

GODS' GAMES

WE PLAY

1



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Kei Sazane

Illustration by
Toiro Tomose

GODS' GAMES

WE PLAY

1





FAY

Still undefeated in the gods' games. The best rookie in recent years and an apostle people have high hopes for.

MIRANDA

Chief Secretary of the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court, where Fay and his friends work. She's great at looking after the young apostles.

LEOLESHEA

Her friends call her Leshea. A former god who loves games and accidentally spent 3,000 years stuck in a block of ice.

PEARL

A Teleporter who decides to quit the gods' games after a big screwup.



SELF-INTRO MEMORY

"You're not even afraid of a god like me.

That's terrific. In that case..."

The young woman—the god—snapped her fingers.

"Float. Initiate spin."







Gods' Call **Gods' Games We Play**

Player.1 **The Girl Who Was Once a God**

Player.2 **Vs. Titan, the Giant God —Divinitag—**

Player.3 **A Dropout Who Wants to Quit Games**

Player.4 **Vs. The Endless God Uroboros
—The Forbidden Word—**

Player.5 **Here Come New Challengers!**

Tutorial **This Is the End of the Tutorial**

Volume | 1



Kei Sazane

Illustration by **Toiro Tomose**


New York

Copyright

Gods' Games We Play

Volume 1

Kei Sazane

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

Cover art by Toiro Tomose

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KYUKYOKUZUNOSEN

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Chapter

Gods' Call

Gods' Games We Play

Gods' Games We Play

Do you know that game, hide-and-seek? Sure you do. Everyone's played it at least once in their lives. Some of the players hide, and then the player who's "it" tries to find them. Simplicity itself.

And do you know what?

Countless gods in this world want to challenge people to games just like that.

Let's introduce one in particular...

A rather easygoing, clumsy dragon god who, playing hide-and-seek one day long, long, *long* ago, hid at the bottom of the ocean and *accidentally* fell asleep for 3,000 years.

When that deity awoke, bam! Our story began.

The Layers belt in the Great Northern Cold-Wave Zone: a land of ice that never melts, home to towering walls of thick ice that bar the way of any adventurers bold enough to try to explore it.

Somewhere in this land, the sound of a howling blizzard was peppered with shouts of surprise from the members of an exploratory team engaged in cutting into one of those ice walls.

"We found something! It's not a fossil!"

"That's impossible... This material is supposed to date back to the Ice Age!"

The great chunk of ice extracted from the wall didn't contain a dinosaur fossil or preserved mammoth...

"It's a person! A...girl?!"

“Inform the Arcane Court immediately. Tell Court headquarters! ...What could this mean? How can we have found a person in the Ice-Age layer?!”

It was, indeed, a human who had been discovered in the ice—a young girl at that, still in her teens.

“Maybe she’s from the ancient era of magical civilization.”

“This is mind-boggling! It’s forty-six below in that ice! How could a human be so completely preserved?! Even a mammoth would have fossilized after three millennia!”

“It’s more than that, Captain... I think she’s alive.”

The girl lying there was very beautiful.

Her bright vermilion hair shone almost as if it were on fire. Her face, which looked exactly like that of any ordinary modern person, had sweet, charming features. There was a faint blush in her cheeks, and her color was good, as though she were still living.

She was also completely naked. There wasn’t a scrap of clothing on her. She was somewhat willowy, but her womanly curves were there for all to see. Perhaps she’d been wearing clothes once, but if so, the passage of 3,000 years and the utter cold had devoured the material.

“You’re right...” One of the team members placed a spare parka over the girl. “I think she looks alive, too.”

“That’s ridiculous! Need I remind you that this is a sample of the Great Northern Cold-Wave Zone from the Ice Age? Without protective gear, you’d freeze to death in half a min— *uh?!’*”

The captain practically jumped back; everyone else cried out in unison, “Wh-Whoa!”



Researchers gasped as the vermilion-haired girl opened her eyes and abruptly sat up. She looked at each of the five team members in turn.

“Oh! Darn. How long’s it been? A thousand years? Two thousand? I accidentally fell asleep there.”

Telepathy: a god’s words transferred directly into the mind, from the girl to the researchers.

“I don’t know how many millennia it’s been, but I’m sure your language systems and grammar aren’t the same as they used to be. But you should be able to understand me this way, right?”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Captain... I think the girl is—”

“That’s right. I’m talking to you right now. Oh! You can just speak normally. I’ll understand it via telepathy. Huh! So this is what people wear these days.”

The girl stood up, putting her arms in the sleeves of the parka with irrepressible curiosity. Then she yawned, right there in the middle of the forty-degree-below wind.

“Phew... I guess it was a mistake to choose the bottom of the ocean as my hiding place. I thought it was a really clever idea, but I sure never imagined an ice age would hit while I was asleep.”

“Who... *What* are you?” the captain asked, stepping forward, trembling despite his warm coat. “My name is Mishtran. I’m the captain of a research team charged with exploring remote regions. We’re associated with the Arcane Court, Ruin branch. We rescued you from the ice, and we’d like to know who you are.”

“Me? I’m a former god.” The girl called herself a god. As if on cue, her hair billowed dramatically. *“But hey, who cares about that? Play a game with me!”*

“...What?”

“The gods’ games. You must still have them in this era, right?” She giggled happily, spreading her hands as if saying she couldn’t wait. *“C’mon, let’s go!”*

And then the girl who called herself a god announced, as if to the entire world:

“Bring me this era’s very best player!”

Player.1

The Girl Who Was Once a God

Gods' Games We Play

1

Ruin, the Sacrament City: one of the largest of the isle cities that dotted the World Continent.

"Verifying resident data..."

"Resident Number: Cohort 68 Division 80999 Shi-63. Fay Theo Philus. Welcome home."

Thick steel walls surrounded the city. Fay stood in front of a mechanized gate that served as an entrance.

"Geez... Six months searching for her. What am I even doing?" Fay, a dark-haired young man, tucked his Resident Card back into his wallet, then looked up at the sky and sighed. "And I never even found her..."

No, no. Head in the game.

Fay gave a shake of his head and started walking. The city streets were impeccably maintained, the electric cars that ran along them all brand-new. If he'd looked up, he would have seen clusters of skyscrapers glinting gray.

All just the same as it had been half a year before. The Sacrament City of Ruin seemed to burst with activity.

Fay stopped at the center of it all: a giant screen mounted on the side of a building. The sign displayed the words: GAME IN PROGRESS. Hundreds of people were watching the stream, enraptured.

“The gods’ games... Three at once, no less,” Fay remarked.

The three massive screens showed three different gods, along with the several dozen apostles pitted against them. These were games, battles of wits, between humans and gods. And hundreds of people were watching them with their hearts in their mouths.

And then they were over. By sheer coincidence, within minutes of Fay stopping to watch, all three screens displayed their results almost simultaneously.

Vs. The Elemental, Salamander—LOSE

Time Elapsed: 82 hours

By defeat of all 16 apostles

Vs. The Demon, Nacht—LOSE

Time Elapsed: 7 hours

By defeat of all 40 apostles

Vs. The Endless God, Uroboros—LOSE

Time Elapsed: 15 seconds

By forfeit of all 69 apostles

There was a collective “Awww!” from the crestfallen audience big enough to startle the birds in the trees and send them scattering. The crowd also started to disperse, people chatting with one another as they went.

“The Salamander match was so close!”

“Hell, with another hour, they might even have won the Nacht match!”

“The team that drew Uroboros... Bad luck for them...”

The gods’ games were humanity’s greatest entertainment, and its greatest struggle. Discussions like this were a common occurrence when a game was afoot.

“Guess I’d better get going,” Fay said to himself. “I oughta be out there, too.”

He turned to go—but someone said, “Hey, isn’t that Fay?”

“*The* Fay?! You mean he’s finally back? I was just thinking we haven’t seen him at all recently!”

What started as a couple of spectators who happened to notice him soon turned into a general rush to get a look at one of the most celebrated rookies of recent years.

“Wha? H-Hey, hold on...just a...um? Hello?” Fay said. If this had been one of the games, even the thought of tens of thousands watching wouldn’t have fazed him. But at the moment, he just felt like an average citizen coming home for the first time in a long while. “Aw, c’mon, I swear I’m not *that* interesting!”

Fay set off running, trying to shake the crowd. He headed for the Arcane Court. For the first time in six months, he would be back at ground zero of the challenge against the gods.

2

The world is home to many superior spiritual beings that humans can’t see—so-called “gods.” They’ve gone by many names throughout history: spirits, demons, angels, dragons. But how could humans worship spiritual beings they couldn’t see?

The answer is simple: the gods, having way too much free time on their hands, reached out to humanity.

There is a phenomenon called Arise, in which the gods grant power to a human. Only they know the criteria by which someone will be gifted an Arise, but the abilities come in two types: Superhuman and Magical.

And those powers are a person’s ticket to being part of the gods’ games.

Fay arrived at the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court, a massive building that extended twelve stories into the air and three belowground. Although referred to as a branch office, this was the main base of operations for the global organization that challenged the gods at their games.

Waiting right there at the entrance was a woman wearing a business suit and

glasses, one hand stuck in her pocket, the other waving cheerfully at him. “Lo! Welcome back, Fay.” It was the chief secretary, Miranda. The most striking things about her were her almond-shaped eyes, the intelligence in her expression, and her career-woman demeanor. “It’s been six months...and change. You must have had quite a trip. And is it just me, young man, or have you lost a little weight?”

“Yeah, well, you know... No! Miss Chief Secretary, what is the story here?!” Fay took a few steps toward the chief secretary. “I was *sure* I’d find her this time!”

“Ha-ha. Ah, yes. This girl you were after—I hear she turned out to be somebody else.”

“And who was it who *gave* me that bogus tip?!” Fay couldn’t believe her. Miranda just grinned at him. The young man sighed for the second time that day. “The girl I’m looking for has bright red hair,” he said.

“Uh-huh. I know.”

“This person did *not* have red hair! I went on this whole wild-geese chase because you said they’d found someone fitting her ‘exact description’! Ugh, I searched *everywhere*. I spent six months looking!”

“I only said I’d heard rumors to that effect. That’s all.” Miranda shrugged. “Anyway, welcome home. Oh, don’t bother with your ID. There’s no apostle in this building more famous than you. They’ll let you in on sight even after all this time.”

“You run as tight a ship as ever, huh?”

“I just know when not to stress. As long as we don’t slip up, it’s all good. That’s the key to effective administration. Anyway, come on in.”

They entered the building, the lobby of which didn’t look much different from your average place of business. There was a cute receptionist and office workers silently hauling stuff around. If there was anything remarkable about the place, it was the gaggle of apostles standing around in uniform. They wore the white outfits of the Arcane Court, and all their uniforms were brand-new.

“This year’s rookies,” Miranda said when she noticed Fay looking at them.

“They got their Arises late last year. Fresh meat. They’re looking for teams at the moment.”

“Any good prospects?”

“Oh, we’re hoping. But probably no one like you. No one who’s likely to rack up three wins in the gods’ games right out the gate. Arcane Court headquarters is still browbeating us.” She shrugged again. ““The apostle Fay Theo Philus has been gone for six months! What the hell is he doing?!””

“Look, I thought I would be gone for only a week or so.”

He’d gotten a tip that the person he was looking for had been found, but after much searching, he discovered it was a case of mistaken identity. Suffice to say the last six months had sucked.

“I’m as eager as anyone to make up for lost time,” Fay said.

“Ready to tackle the games already? Well, that’s just like you. The heart that must beat in your chest, not to ever flinch back from matching wits with the gods themselves!”

“I just love games.”

“Don’t I know it. Although I’m not sure if I’d use the word *just*. Whatever the case, we’re ecstatic to have you back. Ahem—*normally* we would be, anyway...” Miranda pointed to the central elevator. “We should talk. Let me show you to the seventeenth floor.”

“What about?”

“That’s for me to know. You can savor the suspense.”

They got in the elevator, and Fay let his gaze wander to the wall before he leaned against it. Etched into the elevator’s side were the Seven Covenants the gods had granted to humanity.

The Seven Rules of the Gods’ Games

Rule 1: Humans granted an Arise by the gods become apostles.

Rule 2: Those with an Arise will receive either a

Superhuman or a Magical power.

Rule 3: The gods' games take place within Elements, the superior spiritual realm.

Rule 4: Arise powers may be used only within Elements.

Rule 5: However, as a reward for obtaining victory in the gods' games, a partial measure of an Arise power may be manifested within the real world. Further victories will unlock greater expressions of the ability.

Rule 6: Apostles who lose three games in total are disqualified from further participation.

Rule 7: Ten victories against the gods will be considered a game Clear.

Clear: Anyone who achieves ten victories against the gods will be granted a Celebration.

The gods' games. Humanity had been charged with achieving ten victories in these battles of wits, and if they managed to clear ten games, the gods would grant them a reward. Nobody knew exactly what that entailed, but since ancient times, there had been whispers that the gods would grant any wish the winner might have. And humans loved to have their wishes granted. The truth remained murky at the moment because no one had ever achieved a Clear before.

"The world is waiting. Anxiously. *Desperately*. When will we see someone rack up ten victories against the gods? That's what everyone wants to know," Miranda said. Suddenly she was smiling.

The Arcane Court had two roles. One was to make the gods' games accessible to humanity as a form of entertainment. But even more importantly, the Court supported the apostles who participated in the games.

"The greatest number of wins in humanity's history is eight. That's absolute top-tier work. It would be fair to call them a gaming hero. But even a champion like that never got near ten victories. Lost for a third time trying to get number

nine and was forced to retire.”

“Yeah...”

“But Fay, I think a Clear is more than a dream with you. You’re certainly the best rookie we’ve had in many years.”

Fay’s record currently stood at 3-0, undefeated in the gods’ games. He was one of the most exceptional rookies to be seen in a long time, and the whole world hoped he might achieve that elusive Clear.

At the moment, though, he wasn’t saying anything.

“What? Something the matter?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just that I’d like to take care of whatever this business is and get down to challenging the gods.”

“Wow, you sure like games. Look, what we’re talking about here is very important. But I guess you never were the type to just listen quietly.” Miranda let out a long breath.

It was true. Fay didn’t actually care about the greatest number of wins in human history or how impressive a rookie he was. He just wanted to play those games with the gods. That passion was the sole thing that had brought him back here.

“I think the two of you are going to make a *fantastic* team.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I told you we should talk. There’s a young woman who’d like to meet you, Fay.”

“Young woman?”

“She asked for you specifically.” Miranda glanced over her shoulder at him. She looked half teasing, and half full of fervent hope. “‘Bring me this era’s very best player,’ she said. And that couldn’t be anyone but you, could it?”

“Wait... She *asked* for me? Who is she, exactly?”

“A god,” Miranda replied. She looked up, watching the numbers wink on as the elevator climbed higher and higher up the building. Second floor, third

floor, fourth... “It was a year ago now. They dug a god in a girl’s body out of a wall of permafrost. Don’t tell me you weren’t even watching the news?”

“Yeah, I heard about that. It made headlines all over the world.”

The gods lived in the superior spiritual realm, a place humans couldn’t go—but a year before, there had been a global uproar when a god had incarnated herself and come down to humanity.

If I remember right, they brought her to our Arcane Court because we were closest to the dig site, Fay thought. Huh. Guess we just missed each other.

He barely knew the details. He’d just left the city and had been too busy searching single-mindedly for a particular girl.

“So what kind of god is she?”

“A bit of a strange one,” Miranda said. “She claims she was playing hide-and-seek with some humans long, long ago and decided to conceal herself at the bottom of the sea. She fell asleep, and then the Ice Age hit, and she accidentally ended up frozen in negative-forty-degree ice. Got stuck that way for three thousand years.”

“That’s some accident...”

“She’s a living witness to the ancient magical civilization. That’s part of why everyone was so excited when they found her. We took her in, but to be honest with you, we’re finding out we’re not quite sure what to do with her. We can only bend over backward so far to accommodate her. But you wouldn’t want to make a wrong move and upset a god, would you?”

Gods were gods, after all. They lived in a spiritual realm and had no bodies, which meant they had no lifespans, either. Add that to their virtually unlimited power, and they were beyond anything humans could imagine.

“As a point of interest, this god has two avatars—fire and a dragon.” Fourteenth floor, fifteenth, sixteenth... As the elevator continued upward, Miranda continued, “She claims she’s not a god anymore. She calls herself a *former* god. But she seems plenty powerful.”

“When you say *power*, you mean...”

“That you could get in real trouble if you piss her off. This city could be wiped off the map in an hour. Reduced to a black scorch mark on the ground.”

“What?!”

“That’s not us speculating, either. That’s straight from the deity’s mouth.”

“You’re keeping a god that dangerous *here*? What the heck for?!” Fay exclaimed.

“We didn’t think she was so, you know, potentially deadly at first. Research takes time, and we only just reached these conclusions recently. I mean, specifically, the conclusion that she’s much too dangerous for the Arcane Court to have in custody.” Miranda smiled, but she didn’t seem to think this was funny.

At almost the same moment, there was a friendly *ding!* and the elevator came to a halt.

The seventeenth floor. This was it.

“Which brings us to the heart of the matter. We want you to keep an eye on this ‘god,’ Fay.”

“Again: What?” Fay asked, blinking, but Miranda slipped past him and out the door.

The seventeenth floor of the Arcane Court was for receiving visitors, so the hallway outside the elevator looked like it belonged in a luxury hotel. As they walked down it, Miranda kept talking. “Your cover story is that you’re serving as a tutor for a god who’s still acclimating to human society. But I want you to monitor her actions and report back to us. That’s why we picked you for this assignment, Fay.”

“Whoa! Wait! Hold on a second! I’m supposed to spy on a god?!”

“Not so loud. She has good ears, and if she hears you, the jig’ll be up. She might look like a sweet young woman, but she’s an immensely powerful dragon god.” Miranda shrugged as they went. “This is your responsibility. In fact, we couldn’t have asked anyone else. You understand why, don’t you?”

After a beat, Fay said, “I have an inkling...” He nodded and sighed. He knew

why he was the right person for this job. “It’s because I can’t die, isn’t it?”

“You got it. The power of a god is too much. She could smash us like a child knocking over a pile of building blocks—whether she meant to or not. That’s why we needed someone who couldn’t die.”

If you were a human who intended to escort a god, that required that the god couldn’t destroy you with their power. And Fay’s Arise just happened to meet that condition.

“Well! I’m glad that’s settled.”

“Wait, you’re forcing me?! Hold on, Miss Chief Secretary! I didn’t come back here to take on a mission that dangerous! I wanted to play in the gods’ games...”

“Sorry. You can’t turn us down on this one.” As Fay watched, the secretary’s eyes squinted into a smile behind her glasses. “I told you. She asked for you personally.”

There was a long silence from Fay.

“Bring me this era’s very best player. And there you have it.”

3

The seventeenth floor of the elliptically shaped Arcane Court Ruin branch office building was dedicated to receiving visitors.

“We’ve got her sleeping in the special advisor’s room. She is a former god, after all.”

“Heck, us apostles have to live in dorms. Why does she get it so much nicer?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say it’s *that* much better than you have it. Okay, so the dorms aren’t exactly luxury hotel suites, but we like to think we give you a decent standard of living. The apostles are the Court’s breadwinners, don’t forget.”

Miranda took out a golden master key card and inserted it into the lock barring entrance to the special advisor’s room. The door immediately slid open.

“Are you sure we can just invite ourselves in like this? Won’t she get angry?”

“She doesn’t get embarrassed, no matter what state you see her in. Hm... Looks like maybe she’s out. Guess we’d better wait for her, then.”

They walked into the living room, which doubled as a reception area. Fay couldn’t suppress a small smile when he saw the games and game pieces that littered the floor. “Huh! So this god really does like games.” He saw darts, roulette, and a variety of different cards. There was an assortment of dice ranging from the standard six-sided variety right up to some d20s and even specialized dice with a hundred faces, all spilling off of the desk and onto the floor.

“There’s a saying that God doesn’t play dice, but just look at this,” Fay remarked. He picked up a couple of the six-sided dice off the floor and rolled them across the table. “Four and six.”

The two dice tumbled across the surface before coming to rest, displaying precisely the faces Fay had predicted. The secretary’s eyes widened. “Tell me that was a coincidence.”

“It’s simple. Make sure the face pointing up is the one opposite the number you want to roll. Then roll them gently enough that they only take a single half-spin.”

So if you wanted to hit a six, start with one. For four, three should be facing up, and then you just roll the die a half-turn.

“Fay, I saw those dice roll more than a half-turn along that table.”

“Yeah. Thirty-one-and-a-half times, to be precise. It works out to the same as a half-turn.”

“And you can do that with two dice at once?”

“Or three or four; it doesn’t matter. It’s the same principle. Although a parlor trick like that probably wouldn’t be much help against a god.”

Fay hadn’t perfected this technique for his contests with the gods. Instead, it was something he’d learned and polished for when he played against humans—really, against one human in particular.

I remember learning this thing with the dice, and how to manage roulette, too—all because it practically killed me to play against her all day, every day, and lose every single time.

Gosh, that takes me back. Fay found himself gazing at the toys and games, almost lost in them, until—

“Oh! Miranda!” a cheerful voice called from within.

Fay turned, and his eyes met with a shimmering vermilion so intense it looked like fire itself.

“Oh, Lady Leoleshea. You were taking a bath?”

“Uh-huh. Human bodies get dirty so quickly. And it’s better to keep them clean, right?”

A girl with fiery red hair stood there. She wore a light tank top that nicely displayed her slim arms and legs. Her amber eyes shone with curiosity, and the flush in her cheeks was charming.

All of a sudden, Fay realized he had been so transfixed by the girl that he’d forgotten to breathe.

“Miranda? This human—is he the one?”

“Yes, the one you asked for. Fay Theo Philus. He made his rookie debut just last year, and immediately took three wins in the gods’ games. He’s an apostle we have very high hopes for. And starting today, we’re assigning him to be your tutor. Say hello, Fay... Fay?” She clapped him on the shoulder. “Fay? Helloooo?”

“.....Oh!” Fay snapped back to reality. The girl named Leoleshea peered at him, confused.

“Hello? Human? What’s the matter?” she said.

“Listen, Fay. A teacher can’t go falling in love with his students at first sight. Even if they are as cute as this one.”

“N-No, Chief Secretary Miranda, you’ve got it all wrong!” Fay exclaimed, shaking his head. He realized he was blushing furiously.

It was true he’d found himself unable to look away from the girl, Leoleshea.

But it isn't love at first sight! It's precisely the opposite. I'm so astonished because this isn't the first time I've seen her! She looks way too much like her.

Fay was searching for someone—a girl. He didn't know where she was, and his only clue had been her vermilion hair. How could he not stare at someone who looked exactly like her?

"It's nothing," he said finally. "I just got lost in thought."

"Hmm. Well, if you say so. Let's move on," Miranda said, sliding her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "As you requested, Lady Leoleshea, we've brought you this era's very best player. He's yours from now on. Grill him, boil him, whatever you like."



“What am I, a human sacrifice?!”

“Welp, I’m off. Lots of secretary work to do, you know! I’ll leave you two to introduce yourselves and make friends. I’m counting on you to get the job done right, okay, Fay?” Miranda said, and then, with another smack on the shoulder, she was gone.

Get the job done right. She wasn’t talking about teaching Leoleshea, of course, but about spying on her.

Fay found himself alone with a god. Just two people, together in a... Wait. Was it right to think of them as “two people” if one of them was a god? Well, Chief Secretary Miranda had talked about them as if they were the same, and if it was good enough for her...

“Oh! Umm...”

“Hullo, human! And welcome!” The vermilion-haired girl threw herself on the sofa, the hem of her tank top fluttering. “You sit there. I’ll just clear the table.”

She set about cleaning up the assortment of dice and game boards. More accurately, she pushed them wholesale onto the floor. Maybe humans and gods just thought of “cleaning” differently. But *why* was she clearing the table? Was she going to welcome him with tea and snacks?

If that was what Fay had been expecting, those expectations were dashed by the next words to come out of her mouth: “Okay! I know it’s kind of sudden, but let’s get started.”

“Started on what?”

“Oh, come on. What else?” She sat down across from him, her eyes glittering, and spread her arms. “A game! *Me versus you.*”

“...Shoulda guessed,” Fay said with a slight smile. He’d known this “former god” was an avid game player, but even he hadn’t really expected to be challenged to a match the moment they met.

“I’m willing to tell you my name. Around the Arcane Court, they call me Leoleshea.”

The collection of syllables didn’t mean much to Fay. Did it come from the time

of the ancient magical civilization? It sure didn't sound like a name you heard much these days.

"Should I call you Lady Leoleshea, then?" Fay asked.

"That's fine."

"Okay..."

Geez. Inside, Fay was smiling dryly. *Chief Secretary, you stinker. You know I came back here to play in the gods' games, and you stick me with this?*

Looking after a god who had come to the mortal realm? The whole thing had sort of gotten away from him, but there was no turning back now. Especially not after he'd been invited to sit down and play. Fay never backed down from a game—not even one against a god.

"Say, uh, Lady Leoleshea?"

"Yeah?"

"I love games, so this is great and all, but don't you think we should introduce ourselves a little more?"

Miranda had charged Fay with spying on this young woman. That meant information came before games. If he didn't know who this former god really was, how could Fay hope to spy on her?

"Since I'm supposed to be your teacher and all, I thought maybe we could get to know each other..."

"That's exactly what this game is for!" The former-god girl took out a deck of cards. A total of eighty, each inscribed with handwritten characters. Leoleshea spread them faceup on the table so Fay could see what they were.

"Huh? Name, age, hometown, gender, hobbies, dreams... Is this...?"

"A little something I whipped up in my spare time. I call it Self-Intro Memory."

"That name's very, uh...descriptive."

Presumably, it was a variation of the game of Memory played with a deck of cards. You flipped over any two cards, and if they had matching numbers, you kept the pair. It was a simple memory game where you attempted to remember

the numbers and locations of the various cards.

“I get it,” Fay said. “Instead of making pairs of numbers, you’re trying to match self-introduction topics, right?”

“Yep. It’s played with the same rules as Memory. For example, if I collect the two ‘hometown’ cards, you have to tell me where you come from. If I don’t manage to find a pair, you don’t have to tell me anything.”

“All right.”

“But if one person makes a pair, the other person has to answer honestly. That’s the rule.”

“Sure, of course.”

You couldn’t lie. A game like this couldn’t work without that basic understanding—but it was also perfect for Fay in his role as spy. The god herself was promising not to lie, which meant any kind of question was fair game.

“Okay, then. Now you know what topics are on the cards. I’ll turn them over, shuffle them, and put them out...”

“Oh, hang on.”

“Yes?”

“Mind if I shuffle them again?” Fay piled the facedown cards together and then shuffled them once more, so that even he didn’t know which was which. “You put them faceup on the table, right? To teach me the rules?”

