Ira must have read my mind because she quickly answered. "It's the other way around. You're a devout apostle of the Wick—no, the *Titanea* Goddess Noah. Without these precautions, I can't see *any* future events that you've had a hand in. The demons aren't exactly devoted, so they are relatively easy to see... But that's not the case with Noah's apostles. Not a thousand years ago, and not in the present."

"Well, Cain maxed out his devotion too." He'd been more than happy to talk about Noah while we'd tried to get into the Seafloor Temple.

"I can see a way to win this war, but if you do something outside of my *Future Sight*, it could disrupt everything. That's why I need to actively make a connection to you."

"Oh, I see." It was less like support and more like putting a tracker on a wild animal. Suddenly, my mind caught on something else she'd said. "You can see a way to win... So Iblis can be defeated?" The last time I'd asked, the final outcome had been fifty-fifty...or a little worse.

"I can. The modern Hero of Light, your childhood friend Ryouzuke Sakurai,

can...probably...defeat the resurrected form of Iblis.”

“I see... That’s a relief...” The tension left my shoulders.

“How is he going to do it?” I asked, curious.

“If I tell you, that wouldn’t stop it from happening, but don’t you *dare* stick your nose in. You will, though, so I won’t say.”

“I just want to watch.”

“I can’t trust that.”

“Ouch.” That was blunt.

“I can give you a hint... In the modern era, Iblis has only just been resurrected, right? While his individual power is great, even after his resurrection, the armies are far weaker. The armies of the western continent are far stronger, and there are few demon lords left—the numbers of strong demons are decreasing too. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that Iblis will personally try and launch a surprise attack on the Hero of Light.”

“Personally?!” That was...rather decisive. It wasn’t something I’d expect from the overall ruler of the demons.

“He has no other method. The demons are in a weaker position than he’d assumed after so long.”

“Nevia said he’d be stronger in this time period, though.”

“Even if he is *personally* stronger, he can’t win against the weight of numbers. Laphroaig is gradually becoming more powerful...though they’re also getting carried away.”

“That’s right, they have awful relations with Highland. Is there anything you can do?” I recalled the tension in the meeting the other day.

“And how much work do you think that’s been causing me? All of the countries are so selfish...”

“Oh, that’s what’s happening?” So the international disputes were indeed bothering her.

“My biggest fear right now is that all the political relations on the continent

might fall apart during the war. The nations all need to work together.”

“Yeah...” I murmured.

“Hey! You act like it has nothing to do with you, but Roses is part of the problem.”

“It is?”

Why? Princess Sophia barely spoke in the meetings. We were a weak country, so we kept quiet.

“And that’s the problem! Roses has a new legendary hero, and both Laphroaig and Springrogue owe them a large debt, so they’re in a key position in the alliance. I’d actually prefer them to take over from Highland, considering the state they’re in, but Roses won’t act proactively at all!”

“Well, it’s Princess Sophia...”

The leader of Roses was the king, but most of the diplomacy was left to the princess. I...couldn’t imagine her accepting the responsibility of herding the movers and shakers of Laphroaig and Highland.

“I think that’d be difficult,” I said eventually.

Ira sighed. “I know. I’m asking for the impossible,” she said, slumping.

Unfortunately, I had no way of easing her worries. She must have heard that thought because she looked up.

“Well, no matter. My biggest concern—having no contact with Noah’s apostle—is solved now.”

I paused for a moment. “I guess that’s all we can ask for.”

So I was the cause of her sleepless nights.

“Right... Time to get back to work,” Ira said with a stretch.

I figured I should leave before I got in the way, but I’d talk to her if I needed any advice.

“Hey,” Ira said casually.

“What is it?”

“You...won’t betray us, will you?”

What was she talking about? I suppressed a rueful smile as I chose my words carefully. “I’ve got no plans to do that, but why would you ask?”

“Even if...Noah ordered you to?”

I had to think about that. I couldn’t imagine her telling me to defect to Iblis. Besides...

“It’s not like I do *everything* she says.”

The first time we’d met and I’d become her believer hadn’t been pleasant. Even after that, I’d kept sticking my nose in when she’d told me to avoid trouble.

Ira snorted slightly at my answer. “I just wanted to check. Considering your skill in elemental magic, and your status as Noah’s apostle, your defection could turn the war on its head.”

“Don’t worry—I just spoke to Noah, and she’s on good terms with Althena and Eir.”

“So it seems. They want her to properly become a Sacred Deity.”

I remembered their earlier conversation and Althena’s attempts to get exactly that. I also remembered Noah not being entirely against it.

“Either way, I’m not betraying my side. You can rest assured of that,” I said firmly.

“Right... That’s good.” Ira let out a soft yawn and then downed a nearby can of coffee.

She...could have picked something nicer.

My vision started to blur. I was really waking up this time.

“Don’t work too hard,” I told her. “Make sure you sleep properly.”

“You should be worrying more about yourself. Don’t go overboard.”

“I won’t.”

“Really?” she asked doubtfully.

My vision of her expression soon faded.



I woke up, greeted by the ceiling of my room in Fort Blackbarrel. Once I was up and dressed, I had Lucy and Sasa give me a tour of the place. We had a great breakfast in the canteen, and then...

“These are the training grounds,” Lucy said.

Sasa wrinkled her nose. “It reeks of sweat, so I don’t really like it.”

This was an underground space where the soldiers trained. The Soleil Knights had a space outside in Highland, but this place was gloomy and relatively small. Still, the soldiers were putting effort into their training.

Sasa was right—there was a slight humidity in the air. We took a lap around the area.

People were focusing on their training, so no one really spoke to us. That was probably because I’d greeted most of them at the party last night. I wanted to join in with the training, but there weren’t many water elementals underground. Training here would be inefficient.

“Lucy, Sasa, let’s head—”

“Aya! Lucy! I finally found you!” someone yelled as they appeared in front of us.

She was a woman with dark skin and glossy black hair. Her armor left a lot uncovered, but the burning aura around her was very familiar.

“Olga! Yoo-hoo!” Sasa cheered.

“You weren’t here last night,” Lucy said.

“I wasn’t! I went hunting on the demon continent yesterday! Then I found out you were coming. Argh! If they’d told me earlier, I would’ve rushed back!”

The woman was acting really friendly with Lucy and Sasa. From what I remembered, she was more menacing. She used to remind me of a hungry grizzly bear or something like that, but now, she was quite cheerful.

“It’s been a while, Mr. Legendary Hero.”

She turned and smiled at me. Her hair was slightly longer, and she looked more grown-up.

This was the Hero of Incandescence—Olga Talisker.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Talks with a Hero

“You haven’t changed much, Mr. Hero.”

Olga walked closer. Her combat gear left as little to the imagination as ever, but she looked slightly more mature than I remembered.

There wasn’t a single sign of the naked hostility she’d had when we’d first met—that, of course, being when she’d ambushed us in the capital of Great Keith.

“Makoto stopped getting physically older,” Lucy explained.

“Not fair, is it?” Sasa chimed in.

“Huh?” Olga asked after a pause. “H-He stopped getting older? H-Hmm?”

You could practically see the question mark floating over her head. Maybe she thought they were joking.

“Because of Ira’s time travel magic, I’ve looked like this for about three years,” I explained. “It’s kind of a side effect of her miracle.”

“A side effect... Wait, three years?! That’s amazing!” Olga’s eyes were gleaming. “Tell me about it! You met the savior and fought Iblis, didn’t you?!”

“Oh right, you haven’t given us much detail,” Lucy pointed out.

Sasa nodded. “I guess we were just too happy to see him and didn’t ask.”

And so, I ended up talking to the three of them about what happened a thousand years ago.



We moved to an unused conference room.

“Whoa! Bifrons is crazy! I’m impressed you won.”

“Oh, so that’s what my great-grandfather was like...”

“The Grandsage was like that?!”

“Wha...? My holy sword broke back then as well? But...”

“You were busier than I thought, Makoto.”

“I thought the savior would have been stronger, Takatsuki.”

Olga, Lucy, and Sasa were all getting excited as I relayed my tale—albeit slightly dramatized—of what had happened a thousand years ago. It’d been worth putting the effort into the retelling.

“By the way, can you tell me anything about Iblis’s movements lately?” I asked, changing the subject.

All three of them looked at me with slightly odd expressions.

“You haven’t explained to him?” Olga asked the others.

“We did a little...but we don’t know anything beyond the current plan.”

“Yup, we’ve pretty much only got Sophie and Fuu giving us info.”

“They’re the princess of Roses and the queen of Laphroaig. That should be more than enough,” Olga sighed tiredly before continuing with her answer. “Unfortunately, I have about the same information as you do. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

She really *did* look sorry.

Man, she’s gotten super soft...

“Oh, okay. I thought you’d have more of the details about protecting Sakurai from a surprise attack from Iblis,” I said. The information I’d gotten from Ira last night just seemed to drop from my lips.

“H-How do you know that?!” Olga yelled. She thrashed and sent her chair clattering back.

“Huh? What’s that about?”

“Is that true, Takatsuki?”

Lucy and Sasa both acted like this was completely new information to them.

Olga’s eyes were wide. “O-Only some heroes and the upper levels of Highland know that... It’s top secret...”

Apparently, what I’d just said was pretty classified.

“Who told y— No, you wouldn’t say... Uh, but we can’t exactly pull a legendary hero up like that... Um...what do we do...?” Olga was all aflutter.

Suddenly, someone barged through the door and stalked inside. “Now, doesn’t this sound interesting...” This person had a hard glare, and he wore gleaming golden armor.

General Gerald Ballantine—the leader of this fort.

“Makoto Takatsuki, the Great Demon Lord’s attack and the strategies against it are classified at the highest level within Highland. You must inform us who told you...though I can already guess what you will say.”

Gerry’s eyes were the most serious I’d ever seen them. I wasn’t getting away without giving him the truth.

Well...it’s not like I’d intended to hide it, exactly.

“It was Ira,” I answered.

Gerry’s face twitched in shock. “Not Goddess Noah?” he asked doubtfully.

Oh, that makes sense. After all, I was Noah’s apostle.

“Noah doesn’t really give details like that. I hear most of the strategy stuff from Ira.”

“Hold on! You can talk with *two* goddesses?!” Lucy yelped with a shocked look. “Wow!”

“Eir is often with Noah, so I guess you could technically say that I can talk with three of them.”

Gerry, Olga, and Lucy all fell silent.

“Hey, hey,” Sasa chirped. “Is it that amazing?”

“Normally, I’d assume that anyone who said such things was touched in the head,” Olga said.

I’d learned just how divine *hearing* a goddess’s voice was while I was in the Water Temple. Of course they’d think someone claiming to talk to three of them was touched in the head. You’d wanna send him to the hospital.

They’re so quick to turn up in my dreams, though...

Plus Eir absolutely *loved* to chat. Ira would let important information slip to me. Noah...was just free-spirited.

“Very well. If Goddess Ira herself informed you, then we know the information has not leaked. Well, that’s a problem in itself...” Gerry pressed his fingers into his temples like he was holding off a headache.

Wow! Gerry’s become so hardworking!

“Makoto Takatsuki...” he grumbled. “I have a feeling you were thinking something rather rude.”

“That’s not true,” I said flatly.

That was close! Even Gerry’s beginning to learn how to read my expressions!

“So, how are we planning to defeat Iblis?” I asked. “Ira wouldn’t tell me the details about location or specific strategies.”

“That’s not happening! Legendary hero or not, we can’t tell you that!” Olga exclaimed, crossing her hands in front of her.

Well, I wasn’t finding out here.

Ah well. Guess I’ll just ask Eir when she’s talking pretty openly.

“Hold it... You seem to think you can find out,” Gerry said, stepping closer.

“Huh?” I looked away. *Ack, it’s all over my face!*

There was a pause.

“This stays between us,” he said eventually.

“Huh? You’re telling him?!” Olga yelped.

“Trying to hide things from someone with the ear of three goddesses is pointless. The worst-case scenario would be him acting carelessly based on vague information. Giving him the details is safer.”

And with that, Gerry started filling me in.

“Iblis...is going to show up in the capital of Highland?” I asked.

“Yes,” Gerry confirmed. “That was the oracle we received from Goddess Ira.”

“And so they’re constructing a massive barrier centered on Symphonia,” Olga

added. “Well, they’ve already made it, and now they’re strengthening it. It’s a pseudo-divine barrier that will weaken all of the demons he leads. When it’s complete, it should protect the entire continent. Our little Saint Noelle is doing her best to build its strength up.”

Overall, it was really simple.

Iblis would go after the one being who could defeat him—the Hero of Light, Sakurai. Therefore, they would keep Sakurai within the safest place on the continent, the capital of Highland. On top of that, they had a lot of heroes and adventurers there providing protection for him.

I definitely remembered Maximillian and Prince Leonardo—both heroes—being in the capital. On top of that, Queen Noelle was lending her strength as a saint to the huge barrier. She could also use her saint skill *Ballad of Victory* to buff the barrier crafters. Maybe that was why she’d seemed so tired the last time I saw her.

Anyway, I understood the strategy now. We were laying a trap for Iblis.

“So why aren’t you in the capital?” I asked Gerry.

I’d have thought he’d want to fight Iblis.

“Ger doesn’t deal well with the ‘hurry up and wait’ strategy. Plus, he doesn’t want to be stuck with his ex.” Olga grinned as she clapped him on the shoulder.

Gerry had an incredibly sour look on his face as he gave his own answer. “Having too many heroes in the capital will make it look like a trap. We need to make sure Iblis follows Goddess Ira’s predictions and attacks the Hero of Light. Either way, we need manpower at the front lines. We also need to keep watch on Astaroth... This has nothing to do with Noelle.”

Oh, right, she and Gerry were engaged before, weren’t they? I guess if I’d waited in the capital, Iblis would have turned up... Maybe I should have stayed back there. Still, I *had* promised Astaroth a rematch.

Hmm, what to do...?

“I would like to commission you officially as a general of Highland,” Gerry said. “I ask that you keep this information between the three of you. You will be

compensated for doing so, of course. Is there anything you want? If I can grant it myself, I am willing to accept most things.”

Gerry was both the Hero of Lightning and Commander of the North Cardinal Knights. He was also the next in line to the house of Ballantine. He probably *could* follow through on the promise of “most things.”

I looked at Lucy and Sasa.

“Not for me,” Lucy replied.

“You pick, Takatsuki.”

“I don’t have anything I want to ask for either,” I said. “I promise to keep quiet about this, though.”

Gerry and Olga exchanged glances.

“Just take it for free,” she said to him.

“How could I?!” Gerry exclaimed, rejecting Olga’s suggestion out of hand. “I...will contact Princess Sophia in her position as Ambassador of Roses later and offer a reduction in the cost of our assistance with their defense. Is that acceptable, Makoto Takatsuki?”

Oh, so it could be used in *that* kind of negotiation. But this strategy was just information Ira had let slip...

“That’s fine,” I answered. I hadn’t talked it over with Princess Sophia, but a reduction in costs had to be a good thing.

“Thank you,” Gerry replied. “Let’s go, Olga, it’s nearly time for the meeting.”

“Aww, but I wanted to hear more about that stuff. I wanted to talk to Aya and Lucy too.”

Gerry wasn’t having any of it. Olga called a farewell over her shoulder as she put her arm in his and left.

The three of us were left behind in the meeting room. There wasn’t much for us to do here, so we decided to head back to our rooms. I flopped down onto my bed.

“An attack from Iblis...” I mused, thinking over what Gerry had told us earlier.

Of course, there wasn't anything I could really do about it. I was here to challenge Astaroth, the strongest of the demon lords.

I shouldn't be worrying about things I had no control over.

Still, I couldn't stop my mind from rushing back to those I knew in Symphonia.

My thoughts were soon shattered by Lucy and Sasa.

"Hey, Makoto, what're we doing now?"

"Have you got any plans, Takatsuki?"

The two of them were making themselves at home in my room.

"Not really," I answered briefly.

The room was fairly big, but it was still only around the same size as a business hotel room, and just as simple. It had two beds and a closet—that was about it. It was still a bit cramped with the three of us.

The beds were only singles, but Lucy and Sasa had managed to neatly fit themselves in the one.

I looked over at them, wondering if they were feeling too packed in. Then, I noticed the teasing smile on Sasa's face.

"Oh yeah, Takatsuki, about Olga." Before I realized what she was doing, Sasa had slunk over to my bed.