“Uh-huh. But then I turned them over and... Wait. Don’t tell me...” The vermilion-haired girl’s eyes were wide. “You managed to memorize the locations of all the cards in those few seconds, and then keep track of them when I was shuffling them?”

“My bad habit. Ages ago, there was someone who trained me to play games—trained me nearly to death. Pretty much every day, we played games of Memory using ten decks, 540 cards, and we played first to win seven games.”

Leoleshea looked at him with her mouth hanging open. For a former god, it was a strikingly human gesture. Then her face broke into a smile, and she exclaimed, “That’s great! You’re awesome. I like you a lot! I adore people who

love games from the bottoms of their hearts. What a terrific attitude!”

Leoleshea, the dragon god, had grasped the *real* meaning of what Fay was saying: he wasn’t going to resort to petty cheating like playing Memory when he’d already memorized the cards. It was a statement of intent, an announcement that even in the face of a god, he wanted a fair fight.

“You’re not even afraid of a god like me. That’s terrific. In that case...maybe this table is a little cramped for a game like this.”

“Huh?”

If they weren’t going to play on the table, then where? While Fay was still trying to decide whether to ask, though, the young woman—the god—snapped her fingers. “Float. Initiate spin,” she said.

The eighty cards levitated into the air, and then, surrounded by a faint red glow, they began to rotate like a roulette wheel above Fay’s and Leoleshea’s heads. It was psychokinesis, a display of the gods’ power. The cards whirled above them, never staying in the same place for even a second. And that wasn’t all.

“Wow! The exact speed and trajectory of every card is slightly different?” Fay said.

“Ooh, you’re a quick study,” Leoleshea replied. “Good, good.” She sounded downright thrilled. “Every one of the eighty cards is on a different trajectory, so even I don’t know how they’ll spin. It’ll be more fun this way, right? The idea just came to me!”

“I get it...” Fay said. It was 3D Memory, so to speak. In a normal game of Memory, Fay would never have forgotten the location of a given card once it had been turned over, and the same had to be true of this young woman. So she’d added a sort of house rule that meant the precise location of the cards was constantly changing. You might think you knew where a card was, but an instant later, it would be somewhere else.

“So we have to memorize not just the locations of the cards, but the angles they’re rotating on?”

“Uh-huh. Think you’re up to it?”

“Sure am.”

“Great! Oh, one more thing. A special original rule of mine for this particular game of Memory. You don’t object, do you?”

“Uh... What is it?”

“I call it the Absolutely One Turn Only rule.” Leoleshea took out another deck, this time ordinary playing cards. She pulled out two of them—a five and a five. A pair. She handed them to Fay. “Normally in Memory, if you collect a pair, you get another turn, right?”

“Sure... I guess that’s how people usually play.”

“That rule is out the window. That’s all it means.”

So they would alternate turns, whether or not they managed to make a pair on their turn. It was as simple as that. It didn’t strike Fay as the sort of thing most people, let alone a former god, would go so far as to dub a “special original rule.”

No, stop! Fay shouted at himself. *I get it. In this particular game, that rule could be a real pain in the neck!*

Ba-dum. His heart started racing with nerves and excitement. It had been so long since he’d felt that way, he’d almost forgotten the sensation. He could feel his body temperature creeping up.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Great, even.” He nodded at the girl, who was grinning at him. She knew he knew. This was no ordinary game of Memory. From the moment the Absolutely One Turn Only rule came into effect, the strategy for the game was turned on its head.

This game isn’t about memorization—it’s an information-selection exercise where we decide what information to pursue on each turn.

Eighty cards—not all of equal value.

“Okay, good. Let’s get started, then!” The dragon god, Leoleshea, clapped her hands in excitement. “I’ll let you have the first turn.”

Go right ahead, eh? Fay responded by pointing to two cards directly over his head. “Don’t mind if I do, then. I’ll take those two cards... Huh! They turned

themselves over.”

Indeed, the cards Fay had pointed to flipped faceup in midair. It turned out they weren’t a pair, though. The first turn of a game of Memory was entirely reliant on luck. The chances of making a pair on your first move were less than 2 percent. It just wasn’t going to happen very often.

Then there was the issue of what the questions on the cards were.

“Name and Blood Type... Do gods even have a blood type?”

“My blood runs hotter than lava!”

“Come again?”

“I’m the very manifestation of flames and blood, taking the form of a dragon. If so much as a drop of my blood were to spill in this building, the whole place would melt into a pile of slag.”

“Hold on, that sounds really dangerous!”

“If you’d like to know more, then I encourage you to collect the Blood Type cards.” The god called Leoleshea twirled her vermilion hair around her finger and giggled. “Okay, now it’s my turn. Hmm, which cards should I choose...” She studied the possibilities intently. She was sitting on the floor, leaning forward slightly as she looked at her options.

“Uh... Y-Your posture...,” Fay said.

“Is there a problem?” Leoleshea asked.

“Well, not, like, a *rules* problem or anything, but... *Buuuut...*” It was all Fay could do to keep his eyes averted. The neck of Leoleshea’s tank top was loose, and when she leaned forward, it hung down, giving him an almost uninterrupted view of her chest.

It was worse than that, too. “Let me guess... Gods don’t have any concept of, uh, underwear, do they?”

“Underwear? Oh! You know, even once I took on human form, underwear never made any sense to me. Clothes are for covering your body, so why would you wear *more* clothes under them?”

“I guess that’s a, uh, good question...” Fay sure didn’t know how to answer it.

But there it was: this former-god-turned-girl was clearly not wearing a bra. Under her tank top, it was all skin. She’d done a proper job of incarnating herself, too, and definitely had some womanly curves.

“It just makes it hard to concentrate...”

“Oh! Well, we don’t want that. Not being able to concentrate on your game is terrible.” Leoleshea bounced up onto the sofa, pointing at a couple of cards as she went. “That one and that one! Hometown and Age. Aww, not a pair. Okay, your turn.”

“I’ll take these two. Ooh! I got the Hometown pair.”

So Fay was the first to make a pair. Now Leoleshea would have to tell him about where she came from.

“Okay, here goes. Like most gods, I come from Elements, the playground of the gods—the place you humans call the superior spiritual realm. Did you know that because it’s the residence of the gods, humans need a special door to enter?”

“Yeah. I was using that door until six months ago.”

Humans couldn’t normally enter the superior spiritual realm of the gods. When they took part in the gods’ games, they had to use a special door, something that Fay, as an apostle, knew very well. The critical lesson for him in Leoleshea’s answer had been the honesty of it.

“You didn’t think twice about telling me the truth. I’m actually a little surprised,” Fay said.

“Well, of course,” Leoleshea said. “That’s the rule in this game. And rules aren’t just constraints.”

“They’re for enjoyment?”

“Ding, ding! Exactly.” The former-god-girl winked happily.

So it went, each of them taking turns, discovering which cards were which, gaining an ever-expanding knowledge of what was where.

“I’ll go for... Finances and Hobbies. Miss. I think I saw the other Hobbies card a moment ago, though. You remember?” Leoleshea said.

“I think the Hobbies pair is the second card from the back of the four directly behind me, and the third from the right of the six that are flying over the window.”

The two cards Fay had named flipped over to each reveal the word HOBBIES.

“Wow, nice work!” The Dragon God Leoleshea clapped her hands excitedly. Even though her opponent had scored a pair against her, she seemed as happy as if she’d gotten it herself.

She’d been waiting for a human just like this. Her unabashed smile made it clear.

“Your answer, then. My hobby is...games!”

Fay was dead silent.

“It kind of takes the wind out of my sails when you don’t say anything.”

“Aw, I was just thinking... Sure. Of course. What else could it be?” A rueful smile flickered across Fay’s face.

He’d made a mistake. Privately, he’d been hoping that if this former god had some interest other than games, he might be able to use it to tease out more information about her. As someone who was supposed to be spying on this god, that was the kind of material he wanted. Leoleshea, however, turned out to be all about games after all.

If Miranda had been watching the game, though, she might have sat back in amazement. For although ten groups of cards were whirling through the air, as the two players laughed and talked, *they were constantly looking each other in the eye.*

They knew the trajectory and rotational speed of the hovering cards. They constantly calculated when a given card might be behind them or wherever else.

“Ooh, I got the Name pair! What’s your name?”

“Oh yeah, I guess I never did introduce myself. I’m Fay Theo Philus. Dragged

here by Chief Secretary Miranda, as you saw.”

“Do you have a nickname?”

“Nobody’s ever called me anything but Fay. Huh... I hadn’t considered that the Name cards included nicknames.”

It was very appropriate for a game of self-introduction. Part of the strategy was dreaming up what kinds of questions you could ask based on a simple prompt. If your wits were quick enough, you might be able to ask all sorts of things.

“My turn. I collected the Gender pair.”

“Aww, an adorable girl like me? Do you have to ask?”

“That sounded kind of...rehearsed.”

“It’s what your human books say. See?” Leoleshea pointed over her shoulder. Behind the sofa were piles and piles and piles of gossip rags, newspapers, manga, novels, history books, scientific research papers, and more. “That’s last week’s reading. I have just as much coming again this week. I’m so eager to learn more about humans.”

“You read all that in a *week*?”

Then something occurred to Fay: Leoleshea had been thawed out of her icy sleep just a year ago, yet here she was talking to him as plainly as anything. It should have been surprising.

And she obviously learned to read and write pretty well in that time. I guess a god’s learning ability is as divine as everything else about them.

Leoleshea was greedily devouring knowledge about humans. Maybe it was all so that she could play games with them.

“So that’s how you learned modern language and pronunciation and everything? That’s incredible...”

“Verily! I did master it to perfection in the span of a week.”

“That’s not perfection! What you just said was definitely weird!”

“Well, it’s all good. Anyway, gods don’t technically have genders, but this is

the body I ended up in when I incarnated. So I guess I'd say 'girl.'"

"Fair enough..."

Once this deity had become the young woman called Leoleshea, she was definitely biologically female.

"I'll show you, if that'll help. You can see that I'm just like a normal human girl under these clothes."

"Don't show me *that*!" Fay yelped, desperately trying to stop her as she began to strip off her tank top. "What's wrong with you?!"

"What do you mean? I was just trying to prove my answer. The rules say I should."

"You can just *tell* me! That's enough! Ugh... I'm sweating buckets. You nearly gave me a heart attack..."

"Not supposed to take off my tank top. Got it. I'll just pull these pants down, then..."

"That's even worse! Especially because I know you're not wearing underwear! Shouldn't a god have a bit more, you know, dignity?!"

He didn't exactly feel like he was playing against a deity, more like a game-crazy kid. That feeling, though, only lasted the next few seconds.



“All right. My turn.” Leoleshea brushed back her vermilion hair and exclaimed, “Yah!” pointing at the air. The first card she turned over was blank.

So was the second.

“Oh...!” Fay exclaimed when he realized which pair she’d made.

At that moment, he knew she’d trapped him. This wasn’t a coincidence—the same pair Leoleshea had just made was the one Fay had been going for, too.

Wild cards. Jokers, in playing-card terms. Blank card faces without question prompts written on them, showing that whoever collected the pair could ask anything they wished.

“Heh heh! Bet you wish you’d gotten these!” Leoleshea said, happily showing him the Fay. “Now, what shall I ask? You remember the first rule, right, human?”

“Y-Yeah, sure...”

He’d promised to answer every question honestly. He couldn’t lie.

“Okay, then, human, here’s my question: Why are you *really* trying to get close to me?”

Fay tensed as if an icy knife had been plunged into his back. A cute girl stood before him, but for an instant, her voice had been utterly commanding, her eyes sparkling like a dragon’s—a creature vastly beyond any human being.

“Answer me, human. And do not seek to evade my query.” The words themselves sounded powerful, like she could grind a human to dust with her voice alone.

Ba-dum, ba-dum. Fay felt his pulse racing, despite his immortality. Arise. Anyone else might have passed out at that moment from forgetting to breathe.

This. This was why the Arcane Court judged Leoleshea beyond human control.

“Former” god, my butt! “Incarnated as a human”? Right here in front of me is a real, actual god!

Fay had already competed in Elements three times and defeated three different gods, and even he had never encountered an opponent who projected

such insurmountable force of personality.

She was after the same thing I was from the very beginning. She acted like she was picking cards at random, but she was angling for the wild cards the whole time!

Fay could remember every pair that had been uncovered; no doubt Leoleshea could, too. It had been a simple contest of luck which of them would reveal the wild cards first. And that was exactly why Fay said...

“Ha-ha-ha! We really are on the same page!” He couldn’t help himself; he started laughing. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. If I was going after them, I should’ve known a god would be, too.”

The dragon god blinked and gave him a questioning look. She seemed to wonder how a human fixed with the implacable gaze of a deity could be... laughing.

“Heck. Guess I should’ve known a god would see through Chief Secretary Miranda’s plans. Well, at least I got to play an interesting game. So it’s all good.”

The god’s question had been about why Fay had come to her. Under normal circumstances, he would have simply replied that he was asked to be her tutor, and that would have been that. But these weren’t normal circumstances. He’d agreed to this game, and all the rules that went with it.

“Okay, here goes. My goal—my *real* goal—is to spy on you. You’re a god who’s come down from the superior spiritual realm. Humanity hasn’t figured you out yet, and I was asked to find out exactly who you were and why you’re here.”

Leoleshea didn’t answer immediately, and Fay was left to wonder whether she was going to draw and quarter him. He’d known that his answer might awaken the god’s wrath, and he’d told her anyway. For the moment, though, the dragon-god-girl was simply staring at him, not moving.

“There’s one thing I’d like to be clear about—the Arcane Court acted without malice. I think you can probably tell as much from your treatment up to this point, but I just wanted to say it,” Fay said.

Leoleshea was quiet for another moment, then swept her flaming red hair

back. “I kind of had a sense that’s what was going on. That’s why I asked.” She was smiling at Fay. “Okay, thanks. You gave me an honest answer, which shows that you take my game seriously. You’re a good human.”

“That’s, uh...kind of sudden.”

“No, I told you already that I liked you, right? If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have asked what I did. It’s not the sort of thing you’d ask someone untrustworthy, is it?” The dragon light in her eyes disappeared as if it had melted away in the sun, and the girl named Leoleshea gave a small smile. “I think I’m going to call you Fay. Oh, and you can feel free to call me Leshea, too. You don’t have to be extra polite to me or anything, either. How can we have fun playing together if we’re constantly holding each other at arm’s length?”

The smile caught Fay off guard, but what really made his heart skip a beat was what she said after that. She was going to use his name!

“Gosh, it suddenly feels like we’re a lot more like...friends. Are you sure it’s okay to be that familiar with you?”

“Sure! You turned out to be everything I hoped for in an opponent.” Leoleshea tossed the two wild cards down on the table and picked up Fay’s pairs instead. “So you went for Gender, Hometown, and Hobbies. You weren’t trying to win on amount of pairs, were you?”

“You got me,” Fay said. He hadn’t been simply trying to get the greater number of cards. The crux of this game was to remember cards but *not* take them. After all, this wasn’t an ordinary game of Memory, where you were engaged in a straightforward contest of mnemonic power.

Take the “Name” cards, for example. Fay *definitely* wasn’t going to pick those—he already knew Leshea’s name. Without the opportunity to go again when he collected a pair, asking her name would have been a simple waste of a turn.

It’s all because of that Absolutely One Turn Only rule. The usual theory of Memory, where you win just by grabbing every pair you can remember, goes out the window.

It was all about the *value* you could get out of your turn. This was a game of information selection. Each turn, you had to weigh which cards you knew about

versus what you wanted to learn, and then decide what to do. As soon as Fay grasped that point, he began focusing exclusively on cards that would give him access to the information he desired. He hadn't even been interested in victory as such.

"Oh, that's right!" the Dragon God Leshea said as if it had just occurred to her. She leaned across the table. "Question. I assume you were going for the wild cards, too. What did you plan to ask me?"

"You mean you might still give me a response? Er... Ahem. I know you said not to be too stiff. Let me try that again. You're actually going to tell me?"

"Depends on the question."

"I was just wondering...why you chose me. There are other, higher-ranking apostles."

Fay's ranking as an apostle was III. That represented the fact that he had won three of the gods' games—but there were apostles here at the Ruin branch office with higher ranks than his.

"And if you went to Arcane Court headquarters, I'm sure—"

"Yeah, I know. But you're the only rookie to make three wins."

It was said that every year, more than a thousand people around the world were chosen by the gods to receive Arises. In other words, there would be that many new apostles. But none of them had bettered Fay's three wins. Even if you went back over the past hundred years, there had probably been only a few rookies to achieve such a feat.

"You had prospects like that, yet you dumped your team and went off somewhere for six months. I'm sure Miranda told you that the Arcane Court was at its wits' end, right?"

"Well, she can blame herself for feeding me bad info..."

"So anyway!" Leshea pitched the cards on the floor and leaned over toward them. "I know you want to know more about me, too, and I think the best thing would be for us to cooperate. I want to Clear the gods' games with you."

"The gods' games?"

The Dragon God Leshea was supposed to be one of the deities who *ran* those games. In ordinary terms, the gods were the games' creators. From a story perspective, they were unique bosses; and after they were defeated, they even served as the princesses who gave the winners their rewards. But they were never challengers. It was humans who were supposed to take on the gods.

"Yeah. So, uh, I incarnated myself because I wanted to play with humans, which was great as far as it went, but it turns out that going from the spiritual realm to the physical one is...sort of a one-way trip." Leshea twirled a few strands of vermilion hair around a finger as she talked. She sounded the slightest bit embarrassed. "I can't go back to being a god now. It was just kind of an accident."

"You call that an accident?!"

"But it's no problem. I just have to play the gods' games."

"I'm not sure I follow," Fay said.

"I need to win ten games. Then I can go back to being a god."

Ah, yes, rule seven: Ten victories against the gods will be considered a Clear. And anyone who achieves a Clear will be granted a Celebration. Not that anyone knew exactly what that entailed.

"Hold on... Leshea, do you know what the Celebration really is?"

"Sure I do. The rumors you humans have about it are pretty accurate—the gods will grant your wish. That much is true."

"Wow, so they really do grant wishes... But if 'that much' is true, that means there's something we've gotten wrong."

"The gods don't just grant one wish. You could make a hundred wishes, or even a thousand."

"That's nuts! What do they think they're doing acting so generous?!"

"Well, they haven't yet. No human has ever done it."

Fay was brought abruptly back to Earth. "Er... Yeah. I guess that's true."

So on the one hand, the gods would grant any and every wish you could think

of—that was some return on investment. But on the other, you had to win ten games against them, something no one in human history had ever done. It looked like the scales were just about even.

“That’s why I want to team up with you. To play with you,” Leshea said.

“So you want us to be a formal team?”

“You don’t want to?”

“Nah, it’s fine. An honor, even.”

The gods’ games were battles of wits, gods versus humans, in contests so massive and incredible only a deity could have come up with them.

I was actually trying to decide what to do about a team, Fay thought. The last one I was with retired six months ago.

He’d figured he was going to have to find a team somewhere and try to convince them to let him join up—so Leshea’s offer was unexpected, but it couldn’t have come at a better time.

“I would love to,” Fay finally said. He discovered that without quite meaning to he was clenching his fists.

Games existed to be enjoyed. *She’d* taught him that when he was young, and it was a precept Fay had lived by ever since.

He was going to form a team with a girl who was once a god. It was a pulse-pounding idea, the sort of thing that would typically have been out of reach.

“I’ll get to see how a former god plays from right up close. Thinking about it gives me goosebumps!” Fay said.

“Hee!” The former-god girl smiled. “That’s great. You really are everything I’d hoped for. Well, that settles—”

“Oh, but...” Fay interrupted. There was something else. “We’ve only just met. I’ve been on a team before, but never with a former god. I’d like to be properly prepared.” Fay didn’t doubt that a former god would be more than capable of playing any game. If he had a concern, it was about communication. As he said, they *had* just met. “It’s important how a team works in sync—it’s like picking your partner for doubles in tennis or Ping-Pong, right? And I’ve only been in the

gods' games three times..."

"All of which you won."

"Yeah, barely. It was good luck. That three-and-oh record could easily be oh-and-three."

Games involved making the most of your knowledge. You had to play mind games, read your opponent, and go along by trial and error trying to find the best strategy, and then at the end, you had to pray for a bit of good fortune to gain victory. That was true of all games—and the gods' games were the epitome of that.

"That's the whole reason I want to be so careful," Fay went on. "Not blindly leap to teaming up."

Leshea didn't say anything.

"It's like—you know. If you bumped into someone on the street and they were like, 'Marry me!' you'd never do it. You'd start by being friends, then dating... Wait, maybe this metaphor is making things *harder* to understand."

"No, I get it."

"Phew. So we'll start by making sure we understand each other. We can take time, build up our cohesion, and—"

"We'll dive right into the gods' games; got it."

"I'm glad you under—wait, what?! Were you even listening to me?!"

"I'm gonna go tell Miranda!" Leshea said.

"No, let me finish! Awww..."

This former god might be more trouble than he had anticipated. Leshea, her eyes shining, sprinted from the room, Fay racing after her.

4

It's a cruel world.

Two percent—that’s about how much of the land area of the World Continent humanity’s cities would occupy if they were all put together. Add all the land currently being cultivated by the Arcane Court’s teams, and you might reach 7 percent.

So, you might ask, what about the other 93 percent?

Terra incognita.

Plains stalked by terrifying grassland dwellers called Rexes. Murderous deserts where a human died of heatstroke within an hour. And oceans home to massive aquatic life-forms that swallowed any ship that dared set sail.

Humans were absolutely not the masters of this world. Even the Sacrament City of Ruin had to be surrounded by steel walls, or a pack of Rexes would have leveled it in an evening.

People needed power if they were going to fight and survive amidst the brutality of the natural world.

“Gotta hand it to those gods. They’re pretty clever,” Fay said. He was in the apostles’ dorm, back in his room for the first time in half a year. He lay on his bed, looking up at the ceiling. “They know that humans need to get out there and tame those terrible landscapes, but they know we can’t do it with nothing but human abilities to help us...”

That was where the gods’ games came in.

(From) The Seven Rules of the Gods’ Games

Rule 1: Humans granted an Arise by the gods become apostles.

Rule 2: Those with an Arise will receive either a Superhuman or a Magical power.

Rule 5: However, as a reward for obtaining victory in the gods’ games, a partial measure of an Arise power may be manifested within the real world. Further victories will unlock greater expressions of the ability.

Humans to whom the gods granted an Arise obtained incredible skills,

including Superhuman techniques like the ability to move fast enough to outrun a Rex, or Magical powers like producing ice that could blunt a scorching wind. Some mages were even mighty enough to destroy the underwater beasts who lived in the sea.

Initially, these blessings could be used only during one of the gods' games, but by achieving victory in those games, apostles could also begin to manifest their abilities in the real world. Just what humanity needed to go out there and explore. They didn't have to win ten games. Just one or two victories would unlock some of an Arise's power in the real world.

"The gods invite people to play their games to pass the time. If the people can win, they get to bring their Arise abilities into the real world. And that lets us explore and claim more territory for humanity," Fay mused.

Each side received something out of it—the gods got to play their fill of games, and humans got the chance to go adventuring out in the world. So the gods' games were both humanity's greatest entertainment and also where they acquired the capabilities necessary to venture into the outside world. For that reason, the Arcane Court was effectively the world's government, and people treated apostles like heroes.

"I'd assumed I was going to make a career out of the gods' games, too," Fay murmured. Until six months ago. Until he'd heard rumors about a girl who looked exactly like the one he'd been searching for.

"Back again today, Fay? Good. Let's get right down to playing. Just be sure you take the game seriously. It's more fun that way."

An older girl, almost like an older sister, with vermilion hair: the girl Fay had played against as a child. She'd loved games more than anyone Fay knew, then or later.

It's thanks to her, he thought. The whole reason I was able to win at the gods' games was because she trained me.

And then, one day, she'd suddenly disappeared. That's why Fay was looking for her. He wanted to find her and say thank you—to tell her she had made him who he was today. That was the impulse that had driven him away from the Arcane Court on his six-month search.

“All that...and yet I can’t seem to remember her. I wonder why.”

He didn’t know the older girl’s name. Why not? They had played together.

It wasn’t just her name, either—her face seemed hazy to him; he couldn’t recall the details. The only thing still with him was the shocking vermilion color of her hair.

Exactly the same color as the Dragon God Leshea’s. And they both loved games more than anyone Fay had ever known. He had to admit the question had crossed his mind, if only for a second: *Could it be?*

But... No, it can’t. Leshea would remember me otherwise, right?

The biggest strike against the theory was simply this: Leshea had been “discovered” just a year before. While Fay had been playing with the girl, the one he thought of almost like an older sister, Leshea had been sleeping in a wall of ice. It was just a case of mistaken identity. Or...mistaken divinity. Something.

“It’s funny, huh?” Fay mumbled, turning over in bed and smiling a little despite himself. “I come back here, and the first thing that happens is a former god invites me to play in the gods’ games with her.”

It was one in the morning. He should have been asleep long ago, but he just couldn’t drift off. He couldn’t get Leshea’s face out of his head—the god who so closely resembled the “older sister” he admired so much.

“No, no. Leshea is a different person. Or a different god or whatever. I know that. I’m not going to let this keep bothering me after today. Starting tomorrow, I’m going to act perfectly normal around her.”

“What’s that you were saying about me?”

“Oh, just that I— Leshea?! Wait! What are you doing here?!” Fay sat bolt upright to discover that the girl with the brilliant scarlet hair was looking at him with distinct interest. She was wearing the same tank top she had been that afternoon. But what was she doing here? This was supposed to be Fay’s room—and the door was supposed to be locked.

“Miranda gave me a key,” Leshea said.

“Curse you, Chief Secretary! Whatever happened to privacy?!”

“Okay! It’s time for a night game!”

“Uh...”

“Here we go!”

“Wait! Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

Leshea grabbed Fay’s hand, and an instant later, the young man found himself pitched out the window of the living area and plunging from his third-floor room down toward the yard.

“Hngh!” he exclaimed as he impacted and tumbled along the ground. His Arise was of the Superhuman variety, and that had to include some boosting of physical abilities, or the bearer would have been torn apart by his own gift.

As he got to his feet, he muttered, “What does she think she’s doing... Huh?”

He found himself confronted with a gigantic statue shaped like a dragon’s head. Over sixteen feet tall, it was like a piece of ancient history that had plopped right down in the yard.

It was a Divine Gate—a giant statue that acted as a door to the superior spiritual realm and a relic from the ancient magical civilization.

By passing through this stone door, one could dive into Elements, the playground of the gods.

“What’s it doing here? I thought it was at the Dive Center at the Arcane Court.”

“I borrowed it and brought it here.”

“You stole it?!”

Anyway, the weight of that statue was a matter of more than a few kilograms. Frankly, it was a matter of more than a few tons. It was a mystery to Fay how a girl smaller than he was had managed to cart a sixteen-foot-tall stone statue all the way to the dormitory.

“What about the apostles? The ones who are supposed to be guarding the Divine Gate at the Dive Center?”