She's probably thinking about the conversation from earlier as well.

"What about her?" I asked.

"She's all lovey-dovey with Gerald! I'm so jealous!"

That was an abrupt change of topic.

"Lovey-dovey?" I parroted.

"The two of them are together. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't," I said after a pause. "They are?"

They *had* seemed fairly close to each other.

Hm? Now that I think about it like that...

Olga had been talking about Gerry's "ex" while being his current partner. It felt like there was some deep meaning behind that, and it was mildly concerning... Maybe that was the reason Gerry's expression had been a bit strained.

"Also, Olga gets to sleep *together* with Gerald every night. Doesn't that sound great, Takatsuki?"

Before I knew what was going on, Sasa was crawling over me like a cat.

"Eh, don't let it bother you, Aya. It's not our business. It gets a bit annoying listening to her gushing every time, though."

As she spoke, Lucy put a hand on my shirt buttons.

"Um... Sasa? Lucy?"

Sasa had me pinned down, and Lucy was starting to strip me. I was lying on the bed, and the two of them were looking at me with a hungry gleam in their eyes.

W-Was this...?!

Oh, you finally get to become a man, Makoto!

Drat, looks like Lucy and Aya got there first.

Noah and Eir's commentary echoed in my head. The goddesses were watching pretty closely.

Isn't it exciting, Eir? Makoto finally gets to climb the staircase of adulthood.

I was rooting for Sophie, but I can't help wanting to cheer those two on. So determined!

Seriously, goddesses, can you both pipe down? The two on top of me started getting snippy because the goddess's chattering had me distracted.

"Y'know, Makoto, you seem a bit too calm."

"You've seemed a bit cold since you got back."

"I-I have...?" *Sorry, it's the peeping goddesses' fault.*

Lucy looked at me for a second, then started to smile. "It doesn't matter.

After all, you're here now!"

She crawled into my bed and wrapped her arms around me. I hadn't even noticed her strip out of her top and reveal her underwear.

"That's right... Now we can *always* be together..." Sasa murmured, resting herself against me.

She had her clothes open as well, so this was a pretty stimulating scene. My heart was pounding like a drum, and apparently, the two of them could hear that.

"Hey, Aya, his heart's racing..."

"Yeah... I'm glad."

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the two of them as they looked at me with smoldering smiles. Lucy had been the first person to join me in this world. Sasa had been my friend since junior high, and we'd reunited in this world as well.

They were both precious to me, and they'd waited all this time...

"Hey, Makoto..."

"Takatsuki..."

"Lucy, Sasa..."

I embraced the two of them back, and they answered. Lucy was as warm as ever, but even Sasa's usually low temperature felt like it had increased.

"This is okay, right...?"

"Takatsuki...let's do it..."

Their voices murmured into both of my ears, clouding my mind.

Did Charm start working on me? No... This wasn't *Charm*—it was the real "Magic of Love."

My brain was being stupid, but the two of them were getting close to stripping me completely. At the same time, I...

Suddenly, I heard grunts and yells in the distance, mixed with some kind of siren. This was drowned out by heavy breathing from Lucy and Sasa, though.

Maybe it was *my* breathing, actually. However noisy it was outside, it had no impact on the space within this room.

Or...it shouldn't have, but suddenly, the door slammed open.

"Aya! Lucy! I knew this is where you would be! Come quick! The army's att—"

Silence fell.

Olga had opened the door in a rush, and she now met our gazes—we were obviously half naked.

She looked away awkwardly. "Ah...sorry. I'll go tell Ger that you'll be about two hours," she said, closing the door.

Hold it right there! She said the army's attacking, right?

We hurriedly got our clothes back on and headed outside.



"Huh? It's already over?"

We'd just gotten outside—Olga was cutting through a dragon's breath with her holy sword.

A huge number of dragons were circling in the sky above the fortress. Many knights on the backs of wyverns or pegasi were fighting them.

So these are Astaroth's forces...

I focused on them.

"There aren't as many as I expected," I heard Lucy comment.

"Aww, we rushed out here for this?"

They had no sense of tension in their voices. Well, they *were* veterans, so it made sense...

"Hey, it hasn't even been fifteen minutes. Are you a bit too quick, Mr. Hero?" Olga asked.

"And what do you mean by that?" I asked, sure she'd just implied something rather rude about me.

"That's not it!" Lucy protested. "We heard the demon lord's army was

attacking so we came to help with the defense.”

“That’s right! Takatsuki’s not quick!” Sasa then paused. “Well, probably not.”

“Hmm? As you can see, this is pretty much just a scouting sortie. Most of the dragons are young, but there are some ancient dragons, so take care. Though I probably don’t need to tell you two that.”

So this wasn’t Astaroth’s main force. There were still a few hundred dragons. Most cities would be wiped out by that number. This was a stronghold at the front lines, though, so our soldiers could weather it.

“Hey, Lucy,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“How exactly do you tell which dragons are ancient again?”

Olga had just said some of them were the stronger ancient dragons.

“Huh? You should be good at that. Just use your *Mana Sense* to see which ones have more mana.”

“Hmm... Well, I *am*...”

I was looking around, but they all felt the same. Which ones were the ancient dragons?

“You can’t tell?”

“Unfortunately, no,” I answered after a minute.

“I’ll tell you how, then,” Sasa chirped, jumping in from the side as Lucy looked worriedly at me.

“Oh, right, you’re not a mage so you can’t use *Mana Sense*, right? How else do you tell?”

“Yup, listen close!” she grinned, “First, you glare at them! Any that look away are normal dragons, and the ones that glare back are ancient dragons!” She smiled smugly at me.

“Ah, well, that...”

Before I could finish my own retort, the other two spoke over me in unison.

“You’re the only one that can use that method!”

Sasa had a real sense for that kind of thing.

Actually, normal dragons look away from her? C’mon, dragons, try harder!

That was when I heard one of the pegasus knights yell as a dragon closed in.

“Oh no! *Tele—*”

Lucy went to cast, but it was probably too late.

“Water Magic: Ice Barrier.”

My spell separated the dragon and knight, and the dragon plowed into the huge wall of ice. The knight managed to recover in the meantime.

“That’s...a bit far for your spells,” Lucy commented.

“Sorry, should I have kept out of it?”

“Nah, you’re good,” Lucy replied. She looked slightly dazed—she still had her staff up from when she’d started to cast.

“Lu! Let’s go!”

“Right! But...Makoto...”

“I’ll give support from here,” I told them.

Those two were planning on joining in the fray up in the air. I couldn’t tell which dragons were the more dangerous ones, so long-range support was probably the better plan for me.

“I’ll head off first!” Olga yelled, flying back off with her magic.

“Me too!” Lucy added. *“Teleport!”* Small magic circles appeared around her, and she disappeared with a flash of light.

Wow, she can use it over short distances too.

“Sasa, can you fly?”

“Heh heh! Just watch! Hi-yah! *Double Jump!*”

She started jumping through the air.

How is that “double” anything...? I sniped mentally. That had to be one of

Sasa's *Action Game Player* skills, and it was a perfect compliment to her ridiculous strength.

"Ahhh!" I heard someone shriek.

Whoops, I needed to fight too.

"Water Magic: Ice Barrier."

Some dragon was about to attack a woman, so I cast a barrier between the two.

"Graah!" the dragon growled, eyes spinning as it plummeted.

"Th-Thank you!" The knight waved. I waved back.

Who else is in trouble?

I made full use of *Clairvoyance* and my 360-degree viewpoint to survey the battlefield. Every time I saw someone who looked like they were in trouble, I used an ice barrier to help. It took some concentration...

"My liege," said Dia, "if you count on me, we could blast them all away at once." She brought my attention back, and I glanced her way. She stood at the ready.

I definitely could borrow her mana and finish things off quickly. But...

"I can't. It would catch everyone else as well."

"I see... Well, summon me if you have need of me," she said before disappearing into the mist. *She's disappointed...*

I spent a little while longer casting support magic from the back line. Then, someone addressed me from behind.

"What a surprise. I was sure you'd be going wild with elemental magic."

He had blond hair and matching armor that shone. General Gerald.

"It looks like I can't tell the regular dragons and ancient dragons apart, so I decided to focus on long-range support for safety," I explained.

"I...see." He looked like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself.

"What about you, Gerry? Aren't you going to fight?"

“I am the highest authority here. I can’t just rush in. Olga is in charge on the battlefield.”

“Huh...”

It was almost like he’d never been the berserker I’d once known. Of course, judging by how he was tapping at his legs every so often, he wasn’t exactly happy with the situation.

“Watch it! Maintain formation! Fall back if you need to! Don’t die here!”

Olga, the Hero of Incandescence, was flitting between the different squads and busily throwing out instructions. I found out later that she worked as commander of the allied forces against the demon lord.

“Having the Crimson Fangs here is a definite bonus,” Gerry mused.

“Lucy and Sasa?” I asked.

“Yeah. Look,” he gestured.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Explosions were going off all around Lucy as she cackled—her body shone with a burning red light. Even the dragons couldn’t get near her.

Is that the same fire elemental dress that her mom wears?

She seemed even more excited than usual. Lucy was definitely Rosalie’s daughter...

“Teleport!”

She shot across the sky like a meteor and tackled a dragon. There was a pitiful roar as the dragon’s wings were burned, and it fell.

Lucy seemed to have decided that using herself as a projectile was a better bet than casting spells.

So, what about the other Crimson Fang?

“Hyah!” came a cute noise. That noise was quickly followed by a *thud* that sounded like a truck crashing, which was distinctly less cute.

Sasa had axe-kicked one of the airborne dragons. The dragon didn’t even cry

out—it just fell to the ground.

Sasa started hopping through the air, chasing the dragons fleeing from her. The *dragons* were fleeing.

“The two of them are ridiculous.” Gerry sighed.

“Yup, they are.”

“They’re both your women.”

“Well, they weren’t this bad when we last met.”

“With how things are going, the dragons should be retreating soon,” he mused. He hummed, and then his expression changed from an easy look to a frown.

His sights were locked on a black and purple scaled dragon.

“What is it?” I asked.

“An ancient dragon of the poison variety. It’s wiped out multiple squads before. Its breath is an instant kill. The thing must have been hiding until now.”

As he spoke, the poison ancient dragon opened its maw wide.

“Tch! Caliburn!”

He drew the sword at his waist. At the same time, the entire length of its blade began to glow like lightning. He readied it.

This was Highland’s holy sword, Caliburn, held by the Hero of Lightning. It was said that a slash from it went faster than sound itself, but...

It looks like the dragon’s breath may be a bit faster. I used Fate Magic: Mental Acceleration and was certain of it.

I knew what I had to do.

“Dia.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Even if I couldn’t see her, I knew she was at my side. I grasped her cold but beautiful blue arm. In less than a second, I’d used *Synchro* with her. Then, I cast my next spell.

“Water and Fate Magic: Freeze, O Time.”

A wave of mana washed over the area.

The dragons, the knights fighting them, the noise, the wind... It all seemed to stop. But actually, the flow of time had slowed to almost nothing. Completely stopping time was divine rank magic, so I couldn't use it.

“Makoto Takatsuki...what did you just do?” Gerry asked.

“I'll explain later. Attack the dragon, if you would.”

“Very well,” he answered after a second.

The Hero of Lightning swung his sword.

“Lightning Spark!!!”

The arc of light from his blade reached the black and purple dragon after a second and split it in two.

“Phew...”

At the same time, I let go of the *Water Fate Magic* spell.

I'm glad that went well.

“It looks like they're retreating,” I said.

“The poison ancient dragon must have been their trump card.”

The dragons vanished one after another.

“So, Makoto Takatsuki...what was that—?”

“That was amazing, Ger! That dragon was the one that's been causing us so much trouble.”

“Wait a minute, Olga, I'm talking with him.”

“We had no casualties today! Hooray! Praise me!” Olga cheered, dropping from the sky to hug Gerald.

“Makoto! Did you cast some spell?” Lucy asked as she arrived.

“Yeah, it felt like my body got really heavy for a second,” Sasa said. “Right, Lu?”

“Huh? D-Did it? I just felt some weird mana around me for a second.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about mana, but the dragons suddenly stopped moving. I was gonna take advantage, but I felt really slow as well. It was a pain.”

Sasa...you can move in frozen time...?

I’d planned to use it against demon lords, but it looked like it wouldn’t work on people at that level. Well, there *was* still the possibility that Sasa was stronger than demon lords.

“There was some poison dragon, so I just used a spell to slow it down. Gerry defeated it a minute ago.”

“Huh. Will you tell me what kind of spell it was?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s get back inside first,” Sasa interrupted. “It’s cold out here.”

“You say that, but you really just want to carry on from earlier, don’t you?” Lucy pointed out.

“Not like that’s a problem, is it? You come too!”

“Well, that works.”

We all just chatted casually. Honestly, I’d been pretty nervous when I’d heard that Astaroth’s army was attacking, but it had ended pretty easily. *I guess they were just scouting*, I thought.

Suddenly, Gerry called me to a halt.

“Makoto Takatsuki.”

“What’s up?” I asked, turning around. I saw that he had a severe expression on his face.

“That battle...you were holding back, weren’t you?”

Lucy and Sasa responded before I could.

“What?! How could you say that?!”

“Takatsuki wouldn’t do something like that!”

“H-Hold on. I saw him save a lot of knights who were in trouble,” Olga said in

confusion.

“So?” Gerald asked, ignoring all of them to focus on me.

“Well, it’s kinda hard to use my full strength,” I answered honestly.

“It is?” Lucy asked.

“If I use elemental magic, it’ll hit everyone else as well.”

Dia had offered, but I’d turned her down. With her help, I probably could have defeated those dragons, but I would’ve likely caught the knights in my attacks. That was why I hadn’t cast a single offensive spell.

“You said you couldn’t tell the difference between dragons and ancient dragons, right?” asked Gerry. “The thing is, that means that you don’t *need* to be able to tell the difference. They’re both just bugs as far as you’re concerned.”

Lucy, Sasa, and Olga all cried out in shock.

Well...I hadn’t exactly thought of it like that. It was true that all of the dragons I’d looked at had seemed to possess relatively weak mana, even that poison ancient dragon Gerry had killed. It hadn’t seemed all that different from any of the others.

He seemed to take my silence as agreement, and he continued to speak gravely. “I have a request for you. I want you to cross to the north continent and fight Astaroth’s forces. I’d like to go with you...but I would probably just slow you down,” he said with a self-deprecating snort.

“Takatsuki, what are we gonna do?” Sasa asked, looking up at me. She probably already knew my answer.

“Sure,” I told Gerry. “I’ll go.”

That was why I was here, after all.

“Thanks. I’ll have my knights search for Astaroth’s hiding spot. They move periodically, so we don’t know it yet. We need to have an exact idea of the location before we send you in, though. We’ll find the place within a few days and—”

“Nah, I’ll head out now,” I said.

“What?”

“You can’t do that, Mr. Hero. You don’t even know where he is.”

Gerry looked doubtful while Olga just looked confused.

Heh, I’ve got just the ally for this.

“Iraaaa, are you watching?” I spoke to the heavens, pouring mana into my necklace.

“What is it, Makoto Takatsuki?” came the grumpy response.

Lucy and Sasa started to yell.

“Wha?!”

“Ahh! There’s a voice coming from the sky!”

Huh? Why could they all hear her?

“Oh...it must be because of strengthening the mana link. My voice comes through too strongly.”

Wasn’t that a problem?

“Hurry up! What do you want? Out with it!”

“I want to know where Astaroth is! You should know, right?” I spoke quickly before she got angrier. She was probably still in the middle of overtime and sleep deprivation.

“Oh, I see. Astaroth’s location... Do you have a map and pen?”

“Gerry, got them?”

“Someone bring them!”

Gerry’s yell soon had a map and pen prepared.

“Makoto Takatsuki, I’ll be piloting your body for a second, so keep it down.”

I let out a sigh, which quickly changed into a yelp. My whole body shuddered.

“Wha?”

My right hand was moving without me doing anything. It drew a cross on the

map of the north continent—Ira had marked a specific spot.

“That is Astaroth’s current location. He will move within the week, so get there before then.”

“Don’t worry. We’re heading out now.”

“You... Well, whatever. Make sure you prepare well, okay? Take enough food and restoratives that you’ll have spares. If things get dangerous, retreat right away, okay?”

“I know,” I answered.

She replied with a sigh.