“I politely explained the situation to them,” the former god said with a sweet

wink. “All I had to say was ‘Stay the hell out of my damn way!’ and they let me through.”

“How is that polite?!”

“I only borrowed it! And there happened to be one Divine Gate we can enter right now! Lucky, huh?” The mouth of the dragon-head statue was glowing—the sign that the gods were inviting people to play in the superior spiritual realm beyond. “I’m doing what you said this afternoon,” Leshea protested. “You told me that if we were going to be a team in the gods’ games, we’d better practice. You know, understand each other and be in sync and all that stuff.”

“Yeah...”

“And that gave me an idea! Why not practice on the real thing?”

“That isn’t really prac—”

“I just can’t wait any longer!” The vermilion-haired girl held out her hand, her cheeks flushed with excitement. Her smile was enough to make Fay’s breath catch momentarily.

“I’ve just been waiting so long for a human like you!” Leshea said.

Then she took his hand and jumped into the statue’s shining maw.

Player.2

Vs. Titan, the Giant God —Divinitag—

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods on high summoned humans to play in their games, the rules of which had been set ever since the days of the ancient magical civilization. They were thus:

The Seven Rules of the Gods' Games

Rule 1: Humans granted an Arise by the gods become apostles.

Rule 2: Those with an Arise will receive either a Superhuman or a Magical power.

Rule 3: The gods' games take place within Elements, the superior spiritual realm.

Rule 4: Arise powers may be used only within Elements.

Rule 5: However, as a reward for obtaining victory in the gods' games, a partial measure of an Arise power may be manifested within the real world. Further victories will unlock greater expressions of the ability.

Rule 6: Apostles who lose three games in total are disqualified from further participation.

Rule 7: Ten victories against the gods will be considered a game Clear.

Clear: Anyone who achieves ten victories against the gods will be granted a

Celebration.

The gods often acted impulsively. What kind of game apostles played had everything to do with the mood of the god who had invited them. Even if they found themselves playing a game they'd encountered before, the difficulty would be different each time. When the game started and how long it took depended on the god, too.

"Leshea? Hey, Leshea!" Fay called. He was on a path made of light, in a tunnel made of light, although one less than a dozen feet long. He gave a frustrated little sigh. Leshea wasn't there. She'd gotten so excited that she was already through the tunnel.

It's not too late to back out, Fay thought. Until you leave this path, you can still return to the physical, human world.

It appeared, though, that Leshea hadn't left him that choice. She was already waiting for him on the other side.

"She sure looks excited. Practically skipping..." Fay sighed again to hide the wry smile on his face. When you got right down to it, they were two of a kind. They both loved the gods' battles of wits. Just imagining what kind of contest might be waiting for them was enough to get them bubbly and excited.

"Fine. That's perfect!" Fay clenched his fist. He could feel his pulse starting to race. "Isn't this exactly why I came back?!"

Then he went running toward the waiting realm of the gods.

Elements: Phantom Ruin

Vs. Titan, the Sage of the Earth

Let the game begin.

2

Elements, the superior spiritual world, could take on any of a myriad of forms depending on its rulers, the gods. When Fay emerged from his dive through the Divine Gate, he discovered...

“Huh?”

...a very familiar city—the Sacrament City of Ruin. He’d walked the same streets on his way to the Arcane Court that morning.

“I thought we were supposed to be in Elements,” he muttered.

“Fay! Over here!” called a voice from across an open plaza. It was Leshea, waving to him, her vermilion hair fluttering in the wind. “I can’t wait! What kind of game do you think we’re going to play?!”

“No idea,” Fay answered. “You’re the former god. Any chance you know the deity around here?”

“Nope,” Leshea said, shaking her head. “Humans think of ‘the gods’ as if we were all one thing, but that’s not true at all. It’s like how cats and whales are both animals, but that’s about all they have in common.”

“So you’re not, like, friends with this god or something.”

“That’s right. And I doubt it knows who I am, either.”

Leshea made this all sound as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, but to a human like Fay, none of it was obvious at all. He’d never had a chance to interview a god about their peers. He was sure the researchers from the Arcane Court would have given their right arms to listen in on them.

I guess no one really interviewed Leshea over this past year. Probably too frightened. I wonder if that made her a little...lonely.

Leshea’s eyes were already sparkling, and the game hadn’t even started yet.

“Okay, Leshea, so we’re definitely in Elements, right?” Fay asked. He looked around at the scads of buildings. It was twilight, the sun glinting off the silver

skyscrapers. The whole place was a perfect recreation of the city Fay had walked through that morning, right down to the subtle discolorations on the stoplights.

“But why would a god live in a human city?” he asked.

“Hmm... I can’t really guess what other gods might be thinking. Look over there—there’s a group of other humans. Let’s go ask them.” Leshea pointed to the center of the plaza, where sixteen people had gathered. A team, presumably. When the apostles, dressed in their ceremonial outfits, noticed Fay, they suddenly all turned toward him, and a collective murmur broke out.

“Is that him?”

“Fay?! What’s he doing here?”

It was understandable why they might be surprised—the most celebrated rookie of last year was suddenly with them in the game.

“Fay? What are you doing here? I thought you were on sabbatical!”

“Oh, hey, Asta. Sorry for not staying in touch. I actually just got back this afternoon.” Fay bowed politely to the other apostle. He knew her—Asta Canarial. She’d come in three cohorts before him—a long-haired woman who’d just turned twenty. They’d found themselves together in the gods’ games twice before.

“You just got back, and you’re already in here? What about retraining? Even you must have lost your edge at least a little bit after all that time away.”

“Yeah, that was my plan, to try and get back up to speed and stuff, but I sort of got dragged in here...”

“Let’s have a good game, kids!” Leshea said, popping out from behind Fay.

The other apostles gave a collective cry and backed away.

“The Dragon God?!” someone moaned.

“L-Lady Leoleshea! Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?!”

“Being part of the game. Don’t worry. I’m on your side.”

That was when they heard it.

“Hello and welcome! Yes, welcome to my god’s Elements!”

Directly over Leshea’s head, a small, light-green creature descended, flapping a pair of gossamer wings.

“I, the venerable presence you see before you, am the meep of this territory, wherein lives my master, the god Titan. I have no name; you may refer to me simply as Meep.”

The gods did not speak. Instead, proxy spirits called meeps informed players of the game rules on their behalf.

“The moment has come—no further participants in the game will be admitted. Ahem! So we have a total of eighteen partici— Hm? You there, your hair is a very unique color.” Meep came to rest on Leshea’s shoulder. Perhaps they shouldn’t have been surprised that the servant of a god would sniff Leshea out from a crowd of humans almost immediately. *“Who are you, exactly?”*

“I’m a former god. I can still play, right?”

“Certainly. We welcome all players! All right, thank you for your patience, and welcome to my god Titan’s game!”

“Yeah, yeah. We know it’s a battle game.” The apostle captain took out a small electronic device—an intranet application known as Biblio, or the *Encyclopedia of the Divine*. It was a data file containing all the information the Arcane Court possessed on the games humans all over the world had played with the gods. *“Every past encounter with the Giant God Titan has been a battle game. The eighteen of us just have to bring down Titan to win. Am I right?”*

Battle games were a relatively common form of competition in the gods’ games. They were, in a word, a free-for-all, a slugging match between the humans and the deity in question. Even with their Arise powers, the apostles were still hopelessly outmatched by the gods, so often these games had specific stipulations about how the humans could claim victory, such as by bringing the god to its knees or by flipping it on its back or something.

“The Giant God, Titan... Let’s see... You’re right, Captain, here it is!” said a female apostle, consulting Biblio. *“R-Right, this is it! Titan has been encountered twenty-three times globally in the last thirty years. Win percentage is...with a*

party our size, it's calculated at fourteen percent."

The average human win percentage in these games was around 3 percent, so in terms of both the type of game and the chances of victory, Titan was a plum draw.

"This is great news, Captain. We're going to be in a battle, and we've got the Dragon God Leoleshea on our side! We'll have a literal god fighting for us!"

"No, no," Meep said before the young woman could go any further. *"My master claims to be sick of battle games."*

"What...?"

"If I may finish what I was saying..." Meep began.

"The name of the game is Divinitag!"

The eighteen people in the square fell silent. *What's that?* they seemed to be wondering. Fay and Leshea were as perplexed as the rest—they'd never heard of any such game as Divinitag.

"Welp, have fun!"

"Huh?! H-Hey, hold on! Titan *always* does battle games..."

"Not anymore. My master wants to try something different."

"What the hell?!" The captain, standing there holding his Biblio, paled. What a moment for Titan to act on a whim that turned a hundred years of the Arcane Court's records and calculations on their head.

"Any other questions?" Meep asked.

"I have one," Fay replied. He pointed to the area around them, the Ruin cityscape. There wasn't so much as a wad of trash littering the streets, but the buildings were there, lined up in neat rows. "Can we essentially treat this as a game of tag?"

I think I see it, Fay thought. *We're supposed to run down the street, using the buildings as obstacles.* That was the point of recreating a human city here in the superior spiritual world.

"We have to flee from Titan, within the zone defined by the buildings. That's

why it's not just tag but Divinitag. Right?"

"You've hit the nail on the head!" Meep pointed to the horizon where a curtain of blue light formed a barrier. *"The play area for this game is limited—you can't go beyond that light. The light forms a square field you'll need to stay within while running from Titan."*

"All right. I think I get it," Fay said. But that was only the beginning. The rule he really wanted to understand came next. "So if this is a take on tag, do we lose if we all get caught?"

Meep didn't say anything immediately, only grinning. The proxy spirit waited until every eye was looking at it, then laughed uproariously. *"That certainly is one of the lose conditions!"*

The human responses to this fell into two groups. Most of the apostles' eyes went wide—but Fay and Leshea both immediately lapsed into thought.

"Hmm. I think I see," Leshea said. Surprisingly, there was a smile on her face. "That means there's another way to lose besides everyone being defeated. It must be possible to lose even if Titan doesn't catch all of us. Any ideas, Fay?"

"I've got nothing," Fay said earnestly, shaking his head. It seemed like Divinitag was basically just regular tag—everyone had to run away and not let Titan catch them. *This thing about the lose conditions bothers me, though. Is there a way to lose without being caught in tag? Does that ever happen?*

So you could be defeated even if you fled successfully. Turn that fact around, and...

"It means our win conditions aren't as simple as they sound, either," Fay said. He looked up at Meep, who was floating in midair. "So we have to escape Titan to win—but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

Meep nodded. *"Yes. Forgive me for repeating myself, but while it's true that running is going to be key to prevailing in Divinitag, you can still lose even if you successfully avoid Titan."* Then the spirit added, *"As my master Titan is merciful, however, I am told that once the game begins, you're to be given a 300-second head start. I suggest you use it to run as far away as—hm?"*

There was an earthshaking boom, followed by several giant, stomping

footsteps.

Meep turned. *“What? But I’m still in the middle of explaining...”*

From between the twenty-story buildings in the direction Meep was looking, they could see a massive, lava-colored creature emerging—the Giant God Titan. It was the first time Fay had ever seen this deity in person.

“I guess Lord Titan just couldn’t wait! Okay, no head start, then. Let the game begin!”

“Oh nooooo!” cried the apostles—including Fay and Leshea. An instant later, Titan raised a tremendous arm and smashed one of the steel skyscrapers into dust.

And that was the signal.

Vs. The Giant God Titan

Game: Divinitag

Win Condition(s): ????

Lose Condition 1: All players are tagged by Titan

Lose Condition 2: ???? (Players may still lose even if they escape)

The game was on.

With the force of Titan’s blow, the walls of the building were transformed into thousands, or maybe tens of thousands, of steel bullets that came raining down.

“Eek!” one of the apostles shouted.

“Take cover! Hurry, or we’ll be crushed by the debris!” another yelled. The shouting and shrieking echoed around the city.

The first to act were the apostles with Superhuman Arises. With speed and strength far beyond that of an ordinary human, they kicked aside the incoming chunks of steel.

Then it was time for the apostles with Magical Arises.

“Konoha! Kyrgis! Set up a magical barrier!”

“R-Right!” Konoha answered.

“Activating now!” Kyrgis added.

One of them was a wind mage, the other a gravity mage; one female and one male; and Fay judged them both to be about his age. They thrust their hands out toward the sky. There was a *boom* of tearing air, a gale-force wind smashing the incoming debris to pieces.

That was the power of an Arise, strength that was crucial if one intended to square off against the gods. With enough Arises in one place, it was more than possible even to take on the gods in a battle game.

Fay was the only exception here—and not in a good way.

“Oh crap!” He tried to dodge out of the way as quickly as he could, cold sweat running down his back. His Arise wasn’t made for inflicting violence. He didn’t have the enhanced physical capacities of most Superhuman Arises, nor a mage’s ability to stop the incoming projectiles in their tracks.

“You have to get out of here, Leshea!” Fay cried. “It’s too dangerous to—”

“What’s dangerous?” Leshea asked. The vermilion-haired girl turned calmly, lashing out with an almost careless backfist that smashed a chunk of debris to smithereens. Fay could feel the shock wave tickle his skin.

“Uh... Nothing. Never mind.” He watched the chunks of rubble scatter along the ground, feeling a bit petrified himself. Leshea hadn’t only smashed the steel—the debris looked as if it had melted, like chocolate in the sun. All simply at the touch of her fist.

A former god, huh? Wow! She said something about being the incarnation of fire. I guess she wasn’t kidding.

Just as pressingly, Fay had no doubt Leshea could do the same thing in the real world. His stomach flipped over as he realized what Chief Secretary Miranda had meant about not making her angry.

The destructive former deity in question, though, was grinning from ear to ear. She looked at Fay. “Hm?”

“That grin is really unsettling. What’s the story?”

“I just thought you can be surprisingly cute. You act so cool most of the time, but now I know you have it in you to panic once in a while. And maybe it was me, but you seemed *worried* about me for a second. You thought that debris was going to hit me, didn’t you? *Didn’t you?*” She pushed her face right up toward his.

Fay wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but he knew he felt a little embarrassed. “I didn’t have to worry—I get that now. Anyway, let’s get out of here. We’ll start with the premise that this is basically a game of tag.” He set off running out of the open space and toward the buildings. If this was tag, he wanted to be as far away from “it”—Titan—as he could get.

They could see the sixteen other apostles running ahead of them. “Looks like everyone else is doing okay still,” he said. It wouldn’t have been surprising if at least one of the others had been knocked out by that smashed building, but it looked like everyone was in one piece. Nice work.

I guess that was just Titan’s go signal, though. This is where it gets serious...

Fay glanced back. As if on cue, the apostle at the end of the line ahead shouted, “Captain! Titan is on the move!”

Another building smashed. From amidst the smoke and dust emerged the gigantic, rock-like god, who stood nearly as tall as the nearby skyscrapers. Titan watched the humans on the ground, studying them closely with dully glowing eyes.

Then the god was running, making a beeline directly toward them, each footstep producing a shock wave like a bomb blast, the asphalt crying out and cracking beneath the steps.

“D-Damn, that thing is fast!” someone shouted.

“We can’t keep this up, Captain. Even with Superhuman speed, we’ll never win a foot race with Titan! Maybe if we had a mage with flight powers... N-No, even that wouldn’t be enough!”

“Don’t forget we’re in the middle of a city!” The captain pointed at the main thoroughfare. “Everyone, scatter! Split up and hide behind the buildings. We

must look like ants to that thing—so let's do like ants and hide in the grass."

"Right!" The apostles ran in all directions, making for different buildings. Fay and Leshea followed suit, ducking into the shadow of one of the skyscrapers with four other apostles. One of them was Fay's older colleague, Asta, who pressed herself against the side of the building.

"Huff...huff... Tag, with a monster like that?" she gasped. "I don't think a mage like me is going to have much to do here!"

Asta had a Magical Arise. Unlike with Superhuman blessings, she had the physical capacities of an ordinary person—just running this far was already a challenge.

"They might call this a game of tag, but for us, it's a lot more like hide-and-seek, don't you think?" a male apostle said, peeking out from behind the building at the main road. Fay didn't recognize the guy, but suspected he possessed a Superhuman Arise, given that Titan had chased them all this way and he wasn't even breathing hard.

"Even a Superhuman like me couldn't take that god in a straight fight," the apostle continued. "Titan's just too big. Hiding here was the right choice. Think we should go inside?"

"Y-Yeah, that's a great plan, Vice Captain! Titan might not notice us if we use the back door."

"Bad idea, Asta," Fay said. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Wha?" Asta, about to dash for the door, stopped and looked at Fay, the golden hair she was so proud of whipping in the wind. "Wh-Why not, Fay?"

"We can't go inside the building. It's more than a little dangerous, for one thing."

They heard another footstep, *thoom!* Titan seemed to have slowed down to a walking pace, but it was still getting closer. Fay couldn't see the god, but suspected it wasn't far away.

"Our opponent has a general idea of where we went," Fay said.

"That's why we have to get inside! Okay, so...so Titan can smash a building to

pieces if it wants to, but if we just keep running, we're going to get caught eventually!"

If Titan found them, they would be captured—that is, they would lose. So why not grab the one thin ray of hope and duck inside a building, then pray that building didn't get demolished? In a normal game of tag, it might have been a reasonable choice.

"I still don't agree. One thing we can guarantee is that we won't win that way."

"Why not?!"

"Because—watch out, Asta! Run this way!"

"Huh? What's gotten into you?" Asta was just standing there—totally oblivious to the fact that behind her, the Giant God's face was looming over the building, looking down at them.

How'd Titan find us so fast?! Our voices? Our scents? Maybe both?

There was no time for self-recrimination, though.

"Asta, run toward me! Don't look back!" the Vice Captain shouted.

"What? What's the matter, Vice Captain?"

Don't look back. Was there anyone in the world who wouldn't look behind them when you said that? Asta reflexively turned around—and screamed. "Ah—Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Titan stepped on her, a gigantic foot squashing the golden-haired apostle with less fanfare than if she were an insect.

"Asta?!" The other apostles paled. Their friend had been crushed under a body that must have weighed thousands and thousands of tons. That was instant death if anything was.

In the gods' games, being rendered unable to act was equivalent to being "out." Injuries sustained in the superior spiritual realm didn't carry over to the real world—they knew Asta was already gone from under Titan's foot. She'd been sent back to the real world, out of the game.

At least, that's what they thought until they saw the supposedly flattened Asta rise from the cracked pavement unharmed.

"Huh? Why am I—?" she said. She should have disappeared out from under Titan's heel, but instead, there she was, looking like she couldn't believe it herself.

"Asta... You're alive?" Fay asked.

"Y-Yeah, it looks like it. I'm sure I should have been—oh! Oh no!"

That was when things got weird. The upper half of Asta's body suddenly appeared to be dyed the searing color of lava, as if she had been drenched in paint. It was the same color as the god Titan.

"Asta?!" Fay cried.

"F-Fay, what's going on?! Something's happening to my body! Wh-What? My magic—it's just—!" Asta, with her orange torso, thrust out her hands.

Oh no.

Tempest!

Fay just managed to dodge Asta's wind assault, the gale blasting past inches away from him and slamming into the apostles who were still standing there. They were thrown against the side of the nearby building, hard.

"Hrgh! A-Asta, have you gone insane?!" the Vice Captain managed.

"N-No, Vice Captain, I swear! My body's moving on its own!" Asta was screaming. She still had a mind of her own—but her body wouldn't listen to her, and her magic was out of her control.

"So *Divinitag* was more than just a name." Fay looked up at Titan, who loomed triumphantly over them, and gritted his teeth. "A hidden rule. Of course. There would have to be at least one. This is about matching wits with the gods, after all!"

When you got caught in tag, that made you "it." But what if there was more than one "it"? What if the people Titan tagged in this game became the god's servants?

Hidden rule number one: players who are tagged by Titan become Titan's agents and attack the other players, Fay realized. In the board game Shogi, pieces you captured could be deployed on your side. This was no different.

"You probably already know, Leshea—in the gods' games, the chances of the humans winning normally go up the more people there are."

"But it looks like it's a liability this time, huh?" Leshea said with a shrug.

In Divinitag, tagged apostles didn't go out; they became enemies instead. That would create a geometric progression in Titan's fighting strength that would turn the humans' numbers spectacularly against them.

"V—Vice Captain! Run away! Please!" Asta cried.

"You're the one flinging wind magic at me—yikes! Shit!"

Asta, now under Titan's control, let loose another gale. The force of the wind sent the Vice Captain tumbling backward, where he couldn't avoid the god's descending heel. *Smoosh*. Just like that, the Vice Captain began to turn the same color as Titan, just like Asta had. But that wasn't all.

"Wha?" Leshea said, her eyes widening as two more apostles started shouting. It hadn't stopped with the Vice Captain—the two apostles standing near him, a young man and a young woman, turned lava-colored as well.

"N... No...," the young man moaned.

"But why? Titan didn't even touch us!" the young woman said.

Titan had only made physical contact with Asta and the Vice Captain. Yet two apostles next to the Vice Captain had been tagged, too, like a curse jumping from one person to the next.

What's going on here?! They didn't touch Titan or even the Vice Captain!

So maybe it had to do with the definition of *touch*? Perhaps the god didn't have to make direct contact with you; maybe just being in the vicinity was enough. But if that was the case...

"Fay, I think we might be in trouble," Leshea said.

"Yeah. Keep your distance, Leshea. In fact, let's get some more of it!"

The four apostles now under Titan's control—Asta and the Vice Captain, along with the two others—chased them as they raced among the buildings.

"So I guess this means four people on the god's side," Fay said.

"Five, if you count Titan, too. That makes it a fourteen-on-five contest," Leshea replied.

From eighteen humans versus one god to fourteen against five. And they'd barely gotten started. The tide was turning so fast that it looked like the apostles might all be eliminated within an hour.

It's rough that Asta was the first to get tagged, too—her magic was perfect for slowing Titan down.

The more powerful an apostle was, the more dangerous an enemy they became when tagged. And Asta, with her wind magic, was among the most threatening people here.

Titan looked soundlessly down at the ground. For a moment, the deity watched Fay and Leshea, but then it suddenly turned and stared off into the distance.

"Is it changing directions? Found a new target?" Leshea asked.

"Saving us for later—that's my guess," Fay said. Titan must have realized that Leshea, the former god, was nothing like the other players. "If it can take out everyone else first, then it'll be two versus seventeen on the god's side. Titan plans to assemble an overwhelming force, and then let its goons do the dirty work."

"Who's a goon?!" cried Asta, who was already on the god's side. Her torso might have been the color of lava, and her actions beyond her control, but it seemed her mind was still free.

"I mean, aren't you? I can't help noticing the lower half of your body hasn't changed color. It just looks *off*."

"Oh, be quiet! How can you banter at a time like this, Fay? I'm telling you, you have to run away! Even if my body will chase you..."

"Don't worry, we're gonna run."

Fay darted out from the shadow of the building, heading directly east across town—the exact opposite direction from Titan. The god must have found some other apostles, because Fay could hear its footsteps crashing away, smashing buildings as it went.

“Has that thing never heard of overkill? It’s crushing those buildings like pick-up sticks!”

“Fay, I think things might be worse for us than we realized...,” Leshea, running along beside him, said. She turned and looked back down the sidewalk. “Doesn’t that human seem...weirdly fast to you?”

“Yeah, Asta doesn’t normally move that quick. Must be a side benefit of being under Titan’s control.”

Fay was running as fast as he could, yet he wasn’t dropping Asta—who didn’t look like she was even breathing hard. Maybe she had infinite stamina now.

“Shoot. At this rate, we’ll run out of breath before she does,” he said.

“Fay, listen—I’ve got a great idea. A trick to help us crack this game.”

Fay glanced at her as if to say, *What is it?*

Leshea pointed back at Asta. “I annihilate that human. I burn her to ashes so that her body doesn’t even exist anymore, and then she’ll have to be out! That means fewer people on the god’s side!”

“Yikes! You scare me.” It was true Fay would never have come up with that tactic—it was literally inhuman. He did believe that if Leshea really wanted to, she could reduce the apostle to cinders, even with Titan’s blessing upon Asta. But there was still a problem. “I like that you’re trying to come up with fresh approaches, but we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Partly because I’d feel bad for Asta, but mostly because it’s not fair.”

Leshea looked perplexed. Fay pointed straight down the main avenue. “It’s always more fun to play a game the way it was meant to be played. If we’re going to do this, I’d like to do it right—as a battle of wits with the god.”

“Oho?”

“What?”

“Just thinking that’s a very *Fay* answer. Okay, then. Let’s do it!” Leshea sped off—so fast that she was soon way ahead of Fay. “C’mon, Fay, this way!”

“Hey, you’re too fast for me... Oh, hey, Leshea? What about Asta?” She was the only one of the Titan-controlled apostles around; the others were nowhere to be seen. “Titan is controlling her, but that’s within the rules of Divinitag. In other words, she isn’t out yet. Sound right?”

“I think so. Since we gods usually pitch anyone who’s out straight back to the human realm.”

“All right. In that case...” Even as Fay ran, a possibility began to present itself to him. “I think there’s another hidden rule to this game.”

They ducked behind some kind of commercial building. Fay signaled to Leshea with his eyes, then slipped among the shadows of the structure, trying not to breathe. Asta came flying after them. “Huh?” She looked around, unable to find them. The humans she’d been chasing until a moment ago were suddenly gone in this trash dump.

“Sorry, Asta, you’re gonna have to take one for the team! Here goes!” Fay suddenly appeared from the shadows and flung a trash can at her.

“Heek?!” His aim was true; the can landed over Asta’s head, effectively blindfolding her.

“I told you you didn’t look very balanced. If you’re going to turn the same color as Titan, why only the top half of you?”

“F-Fay, stop—what are you talking about?”

“Leshea?”

“Yep. One touch, coming up.”

“Eeeek!” Asta cried, leaping into the air. You couldn’t blame her—while the trash can still blinded her, Leshea had grabbed her bottom. It would be surprising.

“Now just a second, Fay! You can’t go throwing trash cans over people’s heads all of a sudden...”

“There, Asta. Now you’re back on the human side.”

“Huh?” Asta finally managed to get the can off her head, to discover the lava color receding from her torso as quickly as it had come. “Wha? What? I... I can move again...”

“You were on Titan’s side, but you weren’t out. Your legs hadn’t turned Titan’s color, see? I figured that meant there was probably a secret rule that said you could be brought back to the human side.”

“Oh! Huh! That makes sense!” Asta exclaimed.

Hidden rule number two: if you touched the “still human” part of one of Titan’s captures, they returned to the human side.

Tag, tag back. You had to be careful to distinguish between the person’s torso, which was Titan’s color, and their legs, which weren’t.

We couldn’t have tagged Asta’s torso. That would probably have caused us to be considered tagged, and we’d have become Titan’s players.

Humans couldn’t lay a hand on the god, but instead, they could bring people back to their side by touching the part of them that was still human.