“Be careful, then. I’m getting back to work—”

“U-Um, Goddess Ira!” Olga called, stopping Ira as her voice got quieter.

“What is it, Hero of Incandescence?”

“If you could find Astaroth so easily, you could have told us earlier...” There was an unhappy note in her voice, and it made sense.

Why *hadn’t* Ira said anything?

“It is because Makoto Takatsuki is both connected to my mana and near to the northern continent. On top of that, you just fought with a group of dragons, no? That strengthens the connections of fate with Astaroth’s forces, so using his eyes to channel my Future Sight made it possible. It would be impossible if I were to use the priestess Estelle in Highland.”

“I-I see...” Olga nodded, apparently accepting that explanation.

So I’d picked the perfect moment to ask.

“Makoto...you’re connected to Goddess Ira?”

“Takatsuki...are you close to her?”

Now it was Lucy and Sasa’s turn to look suspicious.

“I wouldn’t say close...she helps me, though.” What was going on? It’s not like there was anything dodgy happening.

“Bye then, Makoto Takatsuki. I’ll see you later.”

The connection was cut, and now I couldn't hear her anymore.

"Later?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

Lucy and Sasa closed in on me.

"S-Sometimes they show up in my dreams. I've told you about it before, right?"

I was sure I'd told them about Noah doing that. I explained again, but it was hard getting them on board.

Finally, I took a breath and looked at the map. The mark was right in the middle of the continent.

There's a tall mountain range there. It would definitely be hard to find them if we didn't know where to look.

"Lucy, can you teleport that far?" I asked.

"I can... But you're going to be explaining your relationship with that goddess later!"

Apparently, I was in for another inquisition.

"Hey, Olga," Sasa said. "The northern continent's cold, right? Do you have a jacket?"

"Wait a bit, and I'll get you one. Make sure you take elixirs too."

"Yep! Thanks!"

The two of them started checking over their equipment. We'd be able to leave in around thirty minutes from now.

"We'll be heading off, then," I said to Gerald, who'd remained silent so far.

He didn't answer me. Instead, he just stared at me like I was some odd creature.

"Gerry?"

Eventually, he spoke. "I called the Crimson Fangs ridiculous earlier. Allow me to correct myself. You are even more absurd."

He sighed deeply.

◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

"Makoto Takatsuki. Take this with you."

"What is it?" Makoto asked General Gerald.

"A communicator. It can slip through even strong barriers. If you have the opportunity, give us information. We can send reinforcements if needed."

"Thank you," he replied. "I'll be sure to call."

"Right. Don't push yourself too hard. And if things seem dicey, escape right away."

"I'll be careful."

Both of them had serious expressions as they spoke.

"Yayyy! It's so soft and warm!"

"Uh, Aya, that jacket's going to get in your way," Olga said.

"Don't worry—the cold would slow me down even more."

"Ah... Yeah, your body is like that," Olga conceded. "Either way, the jacket has enchantments against the cold, but it isn't any more physically protective than it looks, so be careful."

"Gotcha!"

"You seem awfully relaxed. Aren't you about to fight Astaroth?"

"Well, Takatsuki's with us, so it's all good."

"You mustn't let your guard down. Here are all the things you need to take," Olga said, handing over some gear and items.

"Lady Lucy! Your final checks on the destination, please!"

Blackbarrel's scouting team surrounded me. Since Goddess Ira had told us where Astaroth was hiding out, the plan was to estimate the force's distribution and sneak in from the least-defended position.

I glared at the map. Maybe...there? It wasn't like I'd ever been to the place before.

“Plus my *Teleport* ends up missing a lot...” I whispered to myself as I scratched my cheek.

Mama or the Grandsage would have definitely been able to get it down to the millimeter. I was feeling a bit uneasy.

“It’s okay, Lu!”

“Yup, we can just run away if it comes down to it.”

Aya and Takatsuki must have heard me. Both of them were looking at me reassuringly and telling me not to worry about it. I could always rely on Aya, and Makoto had always been relaxed.

Right, it’s the three of us!

“Let’s go!” I cheered.

I grabbed both of their arms.

“Yup.”

“Yeah!”

Both of them gripped mine back.

“Godspeed.”

“Don’t push too hard!”

“Take care!”

General Gerald, Olga, and all the soldiers gathered in the area wished us well.

I teleported to Astaroth’s hideout on the northern continent.



“Is this...the place?” I heard Makoto ask. He was looking all around.

“Uwaaa, it’s so cold...” Aya grumbled.

Harsh mountains surrounded us. Craggy ground seemed to continue in all directions. This landscape matched the description I’d heard from the soldiers.

This should be the place...roughly.

“Let’s look for a hiding spot,” I suggested.

The continent was the demon lords' territory. We were way too visible here. I was just thinking we'd be spotted right away when a massive rock started to move.

That's no rock!

"A monster?" Makoto asked.

"It's a rock ancient dragon!" Aya yelled.

"Guh! This is bad. We've already been spotted!" I exclaimed. We needed to shut it up before it called friends.

Aya must have thought the same thing—she'd already started moving. But then, Makoto stopped us.

"Wait, Lucy, Sasa. It looks like we're in a barrier."

Aya and I both said, "Huh?" and stopped moving.

The air shook with a roar. I thought it was the dragon in front of us, but it wasn't.

I heard a flapping noise, and when I looked up, I saw...

"No way..."

Dragons were covering the sky.

"Takatsuki, Lu... These are all ancient dragons..."

Aya's voice sounded like it was coming from a long way away. I felt dizzy.

"A trap..." Makoto mused. "That rock dragon must have been keeping watch, and there's a barrier over the whole mountain range. The dragons can just wait for an invader and attack en masse. It's a pretty organized response."

His commentary brought me right back to the present.

"W-We need to run! We can't do anything against this many!"

Our strategy to attack where there were the fewest enemies had already failed.

"Right. Hurry up and *Teleport*, Lu!"

I chanted the spell as Aya hurried me along.

H-Huh...?

I couldn't focus.

I couldn't feel my mana gathering at a single point like it usually did.

"What are you doing?!" Aya shouted.

"Wait! Don't rush me!" I yelled back.

Then, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Lucy, look at the sky."

I glanced up. The sky above us was *colorless*.

"What the...?"

"It's a barrier that seals magic. It makes mana control worse, so you can't cast detailed spells. I can't do things with a lot of precision either."

My vision seemed to darken. That was because...

Several breath attacks converged on us from the dragons. Fire, lightning, and even rocks and wind were headed straight for us.

N-No!

We needed to defend or run. And then...it happened.

"Dia, a barrier if you would."

"Yes, my liege."

Makoto and Dia both sounded calm. Several layers of thick ice formed around us. The powerful breath attacks stopped at the barriers he cast.

Ah! But his barriers are falling one after another! I need to help too! But I can't get my mana to cooperate!

"Why?! Why can't I cast anything?!" I yelled, flustered.

I knew why, though. Makoto was right—it was the barrier's fault. I couldn't cast spells like normal.

I was still trying to force *some* kind of spell out when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Lu, Lu!” Aya called out.

“Aya! What do we do?! At this rate...”

“Lu... Look at his face, would you?”

I did, and then I realized...

“Huh?”

I’d been in a complete panic with the ancient dragons surrounding us, so it had taken this long for me to notice. His expression was...

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

Takatsuki looks like he’s having fun.

I’d seen that expression on his face a lot in junior high. He always looked like that when he was gaming or when he’d thought up some prank.

That look tells me that he’s definitely scheming.

“Pitiful,” Dia said. “These lizards’ attacks barely leave a scratch.”

“Shall we respond?” Takatsuki asked, sounding for all the world like he was discussing the weather. “*Water and Fate Magic: Blizzard of Slumber.*”

Snow billowed up, and a thick mist filled the air.

“Wha...?” I heard Lu say dazedly.

It happened in an instant. In the blink of an eye, the barren mountains had been transformed into a wonderland of snow.

“C-Cold!” I yelped, leaping to wrap my arms around Lu.

You should tell me if you’re going to cast spells like that! I complained mentally.

“Oh... Sorry, Sasa.” Takatsuki shot an apologetic look my way, as if he’d heard my thoughts. “Undyne, come.” His voice made a young, *blue* girl appear.

“Protect Sasa and Lucy so they don’t freeze.”

“Of course, my liege!”

“Thanks,” Takatsuki replied. He turned to face the ancient dragons once more. Of course, they’d been trying to attack him this whole time, but they

hadn't even gotten close to him.

The small blue girl was standing by our side, smiling.

"N-Nice to meet you," I greeted hesitantly. "You're Undyne...right?"

"You're not the same as that Dia woman who's always with him, are you?" Lu asked.

"Nope, I'm always near everyone. We're the embodiments of all water, after all."

"R-Right..."

I wasn't exactly an expert on elemental magic, so that didn't really help me.

"B-But, shouldn't you be helping Makoto?" Lu asked. She seemed worried about being protected by an Undyne.

"It's fine. My liege has my sisters with him."

I turned to look and saw that Takatsuki was suddenly surrounded by throngs of beautiful blue-skinned women.

"There are so many of them!"

"W-Wow..."

Lu was a mage, so she knew about this stuff and was understandably shocked, but even I knew how crazy the sight was, and I wasn't exactly great with magic.

Suddenly, I realized that the ancient dragons' attacks were gradually tapering off.

The snow had kept falling, but around us—and *only* around us—it wasn't super cold thanks to the barrier the Undyne girl had set up. I felt like I'd be an icicle in seconds if I stepped out of it.

The dragons were gradually getting slower. But it was...weird. Ancient dragons had ridiculous constitutions and vitality. A blizzard shouldn't have this much of an impact on them.

It seemed like Lu had heard my thoughts because she opened her mouth to speak. "There's some nasty mana coming off the snow he's made. It feels like...a curse?"

“Wha?!”

Suddenly, what had seemed like a winter wonderland looked a whole lot less inviting.

Cursed snow?

The Undyne woman explained it to us. “My liege enjoys this spell—it’s a union of *Water, Fate, and Moon Magic*. It’s a simple spell, and all it does is make you sleepy when you touch the snow.”

It seemed like she was trying to downplay how advanced this spell was, but Lu’s expression clued me in—it was a huge deal.

Lu was rambling away, her head in her hands. “How...? We’re inside that magic barrier. He cast a union spell so big that I can’t even see it all at once...and just how much mana did it require?”

I looked toward the ancient dragons that were still trying to break through Takatsuki’s ice barriers.

Now that I was looking for it, they definitely seemed like they were staggering with *exhaustion* rather than in response to an attack.

“It looks like we might get out of this,” I remarked.

“Of course. My liege has nothing to fear from a bunch of liz— Oh?”

Suddenly, the woman’s smile vanished. A bestial roar shook us to our very bones, and the snow stopped completely.

Whatever this was, it was enough to forcibly stop Takatsuki’s spell.

The air itself was trembling, and the ground had started to shake in response.

The beast was bigger than the other ancient dragons, covered in jet black scales, and it had scarlet eyes. Miasma billowed off its entire body.

This was the first time I’d ever seen this dragon, but I’d heard those descriptors over and over. People warned that if you met it, you had to flee, not fight.

“Lu! Look at that dragon!”

“Is that...?”

I gulped.

It was the ancient dragon king, Astaroth.

For comparison, strong adventurers like Lu and I would struggle in one-on-one matches against the leaders of the Soleil Knights, and when these leaders had attacked Astaroth *together*, they'd been unable to even scratch him. Even Sakurai, with his Hero of Light skill, had been told that fighting him head-on was dangerous. Astaroth was the strongest demon lord, after all.

Goose bumps popped up along my skin. This dragon was bad news. Could he even defeat something as strong as *Superstar*...?

Meanwhile, Makoto was strolling toward Astaroth.

"Makoto! That's the demon lord!"

"Be careful, Takatsuki!"

Despite both of our worried yells, Takatsuki didn't even falter.

What were his nerves *made* of?

"Hey, Lucy, is that really Astaroth?" Takatsuki asked.

"Of course it is!" Lu exclaimed. "Why are you even questioning it?! Can't you tell?!"

"You think so too, Sasa?"

I nodded vigorously. "Yeah! I mean, that dragon's different from the others. It's gotta be the demon lord!"

"Hmm... I guess?"

Takatsuki didn't seem entirely convinced. He cocked his head.

"What's wrong?" Lu asked.

"He seems different from when we last met..."

"Well, that was a thousand years ago, right?"

Takatsuki must have been talking about when he'd fought Astaroth alongside the savior. It had apparently ended in a draw back then. I was honestly just impressed that they'd survived it.

“Well, whatever. I can just ask him myself.”

Lu and I were both overwhelmed by Astaroth, but Takatsuki seemed fine.

“Lucy, can you use an amplification spell?” he asked.

That’s a weird request...

“Normally I could, but...I might not be able to with the barrier up...”

“Oh yeah. Hmm, that’s a problem.”

Takatsuki wants to talk to Astaroth? Why?

“Hey, Takatsuki, if you want to say something loud, why don’t I do it?” I suggested.

“You?” he asked, looking blankly at me.

I was a lamia queen, after all. Though it kinda hurt to say, I was a calamity-class monster. My physical abilities were way higher than either Takatsuki’s or Lu’s. *I should be able to yell loud enough that the ancient dragons can hear me from far away.*

He thought for a moment and then said, “I’ll take you up on that.” However, what he wanted me to tell Astaroth was a bit odd.

I listened to Takatsuki, then opened my mouth wide. “Heeeeyyyyy!!!” I bellowed from the bottom of my stomach.

I’d already told the other two to cover their ears—my voice might’ve ruptured their eardrums if they hadn’t.

“Astaroth!!! Makoto Takatsuki is here to fulfill his promise from a thousand years ago!!!!”

Takatsuki must have promised him a rematch. Honestly, I was pretty exasperated.

Takatsuki excitedly waited for an answer. But the black ancient dragon didn’t respond. It just glared menacingly at us with the other dragons.

“H-Huh?” Takatsuki muttered after a while.

“Has he forgotten you?” Lu wondered.

“Well, it’s been a thousand years. That’s not much of a surprise,” I said.

“B-But...” Takatsuki drooped in shock.

“H-He’s coming!”

“Makoto, what do we do?!”

Astaroth was leading the other dragons toward us. Lu and I screamed, but Takatsuki’s expression was inscrutable.

“Okay, let’s *make* him remember. Dia, it’s time.”

“Very well, my liege. Let us pay back the indignity visited upon us a thousand years ago.”

Takatsuki lifted his right arm. It turned blue—as blue as the open ocean.

“Ack?!”

“Wha?!”

Lu clutched at her throat like she couldn’t breathe. For a second, I also felt like I was drowning at the bottom of the ocean.

A sea of mana?

The mana was dense enough in the air that even I could feel it, despite not being a mage.

Hundreds of magic circles glowed around Takatsuki. Then, they burst outward like fireworks.

What the hell kind of spell was he planning on using?

“Right Hand of the Elemental: Comet Drop.”

Lu and I both gasped, feeling confused.

C-Comet? Isn’t that the spell that nearly destroyed Great Keith’s capital?

Everything suddenly got darker. I looked up unconsciously.

The sky was broken.

No, it was falling.

The snow clouds that had brought the blizzard were breaking apart as

something filled the sky.

“Wai—!!! Makoto! Why?!”

“T-T-T-Takatsuki! You’ll crush us!”

Both of us were panicking.

The Undyne girl laughed at us. “Ha ha ha! You two are funny. You’ll be fine. You are with me, so you have nothing to worry about.”

I exchanged glances with Lucy. In unison, we looked back up at the sky.

A comet absolutely filled our vision. The apocalyptic scene was gradually getting closer.

The Undyne said this was “nothing to worry about,” but... N-No way... I can’t believe it.

The ancient dragons were panicking even more than us, which made sense—at this rate, their whole home would be wiped off the face of the planet. Even Astaroth had lost his cool.

Th-This is crazy...

“Hey, Makoto...” said Lu. “Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?” He turned around, and his expression was almost disgustingly normal.

“What’s your water magic proficiency now?” Lu asked.

Her question had me curious as well. The attack on Great Keith had taken the life force of many slaves, but now Takatsuki was doing that *on his own*.

“Here,” he said, passing us a piece of paper.

“Your Soul Book...?”

The paper had his stats and skills written on it. It was pretty much an identification card in this world.

I—being a lamia queen—had high stats. My strength and agility were easily over a hundred. That was on the same level as Olga, and she was a hero. I couldn’t use magic, but with my *Action Game Player* skill, I’d gotten the rank of

orichalcum adventurer.