“Anyway, we’ve got to alert the others to the hidden—” Fay was interrupted by the sound of Titan roaring from beyond a nearby building. “Well, that doesn’t sound good. Is it after us again?”

“Do you think Titan sounded happy just now?” Leshea asked, peering through the haze of vaporized skyscraper. So it hadn’t been just Fay’s imagination that the roar had sounded gleeful.

“Titan is saying it’s glad you figured out its game, Fay. Even the gods have more fun when we find humans who are worth competing with.”

“So that’s why it’s after us. Okay, Leshea, time to run.”

“F-Fay, wait! You’re not going to leave me behind, are you?!”

“You stay here and hide, Asta. Titan’s after us—if you’re with us, you only get yourself stepped on again.”

“Aye, sir,” Asta replied, and promptly made for a dark shadow of the building.

She would be safe for a while, Fay suspected. She didn't have a gigantic god coming after her. No, that was him and Leshea.

Titan's got the right idea going after us. It can't ignore us now that we know how to get people back on the human side. Titan could tag people and make them its servants, but as long as Fay and Leshea were there, they would just tag them back.

"From Titan's perspective, if it can tag us, that's almost a guaranteed victory. That's why it's coming at us at full speed."

"Faster, Fay! Titan's catching up!" Leshea said, glancing back.

Fay could barely gasp out an answer: "Believe me...I'm going as fast as I can..."

Fast or not, Fay was ultimately only human. He was never going to win a race with a god the size of a skyscraper.

"Considering Titan's speed, I wish we could go about 550 miles per hour," Leshea said.

"Faster than a jet fighter! Sure, why not?"

Leshea might have speed to spare, but not Fay. His Arise was simply this: he didn't die. It didn't give him any other physical enhancements. When it came to running, he was utterly ordinary.

They needed a plan, and they needed it now.

"Think weaving through the buildings would throw it off? You might be able to make it, Leshea, if you left me behind," Fay said.

"No point," Leshea responded, shaking her head. "Running away isn't enough to win the game. Meep told us, right? You can avoid getting tagged and still lose. Makes you wonder how that works, doesn't it? What do we have to do to win this?"

Yes—that was the great mystery at the heart of Divinitag, the one no one had solved yet: *What were the win conditions?*

Running away from Titan was the first thing. But what came after that?

"So figuring out how to win is part of the game, huh? If the goal was to take

down Titan, then this would be a simple battle game, so that's not it. Maybe we win if we keep away from it for a certain amount of time?" Fay suggested.

"It's possible, but we don't have any proof," Leshea said.

"Yeah, and there's nothing suggesting how long we have to keep running, either. Okay..."

Suddenly Fay noticed something: Leshea, jogging beside him, was grinning at him. Positively beaming. She looked very, very happy.

"Hee!" she giggled. "He-hee! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"What's so funny?"

"You're exactly what I expected." The former god made no effort to hide the smile on her face—in fact, she seemed to lean toward him as they went, as if to make sure he saw her expression. "We can genuinely talk to each other. You get what I'm trying to say, and more importantly than anything, you put your whole heart into playing. Even if it's only a game."

"Huh? I mean, sure I do. Look how thrilling this game is."

"That makes me really happy. Look, I'm a god myself, even if I'm a former one. It's just fantastic for me to see someone taking the gods' games so wholeheartedly."

Games existed to be enjoyed—if the humans had fun, that had to make the gods happy, too. That much was obvious from the tone of Leshea's voice.

"It stings to lose, though, so I'd rather win," Fay said.

"Well, sure!"

"We have to narrow down the possible victory conditions. We're gonna be in real trouble pretty soon."

He could practically feel the massive presence behind them. He didn't have to look back to know that the clattering he heard behind them was bits of pulverized glass and concrete from the buildings Titan was destroying.

For Titan, a few skyscrapers are hardly more than an obstacle course, Fay thought. Titan doesn't have to leap tall buildings in a single bound... It can just

knock them over.

The buildings did, at least, get in its way. It had to smash through them if it hoped to catch up with Fay and Leshea.

“That means that as long as we stay among the skyscrapers, we can at least buy ourselves a little time...” Fay said. “But Meep implied that there’s more than one way for the humans to lose the game, right?”

It was time to take stock. There seemed to be three win/lose conditions and two hidden rules in Divinitag.

Win Condition(s): ????

Lose Condition 1: All players are tagged

Lose Condition 2: ???? (Players may still lose even if they escape)

Hidden Rule 1: Players immobilized by Titan’s attacks become Titan’s servants

Hidden Rule 2: By touching one of Titan’s servants, they can be returned to the human side

Could there be more rules besides those? Of course. But if they hadn’t stumbled across them this far into the game, then it was probably safe to ignore them for now.

The real danger for us is Lose Condition 2. If there’s a way we can be defeated even if we escape getting tagged, then we absolutely can’t ignore it.

While Fay tried to concentrate, Leshea shouted: “Fay! Get down!” She spun like a top, one long leg whipping out and kicking away a piece of debris flying straight for Fay’s head.

“Thanks, Leshea. I guess Titan’s not going to give us time to think!” It was like a sniper attack; it had come from more than three hundred feet away. And it was more than just dumb chance—Titan had clearly thrown the debris hoping to hit Fay and Leshea. “Titan is nobody’s fool...” Fay felt a bead of cold sweat; he could hear his heart pounding in his ears as he spoke. Pounding with shock. “I was sure we had a little longer till it caught us—I underestimated it, and it used

that against me to try a long-range attack. Man... These gods are really something.”

Titan was so much more than just a big, violent lummoX. It was as clever as it was powerful. Intelligence and strength combined: certainly, a being worthy of godhood.

“Which way next?” Leshea asked.

“Let’s hang a right here... No, wait, it’s the next block up. Too many streets that all look the same...”

The Sacrament City of Ruin was laid out in a grid, with streets running north-south and east-west at regular intervals. Even the buildings were positioned at roughly the same spots on each road. It made the place seem nice but similar everywhere you looked, which left Fay confused about precisely where he was.

“I haven’t been here in six months, myself. I feel like I’m getting lost. Uh... I think it’s this way!” They darted behind another building, hoping that if they stuck to the shadows, Titan wouldn’t be able to find them.

I’ve got to think! How do we win this game? We know Titan is highly intelligent, so the rules should be polished.

They’d probably been given hints, too. Likely, they’d already encountered them.

“I’m almost sure there must have been hints along the way here,” Fay said. “If we haven’t spotted them, that’s on us.”

He didn’t have long to think. It would only be moments before Titan knocked over another building and was after them again.

Then he heard footsteps—someone wearing shoes. Fay could tell someone was running across the asphalt toward them.

“I don’t get it. There can’t be that many of them, right?” He stopped, his heart racing. He paused in front of a dual-tower-type building for several seconds—and a crowd of apostles came bolting around the corner. “You’re kidding...” Fay groaned. They were all Titan’s servants, their torsos lava-colored.

There were fifteen of them.

Way too many. Fay wore a troubled smile, and even Leshea couldn't resist a half-grin.

I don't see Asta—she must still be hiding. Otherwise, that looks like everyone.

Now it was three humans versus sixteen (counting Titan) on the god's side. While Titan had been chasing Fay and Leshea, the Vice Captain and the other tagged apostles had been off capturing everybody else.

"Think you can bust right past them, Leshea?"

"Can I incinerate those people?"

"Forget I asked."

Injuries sustained in this realm didn't follow you back to the real world. If Leshea annihilated the fifteen apostles, they would merely be dumped out of the spiritual realm. But what had stopped Fay in his tracks was the notion that the second loss condition was forcibly removing a player under Titan's control. He couldn't discard the possibility.

If an apostle deliberately took out another apostle—basically, player-killing—that would be against the spirit of this game. Deserving of divine punishment. There was every chance that it was a trap, waiting to be sprung.

Behind them was the Giant God Titan. In front of them were fifteen of Titan's servants.

"Sorry..." the captain said, his teeth gritted, clearly speaking on behalf of them all. "Titan got us all..."

"Sure... I mean, I can see that."

"But you can't give up! The two of you can still escape—you have to!"

"You could just let us go."

"My legs are moving on their own!"

The apostles charged at them. Fay and Leshea weren't going to break past fifteen people at once.

"This way!" Fay signaled to Leshea with his eyes, and they were off and running, heading for the first-floor display hall of a department store. "Perfect.

It's all here, just like I'd hoped," Fay said. He'd gotten the idea when he'd seen that all the lights were on—everything in the building functioned exactly the way it did in real life. The automatic doors really worked, and so did the alarms and security cameras.

"Looks like the elevator's down in the basement right now. No time to wait for it—better take the stairs."

"Fay, the humans have reached the hall already!" Leshea called.

"Emergency stairs, then!" He threw open the emergency exit door at the end of the hallway, and they ran up the spiraling staircase as fast as they could, heading for the third floor. The other apostles followed them onto the staircase, pursuing them by the sound of their footsteps. Until...

"A foot chase? How cliché," Leshea said, and then she stomped on the stairway landing as hard as she could. There was a distinct metallic *crack* as it gave way. The destructive force in the foot of the Dragon God smashed the support struts, sending the apostles on the staircase tumbling down. "That's only going to buy us twenty or thirty seconds at best," she said. "Any of those apostles who have Superhuman abilities are going to be able to jump right over that little gap."

"Yeah. Let's hurry!" Fay agreed.

They emerged from the stairwell and into the department store proper. At the moment, here on the third floor, they happened to be in a corner of the children's clothing department.

"So this is where the hidden rule about becoming the god's servant comes in. Titan can't get into a building with its size, but fellow humans can still chase us down. And then there's—"

Boom. A tremendous shock wave ran through the building. Titan had to be close—and when it arrived, it would reduce the department store to a pile of rubble in a single swing.

We've got our backs to the wall. We have to get out of here, or we'll be blown away along with the whole building!

Getting out was easier said than done, though—a stairwell full of apostles

would be trying to prevent their escape. They were completely cut off inside the building.

“Fay, isn’t there another emergency stairwell somewhere else on this level?” Leshea asked.

“That’s one idea. Otherwise, maybe we could break through the glass and jump down...”

They still had ways of getting away. But that wasn’t enough. They could keep running from Titan, but they still wouldn’t know how to claim victory, and eventually, the god would have them cornered.

“Darn it! As if it wasn’t bad enough with everyone chasing us, we still don’t even know the rules of this game!” Fay exclaimed.

“Yeah, I wish we had more people on our side. Asta’s the only one, and she’s hidden in a building way far away.” Leshea shrugged and gave a little smile. She took a strand of vermillion hair that had caught on her cheek and twirled it around her finger. “For all intents and purposes, everyone’s been wiped out except us. They’ve all flipped over to Titan’s side now.” She sighed.

Fay turned to Leshea, and for a very long moment, it almost felt like he wasn’t breathing. Then he said, “That’s it!”

“Fay? What’s it?”

“You’ve got it, Leshea! They’ve all *flipped*!”

When Titan tagged an apostle, half their body turned the same color as the deity’s.

It all made sense.

The god had layered tricks upon tricks. However, those deceptions also contained the hint Fay needed to achieve victory.

“I knew it. I knew we were missing something, Leshea!”

“Eep!” she cried as he grabbed her shoulders. Her face flushed for a second, but Fay didn’t notice. His head was too full of the possibilities.

“We thought Divinitag was basically a combination of tag and hide-and-seek,”

he said.

“Yeah. So?”

“That was our biggest misconception.”

Titan hadn’t said a word about the game being tag. “But if it was a combination of tag, hide-and-seek, *and another game*, it would explain why there are two lose conditions!”

There was only one way to win, but there were two ways to fail. The rules seemed complicated, but it was all perfectly logical.

“Leshea, give me your ear,” Fay said.

“Y-You mean like this?” she asked, putting her ear close to his mouth. She moved awkwardly, unaccustomed to this sort of thing. And then suddenly she burst out: “Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“What’s going on?” Fay asked.

“Your...your breath! It tickles!”

“You make it sound so...naughty! Well, anyway, I’m just as glad you’re taking it easy around me. It really inspires confidence.”

“It’s all right. Just leave it to me.” Leshea clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s split up. I only need to draw off the humans downstairs, right?”

“Yeah. Exactly half each. Then we both do our own thing.”

“I’ll be outside,” Leshea said.

“And I’ll be *up*,” Fay responded.

They nodded at each other, and then they were off like shots.

Leshea smashed through the window glass, leaping outside. There were fifteen apostles following them—and just as Fay had expected, half of them went after Leshea, following her outside the building.

“Please, just be in time...!” Fay mumbled. He didn’t have a spare second to watch Leshea go. He had to make his way to the other emergency stairwell on the far side of the floor. The entire time, Titan’s footsteps continued to shake the department store, closer than ever before. “And that’s not to mention the

other half of the apostles. They must be trying to follow me...”

He dashed up the stairwell. The sound of crumbling buildings met his ears—Titan was destroying the structures around them.

It must be assuming that I'll try to follow Leshea out of here, and it's trying to deprive us of anywhere to go. It's perfect.

Titan would smash all the buildings in the area, ending with this department store—checkmate. It was a brilliant strategy, the same thing Fay would have done in Titan's place, and an almost painfully perfect play.

“I'm begging! Please let us make it in time! Leshea—and me!” One more play. One more move. It would be enough. “Here we are!” Fay cried.

He kicked open a heavy door and ran out onto the roof, where the wind whipped at him. That would give him some time while the apostles worked their way up to him.

“Wha—?!” Any frail human hope Fay might have harbored was blown away when he saw the eye of the massive Titan waiting for him. Its head was almost level with the roof of the building, and it was watching him. A human and a god locked eyes.

“It was a trap, and I walked right into it!”

Titan had been waiting for him, using the other apostles to lure the last of them, Fay, up onto the roof. Titan would deal the final blow itself, ensuring the job was done right. Fay was alone on the roof, but it no longer mattered where Leshea was. Whatever she was doing, wherever she had run, the game was about to end.

Titan raised its fist, the fist of a god, up to the heavens, and smashed the department store into a zillion pieces. Fay, a mere human, was blown away like dust.

Under the rules of Divinitag, a human who could no longer act on his own initiative wasn't out, but became the god's servant.

Finally, the game was all over...

“Game over, on account of you smashing all the buildings. Right?” Fay said.

Titan gave a confused roar. The human it had blown away began to burn. Titan looked up in the sky, where bright, shining flames surrounded Fay's flesh, and the young man was reborn.

The gods had granted Fay a Superhuman Arise. It was called May Your God, representing the divine love he'd been gifted. It brought Fay back, allowing him to shrug off scratches, mortal wounds, ill will, curses, fate, and even the gods' own attacks. It was the ultimate in regeneration.



Thus, even by Divinitag's rules, he wasn't considered to be unable to act and didn't become Titan's servant. Titan hadn't realized that, and it played havoc with the deity's final calculations.

"Yow," Fay said. "You don't hold back with the smashing, do you? Nobody said I don't feel any pain..." He wiped away the blood that threatened to get into his eyes.

From so high in the sky that even Titan had to look up at him, Fay gazed down toward the surface. All the buildings in the Divinitag playing field lay in ruins.

"You think it doesn't matter if I come back, because it's still three of our people versus sixteen of yours, and that means you win, right? You've got it backward. *We're* the ones who fulfilled the victory conditions, Titan!"

"Hrar!"

Fay pointed down at Titan. "Time to compare answers. The other game that's been hidden under Divinitag this entire time is...

"...Othello!"

Divinitag—the name made you think of *tag* first and foremost, but the moniker itself was a trap, a mind game designed to lead unsuspecting humans astray. And the idea that you had to play hide-and-seek to avoid discovery was a falsehood, too.

The truth was something else again.

"The god chases, and the people run. People become the god's servants, and the other people try to save them. It's obvious: the god is moving first, and then the people move second," Fay said. Titan watched him but didn't make a sound. "Then there's the way the servants' torsos change color. In other words, they've been *flipped over* to a side of a different hue. That was the biggest hint of all."

One: each side took alternating turns.

Two: when a piece was flipped over to the opposing side, half of it showed the opponent's color.

By this point, it was pretty clear: this was describing the game of Reversi, popularly known as Othello.

“In other words, the first player—that’s you—is dark, and the second—that’s us—is light. The winner is determined by how many pieces each player has on the board at the end of the game. And the board...”

“...is this town, right?”

The massive god, Titan, peered at the ground. A young woman stood there, her vermilion hair streaming behind her.

“Your meep is awfully clever,” she said. “I never dreamed the hint would be right in the explanation. ‘A square field’!”

The arrangement of the city itself was another hint. The blocks, divided by evenly spaced streets, were like the spaces on a gigantic game board. That was why Titan had chosen to play here.

By turning that idea around, you understood. A game of Othello ended when the board was full, and you couldn’t play anymore. In Divinitag, the game concluded when you couldn’t play anymore because the board had been leveled.

“So the game’s over. Now the question is, who has more pieces on their side, right? Dark or light? The god or the humans?” Leshea said.

“Huff... Puff... Fay! How could you treat a senior apostle like this?” Asta came running up, her breath ragged.

Counting her, the light or human side had three pieces—nowhere near Titan’s sixteen. It had been desperate right up until the end of the game, however...

“We had one chance. One thin ray of hope for turning this all around: chaining.”

What if light could flip over a bunch of dark pieces all at once? The classic Othello upset. Divinitag included the same rule, even if it was expertly buried.

“N... No...”

“But why? Titan didn’t even touch us!”

When Titan had tagged Asta and the Vice Captain, two apostles nearby had flipped, too, as if a curse had spread to them. At the time, Fay had thought maybe there was an area of effect for the tag, but he’d reexamined that idea.

“If this is Othello, then that explains it. Asta used wind magic and pinned three apostles to the building, right? That wasn’t about keeping them from moving. *It was to line them up between her and Titan.*”

It formed a row: dark (Titan), light, light, light (humans), dark (Asta). That’s why when the Vice Captain was flipped, so the two subordinates went too.

“I just borrowed a page from your book,” Leshea said. “While Fay was busy distracting you.” *Pomphf*, she clapped Asta on the shoulder. “After I jumped out the window, I went running for this young lady’s hiding spot.”

“We split up. I just need to draw off the humans downstairs, right?”

“Yeah. Exactly half each.”

Seven apostles had chased after Leshea. They couldn’t have known that she wasn’t running away from them—she was running *toward* the hidden Asta to link up with her.

It had all been an ambush.

Asta had used her wind magic on the apostles following Leshea, slamming them against the building and forming another row:

Light (Asta), dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, light (Leshea).

Then they’d only had to tag one of the dark pieces, and the seven people sandwiched between Asta and Leshea all flipped over to the light, human side.

“I lured you here and trusted it would work,” Fay said.

There had been nine light pieces (breakdown: Leshea, plus eight apostles, including Asta). Then, at the very end, the human victory was sealed with Fay’s regeneration.

Ten light pieces (Fay, Leshea, and eight apostles including Asta).

Nine dark pieces (Titan, plus eight apostles).

“.....Out.....”

There it was. The god, who wasn’t supposed to be capable of human language, voiced a stumbling confession of defeat. As Fay began to fall from the sky toward the ground, Titan caught him in its gigantic hand and set him gently

beside Leshea.

The next thing Fay knew, Titan was gone, and its Elements had disappeared.

The game was over. Titan, it seemed, was pleased.

Vs. Titan, the Sage of the Earth—WIN

Game: Divinitag

Time Elapsed: 3 hours, 31 minutes

Win Condition(s): Have the most pieces at the end of the game (light versus dark)

Lose Condition 1: All players are tagged (because there will be no more light/human players to flip dark pieces)

Lose Condition 2: The dark/god side has more pieces than the light/human side at the end of the game

Hidden Rule 1: Players immobilized by Titan's attacks become Titan's servants

Hidden Rule 2: By touching one of Titan's servants, players can be returned to the human side

Hidden Rule 3: When rules 1 and 2 are fulfilled, opponent's pieces that are "sandwiched" will chain together

3

The day after the battle with Titan...

The Ruin branch office buzzed with activity starting first thing in the morning. After all, it had been a full thirty-five days since humanity had last claimed victory in one of the gods' games. Each of the eighteen apostles who had participated in the game gained a rank, and they would be able to use more of their Arise powers in the real world.

More than that, though, everyone was simply happy.

"It's *fun* to win a game! Any reward is second to that. You claimed victory in a battle of wits against a god. Every employee of the Arcane Court felt like they could have jumped for joy. Including me, naturally."

"You jumped for joy?"

"Well, you know, I have my position as chief secretary to consider. But anyway, let's shelve that for now."

Fay was in the chief secretary's office, the morning sunlight pouring through the windows. Miranda, dressed in a suit, gestured at the monitor behind her. "So much for the compliments. Now, down to business. Shall we discuss the breaking and entering into the Court's underground Dive Center, the intimidation of the apostles on guard duty, and the theft of a Divine Gate statue, of which there are only *five*?"

"Er..." Fay looked at the ceiling to escape Miranda's exasperated gaze. So—she'd summoned him bright and early for a dressing-down. "If you're talking about Leshea borrowing the statue, she did put it back after we were done."

"Yes, she did, but part of the statue was broken when she was hauling it out of there."

Fay couldn't say anything to that.

"For what it's going to cost to repair that statue, we could train and board fifty new apostles for a year. It's a lot."

“That wasn’t my fault—”

“*You* were supposed to be keeping an eye on her.”

“Yes, ma’am...” Fay said after a beat.

“You should have stopped her before any of this started. Am I wrong?”

“Check and mate, ma’am.”

Fay had no excuses. So what was he supposed to do about it? Did she want him to use his unkillable body as a subject for valuable human experiments until he’d paid them back? Maybe he should run away before she suggested it.

Instead, though, Miranda said, “All right, enough lecturing.” Her expression softened, and she removed her glasses. Fay only ever saw her without them when she was very, very pleased. “At least we got to see an exciting game for the first time in a long while. Maybe that’s enough.”

She turned on a monitor, which displayed an image of the gigantic Titan smashing a high-rise building as it closed in on Fay.

“Global viewership was through the roof yesterday. More than 70 percent in this city alone. The outdoor displays are still showing reruns of the stream.”

“It was really that big?”

“It was the game heard ’round the world. Look—you can see all the people in the square down there right through the window,” Miranda said.

The gods lived in a spiritual world that people couldn’t see—but when apostles were Diving in Elements, recording devices they brought with them also temporarily acquired spiritual power.

“Thanks to the equipment you apostles carry, me and those ordinary citizens can see what you get up to in Elements, and cheer you on while you’re fighting. That counts for a lot.”

When Diving, apostles always had miniature recording devices with them that broadcast their games in real time back to the mortal world. It was a form of global entertainment that also translated to scads of income for the Arcane Court.

“We’re raking it in thanks to you. That money helps support the training of new apostles and the exploration of the outside world.”

Take the Divine Gate, for example. The connection they allowed between the physical and spiritual realms couldn’t be replicated with current technology. The only thing humanity could do was explore the ruins left over from the ancient magical civilization and hope to dig this stuff up. But those excavations entailed going out into the wider, wilder world, where a gigantic creature like a Rex might attack you the moment you took one step outside the city. Powerful survey teams had to be assembled to have any hope of success. And that required money.

“That’s why we need all our friendly neighborhood apostles to do their best in the gods’ games. If we don’t take victory once in a while, humanity’s future starts to look awfully bleak.”

“The future of humanity? Isn’t that kind of, uh, a broad topic?” Fay said.

“Let’s talk about you, then,” Miranda said, replacing her glasses on her face. “How was it teaming up with our lady?”

“I’m not sure what you mean...”

“You two looked perfectly in sync. You were so together that no one would have imagined you were a completely impromptu team. Especially that part where you split up in the department store.”

Fay looked moderately stricken.

“Hm? What’s the matter?”

“Honestly... I was really startled, too. I couldn’t help thinking it was... incredible.”

No matter how difficult the coordination, no matter how complicated the thing Fay wanted to communicate, Leshea was with him. They didn’t even need to talk—a quick glance and they understood everything. It was amazing to think that there was someone he could communicate with so well.

“I’m not trying to dump on my old team or anything; they were great,” Fay said. “But it was like... Wow, I guess she really is a former god.”

“I’m not sure I quite agree,” Miranda replied.

“Huh?”

“I don’t think it’s because she’s a former god. I think it’s specifically because the team was you and Lady Leoleshea. Just personally.” Behind her glasses, Miranda smiled impishly. “Did you know that before you got here, Lady Leoleshea spent all her time playing by herself?”

“By herself?”

“She was too strong—there was no one who could play with her. Not cards, not Go, not roulette. Sometimes I would try, or one of the other apostles would take a shot. But she crushed us every time.”

“Ah...”

“That’s why you’re here, Fay.”

In one corner, a former god. In the other, an apostle who had won three of the gods’ games, one of the most highly rated rookies in recent memory. It was the perfect pairing. They were like puzzle pieces that had been searching for each other.

“I’m sure you’ll make a great team. And it’ll get you one step closer to conquering the gods’ games—and making your dream come true,” Miranda said.

“I’ll give it everything I’ve got,” Fay replied.

The chief secretary tossed him a golden master key. Fay grabbed it out of the air and said firmly, “That’s why I came back.”

The seventeenth floor of the Arcane Court building. One of the special advisor’s rooms up here had been turned into Leshea’s residence.

When I actually stop and think about it, we just met yesterday—even though it doesn’t feel like it at all, thanks to Titan’s game, Fay thought. He opened the door to find the shoes Leshea had been wearing yesterday tossed haphazardly on the floor in the entry hallway. “Leshea, are you here?”

“Hm? Hold on a second. I’ve just gotten to the good part,” she called from the

reception-cum-living-room. She was sitting on the sofa, wearing the same tank top as the day before, her eyes glued to a monitor. She was watching the game of Divinitag with Titan. “See right here? We ran into the department store, but I think we could have taken a left turn and gone into the cul-de-sac in the shopping district, and it would have been all right.”

“Doing a debrief?” Fay asked.

“Uh-huh. Thinking about what I’d do differently next time. Just imagining it is exciting, don’t you think?” The former dragon god gave him an innocent smile. She was so striking that Fay found himself staring at her without realizing it. But then she said, “Anyway, I’ll stop the playback.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve already watched it four times.”

“That many?!”

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve ever played in the gods’ games. I was too excited to sleep,” Leshea said, spinning toward him on the sofa. “But I’ll bet you were, too.” She pulled her feet up onto the couch and gave him a teasing look. “How about it? How’d it feel, finally taking on the gods again after so long?”

“It was really neat, sure. Got my heart pumping for the first time in a while,” Fay said. How could he not enjoy a battle of wits with the gods? The fact was, yesterday’s game had been more fulfilling than any of the three times he’d played before, because he’d been with someone who enjoyed the game as much as he did—no, probably even more.

It’s exactly how she was last night. Just look at how much she loves playing those games.

How could Fay not enjoy himself, too?

For a long moment, though, he didn’t say anything.

“What’s the matter?” Leshea asked.

“This is sort of a random question. There were all those other apostles yesterday...but you noticed not one of them was smiling, right? Haggard expressions all night.”

“Uh-huh.”

“To the apostles, the gods’ games aren’t *games*. They’re more like work. Sort of like how sports are to a professional athlete,” Fay said.

The apostles were like pop idols, heroes who challenged the gods. People cheered for them as they played, and an apostle walking down the street might well get asked for their autograph.

But only as long as they were on the job.

If you lost three games, you lost your status as an apostle and the right to play in the gods’ games. You wouldn’t be an idol anymore or anyone’s hero.

Every apostle felt the terrifying prospect of that loss.

“They *can’t* lose. Everyone works really hard, but there’s this huge pressure weighing on them. And the flipside of it is that when you lose, everyone wants to know who screwed up, whose fault it was. It can turn into some ugly arguments. That always made me a little uncomfortable.”

Fay didn’t want to be like that. The young woman who had taught him everything he knew about games had instilled in him the exact opposite belief.

“You and I have just one real rule, Fay—whether you win or lose, you want to be able to say, ‘Good game! Let’s play again!’”

It was okay to lose, wasn’t it? Sometimes someone made a mistake, or luck wasn’t with you. Wasn’t that just how games operated? That was what Fay had been taught.

“Getting to play against the gods is great! Having a mountain of such strong opponents gets my pulse racing just thinking about it,” he said. “But, well...I’m in the minority at the Arcane Court.”

Did they play against the gods to have fun, or to win? Fay had always believed that was the decisive difference between him and the other apostles.

Until he’d met Leshea.

“Still...” Suddenly his shoulders slackened, and he couldn’t suppress a little smile. “Yesterday was fun. With a certain somebody clowning around so much, it didn’t feel heavy at all.” The other apostles had probably been as tense as

ever, but Leshea had been by Fay's side the whole time, genuinely enjoying herself. It was almost blinding, how much fun she was having. "How's that for an answer?" he asked.

"Very satisfying." Leshea stretched her legs out again and looked at him. "Say, Fay. Do you have any...desires?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh! I guess I mean *wishes*. Like me—I wish I could go back to being a god. But you strike me as the type that doesn't ask for much."

"Sure, there's something I wish for," Fay said.

"Huh, really? Color me surprised." Leshea blinked. "What is it? Tell me, tell me!"

"It's not anything impressive..."

"Huh?! Wait... You want to wish for something *pervy*, don't you?!"

"Where'd you get that idea?!"

"Because every guy your age does! I read those magazines the secretary gave me; they said so!"

"It would be so weak to ask the gods for anything like that. Really, though, it's seriously nothing much... Um..." Fay couldn't quite bring himself to look at the Dragon God Leoleshea—the former god who happened to look and act exactly like the person he was searching for. After a moment he said, "I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"The person who always played games with me when I was a kid. I didn't know her name, so I just called her Sis all the time."

She'd taught him everything about games, and when he was young, he'd never been able to beat her no matter how many times they played together. Morning and evening he would challenge her, and she would always accept with a smile.

"*Let's play again sometime, Fay.*"

Then one day, she suddenly disappeared, leaving only a promise that she would see him again.

“I guess you could call her my mentor. I just want to see her and say thanks—I am who I am today because of her, no question.”

Even his first three wins in the gods’ games were thanks to her. They weren’t because Fay was a genius—he owed those victories to learning after failing against Sis thousands, probably tens of thousands, of times.

“If it’s true that you get a special reward when you conquer the gods’ games, then I have just one wish: I want to find the person I played all those games with so long ago.”

“Huh... That’s a pretty interesting wish, actually,” Leshea replied, her arms crossed in contemplation. “But, Fay? You don’t have any other clues about this person, do you? Other than that she likes games?”

“No... I didn’t know her name, and I only have a hazy memory of her face and voice. There’s only one thing I know for certain—” He broke off.

That she looked exactly like Leshea. The vermilion hair.

The words made it to his throat, but for some reason, he couldn’t say them.

“You really don’t remember? Well, that’s all right. You can just ask the gods to restore your memories, too.” Leshea jumped up from the sofa, the vermilion-haired girl fixing him with a beaming smile and reaching out a hand. “So I want to go back to being a god, and you want to find your friend. Let’s team up and make it happen!”

“Sounds great.” Fay reached out, too, and high-fived her.

“I promise I’ll play with all my strength—so we can clear those ten games,” he said.



Leshea

Hey, Miranda, listen to this!

Miranda

Nice to hear from you, Lady Leoleshea.
You're up two hours early—is it good news?



Leshea

I've decided to team up with that human of yours!

Miranda

That's excellent. If you're going to team up with
Fay, the two of you will need to be perfectly in
sync with each other.



Leshea

How do we manage that? Play more games?

Miranda

No. The key to communication is to foster everyday
intimacy with him. From now on, you'll sleep in the
same bed, bathe in the same tub, and—



Leshea

Got it! I'm on it!

Miranda

Hey, wait! That was a joke! A joke...
(I should've known she would take me seriously...)



Player.3

A Dropout Who Wants to Quit Games

Gods' Games We Play

1

It was the inky hour before dawn. There was a chill in the air, and a blanket of silence lay over the sleeping Sacrament City of Ruin. It was a moment of peace and tranquility everywhere...

Everywhere except in the chief secretary's room on the seventeenth floor.

"Guess what, Miranda? I've decided to team up with Fay!"

"That's excellent news. I'm sure you'll work hard on Clearing the gods' games."

"I'm gonna go Dive into another game right now!"

"No, you're not."

"What?! Why not?" the former god Leshea shouted. Her lovely face was framed by her fiery red hair. "Fay and I can win—I'm sure of it!"

"It's true, I don't doubt that you and Fay will form the most potent pairing our branch office has ever seen," Miranda said.

"Right! So I'm gonna—"

"No, you're not."

"What?! Why not?" Another yell.

What was the crucial third person, Fay, up to while the exchange between Leshea and the chief secretary unfolded? He was calmly sipping the herbal tea

Miranda had offered them and snacking on a cookie she'd put out with it.

"I'm glad you're enjoying the refreshments, Fay, but do you think you could help me explain this to Lady Leshea?" Miranda said.

"I did, all last night. I told her the two of us alone couldn't do it."

Fay and Leshea would form a team: that was all well and good, but two people couldn't participate in the gods' games by themselves.

"I told her it was just like in Titan's Divinitag—the gods' games are based on the idea of a god versus a bunch of humans. In a lot of cases, the two of us alone won't meet the minimum player count requirement. Right, Leshea?" Fay said.

"How many people do we need, then?" Leshea asked.

"...is the question she always comes back with," Fay went on. "And I hoped that, as chief secretary, you might have a more concrete number than I could offer. You're the one with all the data from the Arcane Court."

Which had brought them to this morning, when a very energetic and very invested Leshea had dragged Fay to the secretary's office for a chat almost before the break of dawn.

"I see. That's fair enough. I ask my apostles for hard data, and it's only right that I provide some of those numbers to you." Past the thin lenses of her glasses, Miranda's eyes suddenly smiled. "However, first I have a question for you, my dear Fay. Do you notice anything about my outfit?"

"It's a nightgown, ma'am."

"That's right! It's sleepwear." Miranda was wearing a very demure burgundy nightgown, and she could barely keep her eyes open as she spoke. "I was on the night shift, and I thought maybe I could finally get some rest. I was juuust heading off to the bedroom. Lack of sleep is a girl's worst enemy when it comes to skincare, you know."

"S-Sorry, ma'am..., " Fay apologized.

"The last subordinate of mine to make this mistake spent the next month sweeping the garden in the central courtyard. If I found even one leaf on the

ground, he had to do it all again.”

“I thought the punishment was supposed to fit the crime!”

“Disturbing a young lady’s rest is a very serious offense. I hope you’ll bear that in mind in the future.” The gown-clad secretary sighed and demonstratively swallowed her entire cup of coffee in one gulp. “Now, Lady Leshea, to your point. To date, the Arcane Court has never authorized the formation of a two-person team. Part of the problem is the participation issue Fay outlined, but to be blunt, it comes down to win percentage.”

“Grr,” the former god huffed.

“I suspect you have an idea what I mean. The gods’ games may be battles of wits, but the most effective strategy humanity has is strength in numbers.”

Humans only ever faced one god at a time in the gods’ games, but any number of humans could participate. For the gods, more humans meant a livelier challenge, and therefore more fun. Humanity could take advantage of that.

“The Arcane Court recommends teams be composed of ten people or more. In the last thirty years of data, teams with nine people or fewer have bested the gods less than four percent of the time. Contrastingly, ten people or more and the win ratio shoots up to nine percent. With twenty people, it’s eleven percent. The more people you have, the more likely you are to win,” Miranda explained.

Leshea didn’t respond.



“When you’re dealing with an opponent as powerful as a god, you *need* the numbers if you’re going to snatch victory,” Miranda added.

Leshea still didn’t answer, but puffed out her cheeks and pouted. Fay glanced at her and smiled a little. *I know that look—she doesn’t like it, but there’s nothing she can say back. If Leshea had a comeback, we definitely would have heard it by now...*

If someone was trying to foist some twisted logic on Leshea, she would definitely have smashed it with a counterargument—but she couldn’t do that here. Fay understood that Miranda was right, and Leshea had to know it, too.

“How many people *do* we need, then? Me and Fay and how many more?” Leshea twined a vermilion lock around one finger, which seemed to be her tell when she was thinking. She went on: “The actual number doesn’t matter to me that much. But if we’re just going to fill up the ranks with people who don’t love games, then I would rather it be just me and Fay. Is that bad?”

“No. I understand completely.” The chief secretary nodded. “As I said, the recommendation is ten people or more, but you don’t have to find them all at once. You can build up, start with a team of three or four, and find more companions as you go. Until you have enough people, I suggest you form alliances with other teams that need to supplement their numbers. Right, Fay?”

“I’m sorry?” Fay responded, startled to have the conversation turn to him so suddenly. “You need something from me?”

“I’m asking you to help Lady Leshea find some suitable apostles.”

“How is that my job?! I thought the point of this whole administrative structure was to find the right people.”

“I’m saying you should keep your eyes open. Those who come through our system are untrained beginners. We can only spot apostles who are objectively exceptional—something you can quantify on a report.”

In other words, they were critics. In pro sports, it wasn’t unusual for analysts and actual players to be deeply divided on whether a person was any good or not.

“And Lady Leshea, you’d trust someone Fay found for you over anyone we just happened to send, wouldn’t you?” Miranda added.

“Uh-huh!”

“...It stings a bit to hear you agree so quickly, but anyway, there you have it.” Miranda yawned widely as if to say this conversation was over. “All right, I’m going to sleep. Fay, you and Lady Leshea should begin searching for teammates. I hope you’ll find some good candidates!”

2

The busiest floor of the imposingly elegant Arcane Court building was the fifth, which had a dining hall and a café that anyone could use. It would be absolutely packed at lunchtime, but at ten in the morning there weren’t too many people there yet.

“So, Fay, how does a team get set up, anyway?” Leshea asked.

“You remember the electronic application we did in my room earlier? Anyone at any other terminal will be able to see that we’re looking for team members, and contact us if they want to join up,” Fay said.

“Okay... In that case, what are we doing here?”

They were seated in a corner of the café. Leshea was resting her chin on her hands and looking bored. She gave Fay a look that clearly said *Let’s go back to my room and play a game*, but unfortunately for her, Fay had a good reason for coming here.

“See the window at the end of the hall with the clerk at it? That’s the Consultation Corner,” he said, pointing to a spot that essentially bookended the hallway outside. It was a simple space, with several sofas and round tables. “Applications for teams are handled electronically, but sometimes there are issues you can’t resolve online. That’s when you come and talk to the clerk at that window.”

“And what sorts of issues are those?” Leshea asked.

“Say you keep fighting with members of your team and you can’t stand it, or the team isn’t what you thought it would be when you joined and you’d like to leave. When you’ve got something that’s hard to discuss with your allies, but you can’t figure out yourself, it’s best if you can talk to someone, right?”

“I think *someone* just needs to learn to make up their mind.”

“Okay, well, anyway... There’s another kind of people who show up at the Consultation Corner pretty regularly: free-agent apostles. Basically, people who are looking for a team.” Apostles who signed on with groups and left them quickly often came to the Corner hoping to find the next team they might join. “I thought if we kept an eye on the place, we might see who came by. But I admit, we just have to hope we’re lucky and someone shows up. While we’re waiting, I’ll try to see if I can think of anyone.”

“Hmm...” Leshea leaned her elbows on the table. “You said you just got back here after six months away, right, Fay? You must have been on a team before that. Couldn’t we join with them?”

“I’m afraid that’s...physically impossible,” Fay replied. Leshea gave him a quizzical look. “The team broke up for, uh, reasons. A lot of reasons...”

He debated whether to tell Leshea exactly what had happened. He’d just been thinking about the same thing.

“Did you have a fight?” Leshea asked.

“No, nothing like that. Everyone got along great.”

After taking in a newcomer, Fay, they’d suddenly won three games back-to-back. The team had grown by leaps and bounds. Finally, Fay explained, “It was very sudden. I went to the team room one day and was told they’d decided to split up...”

“And they didn’t even tell you?”

“Nope. That’s why I was so lost about what to do next. That was right when Chief Secretary Miranda told me they’d found the person I was looking for—I figured a bit of searching would be the perfect excuse for a change of scenery.” So he’d all but fled the city. That had been six months ago. “Anyway, unfortunately, my old group doesn’t exist anymore. If we’re going to go

knocking on any doors, it would have to be some other team I was familiar with...”

Fay pulled out a communications device. He had contact information for maybe ten apostles he knew here at the Arcane Court.

“I’ve got some acquaintances, people I did the gods’ games with a couple of times, like Asta,” he said. “First, let’s try...”

Fay decided on Tempest Cruiser (motto: “At the eye of the world’s storm”), a team he’d worked with a couple of times as a rookie. He had a passing acquaintance with a couple of the members, not to mention his record to recommend him.

“Oh, hey. Hi. I know it’s been a while, Captain Ashlan, but do you remember —”

“Fay, is that you?!” shouted a voice on the other end of the line, so loudly Fay thought his eardrums might burst.

Ashlan Highrols was the captain of Tempest Cruiser, a twenty-six-year-old veteran with a rank of III, meaning he’d won the gods’ games three times. He could be a little absentminded, but he’d offered Fay advice even during his hiatus, and Fay owed him a lot.

“Whoa, hey, all right! Finally thought you’d get in touch, huh?”

“What?”

“Your stream, man! I saw it! Here I was wondering where you were and what you were up to these days, and then, bam! You’re right in the middle of one of the gods’ games. And as a free agent, no less!”

Ashlan always had been adept at gathering information—no sooner had he seen yesterday’s stream than he’d ascertained whether Fay was available.

I wonder if he knew I’d get in touch, Fay thought. He’s still always prepared, or, at least, highly motivated.

This seemed promising. Fay could sense the goodwill right through the phone. “So you know what’s going on? That’s great. I’ll get right to the point: Would it be possible to join your team?”

“Hell yeah, man, we’d love to have you! Say the word; I’ll do the paperwork today. Nothing stopping me.”

“I’d like to bring a former god named Leoleshea with me.”

“Buzz! Your call cannot be completed at this time. Please make sure you have the correct number...”

“Hey, Captain?!”

“Fay, listen to yourself! You want the Dragon God with you? I mean, I know you beat Titan together; I saw it. It’s just...” There was an audible gulp. Ashlan’s anxiety was palpable. “The Dragon God Leoleshea...”

“What’s wrong, Captain? You were gung-ho until a second ago...”

“Maybe you haven’t heard, Fay. That god went berserk on some humans once.”

“Huh? Why would she do that?” As Fay spoke, his gaze drifted toward Leshea, sitting across the table from him. With her ears, he was sure she heard every word of their conversation. “Hey, Leshea? Is that true, what Captain Ashlan said?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what he means,” Leshea responded diffidently.

“Care to fill me in, Captain?”

“Everyone in the Arcane Court knows she’s usually sweet and gentle, but she’s still a former god. She used to run the gods’ games herself. She still has all kinds of respect for them, and if anyone says a word against them, she refuses to let it go.”

“Uh-huh. And...?”

“And there was this one team in the hallway. They’d just been thrashed in one of the games. They’d been drowning their loss with a stiff drink, and somebody said, ‘The gods’ games can kiss my ass!’ Then all of a sudden...”

“Let me guess. Leshea was walking by, overheard them, and got angry?”

“Angry? She sent twenty apostles to the hospital. People started calling it the Day of the Blood-Soaked God.”

“Geez! Leshea, did you do that?!”

“Heek!” She jumped back. Her hair fluttered, and she wore a look of shock that all but said *Oh crap!* “Guilt lieth not with me!” she exclaimed.

“Sure sounds like it does! Why are you talking so funny?”

“I m-merely gave them a slight tap on the shoulder. Not one was even injured!” She was trying desperately to deny any responsibility, but her panic seemed to be making her talk a little “old.”

“You heard her, Captain,” Fay said.

“Word is, eight people had compound fractures. They had to carry them out of here on stretchers.”

“Seriously, Leshea?!”

“Yoips!” Leshea backed away even farther. After a moment, though, with Fay staring at her, she seemed to give up. Her head drooped. “It wasn’t intentional. I just forgot it wasn’t like when we’re in Elements.”

“An accident-prone god. Great...” She *accidentally* went to sleep and got stuck for 3,000 years in a wall of ice, *accidentally* lost the ability to return to being a god, and now she had *accidentally* gotten into a bloody fight.

So disrespecting the gods’ games enrages her, huh? Knowing Leshea, I can just picture it...

Nobody died in the gods’ games—but the real world was another story. If you ticked Leshea off when you weren’t in Elements, you weren’t guaranteed to survive the experience. Had things gone even slightly differently, the incident they were talking about could have been a huge tragedy.

“I’m starting to understand why Chief Secretary Miranda wanted to pair *me* with you,” Fay said.

“Hey, Fay, I’m sorry. She sure is nice to look at, and under other circumstances I probably would’ve loved to have her. ‘Course, I guess a guy could wish for her chest to be just a little bit bigg—”

Ashlan was interrupted by an audible *crack* as a fracture spidered down the side of the cup in Leshea’s hand. That stuff was reinforced ceramic—it wasn’t

supposed to break.

“Leshea?” Fay said.

“Chests come in all different sizes,” she said, smiling brightly. “When I picked this body, I didn’t know about the tastes of human males. When you’re incarnating yourself, it’s easiest to copy a simple body type, anyway. I thought maybe this would do. But guys like big boobs, don’t they?”

“Uh... I wouldn’t, uh, know.”

“Even back during the time of the ancient magical civilization, there were rumors about me. Why’d she go with such a small chest when she’s a god and could make it any size she wanted, they asked. Ooh, I was so mad I almost burned up the whole entire world.”

“You almost annihilated humanity?!”

“Fay...” Leshea’s smile was so sweet. She crossed her arms, pushing her two “hills” up as far as she could. “You don’t care about a girl’s chest size, do you? I mean...I think I’m *reasonably* well-endowed, don’t you?”

Fay didn’t say anything.

“Well?”

“Y... Yeah, sure. Of course you are.”

This didn’t make any sense. Fay thought he’d come here to find some more teammates, so what was he doing sweating bullets as he was interrogated about a girl’s bustline?

“Excellent answer,” Leshea responded, nodding in satisfaction. Incidentally, the person who had touched off this tense line of questioning had already hung up the phone.

Stupid Captain Ashlan. He knew trouble when he heard it and bailed. I’m gonna give him a piece of my mind...

“Okay, Fay, back to getting ourselves some new team members. I have one condition: their chests have to be smaller than mine.”

“I don’t think we can say that!”

Fay glanced at the contact info stored in his communications device. He was considering the size of each team, how well it was run, and especially his own opinion of the group. At length he said, "Okay, Leshea. The captain of the next team I'm going to contact is a girl. That okay?"

"Is her chest smaller than mine?"

"Seriously, I have no idea!" Fay exclaimed. Meanwhile, he got through to the girl in question. "Ah, hi, Captain Yuki? How are you? It's me, Fay. Do you have a moment?"

"Fay! It's been, like, a million years!" answered a voice on the other end. To Fay, she sounded profoundly adult. Sexy. "Finally decided to take me up on that date, huh?"

"Yeah, no."

"Aw, ouch! Well, okay, so I figured you'd say that. Hey, I saw the stream of your battle with Titan. My team and I were cheering our heads off watching you."

"Even you, Captain?"

"It's my job, isn't it?" She giggled, but it was a grown-up's laughter, an alluring sound. "There are no guaranteed wins in the gods' games, but there are things you can do to help. Figuring out the hottest strats, that's pure gold. And I've got the best game analysts in the business, so I just let them worry about it while I sat back and enjoyed the show."

"Sounds like you and your team are all pretty tight," Fay said.

Yuki's team, Black Rose (motto: "The wild rose that blooms beautiful and black"), had thirty-six people. Fourteen active apostles, four retired ones who served as advisors, four game analysts, and, this year, ten rookies who were training with the team. Plus two managers to round the whole thing out, and a coach, the team's former captain. All of them plus Yuki made thirty-six.

She believed having great analysts was the most important thing, because it allowed her to tease out strategies from past games.

His match with Titan was no different: people all over the world had been

watching the stream, and Fay was sure that “the best analysts” were already arguing about the most effective way to approach a game of Divinitag. The other members of the staff, too—those excellent coaches and advisors had been lured away from other teams with the promise of lucrative rewards.

“Your group received an A grade from the Arcane Court this year, didn’t it?” Fay asked.

“Of course we did. What’s this, Fay? Starting to take an interest in Black Rose? I’m warning you, lots of apostles want to join our team and never get anywhere close.”

“What about me?”

“We’d find a place for you the moment you wanted to start,” Yuki said without missing a beat. “I got the shivers watching you fight Titan. I haven’t felt that way in a long time. I mean, you know Titan always does battle games, right? And then all of a sudden it’s ‘Divinitag’? You should have seen our analysts—they were white as sheets! A new game means there are no known strategies, after all. So to clear it first time out...”

“I didn’t do it alone.”

“You’re being modest. But anyway, if you want to join, Fay, we’d gladly have you. Excuse me, Manager? Order up an extra desk and locker for the room, please. Right away.”

“Er... Hold on, Captain Yuki. You’ll need more than one.” Fay looked across the table at Leshea, who was listening keenly to the conversation. “Because I’m not coming alone.”

“A recommendation, from you? Sure. Who’ve you got?”

“She’s a former god named Leoleshea. She’s sitting right across from me here. I guess you’d probably know her by her bright red hair.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line.

“Hey, Captain Yuki? Captain? Hello?” It wasn’t just Yuki—the cheerful chatter Fay had heard in the background was gone. “Captain Yuki?”

Finally Yuki exclaimed, “Did you say the Dragon God Leoleshea?! No!

Nooooooooooooooooo!”

And then she hung up.

The communicator sat silently in Fay’s hand. “Huh? Where’d you go, Captain?” he asked. Then he turned to Leshea. “Leshea, Captain Yuki lost it the moment she heard your name. She screamed and hung up.”

Leshea didn’t say anything.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

The pretty young girl developed a twitch in one eye, but still wouldn’t meet Fay’s gaze. Finally she responded, “.....I didn’t do anything.”

“What did you do?!”

“T-t-tis all a big misunderstanding! I did nothing at all!”

“Now I know you’re lying!” Fay circled around so she had to look at him. “I know when you’re upset—you start talking in your sketchiest I’m-a-god tone of voice whenever you’re in trouble!”

“I do no such thing, mortal!”

“You totally do! Captain Yuki *obviously* knew your name. I’m asking you to tell me what in the world you did to her!”

“Er... urgh...” Leshea’s eyes darted around and she made a couple inarticulate noises before she said, “Once upon a time, there was this girl...”

“What is this, a fairy tale?! Next, you’re going to try to tell me everyone lived happily ever after!”

“Okay, okay. Fine.” Leshea let out a sigh of resignation. She still wouldn’t look Fay in the eye; she was obviously feeling guilty. “So, uh... I’ve had the last six months to kill, right? I decided to get some of the best apostles I could find and play with them in an underground coliseum. Perfect practice for battle games, right?”

“Passing the time with a fight club? All right. And what happened?” Fay questioned.

“I guess *maybe* the first person I fought was named Yuki. I still didn’t know my

own strength back then, so she sort of...kind of almost died...”

“You *traumatized* Captain Yuki?!”

The captain probably deserved some kind of award just for surviving a blow from a god who didn’t know how to control herself. Although Captain Yuki’s wounds had healed, the damage to her mind was still raw.

“I w-went to visit her in the hospital and everything! I brought candy!”

“Oh, did you? And?”

“She screamed and passed out.”

“So all you did was re-traumatize her!”

This would never work. The Dragon God Leshea was like a lion at the zoo—fun to look at, but you wouldn’t want to get close to it without bars between you. People seemed to see Leshea a lot like a wild animal.

“I’m starting to get the picture. I don’t think we’ll have much luck getting a current team to take us,” Fay said.

They saw Leshea as out of control—but from Fay’s perspective, that was only half true. Leshea, the former god, just wanted to play with humans. She was making an effort to understand them, as the piles and piles of books in her room attested.

“I’m sorry, Fay. I mean it.” Leshea was uncharacteristically depressed.

Fay shook his head and stood up. “Hey, it’s fine. We just have to be patient. If we can’t get onto a current team, we can start one of our own.”

“You mean those free agents you were talking about?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Lots of apostles out there are looking for new groups to call home.”

There was somewhere around 1,200 apostles in the Ruin branch of the Arcane Court. Someone announced their free agency on a nearly daily basis, and teams traded personnel all the time.

“If anyone’s looking for a new place, they’ll come to that window,” Fay explained. “We just have to watch and see who shows up.”

“Hmm...” Leshea gazed idly down the hallway. “I just want to say, Fay, I don’t want team members who are just making up the numbers. They have to love games.”

“We’re on the same page—I definitely want somebody who appreciates games,” Fay said. He was set on finding someone who adored games, absolutely loved them. Somebody who could sink into a game and forget the passing time, forget everything. A person who would spend every free moment thinking up new strategies if they could. That was the single most important thing to Fay in a new teammate.

Then he added, “There’s something else. I’m afraid this might sound a little calculating...”

“What is it?”

“I’d like them to have some ability that’ll be useful in the gods’ games. For example, Leshea, say you had two mages, one who could use fire magic and one who used ice magic. All other things being equal, which one would you choose?”

“Fire, of course!”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m the god of fire!” she replied. It was exactly as Fay had expected. Leshea was the fire-dragon god, and she felt some affinity for fellow fire-users.

“Buzz. Wrong. The answer is ice,” Fay said.

“What? Why?!” Leshea puffed out her cheeks like a stubborn child. “It’s obviously fire! Just look how strong I am!”

“Fire is energy. Ice is stable. That’s the difference,” Fay stated.

“What?”