In comparison, Takatsuki's stats were low overall. His strength and agility were only three and four, respectively. Plus, even though he was a mage, his mana was only four.

And yet, his water magic *proficiency* was far, *far* higher, and that, coupled with his elemental magic, had enabled him to become a hero.

The last I heard, his magic proficiency was 999.

According to Lu, you couldn't find mages of that level anywhere on the continent. He was probably even stronger now than when he'd left for the past.

Just how accomplished with water magic had he become?

His Soul Book crinkled as Lu crushed it in her hand. She was aghast.

I peered at the paper too...and then I saw the number.

Water Magic Proficiency: 5,096

What...the...?

I thought I might have misread it, so I looked for a third time.

I'm not mistaken.

Though I wasn't massively familiar with magic, even I knew this wasn't normal.

I-It's over five thousand?

How the hell had he gotten such a stupidly high number?

Meanwhile, Lu was still blue-screening. It must have been even more of a shock to a mage. She'd worked so hard to catch up with him, even just a little bit, and she was actually one of the best mages on the continent, but her mastery was nothing compared to his.

"Um, Takatsuki?" I asked.

"What's up, Sasa?" He stared at me with a relaxed gaze.

The words I had for this adorable but unreadable man were as follows: "Your stats are bugged to hell!!!"

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Flashback — One Thousand Years Ago ◇

My eyes drifted open.

Soft, holy light illuminated the area. I looked around dazedly.

"Huh...?"

The sight of Anna's and Momo's teary faces as they'd seen me off was still fresh in my mind. I'd thought that my next awakening would be in the present. I was supposed to be sleeping the entire time in that black coffin, but...

"Hm?"

A beautiful girl was looking at me. She seemed unhappy.

"Ira?"

"Well...if it isn't Makoto Takatsuki? What's wrong?" Ira was sleepily scratching her head at her desk.

"Uh, well, I'm not exactly here for business..."

"Oh, maybe your tie to me as the Goddess of Fate was too strong—your spirit must've come here. You should head back sooner or later."

I sighed. "So, roughly, how long has passed since I started sleeping?"

"Hm, about ten minutes?"

That was no time at all! I'd only just nodded off!

"Are you free right now?" she asked, scooting closer.

"W-Well...yeah, I guess. I'm just going to be sleeping for a thousand years."

"Then help me check these documents! You just need to look at this bit! This is... And this means... Also, there's this, which you should..."

"H-Hold up! Let me take notes!" I quickly started writing down everything Ira was jabbering on about.

"Here! Take this and this! Can you do it? If there's anything you don't understand, ask me!"

"I'll try..." I couldn't refuse—Ira's menacing look was overwhelming.

So, I looked over the documents she'd handed me. I'd never seen the writing system before, but I could understand it somehow. Maybe Ira's office had some special magic cast on it?

This thing...has descriptions written about skills for people who are going to be born... Is this where Soul Books come from?

They said that it was Ira who gave people skills in this world. Apparently, I was going to be checking that there wasn't anything missing from the documents listing those skills—the Soul Books.

Hang on! Isn't this a super important job?!

I'd struggled so much with weak skills right after I'd arrived in this world, and I acutely understood just how tragic that could be. I...couldn't afford to make a mistake.

I used *Calm Mind* and focused as I set about the work. Incidentally...there were two people with missing skills.

"Um, Ira...what happens if someone *does* have a missing skill?"

"Well, they can visit my temple, and I'll append them."

"Ah...I see."

Whew. There wouldn't be any poor people burdened with a life of having no skills.

"But then, the skills I can give them are kinda like leftovers, so they're weak..."

"I won't miss a single one!" I exclaimed.

And so, I focused super hard and checked over the documents. It was tiring.

Around half a day later, Ira spoke up. "Whew... We finished early, thanks to your help. I should be able to sleep a little today."

"You haven't been sleeping?" I asked.

"Hmm, I think I last slept around half a year ago," she said casually.

That was far longer than I'd imagined. I felt embarrassed for boasting to Fujiyan about pulling three all-nighters. Plus, that'd just been to play games.

Ira's lifestyle had me really worried.

"You should head back to your cold sleep," Ira said. "I'll send you back."

She went to put a finger on my head, but I grabbed her hand first. "I'll help you for a while," I offered. "It's not like I've got anything better to do."

There was a pause. "Are you sure? It's not like I can give you anything as thanks. Divine rules mean that we cannot interfere excessively with mortals. I'm *particularly* restrained with that..." Her voice sounded apologetic, but it was tinged with hope.

"Don't worry about it. Is there any work I can do while you're sleeping?"

"Well...can I ask you to sort these documents?"

"Got it."

That was how I started helping Ira with her duties.

Several days had passed since then.

"Ira, I've finished checking these. They're arranged by urgency now."

"Thank you, Makoto Takatsuki. Can you look at these next?"

"Sure."

I was just a human, so I couldn't do a goddess's main work. Instead, I was doing various little bits of organization, and apparently, that was helpful for Ira too.

Oh, and Ira's animated plushies were still busily working away, but they were just going to and fro with documents Ira was done with or things she needed to look at. They were pretty much just there for transport, and they apparently couldn't do the same as me.

"By the way..." I began. I did not stop working as I spoke.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I heard from Eir that most goddesses have angels do their work. Don't you have any?" I'd found that out when I'd asked Eir if constantly visiting Noah would interfere with her work. Surely Ira could just delegate to her subordinates.

“I used to, but they all quit...”

“I-I see...”

Maybe I shouldn't have asked.

“Those spineless angels! So what if they hadn't had a break in a week?! They should learn from me!”

“Way too exploitative...”

That's the boss's fault.

“It's *my* fault?!”

“Please follow labor laws.” Of course, I didn't know if the divine realm even had labor laws.

“But *you're* working nonstop.”

“Huh?”

I hadn't realized until then. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't eaten or slept in days. I hadn't *felt* hungry or sleepy.

“That's because this is my domain. My miracles keep people from needing food and rest.”

“That's...helpful, but a bit scary.”

I guess the gods really can do anything. Thanks to my *Calm Mind* skill, I hadn't run out of concentration. Ira was still glaring at her complicated-looking files. *Maybe I should make some coffee...*

Over the past few days, I'd learned where things were. I figured that having the odd break would probably make things more efficient.

With that in mind, I stood up.

Several more days later, Ira spoke up.

“Say, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“What is it?”

I was sipping some now-cold black coffee while I read a document. It tasted

awful. I'd make some more when I was finished reading.

"You're...using water magic while you're checking those documents. Are you sure you're not making mistakes?"

"It's fine—I've got the hang of it now."

What I was doing was repetitive, so I'd decided to train my magic while I worked. Obviously, I couldn't use elemental magic in a Sacred Deity's domain, but straight water magic wasn't a problem.

"You're a talented man."

"I don't want to hear that from you," I replied. "You keep working while you're asleep."

Even though I'd told her to rest during her free time, she'd somehow kept working while fast asleep. She was a damn workaholic.

"Well, it never ends."

"You should hire more angels."

"I'm advertising, but no one applies!"

That's probably because they all know how awful you are to work for...

"I can't help it! The world is currently at war with the demon lords, so the Goddess of Fate is the busiest position! That's how things work in the divine realm!"

"Well...that makes sense."

Wars happened frequently, and that was where history changed. I could understand Ira being so busy.

"I'll brew some more coffee," I said.

"Strong. Yes, yes—just one for me," Ira said.

"Sure, sure," I replied. Apparently, the "yes, yes" referred to having both milk and sugar. Was that knowledge ever going to come in handy in this world?

Half a year later...

“I’m definitely getting tired of this.”

I was well and truly used to working with Ira, but there were 999 years left before I would wake up. I was so drained that I probably couldn’t cope, even with *Calm Mind*.

Ira heard my muttering and whirled around suddenly. “Sorry. Since you’re a human, your mind won’t cope with a thousand years. I’ll teach you *Fate Magic: Amnesia*.”

“Amnesia?”

That definitely didn’t sound good. Why would she teach me that?

“This is a dream as far as you’re concerned, and there’s no point in remembering your dreams forever, is there? It would put a strain on your mind. So, you can use this spell on yourself and remove some of your memories.”

“But...that’d waste all my water magic training, wouldn’t it?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. Even if you erase your memories, the results of the training will remain. The experience will still be there, and your mastery will go up.”

“I see. Then please teach me the spell... By the way, couldn’t you erase my memories for me?”

“I can’t. That would be interfering with mortals.”

“I’m fairly sure that my helping you with your work is pretty similar.”

“Th-There’s no rule about mortals interfering with the gods, so it’s fine...”

I sighed. “I guess...”

I had a feeling that she was fine with our arrangement, mostly because of how convenient it was for her, but at least there wasn’t a problem.

Ira taught me the *Fate Magic: Amnesia* spell. It was a really big deal to have the Goddess of Fate personally teach me *Fate Magic*. Of course, I was also helping her with her work, so it was a proper give and take.

I kept up my practice while helping her with her duties.

Sometimes I combined *Water Magic* with *Fate Magic*, or added the low rank

Sun Magic Althena had given me. Periodically, I'd erase my own memories and then repeat the cycle.

That was how my thousand years of sleep passed—with me dreaming in Ira's domain.

A fair bit of time passed before I noticed that my water magic proficiency was way over a thousand.



And now, back to the present.

There was a massive comet, big enough to cover the sky. It was the same scene that had engendered despair in Great Keith.

But now I watched it peacefully. After all, I was the one who had cast the spell this time. Well, strictly speaking, it was a massive chunk of ice, so maybe I couldn't technically call it a comet.

Ultimately, my spell was a bluff—a bluff that had taken me a thousand years of training to develop.

I'd decided to go for a dramatic spell as a debut. *I wonder if I managed to show off for Lucy and Sasa.* When I turned around, both of them were staring at me. They seemed completely taken aback.

"Ma...ko... You..."

"Takatsuki...that's..."

Their expressions certainly didn't look like anything I'd call enraptured. It was more like...they were looking at me like one would look at a crazy person.

Just as I was thinking that, we were interrupted.

"Hey! Elementalist!"

That was a voice I hadn't heard in a long time. An incredible-looking woman was floating in the air, wearing a white dress.

"Mel! It's been a while!"

This was one of my allies from the past, the White Ancient Dragon Helemmelk—or Mel, for short.

“It’s good to see that you are all right. Well, I *would* say that, but who just casts *Comet Fall* out of nowhere?” she grumbled. “Actually, wiping out a demon lord’s home with extremely destructive magic is just like you.”

“So I shouldn’t have done it?” I asked.

“Of course not!”

“Then I’ll stop it for now.”

I made the falling comet halt in midair. The huge chunk of ice covered the sky.

“Well now, you stopped that rather easily,” Mel said.

“It’s just water magic,” I explained.

She sighed deeply. “You’re so impudent...”

I’ve missed these kinds of conversations.

“Makoto! Why are you being so friendly with an enemy! She’s one of the ancient dragons!”

“Takatsuki, who’s that woman? She looks like a model!”

Lucy and Sasa had arrived at my side.

“This is Mel,” I said. “She was a lot of help back in the past. In this era, maybe I should call her the holy dragon.”

The two of them yelled out in surprise.

“You mean...the ally of the savior?!”

“She defected to the demon lords?”

Nah, that wasn’t what had happened... I thought about how to explain it.

But before I could, Mel interjected, and she was suddenly much closer. “Rude little girls. Who are you accusing of *defecting*?”

Lucy and Sasa both reeled in shock. Mel had teleported to a spot right next to us.

“I joined the heroes because I lost to the elementalist. With him gone, I had no obligation to remain an ally of humanity.” She huffed.

I grinned. “You say that, but you kept up Momo’s training, didn’t you?”

“Well...after a fashion. I made sure she was relatively strong. She was my apprentice, after all.”

If by “relatively strong,” she means the strongest mage on the continent, then...Mel must have a slightly biased view.

“Helemmelk! Why are you just standing there chatting?! You were the one who said we could easily win against the apostle of the old god!”

The black dragon had finally spoken, and his tone seemed *off*. This was the being that even *Cocytus* had been ineffective against—that spell was insanely strong, even if it was only pseudo divine rank. Astaroth shouldn’t have been shaken by magic of this level. And yet...

The huge black dragon—who was by all accounts the leader of these ancient dragons—seemed uneasy about my *Comet Fall*.

“Brother, I certainly think you *could* win against the elementalist of a thousand years ago, but the present man is not the same one I once knew.”

I jolted and turned to look at Mel. “Brother? That’s not your father?”

“Hm? No. This is my elder brother, a potential demon lord.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

I knew it wasn’t the same guy!

“Th-That’s impossible!” Lucy exclaimed. “He matches everything we know about Astaroth.”

“Right! That black dragon wiped out the Soleil Knights!” Sasa agreed.

Mel cocked her head. “Hm? My father has barely shown himself in front of humans. You just assumed.”

Lucy and Sasa looked at Mel in shock. I was surprised as well. *Everyone* on the western continent had mistaken someone else for Astaroth, and it wasn’t Astaroth who had defeated the Soleil Knights.

“Where’s the *real* Astaroth, then?” I asked Mel.

“The only people who can meet my father are heroes who defeat my

brother...”

I looked back at the huge black dragon.

“I see... In that case.”

I activated *Right Hand of the Elemental*. The comet I’d stopped slowly began to move again.

“W-Wait!” the black dragon yelled. “If that falls, it will flatten the entire region! Helemmelk! If you want to call yourself an ancient dragon, then take one of his allies hostage or kill them!”

“Wha?!”

“Guh!”

Lucy and Sasa both hurriedly readied themselves. Of course, Mel herself just guffawed.

“Why are you laughing?!”

“Look closer, brother. Look at the Undyne around me.”

The Undyne—starting with Dia—revealed themselves from the snow.

“It has been a while,” Dia said to Mel. “I do hope you aren’t planning to betray my liege.”

There was a brief pause before Mel spoke. “Of course not. Brother! As you can see, if I were to even begin to act, the Undyne would kill me.”

The black dragon—Mel’s brother—groaned in annoyance. Of course, if Mel actually tried to attack, it could be pretty dangerous.

I glanced at her face and she sent a slight smile my way.

“My thanks for stopping the comet... I do ask that you don’t drop it though, okay?” she murmured.

“I’ll stop it just before it hits,” I promised.

At that moment, a gale began to blow. The snow covering the mountains flashed into steam as the ground let off heat.

“Huh...?” I heard Lucy breathing quietly.

A massive pillar of light cut from the ground up to the sky.

My faux comet was blasted apart. There wasn't even dust left.

At the same time, a black mist—miasma—covered the area. Finally, my *Sense Danger* skill started going off. It'd been a while since I'd heard it.

"T-Takatsuki...is this miasma...?"

Sasa was shaking. Her resolve usually never faltered, not even against calamity-level monsters.

"It seems the commotion has reached my father, Elementalist."

I nodded slightly at Mel's statement—the memories flooded back. This was the pressure I'd felt inside *Cocytus*, and it was on a completely different level to the other demon lords.

The ground cracked, and an explosion rent the air. The mountains around us erupted—magma gushed forth. A pitch-black dragon appeared from among it all. The other ancient dragons slowly backed away, seemingly paying their respects at their king's arrival. Or maybe they just didn't want to get involved.

Maybe we should follow suit.

"Lucy, Sasa, get some distance."

If I seriously started using elemental magic, I was worried about my impact on the area.

"Elementalist, worry not. I will take care of your allies," Mel offered.

That was a real relief, but...

"Are you sure?" I asked. "You're technically on their side."

I didn't think Mel would take hostages, but should she blatantly act like she was on our side?

"My father has been waiting every one of these thousand years to fulfill his promise to you. Please use your full strength to meet him."

I hunched over a bit. "He was waiting?"

"You *were* told that the ancient dragons kept their promises, were you not?"

That was right. So he'd been waiting faithfully for me.

"Lucy, take this," I said, passing over the communication device Gerry had given me.

"S-Sure. Makoto! You'll...be okay, right?"

"Good luck, Takatsuki..."

Lucy and Sasa were looking at me nervously.

I waved. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

I turned to face the advancing dragon—a creature the size of a small mountain. He faced me directly and looked down to meet my gaze. This was the strongest demon lord—Astaroth.