“In the gods’ games, fire mages are only really useful in battle games. In other words, they may be powerful, but they’re limited to direct confrontations.”

“So what makes ice so much better?”

“You could use it to make an ice wall or a staircase or something, right?”

Because it has solid form.”

Ice magic wasn’t limited to battle games; it had many uses. If there had been an ice mage on Fay’s side in the game against Titan, for example, they could have created a road of ice from building to building to allow the apostles to escape.

“I guess you could say I’m looking for something versatile. The gods’ games can take a million different forms, so it would be great if we could find somebody with a useful ability,” Fay said.

“Hrm... I *guess* that makes sense.” Leshea crossed her arms and sighed. “I’ve pretty much got battle games covered for us, anyway. So you want apostles who can help us with other kinds of games, right?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to scramble to pick them up before another team does, though.”

“Huh. Say, Fay, what kind of powers are you hoping to find?”

“I guess the first thing that comes to mind would be telepor—”

At precisely that moment, the air above their heads rippled with a sort of *whmm* sound. A rainbow-colored ring appeared, and they could hear someone’s footsteps on the other side. It was exactly what Fay had been talking about.

“Teleportation?!” Fay exclaimed.

“Fay, look out!” Leshea shoved him away, and he stumbled back a couple of steps. In front of him appeared a pretty young woman who landed with a light footfall, straight out of the shimmering ring.

A Teleporter! Fay realized. *I didn’t see her at all—she must have come down from another floor!*

This Teleporter was a girl with pale golden hair. She was a good deal shorter than Leshea, but even in her Arcane Court uniform, the womanliness of her body was evident. Her lovely, demure face only added to her charm.

At the moment, though, she wore a look of utter dejection.

“Do you know her, Fay?” Leshea asked.

“Never met her. I don’t think she even knows we’re here.”

The golden-haired girl was clutching an envelope, so intent on whatever she was doing that she didn’t notice Fay and Leshea right behind her. She made a beeline for the Consultation Corner.

“Well, now...” Leshea, watching her, crossed her arms in surprise. “Fay, I think that girl just teleported from the ground floor.”

“That would be a pretty good trick. It’s a long jump.”

“You think she’s a free agent?”

“It’d be unusual. Teleportation’s a really useful skill that fits all kinds of games, so Teleporters usually get snapped up by one team or another before they can even declare their free agency.”

Teleport was the quintessential movement skill, the ability to cross space. In Divinitag, as an example, someone with this ability would have been able to pop in and out of buildings to try to escape.

“Oh! Fay! She’s going to the window!”

“You’re right. If she’s looking for a team, then we’re both in the right place at the right time.”

He decided to try getting a little closer. He was still behind the golden-haired girl, and she still hadn’t noticed him or Leshea. Instead, she produced three folded pieces of paper from her envelope and held them out to the clerk at the window. Fay could see one word at the top of each page: *Resignation*. They were applications to withdraw.

“I’m Pearl Diamond,” the girl said to the clerk, “and I hereby submit my resignation, effective immediately!”

“*Not right now, you don’t!*” A flame came bursting from Leshea’s palm and incinerated the pages the girl was holding. *Poof!* In the blink of an eye, they were reduced to ash. “Phew! Not bad work, if I do say so myself,” Leshea said.

“Wh-wh-wh-what’s *not bad* about it?! Your fire singed my bangs!” Pearl cried. “And my resignation... My notice... W-wait... What?” She blinked in confusion, then stared at Leshea and Fay so hard it felt like her gaze might drill a hole right

through them. “You two look startlingly similar to the Dragon God and last year’s most celebrated rookie, Fay.”

“It’s more than a resemblance. That’s us,” Fay responded.

“Heek!” Pearl yelped and jumped back. “I’m sorry! I didn’t know I was talking to such famous people! I apologize for being so rude!”

“Uh... I don’t think you were being rude.”

“To apologize, I’ll withdraw right now!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself! H-hey, hold on! Please!” Fay exclaimed. He took Pearl by the shoulders; she looked like this was the end of the world. “Calm down. We’re actually here to *stop* you from retiring.”

Maybe Fay, with his six-month hiatus, wasn’t one to talk—but he didn’t believe that apostles should ever retire of their own accord. You only got to be an apostle until you lost three times in the gods’ games, usually just a matter of two or three years for most people.

People might treat you like a pop star, but if you don’t beat the gods, you’re out. Some people even compare the apostles to fireworks, beautiful but only lasting a moment. That was part of why the citizenry cheered them on so enthusiastically.

“Apostles who have lost three games are treated as *retired*, but you mentioned withdrawing. That means you haven’t lost three games yet, right?”

Pearl didn’t answer.

“I was just wondering, why would you want to quit being an apostle while you still have the right to challenge the gods?”

After a long moment, Pearl replied, “I can’t tell you.” She stared at the ground. So she didn’t want to talk—but Fay and Leshea were looking for teammates. They weren’t going to give up that easily.

“Listen, the thing is, my friend and I are looking for free agents,” Fay said.

“No, I can’t!” Pearl exclaimed.

“At least hear us out,” Fay said.

“I’m so sorry!”

“Hrn... O-Okay, let’s do this. I’ll get you a parfait at the café! Let’s eat and talk. When you’re finished, you don’t have to hear another word. Yeah?”

“Okay!”

“You mean it?!”

The girl named Pearl still looked like the world was ending, but her answer was startlingly enthusiastic.

3

Pearl Diamond, sixteen years old. Rank I in the gods’ games (one win, one loss). Hobbies: nutrition-packed creative cuisine. Arise: Magical type (Teleporter). But that sounded boring, so Pearl referred to her ability as “The Wandering.”

The fact was, though, she was quite strong. Rank I apostles could normally manifest only a very modest version of their Arise in the real world—for example, by teleporting a few feet. Frankly, it would be faster to walk.

But Pearl, she’s different—she’s only Rank I, yet she jumped across at least one floor of a building. Fay was suitably impressed. And also perplexed: Why would such a desirable apostle want to withdraw?

“I think I’m starting to get it,” he said. Once Pearl had calmed down a bit, they’d been able to coax the story out of her over a parfait. This was the situation as Fay understood it: “Your team was annihilated because of your mistake, and they won’t let you live it down.”

“That’s right... I’m just the worst. I’m a total coward, and I only ever screw things up— Oh, do you mind if I order another of these strawberry parfaits?” Pearl pointed to the menu.

“Uh, go ahead...”

It bore out her alleged interest in cooking—no matter how depressed she was, she got talkative while she was eating.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Fay began. “You were in a game against a gigantic god. It was about to step on you, and out of sheer terror your abilities activated instinctively. And not just normal teleportation, but—”

“A Shift Change!” Pearl cried.

“Yeah, one of those. I’ve heard it’s a really versatile ability.”

“Well, it’s completely wasted on me!”

Pearl Diamond had two teleportation abilities. One was the basic Teleport, the ability to connect one space to another via a warp portal, as Fay had witnessed. The other was the Shift Change. This was the ability to swap the locations of Person A and Person B.

“So you activated Shift Change just before the god’s foot came down on you, and unfortunately, the person you changed places with was the captain of your team, who got squashed and was retired from the game,” Fay summarized.

“Yes, that’s right. I thought, *I’m gonna get smooshed!* and I was just so scared... I didn’t know I was activating my power!”

Pearl had survived. Unfortunately for her and the rest of her team, one of the rules of that match had been “protect your leader,” and so she lost the game for all of them. More than a few apostles for whom this was their third defeat found themselves retired. Pearl, now branded a team-killer, felt so guilty that she left the team.

Which brought them to this moment.

“I’m such a scaredy-cat and a total klutz, and the fact that I even have one win is all thanks to my team, and I’m walking trouble with nowhere to go...” Pearl put her chin in her hands.

“One win, huh,” Leshea mused. She was studying Pearl from across the table, her eyes sharp, almost like a glare. “Don’t you think you’re taking us gods a little lightly?”

“C-come again?!”

“If a team really was weighed down by a klutzy ball and chain of an apostle, there is no way they would’ve ever beaten one of the gods. We aren’t just

pushovers. The fact that you have a single win undermines everything you said.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you weren’t solely a drag on your teammates. That’s my take, anyway.”

“W-well...!” The golden-haired girl looked up suddenly as what the Dragon God was trying to say dawned on her.

“You said your name was Pearl?” Leshea said.

“Th-that’s right, Lady Leoleshea...” Pearl’s shoulders stiffened, and she sat up straighter when the god called her by name.

“Okay, well, I don’t actually mind if you’re only baggage. Let me and Fay handle the gods’ games. We only need the numbers. You can jump into a game and then drop right out again for all I care.”

“Th-there’s honest and then there’s...maybe a little *too* honest!” Pearl wailed.

“I can’t stand lying,” Leshea said.

“You could at least be a little nicer about it!”

“Here’s the deal, though: even if we lose, we won’t blame you. I won’t, and Fay won’t.”

Pearl didn’t say anything.

“How’s that sound?” Leshea, smiling again, held out her hand. “Just say you’ll try it. First one’s free, y’know. It’s easy. Give it a shot, and I promise you won’t be able to quit!”

“You sound like you’re trying to sell me drugs or something!” Pearl said.

“Geez! You humans sure are sensitive about your invitations.”

“W-well, anyway,” Pearl said, jumping to her feet. “I’ve already made up my mind. I’m going to wash my hands of being an apostle and start a new life! So I’m sorry, but goodbye!”

She turned and ran toward the wall. And as everyone in the café wondered, *Hey, is she gonna hit that wall?*, a glowing warp portal appeared and she made

her exit from the eatery.

“Wonder if we should go after her. Oops, there goes the warp portal,” Leshea said. She looked at the now blank wall with a sigh. “Hrm. I guess that’s that. Better find someone else, huh, Fay?”

But Fay didn’t say a word.

“Uh, Fay?”

He stared at the thin air into which Pearl had vanished, then turned to Leshea. “Let’s do some investigating,” he said.

“And what would we be hoping to discover?” Leshea asked.

“Pearl’s room number in the girls’ dorm. If she plans on leaving, then she must be cleaning out her room. We’ve got to stop her, and quick.”

“Uh?” Leshea gave him a blank look. She had already given up on the Teleporter and was thinking about finding someone else, so Fay’s response took her by surprise.

“I just feel like it would be a waste to let it end this way,” he said.

“What—you mean because her Teleport ability would be so useful?”

“Because if she stops now, she’ll be afraid of games for the rest of her life! And wouldn’t that be sad?”

“Oh...” Leshea’s eyes widened, and then the slightest of grins played across her lips. “All right. That’s a reason I can get behind.”

“Thought so! She’s welcome to make her own choice. But I want to ask her one more time.” Fay nodded at Leshea, then set off at a quick jog.

4

The next day, on the grounds of the Arcane Court...

“Hey, Fay, you think this is the right hallway?”

“If the layout is like the boys’ dorm, then this is probably it. We’d better

hurry, though—it ended up taking me all day to find out which room was Pearl’s.”

Leshea was walking in front, Fay following behind her.

There were two dorms for the apostles. Fay and Leshea were trekking through the girls’ building. It was late morning, so there weren’t many people around, but a man like Fay was still conspicuous tramping around the girls’ dorm. The women who were there kept giving him funny looks.

“Glad I’m with you, Leshea. If I was by myself, they might think I was a criminal,” Fay said.

Leshea turned around. “I keep meaning to ask you, Fay—why are the apostles’ dorms separated into boys and girls?” She walked expertly, keeping up her pace even though she was going backward. “You do it with your baths and toilets, too. I got mixed up once and went in one that was supposed to be for male apostles, and they totally freaked out. But why?”

“Well, it would be, y’know, *bad* for everyone to be together.”

“Bad how?”

Fay wasn’t sure how to start answering that question. Fundamentally, the gods had no concept of gender—Leshea appeared like a gorgeous young woman, but human ideas about sex and gender were foreign to her.

No, you know what? I’m sure she understands perfectly well. She’s just trying to get a rise out of me.

What made Fay think that? The huge grin on Leshea’s face, which was framed by her vermilion hair. She was enjoying watching him squirm at her question.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you tell me? I’m *dying* to know!” she said.

“Oh, you know! I know you know! You shameless gods... Hey, face forward, already. You’re gonna bump into—”

“I’m not gonna bump into anybody,” Leshea interjected, deftly avoiding an apostle coming down the hall without ever turning around. “Hm? Hmm?”

“This is no time to gloat; we have to hurry. We need to stop Pearl!” Fay said.

They went up the stairs to the second floor and found Pearl's room, which was near the staircase. They pressed the intercom button, then waited...and waited...but there was no answer. Was she out? Or...

"Hey, Fay—the door's open."

"What? It's not locked?"

Leshea pushed the door gently, and with an audible *click*, it opened right up.

Fay thought back to Pearl's attempt to withdraw the day before. "Don't tell me she'd already cleaned out her room! Pearl! Hey, Pearl!" Had she left yesterday? Were they too late? "Pearl! It's me—are you here?!"

Fay burst through the door, charging down a cramped hallway and toward the living room, kicking open the door to the main area.

As they entered, a golden-haired girl was just turning toward them.

"Oh. So you are here," Fay remarked. "Wait... uh?"

"Wh-wh-wh-wha—" Pearl stuttered.

She was there, all right. But she'd been right in the middle of changing, and she was standing in her underwear.

And wouldn't you know it? Her clothes had been concealing her figure. Her chest, the swell of which had been just an alluring suggestion in her uniform, turned out to be so large that she could barely cover it with her hands; it threatened to spill out of her fingers. She looked like she was holding ripe fruit.

"*What* is this?!" Leshea finally managed. Her eyes were wide from the sheer *mass*! She'd pondered the size yesterday, when Pearl was wearing her Arcane Court uniform, but this level of development went beyond anything Leshea had expected of the timid, retiring young woman.

Leshea fell to her knees. "You've got to be kidding me!" But no. Leshea kept looking back and forth between her own chest and Pearl's overwhelmingly voluptuous body. "It... It's so big. It's *too* big! This is a catastrophe! Why, that cleavage will swallow everything in its path!"

"How can you describe my bust that way?!" Pearl exclaimed.

“Share with me! Give me half of what you’ve got!”

“Eeeeeeeek!” Pearl screamed as Leshea, her eyes crazed, grabbed the other girl’s chest in a death grip.

Several minutes later...

“I don’t normally ever open my door. I just use a warp portal to get in and out,” Pearl said. They were in her living room and Pearl, who had changed into civilian clothes, was trying to explain herself. “I never checked—I just assumed it was locked. I can’t believe it’s been open all this time...”

“You’re telling me that door has been hanging open until we got here?” Fay asked.

“Probably six months now...” Pearl said.

Six months with the door to your room hanging open—it was amazing nothing had happened before this.

“B-but I guess it worked out for you. Since you, I mean, got a look. At my...at me.”

“That’s, uh, well...” Fay said, feeling his face flush at the thought. In her personal outfit, Pearl looked quiet and reserved—to think, she was hiding something so *stimulating* under there. “I’m sorry.”



“N-no, I’m sorry! I’m the one who left the door open!” Pearl waved Fay’s apology away, her own face turning red. “Oh! But I do expect you to take responsibility for what happened and make me happy for the rest of my life...”

“You want us to marry just because I accidentally walked in on you?!”

“Eep! I was only joking!” Pearl’s expression softened—but only for a moment. It wasn’t long before a sigh was coming out from between her lovely lips. “I debuted last year, too, see? I was part of the same cohort as you, Fay, and I thought it was so awesome how great you did right off the bat. It was enough to make a girl’s heart race.”

That brought Fay up short.

“That’s why I don’t think I belong with you. Me, on a team with people as amazing as you or Lady Leshea? I’d only ever get in the way...” She shook her head sadly.

Her eyes drifted to a corner of the living area. Most of the room had been cleaned up in preparation for moving out, but that corner appeared to be home to several large paper bags.

“Oh, you’re wondering about those?” she asked. “Since I was leaving the Arcane Court, I brought my former team members some treats to apologize.”

The team Pearl had failed was named Inferno (motto: “The light of conflagration”). That incident had resulted in more than one of her teammates hitting three losses and having to retire, and had ultimately driven Pearl to seek resignation from being an apostle. But that wasn’t what struck Fay.

“You’ve already been to see them? I’m not quite sure how to ask this, but, uh, aren’t there kind of a lot left?”

“They didn’t want them...” The golden-haired girl looked dejectedly at the ground. “The captain was out, but all my former teammates said I didn’t deserve to see him, anyway. Ha... Ha-ha-ha! They’re so right, huh? Trying to apologize only brought back unpleasant memories.” And so, Pearl had returned to her room, still carrying her paper bags. She had just been trying to decide what to do with all the treats. “Maybe it’s time to accept—”

“That! Is! So! *Wrong!*” Leshea howled. She jumped to her feet as if she couldn’t bear sitting down any longer and pointed at the girl with the golden hair. “You said your name was Pearl, right?!”

“Y-y-yes?!”

“I can’t believe you. But I even *more* can’t believe those teammates of yours! They don’t understand games—and they don’t understand these!” She grabbed one of the paper bags and studied the boxes of snacks inside. “They shouldn’t need treats to make them feel better. Whether you win or lose, you’re supposed to have had fun. To want to play again. That’s what games are!”

“W-well...”

“It’s the *gods’* games—why would anybody be surprised if the gods win? Trying to pin a defeat on one person is ridiculous!”

“Th-that’s very nice of you to say...” Pearl bit her lip. She clenched her fists loosely and looked into the middle distance as if she was thinking about something. “B-but it doesn’t change the fact that I’m not good for anything...”

“You still have the chance to clear your name, though, don’t you?” Fay said, picking up the thread. “How do you make up for losing a game? With another one. What was your team again? Inferno? Next time they’re taking on one of the games, how about you go with them? Then you can show your stuff!”

“Th-that’s totally impossible! All by myself? I could never—”

“I didn’t say by yourself. We’ll go with you.”

Pearl gasped. She had nothing to say—but this time, it wasn’t despair that silenced her. For the first time, she was hesitating in her plan to withdraw.

“The three of us—we’ll go help your former teammates. You can manage that, right?” Fay said.

“B... But...”

“I’m sure your team was a perfectly good one. It’s just that, like Leshea said, the gods’ games are difficult enough that you should expect to lose a lot of the time. I’m worried about something else. I’m worried it would suck for you if you quit before you really had a chance to get started.”

Pearl Diamond had one win and one loss.

“You’ve got every right to come back for revenge,” Fay said. “For a rematch with the gods.”

Pearl was silent for a long moment.

“Let’s try it, just once. After that, if you still want to leave, we won’t try to stop you.”

Another second passed before the golden-haired girl said, “Heh!” and giggled. She wiped away the slightest of tears at the corner of her eye. “I’ve never met such a tenacious scout.”

“I’m eager to find someone to work with!”

“Well, thank you. One time, then.” The Teleporter bowed deeply. “I may not be good for much, but I’ll give this game everything I’ve got.”

5

The “Dive System” for the gods’ games worked like this: the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court was home to five massive statues shaped like dragons’ heads that served as doorways to the gods’ games. When would the doors open? Whenever the gods felt like it. Sometimes a door opened again immediately after a game was over, while other times it might remain shut for the next decade.

“When a Divine Gate opens, it’s an invitation from the gods: ‘Let’s play a game!’ Then the Arcane Court starts looking for teams to participate.” Fay was walking alongside Leshea, their footsteps clacking on the floor. Pearl, the young Teleporter, was just behind them. “I’m sure you know this already, Pearl, but I want to say for Leshea’s benefit—not every team volunteers to participate just because one of the statues opens. A team member might have a cold, say, or the team might not be at full capacity.”

“Sure, I know that,” Leshea said. “When a Divine Gate opens, teams that want to participate submit their names, right?” They were on the seventh floor, and

Leshea pointed to a big-screen monitor on the wall as they walked by. “I remember Miranda telling me that when one of the statues opens, it’s not just the apostles who jump into action. The people running the Arcane Court have to set up the stream, too.”

“Yeah, it can be tough. And a battle like the one we had against Titan gets a lot of viewers.”

The gods’ games were viewed all around the world. Fay had heard that while he was being chased by Titan, a popular commentator was doing a running commentary in the real world, and the viewers were getting into it. Since the game marked the return of Fay, the most celebrated rookie in recent history, and the earth-shattering debut of the Dragon God Leoleshea, how could they not?

“I’ve heard the rumors—that not just the whole city but pretty much the whole planet was watching us,” Fay said. “That’s why I came here to ask you about this.”

“That’s great, but Fay, wouldn’t you normally wait for me to invite you in before you open the door?” On the other side of the door to the chief secretary’s office, Miranda was sitting behind a desk, typing busily on a keyboard at an electronic terminal. She heaved a sigh.

“I saw the read notification on my message.”

“Of course you did. Anyway, have a seat, Fay, Lady Leshea, and...” From behind her glasses, the secretary eyed the golden-haired girl beside Fay. “Pearl Diamond. One of our apostles, I believe.”

“Y-yes, ma’am...!”

“A Teleporter is worth her weight in gold. I always assumed you would find a new team, but I didn’t think it would be Fay who got you.” The secretary rose to her feet, smiling slightly. “Now, then, Fay, as to your question. You want me to tell you the next time Pearl’s former team, Inferno, applies to dive...”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“I want to say up front that giving you that information would be highly irregular.”

Fay realized that, of course. Teams had to *want* to work together, and unilaterally asking for tips on the activities of another team was always going to be a nonstarter with the Arcane Court.

“Apostles are also very much results-oriented people. If you win in the gods’ games, you gain respect at the Court and people love you.” Miranda retrieved a second pair of glasses, unfolded them, and began twirling them expertly. “That leads some people to try dragging others down—and we don’t want that.”

There were those who entered the gods’ games and then deliberately lost. Worse, they occasionally attempted to strengthen the god’s position in hopes of causing a popular apostle’s defeat to take down a rival team. Some of these underhanded maneuverings might even involve illegal bribes.

“As such, the Dive schedule is confidential information limited to teams with a working relationship,” Miranda continued. “Only teams that have built up trust, for example, by practicing for the games together or playing mock games against each other, are typically privy to such information. So I want you to understand that officially, I absolutely cannot do what you’re asking.”

“You know we’re not going to drag anyone down. Heck, we want to help!”

“Hrm.” Miranda sighed again. She glanced at Pearl, who looked like she might burst into tears at any moment, and then smiled in spite of herself. “Well, what the hay? It’ll do wonders for viewership, if nothing else. I’ll get you the schedule.” She looked positively cheerful. Still spinning her second pair of glasses around her finger, she added, “In return, you have to do one thing for me, Fay—win. No matter what.”

6

Several days later, they were in the Dive Center, where the Divine Gates were kept. Congregating in front of more than ten broadcast cameras were twenty-two apostles. Nineteen of them belonged to Pearl’s former team, Inferno. The remaining three were Fay, the Dragon God Leshea, and Pearl herself.

The apostles had each equipped one of the Godeye lenses that would enable

them to broadcast from Elements—it was thirty minutes until the Dive began.

“Faaaaaay! I *really* don’t think I can do this!” Pearl wailed.

“Don’t lose your cool. You’ve attracted a little attention, that’s all,” Fay assured.

“They’re glaring daggers at me!” Pearl’s face was pale under the unfriendly stares of her former teammates.

The livestream began even while the apostles were still standing by. The world was watching, so there wouldn’t be any open abuse, but the other apostles were standing just beyond the cameras’ field of view and giving her withering looks.

“Oh, hey, it’s Miranda!” Leshea said.

“Good morning, Lady Leshea,” Miranda greeted as she got off the elevator. She glanced at the screen in front of her displaying the audience numbers for the livestream. “Wow! Simultaneous global viewers are up to 890,000 before the match even begins? Now, *that’s* publicity. Not that I’d expect any less from Fay and Lady Leoleshea’s first official game. And you’ve got a great storyline here.”

“First—? Oh, I get it. You mean because our thing with Titan was kind of off the cuff,” Fay said.

“Right. Viewership was really strong for that, but we’re still positioning this as your debut performance.” The secretary sounded downright cheerful. “And as for you, Pearl—you probably realize, but the entire world is watching this match. So put on a good show!”

“Oh— Oh— Ohhh...”

“Just relax and have fun. It’s a game,” Fay said, patting Pearl on her quaking shoulder. The golden-haired girl turned to look at him, and he patted her shoulder again. “We’ll make things up to your old team with a gift—a spectacular win.”

“R-right!”

“It’s time,” Miranda stated, and that was all it took for every apostle and

camera in the room to focus on the same thing: the Divine Gate. The mouth of the dragon's head was glowing, and beyond it there was a door.

"Let's go!" shouted Inferno's captain, and at his word the entire team rushed into the dragon's maw.

"O-okay, now when you go through the Divine Gate, hold your breath..." Pearl was saying.

"Here we go!" Leshea exclaimed and grabbed her hand, dragging her toward the door.

"N-no! Wait! I need a moment! I need to psych myself up before I— ahhhhhhh!" Pearl cried as they plunged into the glow.

"Well, Fay, break a leg," the secretary said.

"I'll do the best I can. As long as I'm having fun." He nodded, then bounded toward the glowing statue as well. As he went, he wondered what kind of god awaited them on the other side. What kind of game would they play?

Player.4

Vs. The Endless God Uroboros —The Forbidden
Word—

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods' games, hosted by the gods above: those whom the gods chose became apostles, able to enter the superior spiritual realm, Elements, otherwise known as the gods' playground. What form would the place take this time? What kind of game was waiting for them? Only the gods knew.

When Fay and the others came through the door, they found...nothing.

Only a gradient of vibrant blue, like a never-ending sky stretching out beyond the horizon—an impression that was reinforced by the billowing white clouds they could see below.

So: beautiful, blue sky above. Fluffy white clouds below. Along with twenty-two apostles, including Fay, plunging toward the clouds from nearly one thousand feet in the air.

“Wh-wh-what’s going on here?!” Pearl shouted over the rush of the wind. “We’re falling! That’s all we’re doing! Do you automatically lose this game if you can’t fly? Leshea! Can’t you please do something?!”

“Hmm... I’m not *not* capable of floating in midair,” Leshea replied, calmly crossing her arms in thought despite the fact that she was dropping headfirst. Even with Pearl clinging to her, the former god seemed genuinely relaxed. “Why not just fall and see where we go? Aren’t you curious? There might even be land a few tens of thousands of feet down there.”

“Land?! You mean like for us to splat against?!”

“I’d be fine.”

“But everyone else would be pancakes, Leshea!”

They were falling through a seemingly endless sky, with nothing but clouds below them...

“Hm?” That was when Fay noticed something happening below.

Boom!

A roar tore through the air, and the ocean of clouds seemed to erupt, a gigantic hole opening in the thick, cottony clouds—to reveal a dark, drifting shape.

“Hey! There’s something down there!” Fay called. It was floating up toward them. And it was very, very big...

A tremendous dragon of sorts, bursting through the cloud layer.

“*This* thing?!” Fay exclaimed.