I hadn't measured up a thousand years ago, and unlike then, I currently didn't have Ira's mana to help. Instead, I had the fruits of my training in Ira's domain.

"You have kept me waiting for quite some time," came a deep voice. Even those few words were enough to buffet me with blasts of wind.

"I apologize for that," I said, lifting my transparent blue arm toward him. "Let us have a fair fight."

And thus, our fated rematch, a millennium in the making, had begun.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Fights the Strongest Demon Lord

The ground was burning red.

The air was dark and murky from the miasma coming off of Astaroth.

Despite being daytime, the area centered on the dragon king was as dark as night. Magma overflowed from the surrounding mountains and gushed across the ground.

“Dia,” I said.

“Yes, my liege?” she answered immediately, dropping to one knee.

Hundreds of other Undyne were arrayed behind her. Massive clouds blanketed the sky, and thick snow began to fall. The world around me was a silent expanse of silver. The area was quiet, as if every living being had vanished.

“Y-You... Elementalist, I must say...you’ve improved,” Mel said. She was almost speechless as she looked at me. Lucy, Sasa, and Mel’s brother all gaped at me.

“Hrm...you summoned all of the water elementals on this planet, then,” Astaroth murmured. Even faced with hundreds of Undyne, he wasn’t flustered in the slightest.

“Well, it’s nowhere near all of them,” I answered honestly. If I really *had* summoned all of them, the balance of nature would’ve been thrown completely out of whack...or so Ira had warned me. I’d pushed it right up to the limit instead.

Astaroth’s pitch-black miasma—the clear blue mana from the Undyne.

Worlds of black and blue pressed against each other, vying for superiority.

It seemed like this was going to be a contest of strength when *it* happened.

“Oh my, this certainly looks like fun, doesn’t it?” came a chillingly beautiful voice.

There was a strange magnetism to it, and despite the fact that I was facing off against the strongest demon lord, I couldn’t keep my gaze from straying that way.

Shining silver hair, even more brilliant than the snow around us, filled my vision—it framed a pale face of otherworldly beauty that seemed too pristine for this world.

This was the Goddess Noah.

“Noah, how are you here?! I thought you were supposed to be in the Seafloor Temple?”

Had Eir performed some miracle again to let her descend for an instant?

“She said she’d never do that again,” Noah replied with an adorable shrug.

“What are you doing, Makoto?!”

“You can’t take your eyes off him!”

Lucy and Sasa scolded me for my lapse in attention.

“Yeah, right, I’ll be careful.” They were right—losing focus in front of *Astaroth* was out of the question. But their words made me suddenly realize something.

“So you’re an illusion?” I asked Noah. This seemed similar to the time when Sakurai had needed saving against Zagan. And in a region where the influence of the Sacred Deities was weaker, only *I* could see Noah.

“That’s about the size of it. I have to say, this place is *nice*, though,” she mused cheerily. “It’s nothing like the dominion of those pesky Sacred Deities. Instead, we’ve got my beloved elementals and the rather nostalgic presence of the dragon gods...”

So essentially, she’d come to get some air. Well, in spirit only.

“I’m technically up against the strongest demon lord right now,” I pointed out. “You’re cheering for me, right?”

She giggled. “I always have faith in your victory,” she said, eyes full of surety.

With my goddess looking at me like that, there was no way I wasn't going to do my best.

Let's do it, I thought, readying her dagger.

Astaroth was acting strangely, though. He was looking toward Noah, his face twisted in shock.

"Oh, you can see little old me? Descendant of the dragon gods, Storey?" Noah asked gently.

Astaroth's mouth opened slowly.

"The last of the Titanea. The courageous goddess who yet stands against the Sacred Deities of the divine realm, charming all of this world. The Goddess of Freedom—Noah. It is an honor to meet you..."

Astaroth was showing her respect?!

"You do your ancestors credit. It doesn't matter, though. After all, Makoto's about to defeat you."

Unlike the usual affection she directed toward me, her face was carved into a cruel, icy smile as she looked at Astaroth.

The dragon king didn't flinch in the slightest as he answered. "Unfortunately, I do think I am about to kill your apostle, Lady Noah. Against the awakened blood of the dragon gods...even your apostle has no hope of measuring up."

Even after that, Noah's expression didn't falter. She giggled. "Well then, out of the descendants of the dragon gods who are left in this world...only one of the ancient dragons has awakened their blood—you. Having become the strongest in the world, you are a pitiful powerhouse that none could ever hope to defeat."

"Huh... Isn't Iblis stronger?" I asked.

Astaroth may be the strongest demon lord, but he's still Iblis's subordinate.

"The blood of the dragon gods awakened within me when I battled the great one—Lord Iblis. That alien god made me stronger. However, excluding him, there is now no one on this planet capable of standing against me..."

As he spoke, Astaroth looked almost saddened.

“There was the Hero of Light though, right?”

He simply shook his head in response.

“I had hoped, but it seems that without you, she could not fight. With her strength... Well...”

“Mph.” It pissed me off a little to hear him discount Anna like that. Though it was true that she hadn’t exactly been familiar with her Hero of Light skill yet. She should have been stronger later...

“I have no greater hope for the Hero of Light of this era...”

“Oh, it sounds like you’re missing some information, Astaroth,” I said. “The current Hero of Light is now stronger than me. You know that, right?”

“Hmmm...” His eyebrow twitched at my statement.

I’d spent a long time with Anna, so I was sure of it. There was no comparison between their *Hero of Light* skills. Sakurai’s was like a version update of the skill—way different in its effectiveness.

Incidentally, Althena gave the skill to an otherworlder like Sakurai—despite having so many other candidates—because there was such a low chance he would be corrupted by the power.

I mean, it made sense. I sometimes wondered if he was a saint or something. Also, he was Althena’s type.

Unlucky for you, Sakurai.

I’d actually asked Ira about it because she was supposed to be the one who gave people skills.

“Fundamentally, granting the people born in this world skills is under my domain. Heroes and priestesses are special skills though. Each goddess chooses the recipient of those skills after the fact. Also, for you all—the otherworlders, I mean—skills were given at random. It made the admin even harder.” That had been her answer.

While I was thinking back over that conversation, I faced the dragon king

again.

“Once I have defeated you, I will head to challenge the Hero of Light,” he said.

Miasma gushed forth.

Here it comes...

I kept *Right Hand of the Elemental* going as I readied the goddess’s dagger.

Suddenly, I broke away to look toward Noah. She was watching me with a smile.

“I’ll do my best,” I promised.

“Good luck,” she said, waving a hand slightly as she gracefully crossed her legs.

In the next moment, Astaroth’s roar shook the air, and a dark flash cut through the sky.

◇ Helemmelk’s Perspective ◇

What the...? A full-power breath attack right off the bat?

Father’s breath attacks were on a staggeringly higher level than other ancient dragons. They were powerful enough to pierce mountains or obliterate entire towns at a time. Normally, a human mage wouldn’t leave even dust behind if they were hit by the attack.

“Thank goodness...” The redheaded elf sighed.

Indeed, the elemental was completely unharmed. Dia’s barrier had perfectly blocked the onslaught. However, because father’s breath attacks incorporated anima, being struck by one meant certain death. A simple barrier spell would never have been able to defend against it...

“Hmm... Is there something weird around him?” the other girl asked.

“Eh?”

“Hm?”

Several ripples seemed to be spreading out from my father—they faded as they moved outward.

Is that...what I think it is?

“It’s kinda hard to breathe...”

“I don’t feel so great...”

The elementalist’s friend looked pale. This was bad.

“Let us move farther away. The area around the elementalist is filled with ether. It is what the angels and demons use in the other realms. Mortals find that it warps their minds if they remain within it.”

“What?! Will Makoto be all right?!”

“Takatsuki!”

Despite their yells, I continued explaining.

“He ought to be fine. Mortals would normally lose their minds at the slightest contact with anima, and yet he borrowed some from the Goddess of Fate herself and manipulated it. He used ether regularly a millennium ago.”

The two girls nodded and gave hums of understanding.

To explain the process, we mages extracted mana from the prana permeating the atmosphere. Refining that mana then created ether. Using ether made spells far stronger than simple mana. However, huge amounts of mana were required to produce even a smidgen of ether.

It wasn’t something a mortal could achieve. Even the ancient dragons would’ve found it impossible. The elementalist, though, currently had hundreds of Undyne at his beck and call. He was surrounded by endless mana.

He wouldn’t have been able to do such a thing back then. What in the world had happened...?

Just as father’s scarlet breath left his mouth, several flashes of darkness assailed the elementalist. But because he was surrounded by Undyne, not one of those attacks reached him.

“You’ve gotten stronger, elementalist!!!”

Father’s voice was—for the first time in a long time—emotional. It was likely...joy. Father was always eager for a fight.

The blood from the gods of war that ran through his veins had granted him tremendous power.

At the same time, no one but Iblis was a match for him. Challenging Iblis to a rematch after his defeat would impugn the pride of the ancient dragons.

Thus, he had waited for a rematch with the elemental—after all, their first fight had not reached an acceptable conclusion.

Father seems so happy... I hadn't seen him so emotional in over a thousand years.

Still, there was more than one person in this fight.

"Well, I've been training for the past thousand years," the elemental answered casually. I saw no hint of fear on his face.

That made no sense— Actually, he might have been telling the truth.

I had fought alongside the elemental against Iblis a thousand years ago. Back then, he had been extreme in every way. And now, after so long apart, it was like he was on a completely different level.

Their fight was getting more and more intense.

The ground was splitting—magma burst from it as countless masses of ice rained from the sky. It was like a scene of the apocalypse, with lightning flashing through the air.

We'd backed away to avoid getting caught in it, but ominous gales buffeted us.

"Guh..."

A dense miasma was contained within the gusts. Even the aftershocks were like full-on offensive spells.

"Are you okay?" I asked, turning to look at the elemental's two comrades whom I was responsible for.

"Hyup!" The town girl punched the wind.

Huh...?

I looked again. What kind of logic was that? That was a blast of wind full of

miasma—it would have hurt had it connected with her, and it was certainly not something you could just punch.

“Are you not going to use barrier spells?” I asked the two of them.

“I can’t use magic,” one of them replied.

“I’m not great with barriers...” the other admitted.

I sighed. “I will cast one, then.”

They seemed impressive in their own rights, but apparently, their skills were far too specialized.

It was perhaps perfectly fitting for the elementalists’ comrades.

“Um, you’re the holy dragon who fought with Makoto a thousand years ago, right?” the red-haired elf asked.

“I am indeed. I am not used to that form of address, but I was indeed his comrade.”

“Huh... But Astaroth is your father, right?” the town-girl asked. “Are you sure about this?”

“It’s fine,” I responded.

Father was fighting energetically, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. All I, the elementalists’ comrades, and the other ancient dragons could do was watch.

In the end, father and the elementalists’ fight was still going after an entire day.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

I’m exhausted...

Casting magic for twenty-four hours straight was obviously going to be tiring. Apparently, having my proficiency over five thousand *and* borrowing all the power I could from the Undyne still weren’t enough to beat Astaroth.

Of course, he seemed to be in the same situation—he had no trump card to use on me.

Where are Lucy and Sasa...?

I peered at them in the distance—they seemed to be praying as they watched. They looked like they hadn't slept a wink—like they'd stayed awake supporting me the entire time.

Mel and the other ancient dragons surrounded us in the distance, watching. We were both in the same situation, but there was no suggestion of a ceasefire.

Mel had once told me that ancient dragons had the strongest constitutions of any creature on the planet, and that they could keep fighting for seven days straight.

I had infinite mana from the Undyne, but I didn't have the stamina to keep fighting for this long. I didn't have a winning move to play either.

This is ridiculous! You trained for a millennium, and he can still fight you to a stalemate! What kind of cheat is he?! Beings like him are why my predictions go wrong! Makoto Takatsuki! Escape!

Incidentally, Ira's frantic voice had been offering me advice since a few hours after we started fighting. But now, it seemed like she was out of useful tips.

Can you hear me, Makoto Takatsuki?!

"Yup, I'm listening," I answered.

I'd had *Calm Mind* at a hundred percent since the start of the fight.

I knew this did damage to my mind, and it wasn't a good thing to do, but it wasn't like I had much of a choice against Astaroth.

Hurry up and run!

"I will once there's nothing more I can do," I said.

Isn't that now?!

Despite what Ira was saying, there was something niggling in my mind. I looked toward Noah where she was floating in the air.

I saw her yawn.

She's bored. This fight must be too low-level for her. She's still staying, though.

She didn't show any sign of heading back to the Seafloor Temple, and she was smiling as she watched the two of us fight. Unlike Ira, she hadn't offered any advice. She looked like she wanted to say something, though...

There was a roar as another breath attack—I'd lost track of how many Astaroth had launched—blasted through the air. I used ether to create a barrier to block it. As things were now, I wouldn't win against him. At best, I could hope for a draw, or maybe passing out when I ran out of stamina.

There was the option of running like Ira said, but I didn't want to delay the conclusion with Astaroth anymore—I'd promised to be in full form for the fight between Iblis and Sakurai.

I needed *something* to overturn the current situation, and I had a feeling that the answer was staring me in the face.

Suddenly, letters formed in front of me.

Will you make an offering...to Goddess Noah?

Yes

No

I looked at the words, and I knew my next move.

Oh, that's how I should do it...

I looked at Noah and saw that her smile had taken on an expectant, almost hopeful tinge.

Makoto Takatsuki, said Ira. *You aren't planning something odd, are you?*

She sounded uneasy.

"Sorry, Ira. This will cause you some trouble."

D-Don't! Noah! Stop him! History will... Not aga—

"None of that, Ira. I didn't suggest a single thing." Noah's grin made it look like she understood everything. "This is what Makoto decided of his own free will."

I was holding the dagger in my right hand, and I stabbed it into my left palm.

Thanks to *Calm Mind*, I didn't feel any pain. Blood welled forth.

As blood clung to the blade, the metal began to glow.

"What did you...?" Astaroth's suspicious gaze focused on me.

You'll know soon enough, I thought.

"I offer this...to you, Noah. Please...allow me to borrow your strength...on this single occasion." I appealed to Noah using sacrificial magic.

She was standing right next to me, and she said simply, "I'll allow it."

I heard Ira yelling about not forgiving me.

After Noah's indulgent words, I spoke in Elemanti.

"xxxxxx, xxxxxxxx. (Elementals of time, lend me your power.)"

My vision warped.

◇ Astaroth's Perspective ◇

Ever since my birth, I'd been raised as the king of dragons. I possessed exemplary strength.

In my youth, I had ventured to other continents and conquered them. I'd fought countless heroes and turned them all aside. I had even ruled the world more than once or twice.

And yet, the goddess's heroes sprouted like weeds. I wiped them out time after time, and eventually, people willing to challenge me lowered in number. In all lands, there were warnings against striking out against Astaroth of the northern continent.

Eventually, there was no one left, and my time grew boring. I hunted the heroes as they fled.

I despaired.

There were fewer chances to fight the strong, and I had more and more time to do nothing.

In that time, my family prospered on the northern continent. I lost my desire to rule the world, and I left the battlefield. Tens of thousands of years passed.

Demons, humans, and demihumans fought for supremacy, but I just watched as long as they made no move on my continent.

I had no personal knowledge of the situation outside my continent, but my longtime friend, Bifrons the Undead King, visited my home.

“Astaroth, you have yet more mana. What say you to ruling the world again?”

“Bifrons, the moment I do such a thing, the goddesses will create heroes elsewhere. Then I will have to chase them. Why should I waste my time on that?” I asked with a sigh.

He guffawed in answer. “You are far too strong! You were born in the wrong era. You ought to have been born in the era of the gods.”

“That is a compliment coming from you, who has lived longer than anyone else. How was the era *you* were born in?” I asked.

“Frightful,” he said. “The gods rent the earth in irritation, ushered in floods due to jealousy, and fights between angels and demons made stars fall from the sky. The weather made no sense—it changed at their whim. Naturally, I had no experience of open war between the gods.”

“I am impressed you survived,” I said.

“I was born in the very closing days of the era,” he replied. “There were a few of the divinities and divine beasts left, but most finally returned to their own realms. Following the rules of the Sacred Deities and confining themselves to the mortal realm was stifling. Thanks to that, weak demons like myself are now called demon lords.”

“The divine and those beasts... Maybe I would have been less bored had they remained...”

Unfortunately, that was not to be. Bifrons—a former archangel who was now a demon lord—talked about how the gods ruling this world had entered a pact. They would not interfere directly with the mortals.

No one in the world was capable of standing on my level...

My time passed in tedium until *he* appeared.

The Scrap God Iblis. A god fallen from an outer realm to this one.

In an instant, he ruled the world. No, he *molded* it.

Using his infinite mana, he covered the world in persistent black clouds and stole the sun's light. All life on the planet knew the fear of his dominion.

I led the ancient dragons in a fight against him. Many of them lost their composure when they saw him, and they became unable to fight.

I, for the first time in my life, had used my full power to challenge him. And...I lost.

It infuriated me. But at the same time, I was glad.

I survived, and in accordance with our customs, I followed the victor. I was not unhappy with that. Iblis also awakened me to the blood of the dragon gods—it was said that they'd clashed with the Sacred Deities during the age of the gods.

That strength had been slumbering within me. The great one had the ability to awaken someone's latent power.

He used it upon me, saying, "You are strong, and with your blood awakened, you can become even stronger."

He awakened many others' latent abilities as well. Of course, not everyone was able to partake of its benediction. It could fail, and when it did, the power warped its target into a blighted monstrosity. Even so, there was no end to the people gathering under him.

My awakening had made me even stronger. That was good, but having lost, I could no longer challenge the great one to a fight.

The heroes and other creatures of this world were too weak. They couldn't take even a single attack from me. I grew even more weary with the world.

But...

Wonderful!!!

My body was shaking. Stars were falling from the sky—great stars of ice. The ground was burning, like the very planet was being torn apart. Every so often, huge washes of water—almost tidal waves—attacked me.

The same scenes Bifrons had once described to me were unfolding before my eyes.

“Graaah!”

Even my breath, with the power to destroy all, was summarily stopped by barriers of ice. There was no way that mere magic could defend against that. My *God Eye* could see that those barriers were created from ether.

The battle continued through the day and night. I had never experienced a fight lasting so long. My battle with the great one had lasted mere moments.

Before my awakening, I had not been able to put a scratch on the great one—who was technically the lowest class of gods, but still a god nonetheless.

But things were different now. I could use the remnants of my heritage and fight even against the gods.

Standing against me was the apostle of the goddess who’d brought about the final Titanomachia. The man was using Undyne to turn aside my attacks with nary a hint of concern on his face.

Memories of a conversation with Bifrons rushed forth.

“Bifrons, which race was the hardest to deal with in the era of the gods?”
Back then, I’d asked out of sheer curiosity.

“They were all difficult... I would have to say the gods, of course...particularly those goddesses. They spared not a whit of thought for the mortals on this planet. Though considering how I was little more than a bug beneath their feet, they paid me no attention, so they were easier to deal with. As long as you left them alone, they would ignore you.”

“Hmm... So it would be the other divinities and beasts? Or perhaps the angels and demons...”

“Maybe. They were intelligent though, so they did not fight meaninglessly. The angels were busy with errands for the goddesses, and the demons would soon lose interest because of the allure of souls. None of the races were all that terrifying to deal with if you knew how to handle them... Actually, there was *them*.”

Bifrons, a man who rarely changed his expression, had a sour look on his face.

“Them?”

“The elementals... They would approach with no ill intent at all and then plunge things into chaos.”

“The elementals...?” As far as I knew, they were peaceful beings. There were many of them, but they were weak.

“You can only say that because you don’t know the arch elementals. Nothing was left after they rampaged, and they were completely unpredictable. They are innocent calamities, and I never worked out how to deal with them.”

“Hmm... But there were people capable of guiding them in that era, no?”

“According to the legends. I never met one, though.”

Such had been our conversation. And now, I couldn’t help but laugh.

Bifrons had known the era of the gods, and the beings he had considered to be the most difficult foes were right in front of me.

Each Undyne had mana that far outstripped an ancient dragon, and there were hundreds of them, all following one man.

The infinite mana was like a wall pressing down on me. Spells rained down.

Since I was protected by anima, it was hard to injure me with simple magic. There were irritating attacks, though.

“xxx... (Tee hee hee...)”

The Undyne would charge me. Those attacks I had to avoid. Earlier, one of them that I’d dodged had frozen an entire mountain solid. Actually, it was more like it had frozen the entire region it had occupied. It’d been a bizarre attack, and not one I could withstand. If I got hit, it was likely that not even I would escape.

“xxxxxxxx. (We can’t get him.)”

“xxxxxxxx... (If we could just touch him...)”

“xxxxxxxx? (Has he noticed us?)”

“xxxx xxx. (Let us leave this to our liege.)”

I could hear the Elemanti. Undyne were flying around, trying to take my life. Their attacks would never hit me though, since my *God Eye* could see a few seconds into the future.

The battle between us was still far from its conclusion. Or so it should have been...

Suddenly, the goddess’s apostle stabbed his dagger into his own hand.

“...to you, Noah.” I heard him murmur quietly.

What is he doing? Had he lost his composure due to the battle? He didn’t *look* to be so weak-willed.

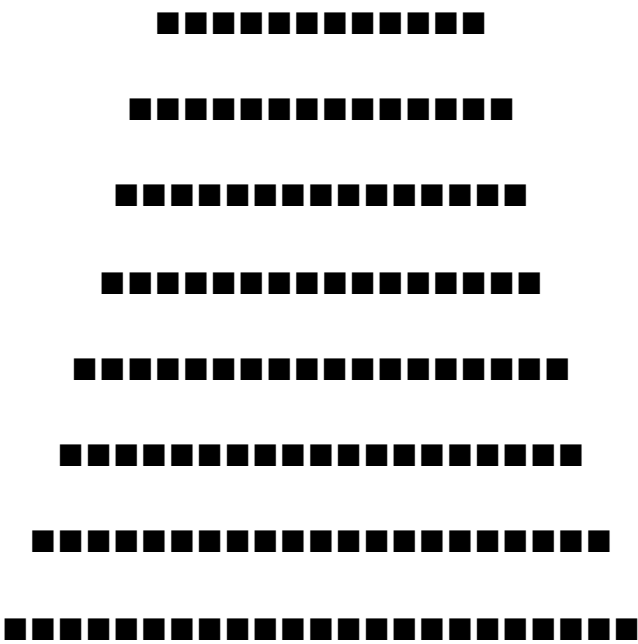
“xxxxxx... (Elementals of time...)”

Then, the elemental’s form warped. My vision warped too.

The world was shaking.

He still had a hidden technique?!

I had my *Future Sight*, though. Even if this was a new kind of attack, it would never— ■■■■■■■■■■



Wha?!

My vision was covered in black. This sensation—it was the same thing I’d felt in my fight against the great one. There was no future for my vision to show.

Just as I realized I was defeated, my entire body stopped functioning.

Before my consciousness faded, I felt the cruel gaze of the goddess upon me and heard the laughter of the Undyne.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

Slowly, Astaroth's massive frame dropped to the ground. Then, it stopped moving.

Phew... That spell worked on him...

I let out a sigh of relief. The spell I'd used was a unison between *Water* and *Moon Magic*—*Ice Gaol Binding*.

It wasn't particularly lethal, but it almost certainly rendered anyone it hit incapable of moving. If I used it on the dragons in the area, they'd be frozen solid for at least a century. I'd figured that even Astaroth would fall under its sway for a period.

Incidentally, it was the same spell that I'd cast on myself a thousand years ago.

"Well done, my liege. I will see my sisters back to their original locations," Dia said to me with a smile before breaking apart into mist. The others disappeared one after another.

Suddenly, I felt woozy.

I pulled the blade from my hand. *Must've lost too much blood.*

That was close...

In a single battle, I could just barely borrow the strength of the time elementals once. Any more than that, and I wouldn't keep my sanity. I probably wouldn't have the lifespan for the sacrificial magic either. It was a dangerous gamble, but I would've lost it all anyway if I'd perished at Astaroth's hand. It'd worked out in the end.

I'd only asked one thing of them: to fix the future in place.

I didn't really understand the theory behind it, but apparently, it was a common way of using time elementals.

Incidentally, Ira had insisted that I never use them. Never. But I'd ended up doing just that, so I was pretty sure I was in for a massive lecture.

"Good work, Makoto. Well done."

Noah appeared at my side—a floral scent wafted from her.

"Thank you, Noah. It was all thanks to you."

"No, that was all you. Have confidence in yourself. Well, I should head back to the Seafloor Temple."

With that, Noah's form vanished into mist.

Every time she appeared, she was barely here before she was gone. She could have taken it easy for a bit.

"Makotoooo! That was incredible!"

"Takatsuki! Your hand! We need to treat it!"

Lucy pulled me into a hug, and Sasa started wrapping bandages around my hand. It was starting to throb in pain now.

Then, I heard something moving.

The massive black dragon was lifting his head. Astaroth was already back?!

Lucy, Sasa, and I all looked at him tensely. But all he did was lift his head—he didn't move to attack.

"Elementalist... This was my loss," said Astaroth. "As promised, you may call yourself the dragon king."

I nodded slightly at his words. I was so glad he hadn't said something like, "This isn't over!" Honestly, if he'd wanted to keep going, I would've had to run.

Astaroth soon continued. "Even with the awakening from the great one... I could not measure up to an elementalist from the age of the gods. Heh. It isn't a bad feeling..."

"Father..." Mel had a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"I will not live in shame. Elementalist, take that dagger of the gods and end my life. When you do, the ancient dragons will all follow you."

“Father! Why would you go that far?!”

“Helemmelk, I am the great one’s subordinate. Though I have lost to the elementalist, I cannot do as you have and follow him...”

“B-But...”

“Hey, Makoto, are you going to do what he said?” Lucy asked.

“He’s her dad, right? Killing him would be...”

I could hear Astaroth, Mel, Lucy, and Sasa all talking.

I could...but their voices were going in one ear and out of the other. It felt like I was listening to them talk from a great distance away.

“Well...I’m...done,” I managed to say.

“Huh? Makoto...?”

“Takatsuki? You look super pale...”

“Elementalist!”

Everyone’s frantic voices were getting even farther away.

I’d controlled hundreds of Undyne.

I’d pushed *Calm Mind* to one hundred percent.

I’d lost too much blood from my sacrificial magic.

Finally, I’d called forward the elementals of time.

I’m at my mental and physical limit.

Lucy and Sasa propped me up as I finally passed out.



My eyes snapped open.

“Where am I?”

“O-Oh... Makoto Takatsuki?!”

“Ira?”

Both of us blinked. Apparently I’d turned up in Ira’s domain. We looked

silently at each other for a while.

Hm? She doesn't look as angry as I expected. But as that thought went through my head, she gradually got redder and redder until she looked like a boiled lobster.

No, she wasn't just angry. She was *pissed*.

"Why! You! Little!"

She grabbed me by my lapels and started shaking me back and forth.



“I-I’m sor— I’m sorry, Ira,” I mumbled between shakes.

“I told you! Over and over! And over again! Never use the elementals of time!”

“B-But I didn’t have another way...”

She stopped dead and paused. “Right, you probably didn’t have any other way to win... I saw a vision of you getting defeated by Astaroth.” She looked seriously up at me.

Sh-She did?

No wonder she’d told me to run.

“I managed somehow, though,” I said with an awkward smile.

Ira’s expression was still cold. “Can you still say that when you look at this?”

She handed over a Soul Book—*my* Soul Book.

I glanced over it, not seeing anything really out of the ordinary. But then...

“Remaining lifespan: three minutes,” she said.

“Huh...?”

That was...pretty bad, right? I could get some instant noodles going and be dead before I could eat them.

“So? What say you, Makoto Takatsuki?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?!”

I looked beseechingly at her. My voice shook.

She let out a big sigh. “Come here,” she said, pulling me by my arm. Then, she fixed both of her arms around my back.

“U-Um?”

“Hurry up and hug me back.”

“R-Right.”

I didn’t understand what was going on, but I did what I was told. Despite how small she was, she was also unbelievably soft as I hugged her. She also gave off

an odd, pleasant smell.

“Honestly, you’re such a handful,” I heard her mumble. At the same time, I felt something flowing into me.

“Ira, what are you doing?”

“Extending your lifespan. You succeeded in defeating Astaroth, so I could give you around a thousand years, but a human’s body would never withstand that, so I’ll keep it to a hundred for now.”

That was crazy! And she was saying it like it was nothing...

Oh, so Ira can extend my lifespan... I suddenly remembered learning that detail in the Water Temple.

“There, done,” she said, clapping me on the back. I slowly released her from my arms.

Ira’s otherworldly beauty was right in front of me, and I felt my heart skip a beat. My heart might have sped up, but I didn’t have any impure desires. That had been the same for the entirety of the millennium I’d been working with her.

“You’re thinking something you shouldn’t,” she scolded.

“No, it’s the other way around. You’re beautiful, but despite being so close to you, my thoughts are pure. It’s kinda weird.”

“Of course you don’t feel that way. We are goddess and human, right? We exist on two vastly different levels of existence. Love and lust are only applicable to those on closer levels. A god in heaven would never couple with a mortal.”

“Huh? But what about the godking...?” I still remembered that mess with Alexander.

“That...is an exception... The godking—*papa*, that is, has an insatiable desire for women.” She laughed hollowly.

I decided not to go any further with that topic.

I checked my Soul Book and saw that it said I had a hundred years left.

Whew.

“Thank you, Ira. Man, it sure was a miracle I still had three minutes left. That was close...” I sighed in relief.

“Hardly a miracle. Normally it would’ve been impossible to use sacrificial magic and just leave three minutes left. Noah adjusted it so that you’d survive.”

“She did?”

“You offered up your lifespan to her to summon the elementals. Plus, she was right there—albeit only spiritually. In other words, she knew what you were doing...” Ira gnawed irritably at her fingernails.

Oh, so Noah made sure I wouldn’t use all of my lifespan. “I’ll have to thank her later.”

“I’ll need to complain to her later,” Ira said simultaneously.

We looked silently at each other for a moment.

Though we might’ve been aiming for different things, our destination was the same.

“Shall we go to the Seafloor Temple, then?” I asked.

“You put it so simply. Fine. Here.”

She thrust out her hand at me. I hesitated for a moment and then took it.

“I’ll teleport us to... Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

Ira tilted her head.

“It’s strange... There’s a barrier set up there. Noah has her strength sealed, so there’s no way she could’ve done it, and it blocks *my* teleportation. Maybe Althena put it up?”

“Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know... They used to be good friends though, so maybe they’re talking. I think it bothers her that Noah took the Daemons’ side a thousand years ago.”

“Huh...” I wondered what the two were talking about if Althena had gone out of her way to set up a barrier.

“I suppose we should wait for a while,” I said. If Althena and Noah were having a private conversation, we couldn’t interrupt them.

“What are you talking about? Who do you think I am?” Ira asked.

My vision wavered and warped. I felt slightly dizzy for a second. When my sight was back to normal, nothing had changed. What had she...?

“There, I put us forward in time by about an hour. Let’s go.”

“Eh? W-Wait.”

She’d used a divine rank spell like it was a cantrip, and now she was about to set off on an ultra-long-distance teleport between the heavens.



Noah’s domain was way different from Ira’s. It was a wide, empty area. In the middle of the space was an antique-looking table and chairs.

Noah was sitting with her elbow propped on the table, staring into space and looking as beautiful as ever.

Even when she was thinking something over, the scene was like a piece of art.

Her expression soon turned from her thoughts as she noticed our arrival.

“Oh, Makoto! And...Ira.”

She grinned widely at me, and then spoke casually to Ira.

I fell to one knee and offered her my most heartfelt thanks. “Noah, thank you for your assistance in my fight with Astaroth.”

She chuckled. “You’re much stronger now,” she said, putting a hand on my head and softly stroking my hair.

“Noah! You know using sacrificial magic through mortals is forbidden! Makoto Takatsuki nearly died!” Ira yelled in complaint.

“Those are *your* rules. They don’t have anything to do with me. Besides...Makoto didn’t die, did he?” she asked with a beatific smile.

“Maintaining history falls on me!” Ira protested.

“Eh, it’s fine. He only called a couple of time elementals.”

“Dealing with it is difficult!!!”

“Oh. Well, good luck. What are you telling me for?”

“Because it was your apostle who did it!”

“I didn’t tell him to.”

“But you could have stopped him!”

“He wouldn’t have listened, even if I’d tried. There’s no way he would’ve decided against it.”

I could hear Ira grinding her teeth. Apparently, she couldn’t do much against Noah. Maybe it was because Althena and Noah were on good terms?