The serpent was extraordinarily—indeed unbelievably—big. Even in free fall from far above it, Fay couldn’t see the entire thing. The dragon was covered in scales that reflected the light, making its entire body gleam a dark purple.

It was bigger than an elephant. Bigger than a whale. Bigger than Titan. It was bigger than any deity Fay had previously encountered.

Other plummeting apostles added their own cries of dismay to Fay’s shout:

“No way!”

“Is that—?”

All nineteen of the members of Inferno were looking at the gigantic snake, their faces pale.

“N-no! Not now! Not at such an important moment...!” one of them said.

“It’s Uroboros!” another cried.

At that name, even Fay broke out in a cold sweat, a shiver running down his spine. There was no logic to the shock of fear: the entity before them inspired

terror in humans by its very existence.

I've never felt anything like it, Fay thought. I've never met a god that hits you right in the gut so hard. He couldn't stop trembling—from sheer excitement.

"So that's the famous Uroboros!" he said.

Uroboros, the Endless God. To this day, not one person had succeeded in defeating it. Over the many years, sages, Superhumans, and genius players of every type had found themselves as helpless as babes before it. This was a god of despair. When you found yourself facing it, defeat was the only possible outcome. Uroboros was such a disastrous draw, in fact, that Arcane Court headquarters actually recommended simply forfeiting rather than engaging the deity. Such was the nature of this vast, vast, vast black serpent.

"What a time to get this one... It's perfect." Fay looked down, so hard he forgot to blink. Down, and down, and down, trusting himself to the fall as he dropped toward the clouds through which the Endless God moved. "Let's take a crack at this game of yours!"

Elements: The Zeroth Firmament
Vs. The Endless Expansion, Uroboros
Let the games begin.

2

Uroboros, the Endless God, was a deity six miles long. Until humanity had first encountered it, the longest deity on record had been somewhere in the neighborhood of less than half a mile, which showed how far off the charts Uroboros was. It was on a completely different level. And its game was widely acknowledged to be unwinnable. In the past, teams of more than a hundred apostles had drawn Uroboros and been shattered. No one could even figure out how to start approaching Uroboros's game.

"It's all ooovveeeerrr!" Pearl wailed; her cry could be heard all around the open, blue sky. "There's no plan and no hope. Ahh... I really appreciate you inviting me along, Fay, Leshea. And I'm very sorry."

"Don't you think it's a little early to be giving up?" Fay asked.

"B-b-but just look down there!"

The twenty-two apostles were falling toward an ocean of clouds, amidst which was what appeared to be a vast tract of land—but it wasn't. It was the back of Uroboros, gliding through the clouds, spreading out below them like a vast playing field.

"Right, it's great. At least we have a place to land," Fay said.

"We have a place to go *smoosh*!" Pearl said. "Listen to me—the moment we hit Uroboros's back, we're all going to be pulverized by the impact!"

They probably had about 2200 feet to go—taller than a hundred-story skyscraper, and we all know what would happen to a person who fell off the top of one of those.

"I think I can make this work. It'll probably leave me unconscious, though," Fay said. His Arise was called May Your God, a Superhuman ability which, as he had demonstrated during the game with Titan, allowed him to regenerate, to recover from anything ranging from a scratch to a mortal wound.

I'll probably end up as flat as a pancake. It won't be pretty, but I should regain

consciousness in a few seconds.

Leshea, needless to say, was pretty much invulnerable. That left just one of them in trouble.

“Can’t you use your Teleport to help yourself somehow?” Fay asked.

“I can only teleport up to a hundred feet...and I don’t think cutting that much off this fall is going to help very much!”

Fair enough. If Pearl were on top of a one-hundred-foot-tall building, she could teleport right to the ground. But you couldn’t mitigate the momentum of a nearly one thousand foot of free fall just by shortening the drop by a tenth.

“What about you, Fay?!” Pearl said.

“I’ll be fine. I think.”

“Oh! Great! That means you can help me, too, right?” (Very long pause.)
“Why won’t you look at meeee?!”

“Gotcha!” Leshea said, grabbing onto Pearl’s collar. “Sheesh. Human bodies are so fragile!”

“Leshea?” Pearl exclaimed.

“I told you I could float in midair.” Even as they dropped, Leshea adroitly maneuvered Pearl onto her back, then reached out to Fay. “C’mon, you too, Fay.”

“You think you can manage it?” he asked.

“I just need to slow us down a little, right?”

The rate of their descent began to drop off gradually. Fay felt like an invisible hand was pushing against his feet. “You’re using psychokinesis?” he questioned.

“Uh-huh. It’s a pretty common Arise power, isn’t it?”

Now they were floating downward as gently as a balloon, until they touched down uneventfully on the god’s back. The scales felt as hard as steel beneath their feet.

“I...I thought I was done for!” Pearl said, slumping down. Fay stood beside her, while Leshea looked down eagerly toward the clouds.

“Fay, I’ll bet this sky goes on, well...endlessly.”

“I’m more surprised by such a gigantic god,” he replied.

Uroboros, the Endless God, was six miles long from head to tail. That was a precise number, data brought back by apostles who had actually measured it. Even the width of Uroboros’s back was nearly a thousand feet. Large enough to have a decent foot race.

It’s so huge, it feels like we’re standing on solid ground. Not on the back of a god.

Because Uroboros hardly seemed to tremble as it glided through the air, the sensation was very similar to being on the ground.

“Umm, Fay?” Pearl asked, getting hesitantly to her feet. Like Leshea, she was looking at the ocean of clouds surrounding them. “I see we’ve arrived safely on the god’s back. Does that mean we, um, win the game?”

“That possibility crossed my mind,” Fay answered. Landing safely from a height of 2,200 feet was pretty high on the difficulty scale, but it wasn’t impossible. With a Superhuman power like the psychokinesis Leshea had used, or a well-placed burst of wind magic to slow you down, it was conceivable to survive the drop. “But I think we’re barely at the end of the beginning, here. If I were to compare it to a card game like poker—”

“We’ve only just been dealt our cards?” Pearl asked.

“We’ve only just walked into the casino,” Fay said.

“You mean we haven’t even *started* yet?!”

“That’s my guess. The Arcane Court has lots of info on many of the other gods, but Uroboros is still pretty much a black box. We’d better start by comparing notes.”

“What? With who?” Pearl said.

“With them.” Fay pointed at the members of Inferno, who had landed about three hundred feet behind them. Several of their people were curled up in pain on the ground after injuring themselves in the fall—or the landing.

“We’re going to talk to Inferno?! N-n-no, I don’t think I could—”

“I’ll take the lead,” Fay said.

“Yeah, no worries. Just let me and Fay do the talking,” Leshea added.

So Fay went first as they proceeded across the huge, shimmering scales, with Leshea behind him, practically dragging Pearl along.

“Hey! I’m Fay. This is Leshea,” he said.

He received no answer except glares. Pearl’s former teammates turned toward him, not exactly hostile, but clearly not friendly.

“We didn’t get a chance to introduce ourselves earlier, but, uh, we’re all in this together, so...”

“Last year’s big-name rookie, Fay Theo Philus, and the Dragon God Leoleshea? The two hottest properties in the branch office today? Couldn’t ask for better partners.” The speaker was a man who stood among the dozen or so apostles—their captain. At first he stood with his back to Fay, but then he turned with a sigh, revealing his face in profile. “Long time, no see,” he greeted.

“I’m very sorry!” Pearl squeaked.

“Calm down. Pearl here... Well, there’s a whole story, but the point is, I invited her. I hope you’ll take it easy on her.” Fay gave a friendly wave on behalf of Pearl, who was cowering behind Leshea.

So that’s their captain, Fay thought. The guy Pearl Shift Changed into getting squished. What surprised Fay was that unlike the other apostles, who showed their disgust openly, the captain only winced a little when he saw Pearl. *Maybe it’s water under the bridge to him already? Maybe it’s really the rest of the team who can’t get over it?* Seeing how upset they still obviously were made him realize how rough things must have been right after it happened.

“Anyway, uh...Captain Orvan, right?” Fay said.

“Yes, Orvan Misketz. Fourth captain of Team Inferno. I’m in my third year as an apostle.” He looked to be just younger than thirty. Most of the glowering apostles around him ranged from their teens to their mid-twenties—the captain was essentially an old hand by now.

Fay glanced at the captain and then at the other apostles—and he realized

something. *They're missing somebody?* Inferno had nineteen members—but he was only looking at fifteen people, including Captain Orvan.

“Four retirements,” Orvan sighed before he could ask. “Nothing like a two-thousand-foot free fall. We had five apostles, including me, who were equipped to deal with it, but we could only save fifteen between us. Three of the others didn’t survive the landing and were returned to the real world.”

“And what about the last one?” Fay asked.

“Them,” Orvan replied, pointing to the clouds. Fay looked very closely, and just for a second, he caught a flash of something out there. Silver skin that nearly blended into the billow. Whatever it was almost looked like a snake, except that it had four vestigial legs.

“Wh-what are those? Flying whales?!” Pearl said, her voice cracking.

They did indeed look like white whales swimming through the sky, drifting lazily using dorsal and pectoral fins so massive they looked like they belonged on an airplane. So Uroboros wasn’t alone up here. The god was accompanied by hundreds of these gigantic monsters.

“The Arcane Court calls them Leviathans. They’re small compared to Uroboros, but they’re plenty big from our perspective—more than thirty feet long. They’re just waiting for one of us to fall off Uroboros’s back,” Orvan explained.

“Wait. You’re telling me...”

“When prey comes dropping toward them, they start acting a lot less like whales and a lot more like piranhas. One of my people misjudged where they were going to land and wound up in the clouds, and, well... You can probably guess.” The captain gave a little shake of his head. “That’s the four retirements. The fifteen of us you see here are everyone who’s left. Any other questions?”

“No, I... I’m good,” Fay said. The looks on the faces of the other members of Inferno were so dark that he almost couldn’t get the words out. They were clearly on the verge of losing their will to fight already.

“Uroboros! We can’t do anything about Uroboros!” a male apostle groaned. There was a catch in his voice, perhaps inspired by the fact that even after

they'd survived a 2,200-foot fall, the game was still only just beginning.

"This can't be happening," someone else said. "Of all the gods to be dealt..."

Another girl choked back tears. "We've already got two losses. I promised myself I would put my heart and soul into the next match so I could retire without regrets even if I lost. And then this... This is what I get?!"

Uroboros was the worst of all gods. Even the Arcane Court recommended unconditional surrender. In other words, they wouldn't blame you for giving up. Even if an entire team forfeited on the spot, no one would blame them or punish them. Uroboros was just that despair-inducing an opponent.

Captain Orvan, though, clapped his hands and called, "Chins up, everyone! Don't forget, we're on stream. The world is watching us. I know Uroboros is bad news, but let's start by analyzing this game."

"How do we even do that?" One of the apostles bit his lip. "We're stuck on the back of an indescribably massive deity. What are we supposed to do?!"

That was the problem: Uroboros, the Endless God, didn't speak. What kind of game were they even playing?

"This is one unusual god. If it won't even tell us what kind of game this is, then maybe figuring it out is a game in itself?" Leshea cocked her head, her vermilion hair billowing behind her. She looked out at the white, fluffy clouds and the Leviathans drifting among them. "This playing field has to be a hint in itself. Uroboros prepared this sky and these clouds, so the game has to involve them somehow. I'm curious about those flying whales, too. Fay? What kind of contest do you think this god wishes to have?"

"Thinking about it..." Fay said. He sat down on Uroboros's back and ran his fingers along its scales, which were as hard as steel and as slick as glass. "For the moment, I agree with you, Leshea. This place must be our hint. Just like it was with Titan."

The playing field, Elements, changed with each game. Just like it had been full of buildings to facilitate Titan's Divinitag, the endless spreading clouds were probably related to some special gimmick Uroboros had come up with.

"Wait," Captain Orvan broke in. Fay and Leshea looked at each other,

surprised. “You haven’t seen it, then? The Arcane Court’s data?”

“What do you mean?” Fay asked.

“They *know* what Uroboros’s game is. They found out one time when an apostle with Telepathy wound up here.”

The apostle had successfully read Uroboros’s mind, if only a small part of it, and they had learned about the game...

Game: The Forbidden Word

Win Condition: Make Uroboros say *ouch*

Lose Condition: All apostles out

Hidden Rule 1: ????

**Hidden Rule 2: After fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can — the
— for a brief time**

“The Forbidden Word? What?” Pearl blinked, confused. “We’re supposed to make Uroboros say *ouch*? But this god doesn’t talk in human language...”

“It doesn’t talk at all. Just like we’ve seen.” Fay shook his head, looking around the gymnasium-sized space on Uroboros’s back where they were standing.

Some of the gods could speak human languages, but all of them had one thing in common: they looked humanoid. Uroboros, by contrast, was obviously some kind of snake or dragon. It was hard to even picture it speaking a human language, and there was no reason to expect it ever would.

“Besides, Pearl, what do you think would happen if a god this size were to exclaim ‘Ouch!’?” Fay said.

“It would...be very loud?” Pearl ventured.

“You bet. There’d probably be a sonic boom greater than a missile impact. All of us here on Uroboros’s back would be blown clean off.”

“Eep?!”

“In other words, this thing about making Uroboros say *ouch* isn’t meant to be taken literally. There’s some kind of trick to it.” Fay looked at the Inferno

apostles, at Captain Orvan's drawn face. "That's my guess, anyway."

"You're right about one thing—there's no record of this god ever speaking a human tongue." Captain Orvan nodded unhappily. "To be frank, we don't even know if we're supposed to make Uroboros say *ouch* with something physical or not. The gods are spiritual beings, after all. Their perceptions may not be the same as humans'." How did you make a god feel pain, let alone exclaim "Ouch"? No one had figured it out yet.

"I get it," Fay said, almost to himself. "You can know how to win the game without knowing *how* to win the game." He stood up, turned toward Leshea and Pearl, and pointed straight down. "That settles it, then. Shall we get to it?" he asked them.

"Y... Yes?" Pearl said.

"What do you have in mind?" Leshea asked.

"What else? We test every possibility." The two women looked perplexed. Fay gestured again at Uroboros's scales, which spread out like the ground beneath them. He lifted his foot. "Let's start with the most basic way of making someone say *ouch*!"

He brought his heel down hard on the scales, but there was just a dull *thud*; the god didn't so much as quiver. Fay, however, cried out in pain. "Eeyow-ow-ow! My foot... I can't feel my foot!"

"Um... You sort of brought that on yourself," Pearl remarked. She was looking at him with a cold expression.

"By all means, explain what you think you're doing," Leshea said.

"I dunno, I just thought maybe it would turn out gods get hurt when you kick them just like humans. I thought it was worth a shot."

"How could that ever work?! This is a god we're dealing with here! You're like an ant stamping on the back of an elephant!" Pearl said.

"Yeah, guess it was a bit much to hope for from a regular human."

"I can't believe—"

"So what if it wasn't a regular human?" Fay said, pointing.

“What?” Pearl looked in the direction he was indicating. The fifteen Inferno apostles had formed a circle and were trying Magical abilities and Superhuman psychokinesis, powers that had proven effective against gods in battle games.

“Even they’re trying a few things. Hey, watch out, Pearl—with all of them using their abilities at once, you’re gonna get hit if you stand there.”

“I don’t want that!” she yelped, the blood draining from her face. She activated a warp portal and was instantly out of the way.

At the exact same moment there was a *boosh!* and Fay found himself assaulted by a rush of air.

“Eek!” Pearl shrieked.

“Oops! You okay, Pearl?” asked Leshea, who had grabbed the other girl just before the wind pressure could blow her away. It had been all Fay could do to remain standing after getting caught right in the shock wave.

“Guess they’ve got a lot of talented apostles there,” he said. You knew this was an experienced team by all the power they created when they activated their abilities. Their timing was perfect, too; they were together in a way that bespoke long days of diligent practice.

But apparently it wasn’t enough.

“I knew it!” Captain Orvan was despondent. When the fiery blast had dissipated, Uroboros’s scales glistened just as brightly as they had before. Not a scratch on them—not even a bit of ash.

“What?! But I put everything I had into that!” cried one of the apostles in the circle.

“We couldn’t even strip off one scale,” someone else added. The blood was draining from their faces.

Fay, watching from a distance, turned to Pearl. “I guess humans are powerless here, huh?”

“Don’t ask me to second that! It’s depressing!”

“How tall are you, Pearl?”

“Huh? Uh, a-about five foot seven—but I’m still growing, okay?! I’ve gone up at least one-tenth of an inch since I measured myself last year!”

“They say Uroboros is six miles long—in other words, over thirty-one thousand feet.”

Pearl cocked her head like an inquisitive kitten. She didn’t seem to follow what Fay was thinking.

“I’m talking about size comparison. To a thirty-one-thousand-foot-long deity like Uroboros, what do you think a human not even six feet tall looks like?”

“Umm...”

“It would be like a human looking at something *400 micrometers* tall. Er, roughly,” Fay said.

“How big is that?”

“About the size of a large grain of pollen.”

“There’s got to be a more flattering comparison than that!”

“Maybe a tick, or some house dust?”

“That’s even worse!”

“I thought making it concrete would be easier to understand.” At the same time as he tried to soothe the pouting Pearl, Fay pointed at Uroboros’s back. “My point is, it doesn’t matter what we do here. This thing’s not gonna notice.”

There were countless pollen grains and dust particles in the air, but humans didn’t specifically take note of them. To Uroboros, the humans were probably no more disturbing than that.

“Oh! Okay, Fay...” Leshea, who had been standing with her arms crossed, raised her hand. She looked innocent—like she had some very special bit of mischief in mind. “Let me try next!” She made a fist as Fay, Pearl, and all the apostles from Inferno looked on.

“Wh-whoa, hold on, Leshea! You can’t unleash your power here!”

“Hitting a target this big is gonna be fun!” Leshea exclaimed.

“No, no, think about the rest of us—”

It was too late. Before Fay could stop her, and before Pearl could escape into a warp portal, there was a tremendous *Boom!* as Leshea's punch exploded against Uroboros's back. The air whipped into a vortex, and the shock wave even sent some of the clouds scudding away.

Uroboros's back shook violently, like the ripple of a great wave was passing through it; Fay and the others were tossed up in the air like they were on a trampoline.

"Did Uroboros just—?"

"Th-that was amazing... But you overdid it!" Pearl cried. "Help! Help me, Fay!"

"Pearl, grab on to the scales!" Fay shouted as he and Pearl tried not to slide off the deity.

That was when they heard an "Oops." One of the members of Inferno lost their footing. Their teammates couldn't reach them in time, and they went tumbling from Uroboros, falling straight down toward the clouds. One of the Leviathans that had been waiting so patiently for prey gobbled the apostle up, and in a matter of seconds, they turned into light and were sent back to the real world.

Another apostle down. Inferno now had fourteen members remaining, plus Fay and his two companions.

There was a long moment as the quaking subsided. Everyone, including Fay and Pearl, stared silently at the former god, half angry, half exasperated.

"I—I didn't do it!" Leshea shook her head furiously, letting her vermilion hair billow again in what she probably hoped was a dramatic display. "It's not my fault—that was a force of nature, inevitable! Don't be deceived; this is all because of Uroboros!"

"That was a man-made disaster just now," Fay stated.

"No, it was definitely an act of a god," Pearl replied.

"Our teammate...", one of the Inferno people mumbled.

"Oh... Ohh...", another sobbed.

Oppressed by the glares of everyone around her, Leshea finally gave in. "I'm

really sorry... That was... That was my fault.”

“A heartfelt apology from the Dragon God herself. There you have it.” Captain Orvan heaved an even bigger sigh than usual and turned to his deflated apostles. “I feel bad for Nash going over the side like that, but Lady Leoleshea’s said she’s sorry. Listen up, everyone, right now we need to focus on winning this game.”

“Captain Orvan.” It wasn’t a member of Inferno who spoke up, but Fay. “I know you saw that.”

“Saw what?” Orvan said.

“When Leshea hit Uroboros, there was a change. But it sure didn’t make a sound.”

The name of the game was the Forbidden Word; they were supposed to make Uroboros say *ouch*. But if even Leshea couldn’t get a squeak out of the god, what hope did the apostles have? It made one thing clear: this game involved something other than brute force.

“This is clearly a battle of wits,” Fay said. “What does it mean to make a god say *ouch*? Uroboros wants us to use our heads!”

“Yes! Exactly, Fay!” Leshea ran a hand through her hair excitedly. “That’s just what I was trying to find out! Do you see what I was trying to do now, everyone? Er... Even if I did accidentally overdo it a little?”

“That ‘accident’ almost destroyed all of us!” Pearl exclaimed.

“Pearl, Leshea, come over here,” Fay said, gesturing to the young women. When they came to him, he pointed at the distant clouds. “There must be something at the far end of this god’s gigantic back. Aren’t you curious what it is?”

“Yeah!” Leshea said.

“We’re going to walk all that way?!” Pearl cried at the exact same moment.

The two of them, evidently, had precisely opposite reactions to Fay’s idea.

Pearl elaborated her concerns: “You want us to walk all the way to the end of Uroboros’s back?! That’s so far away this god has its own horizon! It just keeps

going!”

“Not more than six miles, it doesn’t,” Fay responded. “Let’s say we dropped right in the middle of Uroboros’s back. That would put us three miles from either the head or the tail. We could walk there in an hour.”

“Oh... I guess you’re right. It doesn’t sound so bad when you put it that way.”

“Right?”

Fay set off walking, Pearl in tow. He didn’t know whether he was bound for the head or the tail, but if they were going to end up investigating them both, it didn’t make much difference.

Doesn’t matter how long it takes. I doubt there’s a time limit on this game. It’ll just go on until we collapse and give up.

Two hundred and seventy-eight hours—that was how long one apostle had held out against Uroboros before they had surrendered. Fay knew that because it was in the Court’s records as the longest single game ever played.

“I guess we should mentally prepare ourselves for a long fight,” he remarked.

“Fay, look! Uroboros’s Leviathan servants are tracking our every move!” Pearl called, pointing at the clouds. As the apostles moved along Uroboros’s back, the Leviathans moved with them, like predators tracking their prey.

“That’s because they think we’re their food,” Fay said.

“But I’m not tasty!” Pearl wailed, tears beading in her eyes. She grabbed on to Fay’s arm as hard as she could and wouldn’t let go. He wasn’t offended by that—the problem was that in her panic, Pearl had shoved her chest right up against his arm...

“U-um, Pearl...?” Her two luscious, ripe melons were pressed firmly against him, yet they felt so soft. Fay was turning red with this fresh, new experience. “Pearl, just calm down. You don’t have to be so scared—we know that as long as we’re on Uroboros’s back, the Leviathans won’t attack us. They only go after you when you fall.”

“Y-yeah, but...” She still didn’t let go. Behind her, Leshea was beginning to make a very, very frightening face, but Pearl was so busy clinging to Fay that she

didn't notice. "Ohhh, they're so scary! Don't let go of me, Fay, please!" Pearl said.

"Uh, Pearl, I think there's something a million times scarier than a Leviathan right behind you. I think she might have murder in mind..."

"...Hmph." Leshea snorted, a dry, emotionless sound. "So I see you're no different, Fay."

"Different from, uh, what?" he asked.

"*All* young men. You always prefer *developed* girls. It was the same in the ancient magical era. They said that a young woman with a stupendous chest had powers of attraction that outdid even the gods' magic—the greatest sage in the kingdom told me that!"

"Was this guy really a sage?!"

"And you, Pearl!"

"Eep?!" Pearl squeaked as Leshea grabbed her by the scruff of the neck as if she were a kitten.

"Weren't you going to show your best side?" Leshea said.

"Wha?"

"Are you happy letting those people back there see you cry and cower?"

The apostles of Inferno were trailing them about thirty feet back. Some looked beaten down and tired, but the faces of others—including Captain Orvan—still shone with determination.

"You said they lost because you screwed up. If you spend this entire game weeping and hiding, they'll just think, '*Oh, that's Pearl; she's the same as ever!*'"

"W-well, you... Um..." The plump-faced young woman bit her lip. "You're right about that, Leshea. Y-yes, you're right! This isn't the time to be squeaking like a mouse!"

"Are you ready to go kick some butt?" Leshea asked.

"I'm so ready!"

"Are you ready to run?" Leshea pressed.

“I’m so r— Wait, run? Run where?”

“Wherever we’re going! It’ll either be the head or the tail.” Leshea grinned. She grabbed Pearl by the wrist. “You want to see what’s up there, right? Well, why waste time walking? The faster we go, the sooner we’ll get there!”

“What? I—I wouldn’t really mind taking our time, personally...”

“Here we go! On your mark! Go!”

“Oh noooo!”

In a matter of moments, Leshea had dragged Pearl over the horizon.

“Heeey...,” Fay called after them, the members of Inferno giving him odd looks. He sighed. “Maybe our team doesn’t coordinate so well after all.”

Fay walked along Uroboros’s back, which extended out of sight, past the cloud-covered horizon.

“Oh, it’s Fay! Fay, over here!” Leshea called, waving cheerfully.

Pearl was collapsed on the ground beside her, exhausted. “I can’t...run... anymore. Didn’t we just end up waiting for Fay, anyway? Why did I run so hard?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Is this the end?” Fay asked.

“Uh-huh. And just look, Fay. If *that’s* not suspicious, I don’t know what is!” There was a spark in Leshea’s eyes and she pointed back behind herself.

It was Uroboros’s tail, bent almost at a right angle and stretching upward, so that even when Fay craned his neck, it looked like a gigantic wall.

“Not very subtle, is it? Look at those spikes,” Fay said. Uroboros’s tail had the same scales that covered the rest of its body, but it was also studded with thorn-like spikes. “Nice find.”

“I know, right?”

“I feel like we’re finally getting somewhere. Those spikes are intriguing, but what’s *really* interesting to me is how the tail is silver.”

Everywhere else Fay had walked on Uroboros’s body, its scales had been a dark violet—but on the tail, and the tail alone, the scales were silver. The longer

Fay looked at it, the more unmistakably it seemed like a message: *This thing is special!*

I'm sure this is a hint Uroboros is giving us, he thought. Like maybe the tail is its weak point?

And then there were those spikes. No matter what form they took, from the needles on a hedgehog to the thorns on a rose, spikes were a self-defense mechanism that said DO NOT TOUCH!

"Did you investigate this thing at all, Leshea? Touch it or climb on it or anything?"

"Not yet. I wasn't sure about the best way to approach it," she said, shaking her head. "It's almost *too* strange."

"Yeah, I've got the same feeling. It's so obviously key that it's like, what's the secret behind this secret?"

Fay and Leshea stood with their arms crossed, thinking, when Pearl, shaking off her exhaustion from the run, suddenly lunged to her feet and shouted, "I've got it! Fay, I've figured it out!"

"Yikes, don't scare me like that! What did you figure out?"

"Hoo hoo hoo!" All Pearl's timidity seemed to have vanished without a trace. She bounded up to the tail, grinned triumphantly, and announced, "I've found the secret to victory! I know how to win the game that Uroboros, the Endless God, is playing!"