Then, something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. There were *two* glasses on the table. Bloodred wine had been poured into both of them.

“Noah, who visited?” I asked.

“Oh, Naya turned up.”

“She did?!” Ira yelped at her casual answer.

Naya was the Goddess of the Moon, one of the seven—no, *eight* now—goddesses who ruled this world.

She was the most mysterious of them all, and she was *also* the goddess who Furiae followed.

“Wh-Why was she here?!” Ira sputtered. “More importantly, she was in this world?! I thought she was off playing in some other one.”

“Oh, right, Furiae said she’d been seeing Naya in her dreams,” I added.

“What?! Why would you not tell me something so important?!”

“It’s important?”

Ira started shaking me again. I didn’t know why she was so frantic, though.

I looked to Noah for help.

“Naya’s a hedonist, so she’ll stick her head into anything that seems interesting. Once she gets bored, she’s gone just like that. Which means—”

“She’s planning something! Noah! Tell me! What did Naya say?!”

“Nothing major—she was just complaining about Furiae being so talented but so uptight with it. She said that the moon priestess should just do what she likes, and so on.”

“Huh...so Furiae’s skills are *that* impressive?” I said curiously.

“They are. She has almost unprecedented natural talents with *Charm* and *Necromancy*. If she put them to use, she would be able to control people over an even wider scale than Nevia...but she doesn’t use them much,” Ira explained with an odd look.

I didn’t know her skills were so impressive!

“But Princess prefers taking it easy and not standing out,” I said. That was the impression I’d gotten after traveling with her. She was the queen of Laphroaig now though, so she had a lot on her plate.

“And that’s boring for Naya,” Noah explained.

“We don’t want her being like Nevia...” Ira said tiredly.

“So, what did the two of you end up talking about?” I asked.

“We just chatted.”

She wasn’t going to tell me.

“She wasn’t trying to unseal you...?” Ira asked.

I couldn’t help but whirl to look at Ira.

Would Naya free Noah? I couldn’t ask for more.

Noah just shrugged. “No way. If a god unsealed me, they’d be thrown straight in Tartarus—those are the laws. The only thing that can unseal me is a mortal beating the Seafloor Temple...”

She looked away with a sad sigh.

“I-I know that...” Ira said, awkwardly looking away as well.

I couldn't help but interrupt the two goddesses.

"Noah, am I strong enough to beat it now?" I asked. My water magic mastery was now over five thousand. Ira had told me that no other mage in history had refined their magic to that extent.

But my hopes were dashed by the saddened look on Noah's face.

"You tried so many times in the past, so you should know about the barrier against the elementals. You won't reach it as an elementalist."

"B-But...what about if I destroyed the barrier?" I couldn't let go of the possibility.

She just smiled gently at me. "It was the godking's brother, Neptus, that put that barrier up. A human cannot destroy it."

"I see..." I slumped over, depressed. Since I'd put up a good fight against Astaroth, I'd been ready and raring to try again.

"You don't need to be so sad. It's thanks to you that I'm this world's eighth goddess. I have so many believers now. When we first met, I had *zero*."

She softly put a hand on my shoulder.

"Noah..."

She giggled. "You're so cute."

I couldn't help but be taken in by her smile.

"Why are you two going off into your own little world?" Ira asked coldly from my side. "I'm still here."

"Oh, you are?" Noah asked.

"I am. Problem?"

"I just thought you would've read the room and left."

"Hmph. Well, I'm busy, so I'm going back. Makoto Takatsuki, don't use those elementals again! I won't give you more lifespan next time! Noah, teach your apostle properly!"

With that, Ira warped away with a *whoosh*. Was she going to shut herself

away again in that busy office?

Maybe I should go help her again when I have some time.

“Hmmmmmm?”

Noah had gotten up close to my face and was sniffing.

“N-Noah?”

Before I could ask her what was wrong, she’d fixed me with a glare.

“I can smell Ira on you.”

“Ah, well...I...” I swallowed the fact that she’d given me more lifespan earlier.

“Hmm, so she hugged you and gave you more lifespan...”

Ack! Noah could read my mind, so there was no point!

“Um, well, it was...”

I cast around frantically for an excuse, but then Noah cut me off.

“I’m kidding. Ira was right—be more careful when you use sacrificial magic.” She’d gone from giving me a gimlet eye to a smile., Suddenly, my vision started to blur.

“It looks like I’m out of time,” I said. “I wanted to talk for longer, though.”

“Right. I did too. Well done with your fight.”

“Thank you. Until next time.”

My vision went white.

Noah’s smile was the same as ever—brilliant.



I slowly opened my eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling—no, to a familiar face.

“Morning, Sasa,” I greeted.

“Ah! You’re awake!” She grinned and wrapped me in a hug. “I was so worried. You looked ashen when you fell. Mel cast healing magic on you, but it didn’t do anything. Then suddenly, you started looking better. It was weird.”

She tilted her head cutely as she spoke.

“Ahh.”

That was because Ira had given me more lifespan. I hesitated over how to explain when I heard a cheer followed by the patter of footsteps. Someone must have heard Sasa. And those sharp ears belonged to...

“Makoto!!!”

The door slammed open.

The exclamation came from a redheaded elf.

“Morning, Lucy.”

“Thank goodness... You’re okay. Someone wants to talk to you...”

Lucy was holding something in her hand—it was the communication tool Gerry had given me before we’d set out for the ancient dragons’ nest.

Oh, right, he told me to report while I was away, didn’t he? I forgot!

“Hey! Is he awake?! Is he safe?! Actually, just let me talk to him!” I could hear the tool faintly using *Eavesdrop*.

Gerry sounded angry. That was pretty much par for the course, but this time, it felt a little different.

It was almost like he was rushing around...

“Lucy, let me see it.”

“Sure, here you go,” she said, passing me the magic communicator.

I lifted it to my ear and said, “Hello, it’s me.”

“Makoto Takatsuki! Are you safe?! I heard you drove Astaroth away single-handedly! Your name will go down in history! Let me be the first to offer my congratulations!” His angry voice burst forth. *Loudly*.

My ears were ringing, and I moved the communicator away from my ears a little.

“Thank you,” I said. “Is something going on?”

There was a short period of silence before he spoke. “Keep calm and listen.”

I felt like he should have been telling himself that, not me.

“The Great Demon Lord’s Castle, Eden, has appeared above Symphonia. I am heading there immediately. I’ll leave more detailed information at the fortress, so ask my subordinates.”

This was the first sign of Iblis’s attack on Highland.

Epilogue: Urgent Report

Iblis had attacked Highland.

My guts churned slightly at Gerry's words.

"Ira!" I couldn't help but yell. What happened to her *Future Sight*? Shouldn't she have known?!

There was no response from the heavens.

She's probably busy, Noah replied instead. *I bet she's giving instructions to the heroes there through her priestess.*

Eir's voice joined Noah's, though distress was mixed in with her usual cheery tone. *Hey, Mako! Congrats on your win...but it's not exactly the time for that. Things are a bit serious.*

"What exactly—?"

My request for clarification was cut off.

"Makoto Takatsuki! First and foremost, you are to rest. We will meet in Highland after," Gerry ordered. He cut off the transmission when he was done.

"Makoto...do you think Fuuri and Queen Sophia are okay?"

"Fujiwara and Nina are in Highland too, aren't they?"

Lucy and Sasa were both uneasy as they asked their questions.

My response was obvious: if we were worried about them, then checking for ourselves was the best course of action. "We should head back right away!" I exclaimed. "Lucy, Sasa, are you good?"

"I-I'm fine," Lucy said.

"What about you?" Sasa asked.

I'd expected the same kind of instant reply that they usually gave, but they didn't seem entirely on board.

Makoto...you just passed out, you know that, right?

Mako, rest for a while longer.

The two goddesses both scolded me. Now that they mentioned it, I *had* just collapsed. Still...

“If Iblis is there, we need to hurry.”

Lucy sighed. “Fine.”

“That’s just like you.” Sasa shook her head.

Both of them fought off reluctant smiles.

Time to head off! I thought, heading toward the exit.

Suddenly, someone entered the room before I could walk out. “Now, now, Elementalist. We haven’t seen each other in over a millennium and you’re already leaving?”

She was a tall, slender woman with white hair. It was Mel. Her presence was what finally made me realize that I didn’t know where I was.

“Mel, thanks for that earlier. By the way, where are we...?”

“We made a room for humans in our home. We just used magic to create it though, so it’s rather plain.”

“Huh...”

Despite what she said, there was furniture and decoration, so it was done properly. It definitely didn’t look “plain.” It was more like a high-class hotel.

“Something pretty urgent has come up, so we’re heading out for a bit,” I said. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Odd... I heard something about the final battle with Iblis while I was on my way.”

“Once we’ve beaten him, we can have a proper conversation,” I promised.

“There you have it, father.”

“I-I see...”

The other three of us jolted in shock. Standing behind Mel—appearing out of

nowhere—was a man over two meters tall.



I recognized him—we'd met in the demon capital a thousand years ago. This was Astaroth's human form.

It ought to have been the first time Lucy or Sasa had seen him, but they soon seemed to realize who he was, and they were on their guard.

"Elementalist, are you going to challenge the great one?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"Are you going to stop me?" I asked.

Astaroth shook his head.

"I lost to you, so I have no right. However, I cannot betray him and become your ally... Though I could offer my life."

"Unfortunately, we're in a bit of a rush, so we'll have to talk about it later," I said. I really didn't want to talk about killing him right in front of his daughter. Instead, I just deflected so we could pretend it never happened.

"Wait," he said as I tried to leave. "At least let me bestow upon you the symbol of your victory."

With that, he held something out. It shone in a kaleidoscope of color, and it looked like a pointed bone of some kind.

"What is it?" I asked.

"My fang. If you display it, any dragon on the planet ought to obey you... Assuming it isn't to injure the great one."

"That...doesn't seem particularly useful," I remarked. We were literally just about to fight against Iblis, so handing over something we couldn't use against him...

Don't be like that, Makoto. He literally broke his fang off for you, Noah admonished.

That's right. It's a symbol of being the dragon king, so most monsters should run if they see it. That, or they'll obey you.

O-Oh. The two goddesses had backed him up... This let me know that I had an absolutely absurd item in my hands.

“I shall gratefully accept,” I said.

“I see...” Astaroth said after a pause. He seemed slightly put out, maybe because of how I’d reacted initially.

Maybe I should apologize.

“Father, I will escort the elementalist to Iblis.”

“Hm... But—”

“I am not the great one’s subordinate. Besides, considering how I defied him a thousand years ago, it is a little late for such concerns.”

“As long as you do not invite his rage...” Astaroth’s expression was not that of a terrifying demon lord, but of a father worrying for his daughter.

“Let’s go, then.” I looked between Lucy, Sasa, and Mel.

“This way,” Mel said, leading the way.

We followed after her and walked through the ancient dragons’ home. It was like a labyrinth—or a dungeon—and without a guide, I wasn’t sure we would’ve made it out.

The only thing that had me on edge was that Astaroth was following us. Was he really intent on seeing us off?

We soon arrived at the exit and were greeted by a clear, open expanse. Apparently, our fight had made huge changes to the scenery. I felt kinda bad.

Lucy, Sasa, and I all climbed onto Mel’s back—she’d reverted to her dragon form.

“Take care, Lady Helemmelk!”

“Be safe!”

“The dragon king is leaving...”

“Then the terrifying elementalist will finally be gone, right?”

Various dragons poked their heads out as we left, all saying one thing or another. Come to think of it, this was the *ancient* dragons’ home, the most dangerous of any of the dragon nests. We were surrounded on all sides by

ancient dragons, and all were staring straight at us. I felt a chill run down my back.

None of them seemed hostile, though. It must have been because I defeated Astaroth. They all had their heads bowed toward us.

Mel kicked off the ground, and took flight, weaving through the sky. With thousands of ancient dragons watching us leave, it was quite the spectacle.



“Sorry, Makoto. If I weren’t feeling so rough...” Lucy apologized.

“There was no avoiding it. You were quite close to father and the elementalists’ battle. Most humans wouldn’t have been able to withstand the aftershocks of the magic.”

We were currently flying through the air on Mel’s back. We would’ve used Lucy’s *Teleport*, but it wasn’t working right. For now, she was taking a break and recuperating.

“Are you okay, Sasa?” I asked.

“All good,” she chirped back. Sasa had literally no equal as far as physical hardiness went, and she was just as energetic as ever.

“I hope...things are okay in Highland,” Lucy mused.

“Sakurai and the other heroes are there, so I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I reassured her.

It still didn’t entirely help, though.

“Why now?” Sasa wondered.

“That ought to be obvious,” Mel replied.

“You know why?” I asked. Not even Ira had been able to predict it.

“Of course,” she said nonchalantly. “He picked the moment you weren’t in Highland, didn’t he?”

“Lady Holy Dragon, are you saying that Iblis is scared of Makoto?” Lucy asked.

“Wow, nice one, Takatsuki.”

“No, no. That’s not it, no way,” I denied rapidly. There wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that this was the reason.

“Enough modesty,” Mel said. “While the Hero of Light might have struck the blow, I doubt she would have won without your presence.”

“I knew it!” Lucy cheered.

“He’s always playing down his contributions!”

“Oh, you haven’t told your companions exactly what happened? Very well then, I shall give them the details. It will be a while before we arrive at our destination regardless.”

With that, Mel launched into a—rather embellished—retelling of the events of a thousand years ago.

“...and that was how it finished,” she concluded.

“Nah, that’s exaggerated,” I protested.

“Wow!” Lucy marveled.

“You’re so cool, Takatsuki!”

Neither of them seemed interested in my protests. Eventually, I ended up just nodding along with whatever Mel said.

There was a distinct lack of tension in the conversation. However, waiting for us at its end was Iblis, the Great Demon Lord of a thousand years ago—the being who had once ruled the world. Even if our conversation was light, everyone was still filled with foreboding.

We were traveling from the center of the demon continent to the center of the western continent—between the ancient dragons’ home and Highland. Even on a wyvern, the fastest form of transport, it would take two full days. But with the combination of Mel’s flight speed and Lucy’s teleportation, once she recovered, it only took us a few hours.



Highland’s royal capital, Symphonia...

It centered on the gigantic Highland Castle and spread out radially from it.

Countless buildings crowded the city, which was the biggest on the continent. However, something there was different from usual.

That difference soon became clear.

“Wh-What the...?!”

“Takatsuki! Is that an island?!”

Lucy’s and Sasa’s yells rang in my ears.

I spied a gray chunk of land—not made of rock or dirt, but of something more unsettling and bizarre. It must have fallen from the air, and it looked like it had just *grazed* the city.

I recognized it, of course.

“That’s the Great Demon Lord’s castle, Eden. It originally floated, but...”

“Odd. It looks like they dropped it to destroy the city, but there was no point to that.”

I had to agree. From what I could see, the castle hadn’t caused *that* much damage to the city.

“What is our plan?” Mel asked.

“Let’s head for Highland Castle,” I decided. Sakurai and Queen Noelle would be there, and Iblis’s goal was to take Sakurai out.

Mel nodded. “Very well.”

We remained on her back as we carried on in that direction. But, as soon as we tried to pass the walls of the city, Mel threw the brakes on.

“Wah!”

“Ahh!”

“Mel?”

She took a nosedive without warning.

“There’s a barrier here against monsters...” Mel explained, sounding pained. “It’s pseudo-divine rank as well. Being an ancient dragon, I can go no farther... I suppose this is what lowered the damage of the falling castle so much.”

Now that I looked closer, the whole city was covered in a thin film of light.

“Hey, Makoto,” Lucy said. “Do you think this is what Queen Noelle was using her power as a saint for?”

“Right, Gerry did say something about that.”

He’d mentioned a barrier under construction against Iblis. It would have covered the entire continent once it was done, but they must have put it up over the city itself as an emergency measure.

“If it’s a barrier against monsters, am I gonna be able to get inside...?” Sasa wondered. “I don’t *feel* anything, though...”

She had a puzzled look on her face.

“It likely...has exceptions...to which it specifically...does not apply. I...can’t take any more...”

Mel landed gently on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I will be...as long as I get away from here soon. Alas, it seems that I will be unable to offer you further assistance.” Her face twisted in regret.

“Thank you. We’ll go and see Iblis, then.”

She snorted softly. “You’re as easygoing as ever, I see. Don’t die, Elementalist.”

With that, she slowly took flight and headed away from the capital.

The gate was open; no one was guarding it either. On top of that, the normal mass of people going back and forth along the streets was nowhere to be seen. It was a strange sight. Then again, Iblis was here, so of course things weren’t normal.

Carefully, Lucy, Sasa, and I made our way toward the castle. Stalls and shops lined the route, but no people could be seen.

“It’s quiet...”

“I can feel something, though.”

“Let’s just be careful.”

We progressed quickly as we talked. After a while, there was a deafening hissing noise. A snake the size of a dragon was suddenly bearing down on us.

A monster?! It got through the barrier?!

Before I could use magic to intercept it, red light pierced it from the heavens.

“Fire Magic: Vermilion Spark!”

Lucy’s spell obliterated the snake’s head. All that was left was its torso, which writhed around.

“Urgh...that’s gross,” Sasa said, frowning at the snake’s pattern.

Strictly speaking, it wasn’t the pattern—there were *eyes* spread over its surface, rolling to and fro.

“A blight monster...”

It was one of the monsters that had lived on Eden. They had been granted power from Iblis but were unable to withstand it, so they’d transformed into these blighted creatures.

We came across plenty more during the rest of our journey, but Lucy and Sasa made quick work of them. As we defeated the monsters, we gradually started to see people coming out of hiding. They must have hidden while the blight monsters were roaming the city.

The closer we got to the castle, the more people we saw. Some of them were temple knights fighting the blight monsters. The monsters were by no means weak. But, whether due to the barrier or something else, the knights were taking them out one after another. I’d been worried that the city might have already been under Iblis’s control, but that didn’t seem to be the case. If anything, it looked like the knights were picking off stragglers.

Where is Iblis, then? I wondered.

The castle had fallen to the side of the city. Iblis himself was definitely here.

But *where?*

As if to answer that question, a temple knight came running up, yelling

something. He was presumably spreading the news throughout the city.

I listened to his shouts.

“The Hero of Light has defeated Iblis!!!”

Side Story: The Elementalist and the White Grandsage

“Hey, Momo.”

It was the day before we would leave for Fort Blackbarrel, the front line against the demon lords’ armies.

I’d come to Momo’s estate. The half vampire was lounging on a sofa, glaring at me like a cat. She gave no reply.

“I thought I’d come see you before I leave tomorrow morning,” I told her.

No response.

“Um... Momoooo?”

Again, no response. Huh? What was up? She seemed to be in a real mood today.

“W-Well, guess I’ll be going, then. I’ll bring you back a souvenir.”

“They’re not going to be selling souvenirs on the front line!” she exclaimed, finally breaking her silence.

Apparently, I’d managed to piss her off.

“You seem kinda angry,” I pointed out.

“Of course I am! I waited a thousand years, and you’re just constantly flirting with other women. It’s all flirt, flirt, flirt! I’ve seen it all with my magic!”

“You were watching...?”

I hadn’t known that before. Hm... So it wasn’t just the goddesses watching me.

“Waaaaah! You’re awful, Sir Makoto! Pay more attention to me, hug me more, flirt more with *me*!” She started smacking me lightly.

“I want to spend more time with you too,” I said. It wasn’t like I *didn’t* want to

show my appreciation after she'd waited so long. She was the White Grandsage of Highland though, so she was someone even royalty had to be careful around. If I hugged her or patted her head around people and someone saw me, I didn't even want to think about their response. Besides, with how important she was to the country, she constantly had people visiting her, so it wasn't like we could be alone together for long.

She sighed. "So you're heading for the northern continent after this?"

"That's the plan. I promised Astaroth a rematch back in the past."

"I want to go tooooo."

"I'd love for you to come," I agreed.

I *had* asked Queen Noelle and Sakurai, but I'd been soundly rebuffed. The military leaders had apparently been in tears at the suggestion.

"Well, it's not like Highland can just have their strongest combatants wandering off."

The circumstances were different than they had been a thousand years ago. Momo knew that too, so she hadn't been too forceful about it. We'd just have to bear with it until Iblis was defeated.

"You're spending the night with me, right?" she asked.

"I'm heading out early in the morning, but that was what I was planning," I said.

She giggled. "Very well, then."

She finally seemed to be in a better mood—she approached me and squeezed me in a hug.

I softly returned it.

"This...kinda reminds me of the past," I murmured. Back then, we'd slept in a single narrow bed, wrapped in each other's arms.

"It's a nice memory," she replied.

"Well, the rooms in the Labyrinthos hideout were small."

The two of us had been put in a single room back then. We'd apparently been

seen as brother and sister.

“The Sun Temple was big, though,” I mused.

“It was. But that was only us, Anna, and Teacher Mel, after all.”

“I wonder what it’s like now.”

“You didn’t know? The temple is used for training future priestesses and heroes. Highland runs it. It’s also an emergency evacuation point, but that isn’t public knowledge.”

“Hmm, then it’s completely different. That’s a shame, I wanted to go train there again.” It was a place where I’d made a lot of memories with Mel, Anna, and Momo.

“But you spent less time training there and more time trying to beat a certain *other* temple, didn’t you?” Momo remarked drily.

I paused. “Did I?”

“You did! Anna and I felt like wives waiting for their husband to get back from a business trip!”

“That’s a bit precise for a metaphor.” But I understood what she meant, at least.

“On top of that, your whole goal was to see another woman, and you kept the fact that Cain was with you hidden the whole time. You’re a secretive person!”

“I couldn’t help it. Talking about a wicked deity or a demon lord back then...” I wonder what would have happened if I’d told them.

“You’re not hiding anything else, are you?”

“I’m not. At least, I don’t think so.”

But now that I thought about it, Noah *had* talked about overturning the world order before. She probably wouldn’t say anything like that now that she was the eighth goddess of the pantheon.

She wouldn’t, right?

“Hmph, then that’s fiiine.”

Momo laced her arms behind my head, leaning on me as she stretched with an “mmm” noise. She was like a cat. Then she buried her face in my chest and tightened her grip. I felt like a kitten had decided to trust me—gently, I stroked her white hair.

After a while of that peaceful contact, Momo suddenly spoke up. “By the way, how is Sir Makoto Junior?”

“Junior?” I asked.

“I’ve made advances like this, but you haven’t ever made a single move back.”

“These are *advances*...?” It all felt pretty normal to me.

She sighed. “You’re so dense. I suppose I’ll start things, then. ☆”

I didn’t quite understand, but she’d soon latched on to my neck. I felt a slight throbbing pain, but there was also a sense of pleasure spreading through my body.

I could hear the quiet noises of her swallowing as I just let her suck my blood.

After a few moments, she broke off with a gasp. While I felt a slight sense of lethargy, there was also a bizarre feeling of satisfaction. This always felt the same way.

“Haaah! ≡” She sighed once more. “Your blood is just the best.”

Her rapt expression and pink cheeks gave her an oddly sensual air.

“Oh, right... You look kinda hot after you drink my blood,” I told her.

There was a long pause before she managed to ask “What?” Her eyes had gone wide, and her face was starting to get even redder.

How could an undead like her *blush*? Was it because she was only a *half* vampire?

“D-D-D-Did you always think that?!” she stammered.

“Not always,” I replied.



I'd actually asked Mel once *why* Momo always looked so sexual after taking my blood, and she'd just called me an idiot.

"Welllll, so you'll do it now?"

She might have been trying to hide her embarrassment because she pushed me down with an impressive amount of force, her cheeks still red.

I couldn't do anything, and I let her straddle me and strip my shirt off.

"Sir Makoto...≡"

She had a molten look in her eyes as she got closer, and her lips soon pressed against mine. I held her body in my arms. She had a small frame, and she still looked as young as when we'd first met.

Her small tongue parted my lips, exploring the inside of my mouth. I tasted the tang of iron.

"Hey, Momo," I murmured as she kept kissing me.

"This is hardly the time for talking, Sir Makoto."

"I can taste blood so strongly."

"Of course you can, I've just drunk yours."

"I really don't like the taste of my own blood," I told her. Obviously, to me, it didn't taste as sweet as Momo described.

"Deal with it, Sir Makoto." She didn't let my protest bother her, and she assaulted me with more kisses. That wasn't all—her delicate fingers were running all over my body.

Guh... She's way better than how she looks like she should be. Where'd she learn this...?

"Hey, Momo?"

"What is it?"

"You seem really used to this," I said, my tone questioning.

She giggled. "I haven't lived a thousand years without getting something out of it. I know *lots* of things."

Oh, right. I guess that'd be what they call "book smart."

I let her continue doing what she wanted for a while, but suddenly, she froze. Her joyous expression had pulled an about-face, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Momo? What's wrong?" I asked.

"I...can't really be with you since I'm undead."

"You...can't?"

"Indeed. The undead can't have children with the living. Things would be different if you were undead too, though." Her expression was resigned as she spoke.

The undead and the living...

Was there really nothing that could be done? If anyone would know...

"Iraaaa, you there?"

"Sir Makoto?"

Momo looked oddly at me. There was no response from Ira. I spoke again, though.

"You're watching, aren't you, Ira?"

I am! Problem?! came an angry voice in my head.

"I knew it."

"Someone was watching?!"

Momo's face was bright red again. Even redder than before.

You're awful, Makoto Takatsuki! You were so intense with...such a small girl... You aren't even wearing your clothes... How disgraceful!

"The kissing and the clothes weren't started by me," I pointed out.

Letting such a small girl take the lead is pathetic!

"I...don't have any rebuttal for that," I admitted.

"Don't just talk! What's the goddess saying?!" Momo demanded, shaking me

as she was unable to hear Ira.

Right, if I wanted her to hear...

Fate Magic: Synchro.

I wrapped my arms around Momo and activated *Synchro*.

“Wha?! Sir Makoto?!”

“Ira, could you say something?”

Momo, you’re getting tricked by a bad man, came Ira’s response.

“Ah! I heard her!” Momo exclaimed with a shocked expression. I’d thought it might work, since Momo was already good with *Fate Magic*.

“I have something to ask you, Ira.”

What, Pedo-hero?

Well, that was harsh. Still, Momo looked pretty young, and what we’d been up to *was* kinda questionable.

“How can I make it so we can be together?” I asked instead of protesting.

“S-Sir Makoto?!” Momo sputtered.

Hmm...let me think... Ira’s mental voice sounded contemplative.

“Is there a good option?” I asked.

There was no response.

“Of course there isn’t...” Momo said bleakly. If not even a goddess knew how to do something, then it was probably not gonna happen.

There are...technically several ways.

“There are?!” we asked in unison.

There are multiple examples of offspring between living and undead people in the past. Such children are somewhat against the natural order, so bringing them up wouldn’t be easy. They’re something between, after all.

Momo and I exchanged wordless looks. I’d heard inter-race marriages were tough, and apparently, that went double for a human and a vampire. I didn’t

want to force hardship on a child.

Momo's right—it'd be better if you were the same race. You need to both be one or the other, undead or living.

"Things would be easy if that were possible," I replied.

"But if Sir Makoto becomes undead, he won't be able to use elemental magic anymore..." Momo lamented.

And then I'd be the weakest vampire ever—a vampire with super low physical stats and not much mana.

Ira just replied nonchalantly. *It doesn't have to be that way. The Grandsage can just become human again.*

The sheer lack of fanfare to that outrageous statement made it hard to follow her logic.

"Th-That's possible?!" Momo's voice was shaking.

Restoring the dead isn't a particularly difficult spell. Well, I suppose it would be for a human.

"Please then, Ira."

"Please, Goddess Ira!"

Calm down, you two. Just going ahead and doing so would be against the divine laws. I need to get permission first.

"Permission?"

"From who?"

Momo's and my questions came out at the same time.

The Godking of Hades, Uncle Pluto.

That sounded like a god right out of myth and legend.

"How do you get permission?" I asked.

He is my uncle, so I know him... He was always kind when I was small, but he's been pretty harsh since I became the Goddess of Fate. He says stuff like "You're a proper goddess now, so I can't be spoiling you." What do the two of you think?

“Ira, you...”

“You’re definitely an incredible goddess.”

She spoke about knowing the godking of the underworld like it was nothing. Hell, they were *related*.

Of course! She giggled.

I could hear the smugness in her voice. “So it’ll be hard for even you to get permission, right?” She’d just said he wasn’t so soft on her anymore.

It won’t be simple, but I should be able to negotiate some conditions for it.

“Conditions?” Momo asked.

Maybe something like...the person I am asking on behalf of is saving the world from danger and he wishes for it.

Momo and I exchanged looks.

“So...”

“If I want to be human again...”

Defeat Iblis and save the world, Ira instructed.

Figures. Of course that was how it would end up.

“Not everything is so simple,” Momo said.

“Yeah, at least it’s easy to understand.”

It could all happen after defeating Iblis and bringing peace to the world.

“I suppose you will keep at it, then, Sir Makoto.”

“That’s right, White Grandsage.”

“I told you to call me Momo when we’re alone!” She lightly smacked me again.

You two are close, Ira remarked. *Goodbye, then.*

With that, she cut off the telepathy. Well, she was still probably watching me, as always.

The room fell silent as Momo and I looked at each other.

“Will you stay with me until morning?” Momo asked. It was the same question she’d asked earlier.

“Yeah. I’m leaving early though, so I can’t stay too late.”

“No. As soon as you go, you’ll be gone for *ages*.” She tightened her hug and started kissing me again. I held her back with some force. Her undead body was cold. She was still just as adorable as she’d always been, though.

“We’ll defeat Iblis and you can be a human again, Momo.”

“Astaroth is still out there too. Will you be okay?”

“Well, I’m stronger than I was back then...”

“But he’s Teacher Mel’s father.”

“That might make things a bit harder.”

“Taking it so lightly will just end up with you dead.”

“I know. He *is* the strongest demon lord.”

The conversation had turned completely—we were once again a hero and the Grandsage. It was still a pleasant exchange, though.

Momo and I chatted for a while, and before I knew it, we’d fallen asleep in the same bed. As I slept, I dreamed of our travels with Anna, Mel, and Johnnie a thousand years ago.

Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you very much for purchasing volume 12 of *Zero Believers*. This volume was the reunion of Makoto and the heroines after his return from the past, and he had to face the fate he put into motion. We also saw the long-awaited return of our headline heroine, the Goddess Noah. She got to cheer Makoto on and be jealous(?) of Ira. I would say that she well and truly showed off her position as a heroine, wouldn't you? A headline hero definitely adds to any story.

Also! The next volume will finally conclude the main story.

How will the fight with the newly resurrected Great Demon Lord go? Will Makoto be able to save Noah from her prison deep below the ocean? What of his virginity? Please look forward to it.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone for their assistance. Tam-U—that cover with Ira plus Lucy's and Sasa's new designs were the *best*. Hakuto Shiroi, I loved how Roses Castle looked in the manga. Thank you to my editor, S, who is also helping me with my new series set in the same world, *Kougekiryoku Zero*. Additionally, I appreciate all of the readers who have supported me for so long. Thank you all so much! Let's see each other again in the final volume!

Full Clearing
Another World
under a
GODDESS
with Zero
Believers

12

The Strongest Elementalist in the World
and the Goddess's Wish - Act 1

Story
Isle Osaki

Art
Tam-U

"YOU'VE
RETURNED,
MAKOTO."

Noah

THERE SHE STOOD
WITH BEJEWELED RINGS
ON BOTH HANDS AND
SEVERAL NECKLACES
AROUND HER NECK.

NOAH WAS THE VERY
IMAGE OF A NOUVEAU
RICHE GODDESS.

Makoto



"OH MY,
THIS CERTAINLY
LOOKS LIKE FUN,
DOESN'T IT?"

ASTAROTH'S
PITCH-BLACK
MIASMA—
THE CLEAR
BLUE MANA
FROM THE
UNDYNE.

WORLDS
OF BLACK
AND BLUE
PRESSED
AGAINST
EACH OTHER,
VYING FOR
SUPERIORITY.

IT SEEMED
LIKE THIS
WAS GOING
TO BE A
CONTEST OF
STRENGTH.

THEN IT
HAPPENED.
A CHILLINGLY
BEAUTIFUL
VOICE
REACHED
MY EARS.

Astaroth



"TAKATSUKI...
LET'S DO IT..."

"THIS
IS OKAY,
RIGHT,
MAKOTO...?"

Lucy

Aya









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Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers: Volume 12

by Isle Osaki

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Edited by C.D. Leeson

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