"You, uh... You have?"

"Allow me to reveal it to you. Please direct your attention to this tail. Observe how the tail alone is covered in silver scales, not to mention these prominent spikes. Suspicious! Very suspicious!"

"Uh, Pearl, I'm getting a bad feeling about this. Just hold on a—"

"And! *And!*" Fay's placating voice fell on deaf ears. Pearl, pointing to the upright tail, only grew more excited. "The goal of this game is to make Uroboros say *ouch*. Clearly, then, the tail with its distinct coloration is Uroboros's weak point, and the spikes are there to ward off its enemies, namely us! Eminently

logical, wouldn't you say?"

Yes, they knew that. Fay and Leshea had both figured that out within about two seconds of seeing the tail—and they both knew what it meant.

I like Pearl's confidence, though. Maybe there's a chance she's actually figured out something Leshea and I haven't seen, Fay thought. He swallowed heavily but looked straight at the golden-haired young woman. "Okay. Tell us. How do we beat this god?"

"Gladly! The secret..."

"Yes?"

"...is to attack the tail! By striking this vital point, we can cause Uroboros to howl in pain and surrender. There is no doubt in my mind!"

"Uh-huh." The disinterest in Fay's response was lost on Pearl, who was much too taken with the brilliance of her own strategy.



“Fay? Leshea? What do you think? I daresay it’s the discovery of the century!”

“Pearl, may I ask you something?” Fay said.

“Anything at all!”

“Has anyone ever told you that you kind of get wrapped up in an idea?”

“What?” Pearl’s eyes went wide. “How did you know? Yes, my parents and my older sister say that to me all the time.”

“Ah...”

“And the grannies in the neighborhood, and the supermarket checkout clerk, and the postman—they all say, ‘Oh, Pearl, you’re such a ditz!’ They seem very concerned.”

“Wait, so you have, like, a reputation?!”

“Did you know my nickname when I was little was ‘Assumption-Autopilot Girl’? Kind of rude, huh?”

“Kind of exactly right. Er...never mind.”

Somehow, it all made sense. Pearl may have seemed calm and grown-up, but in actuality, she was even more subject to her whims than Leshea. Thinking about it, Fay realized that even the single-mindedness with which she’d insisted she *had* to retire had been a sign of the same habit.

“So you’re the type who doesn’t stop once you get an idea in your head. Maybe it’s better to let you take a crack at it rather than me trying to explain, then.”

“Huh? What’s that, Fay?” Pearl asked.

He waved his hands vigorously. “Oh, uh, nothing. Talking to myself. Sure, Pearl, let’s test your idea.” He pointed at Uroboros’s tail with its shining silver scales. “Maybe this is Uroboros’s weak point. So go for it, Pearl. Try and take this thing down—Leshea and I will cover you.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” Pearl took a bow and then put up her dukes, taking a stance like a boxer. She looked up at the towering wall that was Uroboros’s tail. “Fay, Leshea—just watch me! You’ll always remember the moment Pearl

Diamond, sixteen years of age, took down the undefeated god! I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that this could be the zenith of all human history!"

"Awesome. Go for it," Fay said.

"And so I shall!" Pearl replied.

"Oh, yeah. Word of advice, Pearl? Once you hit Uroboros, I think you should run away. Like, fast."

"Sorry...?"

"You know, just in case. Anyway, keep that in mind."

Just then, they heard a bevy of footsteps approaching—the other members of Inferno, finally catching up with them. Their faces were bloodless.

"C-Captain Orvan! I knew it!"

"They want to attack Uroboros's tail. Look, it's Pearl!"

"Hey, Pearl, wait!"

"Oh! Captain Orvan," Pearl said, glancing back. The team had so studiously ignored her since she'd shown up that the captain calling her name was enough to get her attention. "Captain Orvan! U-um, please, watch this. This is where I make up for that mistake six months ago! This is when I claim victory over Uroboros!"

"No! Stooooop!" Orvan cried, but he was too late to hold back his former teammate.

"Hacha! You're already deaaaad!" Pearl launched her fist at what she assumed to be Uroboros's weak spot. There was adorable little *pompf* as she connected.

Uroboros's tail immediately began to glow, the silver scales flashing with what looked like electricity, the light concentrating in the spikes.

"Huh? Does... Does this mean we win?" Pearl asked.

"Ahh... Yeah, this is about what I expected," Fay said, letting out a long sigh and backing away. "Say, Pearl, if someone suddenly punched you in the head,

how would you feel?”

“Angry, I guess?”

“Right. Well, gods get angry, too. And you know what happens when you upset a god...”

The light collected at the tip of Uroboros’s tail. It was only too clear what was about to happen.

“Pearl, I’d recommend you duck.” Leshea pushed on Pearl’s head and forced her onto the ground.

Then came Uroboros’s counterattack.

Hundreds of beams of light flew from the god’s tail, indiscriminately frying apostles that were in the way, slicing through nearby clouds, and even slamming through the occasional unfortunate Leviathan. If they’d been in anything resembling the real world, the beams would have sliced through skyscrapers like a knife through butter. Just imagine what they did to humans. It wasn’t pretty.

“No! Guys!” Captain Orvan cried as Uroboros’s beams showered his subordinates, who were annihilated without so much as the chance to scream. They simply became light and were sent back to the real world.

Four down. Inferno had ten people left, along with Fay, Leshea, and Pearl.

“I...I don’t understand. I was sure that was how to win the game...,” Pearl said.

“It’s a trap,” Orvan growled. He had a scratch on his cheek—luckily for him, he’d only been grazed by one of the beams. If it had been a direct hit, he would have been back in the real world just like his teammates. “Teams who have faced Uroboros in the past have tried everything. That tail is *designed* to entice humans to attack it—then the second you do, everyone gets blown away by those beams.”

“N...No... I was so sure...” Pearl was shaking her head, tears brimming in her eyes. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone! I felt so confident I could help this time. You... You know I’m telling the truth, right, Fay?”

Fay didn’t say anything for a while.

“Fay?” Pearl asked.

When Fay broke his silence he said, “All right, that settles it. There’s definitely something special about this tail. If it’s some kind of gimmick deliberately designed by Uroboros, then maybe those beams—”

“How can you act so detached right now?!” Pearl exclaimed, jumping up and rushing at him. “I can’t believe you, Fay!”

“H-hey, what? I felt like I was on the verge of a real insight there...”

“You *knew* Uroboros would retaliate when I touched its tail!”

“Well, yeah.”

“Gaaaah! Then why didn’t you tell me?! Then those apostles wouldn’t have —”

“Pearl, calm down,” Fay instructed. He took the young woman by her quivering shoulders and looked into her red face, and then, carefully enunciating each word, he said, “If you hadn’t tried it, I would have.”

“If you think that’s comforting, you’re wrong!”

“We had to know. This is just my personal theory, but I don’t think previous data about the gods’ games means anything. So some apostles tried it once? You can’t go based on that.”

“Why not?”

“Because the gods follow their whims,” Fay replied.

The gods were spiritual beings with nothing but free time on their hands. Their thoughts were far beyond human thoughts. Why should they politely play the same game each and every time? Titan’s Divinitag—a game no one had ever seen before—was a prime example.

“What are the rules? What are the victory conditions? Figuring that stuff out is part of the game, part of the battle of wits, right? We have to try every possibility for ourselves. Besides, why should we assume the data is accurate when no one’s ever defeated this god before?” Fay said.

Pearl was silent for a long beat. Fay went on, “That’s why we have to get in

there and try things. Even if one of those beams had hit me, I wouldn't have blamed you." Pearl caught her breath. She saw that Fay was really speaking, not to her, but to the Inferno apostles behind them. "Humans can never achieve a perfect victory in the gods' games. Sure, it might be a trap. You have to accept that. But that means the most important rule is that you don't attack teammates who make a mistake."

The other apostles were quiet; the members of Team Inferno looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Fay looked up at Uroboros's tail, making sure he had the other apostles' attention. "Captain, you said this was a trap. That the scales were colored silver specifically to cause humans to attack it and provoke retaliation."

"That's right..."

"I've got a different take."

"What?" Orvan said in surprise.

"I'm not sure Uroboros would really have any fun with a trap like that. I mean, think about it. This god is off pretty much every conceivable chart—do you think it would really get pleasure from tricking a few humans? I don't think Uroboros is that petty."

There had to be some point to it. Uroboros, the Endless God, had set up this obvious gimmick with its tail, as if it were saying: *This is how we'll play.*

"Okay. If it's not a trap, what is it?" Orvan inquired.

"Part of the game," Fay said. "Remember what we know here."

Game: The Forbidden Word

Win Condition: Make Uroboros say *ouch*

Lose Condition: All apostles out

Hidden Rule 1: ????

Hidden Rule 2: After fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can — the — for a brief time

Fay was particularly interested in Hidden Rule 1.

“Here’s my thinking: I think the rule is, *Attack Uroboros’s tail and get counterattacked*. It’s not a trap. I think we’re on the right track—that we’re doing what Uroboros means for us to do.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” shouted an apostle with wounds all over his arms. “Look at my arms! Did you not see those beams of light? There were hundreds of them! One wrong move, and we would all have been annihilated!”

“But it was just four people,” Fay stated.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re right, I feel bad for those four. But if Uroboros had really been out to get us, I think there would have been a lot more casualties.”

It wasn’t a trap. The beams might be inordinately powerful, but they didn’t exactly seem to be aiming at the humans.

It would strain belief if every one of those hundreds of beams missed every human around, but as is? It’s clearly one step in the process. Uroboros made it look like a trap, but only took out a few people. The apostles who drew the proverbial short straw could only be considered unlucky.

“Are you insane?” a female apostle demanded. The rest of Inferno seemed to agree with her. “You don’t seriously believe that this is part of the path to besting Uroboros, do you? You’re just saying whatever comes into your head, trying to cover Pearl’s ass!”

“No, believe me, I’m very serious about this.”

“In that case, Fay, tell us...” Inferno’s captain, Orvan, looked pained but spoke up anyway. “If attacking the tail is what we’re supposed to do...what do we do next?”

“Work out Hidden Rule 2, of course.”

“And may I assume, then, you have some kind of guess as to what that rule is?”

“Not a clue.”

“What?! How can you sound so relaxed about it?!”

“It’s okay to take our time. There’s no time limit on this game. And I don’t think the tail will bother us as long as we don’t bother it,” Fay said coolly, sitting down on Uroboros’s back. He pulled one leg up to his chest and relaxed the other with a slight bend in his knee.

Okay, think. Let’s assume attacking Uroboros’s tail is Hidden Rule 1. So Hidden Rule 2 must have to do with what you’re supposed to do after that.

Hidden Rule 2 stated that when you had fulfilled Hidden Rule 1, you could “—— the —— for a brief time.”

“So what is it you can do?” Fay wondered out loud. It must be something they could do from Uroboros’s back. “Like, maybe our Arises get a power boost and then our attacks can affect Uroboros? What do you think, Leshea?”

“If you’re right, we would be most likely to see it in Pearl. Pearl? Come here,” Leshea said.

“Er, yes? What is it, Leshea?” Pearl looked right at her. “Something to do with me?”

“Well, let’s find out.” Leshea worked fast; before Pearl quite knew what was going on, Leshea was holding her head and gently pinching her cheek, *poink*. She let it go, then repeated the process several times, checking how it felt. “Hmm. We may be in the superior spiritual realm, but you feel real enough. Your skin is healthy and elastic; you’re obviously staying hydrated.”

“Umm... What does pinching my cheek prove?” Pearl asked.

“The best gameplay can only be manifested in the best health. By the soft, responsive quality of your skin, I’d say that today your health...is excellent! You pass, Pearl! So now you can help us tackle the mystery of this game!”

“Umm.....”

“However, there’s no observable change,” Leshea added seriously, finally releasing Pearl’s cheek. “Since you’re the one who fulfilled Hidden Rule 1, I thought maybe something would have happened to you.”

“Huh? Something like what?”

“Remember what Fay said—that attacking Uroboros’s tail and being attacked

back is the right thing to do. Since the next rule says that when you do that, you can ‘— the — for a brief time,’ it implies that there must be something you’re able to do now that you couldn’t before, right?”

“Um, maybe, but...” Pearl looked studiously at her hands. “I don’t think there’s anything different with me.”

“Try to be sure. Can you suddenly fly through the sky, or run at two hundred miles per hour? Anything. Like, you suddenly feel like you could take a fifteen-hour nap!”

“I don’t think that last one is quite like the others!”

“You don’t feel anything at all?” Leshea pressed.

“Nothing!”

Fay decided to intervene. “Okay, Pearl, how about a test, then?” Still sitting, he looked up at the golden-haired girl, then pointed at his feet—at Uroboros’s back. “Hit Uroboros’s back the same way you did its tail. Or kick it; it’s all good.”

“Huh...?”

“Maybe, thanks to fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can damage Uroboros now or something. Then you could make it say *ouch* and we would win!”

“Oh! That definitely sounds plausible!” Pearl crouched down, screwed up her face, then slowly clenched her fist. “Watch closely, Fay. This time I, Pearl, shall finally defeat Uroboros!”

“Go for it. I think you’ve got a real chance this time.”

“Yaah!”

Kerack.

When Pearl’s fist connected with Uroboros’s iron-hard scales, her wrist made a very unpleasant noise. The blood drained from her face just before she howled: “Eeeyooowww!”

“No good, huh? I thought there was about a 0.2 percent chance, but I guess Uroboros isn’t going to make it that easy on us.”

“The only thing that did was turn my hand bright red!”

“Yeah, it’s swollen because you punched a god who’s as hard as iron.”

“You could have at least warned me!”

“Remember how bad I stubbed my toe when I kicked this thing earlier? Anyway, we’ve taken another step forward. We just have to think of something else.”

As he sat there, Fay closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Pearl asked.

“I’m thinking. I’m tired of looking at those clouds, though, and I thought maybe closing my eyes would make me feel better.”

Hidden Rule 1: Attack Uroboros’s tail, suffer a counterattack

Hidden Rule 2: After fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can — the — for a brief time

What was it you “could” do? The most likely possibility seemed to be “attack the god.” That was why Fay had hoped that Pearl’s punch might get the deity to say *ouch* and give them the victory.

But she didn’t even scratch it. Which means Hidden Rule 2 has to do with some totally different ability. He just didn’t have any idea what it was. Uroboros, the Endless God, simply floated along. The Elements seemed to consist of nothing but clouds as far as the eye could see, with the occasional Leviathan swimming among them.

The stipulation about “a brief time” is weird, too. Why would it be limited? Think! Fay squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated. *Uroboros invited us humans into this Elements. So what does it want us to do here? What possibilities haven’t we tried yet?*

They’d walked all this way along Uroboros’s back. They’d tried attacking its tail and been subjected to the counterattack. What else was there? What choices were left to a bunch of humans the god happened to allow to ride on its back?

He kept searching. He kept imagining new possibilities and then dismissing them. Fay didn’t know how much time had passed. He just kept his eyes shut,

his mind going full throttle.

One thing.

There was just one thing, one possibility, that kept sticking in Fay's brain.

He opened his mouth. "Is it possible—"

"Forget it," one of the male apostles spat, setting off a murmur among the members of Inferno. "Some game! This is just a sadist screwing around with humans for its own pleasure!"

"I agree," said another girl. "Captain, it's been more than ten hours since we entered this arena. We're already well past the average time spent on one of the gods' games, and all we've done is suffer casualties."

"Yeah, I'm with her. I don't think we're going to get anywhere here."

"Captain, I say it's time we thought seriously about forfeiting."

They had snapped—the absurd game had finally pushed them beyond the limits of their endurance.

"Captain!"

"H-Hold on a second..." Captain Orvan said, quailing under the scrutiny of his apostles. There were people with him who had already logged two losses. If they hit three, they would lose the right to participate in the gods' games and have to retire. In fact, the captain himself was one of them. With his two defeats, he was cornered. Surrender here would be practically suicidal.

"Why... Why did we have to draw this stupid god?" an apostle said, biting her lip. Why did they have to be so unlucky? They just wanted to Clear the gods' games, so why did they have to be subject to the despair of finding themselves pitted against the undefeated deity?

Unhappiness like that led to only one thing—finger-pointing and blame-placing. A desperate attempt to make oneself feel less terrible by foisting responsibility on anyone in a weaker position.

"If only we hadn't lost back *then*," someone said, prompting a murmur among the members of Inferno. Their piercing gazes settled on their former teammate—Pearl.

“It’s all because *somebody* dragged us down six months ago.”

“Yeah. If we hadn’t been wiped out, I’d still be at one loss. I could take this loss to Uroboros with room to spare.”

“U-um... Look, I... That was...,” Pearl stammered.

“You think apologizing can take our loss away?” one of the disciples demanded.

Pearl gasped, her face steadily darkening as her former teammates’ barbs lodged in her mind.

“It must have been your jinx that landed us with Uroboros. Why would you even follow us like that?” someone remarked.

Pearl didn’t say anything. It didn’t seem like she could. Even if she had been able to muster an answer, it would only have poured oil on the fire. Pearl, knowing that, looked away and bore the assault in silence. Yet her failure to respond only intensified the verbal barrage.

“*You* were the one who—”

“———*Shut up.*”

Two words cut through all of it. The words unleashed by the former god, Leshea, caused silence to descend almost instantaneously.

There was no longer any hint of the adorable young woman on Leshea’s face. Instead there was a *deity*, who stared down Inferno with eyes so intense the team couldn’t look upon her. Flames, the same vermilion color as her hair, shone faintly all around her. They all suspected that if even an ember from that fire were to touch them, even the strongest apostle would be incinerated on the spot.

“Let me tell you what *I* see. I see a bunch of people who seem to *enjoy* tormenting a young woman.”

The members of Inferno shared a collective gulp.

“You’re all eyesores. If you hate being here so much, then begone. I will be more than happy to return you to the real world by my own hand.”

“H... Hrrgh?!”

“Well?”

“H-hold on a second! What’s a former god doing standing up for a human, anyway? It’s not fair!” one of the apostles burst out. He pointed at Pearl with a grim smile on his face. “This is between her and us. It doesn’t have anything to do with you. Our team was annihilated because of her, and that’s a fact!”

Leshea didn’t answer.

“Standing up for someone like that is unnatural. It’s—”

“Idiot.” Leshea’s interjection was accompanied by a very exasperated sigh. “Huh, fine. I don’t have it in me to be angry at somebody who’s missing the point so badly.” Her voice was back to normal, and the flames around her had died, ebbing away with her rage. “Let’s be clear about something: Pearl hasn’t officially joined our team yet. So that’s not what this is about.” Leshea pointed at Pearl, who was still looking thoroughly confused. “Anyway, just look at this girl.”

“Uh... me?”

“You have to know I would never, ever go out of my way to defend someone whose chest was so much bigger than mine, right?”

“That’s no fair, bringing my chest into it!”

“And it looks even bigger with her shirt off! She’s hiding something unspeakable under her uniform, this girl!”

“Stop stop stop *pleeeeee* stop that’s enough!” Pearl wailed.

“But you’re getting in the way of the game, and that’s why I told you to be quiet.” Leshea raked her fingers through her vermilion hair. “I don’t give a fig about your beef with Pearl or whatever. I was upset because I’m trying to take this game seriously and you’re sending it down the tubes by bringing all these complicated feelings into it.”

Long pause from everyone.

“This game is exciting! Why not enjoy it?” said Leshea.

“Enjoy it?” the apostle repeated, his mouth hanging open, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You’re having fun? You’ve got to be kidding. I mean, we don’t have the first clue how to beat this game. It’s just been one iced apostle after another!”

“You think so?”

“Of course I do! There isn’t a single other person here besides you who hasn’t given up all hope of ever—”

“Sure there is.” Leshea grinned with absolute self-confidence, as if she had been waiting for him to say that. “I know at least one person who’s sincerely enjoying this game. Right, Fay?”

Fay, still sitting on Uroboros’s back, opened one eye and looked at her. “Just a little longer...”

He’d stayed quiet all throughout Inferno’s attack on Pearl, and not because he was afraid to get involved. It was because he hadn’t heard it. He’d blocked out all external information, focusing his awareness entirely on cracking this game.

“It’s gonna come to me. Real soon,” he said. He looked up, fixing his eyes on Uroboros’s tail towering over them, looking at it so hard he barely seemed to blink.

Yeah... The tail, that’s gotta be the secret. We know it counterattacks anyone who touches it, but there’s something that bothers me—those beams are too powerful.

Anyone other than himself or Leshea who got hit by them would be fried on the spot. The beams were more than enough to take out anyone, whether their Arise was Superhuman or Magical. It was total overkill. It was like using a cannon to smash a gnat.

So what was the implication?

“Maybe there’s some point to the massive beam assault besides just being overkill,” Fay suggested.

The beams had only scorched four apostles; the rest had gone flying off into the endless blue sky with its ocean of clouds. Fay gazed into the distance.

Finally, he said, “I think I see!” He clenched his fist, nodded vigorously, and jumped to his feet.

“Wh-what do you see, Fay? What’s come over you?” Pearl asked, but the young man didn’t answer. Instead he looked at the dithering members of Inferno.

“Captain, I apologize in advance. I think we’re going to have a few more casualties,” he said.

“What?” Captain Orvan asked, looking at him.

Fay heaved a sigh. “I’m going to antagonize Uroboros again.”

“Don’t be a fool!”

“But in exchange, I promise you, we’ll win this. Leshea and Pearl and I. So anyone who gets sent back to the real world, just keep your eyes on the livestream. Right to the bitter end.”

“F-Fay? What are you planning?” Orvan inquired.

“Leshea!” Fay shouted, returning to the vermilion-haired young woman. He pointed at the silver tail towering over them. “Do it again. Punch the crap out of that thing!”

“Wh-what—?” Orvan cried.

“This time I’ll *really* let loose!” Leshea, her eyes shining, slammed her fist home against Uroboros’s tail.

There was an impact. Uroboros’s back jolted violently. Light, a hundred times more of it than when Pearl had hit the god, collected in the tail, and a second later thousands of beams of light erupted from the spikes. They immediately wiped out the members of Inferno standing on Uroboros’s back, while many of the beams went flying off into the sky. Some even brought down Leviathans drifting nearby.

And then there were three. Leshea, who had provoked the assault, and Fay and Pearl, whom the Dragon God had protected.

“Wh-what in the world did you do?! We’re the only ones left now...,” Pearl exclaimed.

“I knew it,” Fay said, shivering as he watched the scene unfolding before him. “Pearl, over there. The gap in the clouds.”

“Huh? I don’t understand...” The golden-haired girl looked at him, aghast, as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Her voice trembled as she spoke. “Wh-why are the Leviathans attacking Uroboros?!”

That was exactly what was happening: the Leviathans, who had been drifting placidly among the clouds, were now attacking the god, one after another. Their bites didn’t so much as leave a mark on it, but that didn’t dissuade them in their crazed assault.

“I thought they were supposed to be under Uroboros’s control...,” Pearl said.

“Oh! So that’s it.” Leshea clapped her hands. “They’re neutral monsters!”

That is, third parties, who helped neither the humans nor the gods.

They weren’t Uroboros’s servants after all. The god and the Leviathans just happened to exist in this space together; nothing more.

“Huh?!” Pearl exclaimed. “But... But that...”

“I told you—you can’t rely on past data. You have to explore a god’s game for yourself.” Fay was so excited that he was shaking. “Think about it, Pearl. Uroboros didn’t say a single word about the Leviathans being its servants, did it?”

“Huh!”

It was just that apostles in the past had seen the monsters floating through the sky and immediately assumed Uroboros must be controlling them—but they had been wrong. The Leviathans simply attacked people who fell into the clouds because they were invading their territory. And at this moment, by contrast, Uroboros’s attack had made the Leviathans view the god as an enemy.

“We just didn’t notice earlier. First we were too freaked out by the counterattack, and then Inferno was fixated on their casualties.”

“Y... Yes, they were that...” Pearl bit her lip. She saw—saw that Fay had essentially made himself the villain for her sake. Directed the team’s anger at himself. “You knew that if we provoked Uroboros again, there would be more

losses... But someone had to do it. So you decided to—”

“Hey, forget about it.” He patted Pearl on the shoulder, then pointed at the Leviathans among the clouds below them. “I’d say it’s about sixty-five feet to that Leviathan. Looks like you’re up.”

“Um... How am I up?”

“You know the saying, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’? Well, let’s jump down there!”

“Wait! Hang on—!”

Fay grabbed Pearl’s hand, then went charging full-speed off Uroboros’s back. It was like leaping off a cliff—and of course, there was nothing below them. Only an endless, spreading sky full of clouds.

“Time for you to show us what you can do, Pearl!”

“This is completely and totally, absolutely outrageous... *The Wandering, activate!*” Pearl shouted. Instantaneously, a golden ring appeared in the air. Teleportation: an ability that linked any two points A and B within a hundred feet of each other via a warp portal. You passed through point A and wound up at point B.

Point A was now directly in front of Fay and Pearl—and point B was on the back of a Leviathan.

“We’re going through!” Pearl said. Fay’s vision blurred, and a second later he and Pearl were on the Leviathan’s back. Unlike Uroboros, however, the Leviathan jolted and bucked, making their footing extremely unsteady.

“Ohhhh no, no, no, I’m gonna fall off!” Pearl cried.

“Hold tight. The turbulence is only going to get worse. Leshea?”

“Hope I didn’t keep you!” Leshea said, landing on the back of another Leviathan. She didn’t need to warp; she simply jumped sixty-five feet.

“Fay, look at Uroboros!” Pearl called.

“Yeah, here it comes,” Fay replied.

Something was happening. Uroboros, which had been as steady as a

mountain until the moment Fay and the others had jumped to the Leviathans, had begun a great rotation in the air. It had begun to move.

There could hardly have been a clearer sign that they were on the right track in tackling this game.

“That’s amazing... Fay, you’re absolutely amazing!” Pearl said, trembling at the sight. Her voice quivered with excitement. “We actually cracked Uroboros’s game!”

Game: The Forbidden Word

Win Condition: Make Uroboros say *ouch*

Lose Condition: All apostles out

Hidden Rule 1: Attack Uroboros’s tail, suffer a counterattack

Hidden Rule 2: After fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can control the Leviathans for a brief time

“We must be the first people in the whole world to have gotten this far!” she cheered.

“Yeah. But let’s celebrate later,” Fay said. Uroboros was wheeling around, coming after the Leviathans Fay and his friends were riding on. It was like a car chase through the clouds. “Guess the tutorial’s finally over.”

“Tutorial?! You mean there’s *more* we have to do?!”

“We still haven’t figured out how to make Uroboros say *ouch*.”

“Oh...” Pearl swallowed hard. It was true: even after all this, after getting so far, the end of the Endless God’s game was nowhere in sight.

1. Survive a 2,200-foot free fall.
2. Uroboros’s back is impervious to any attack.
3. Discover the “counterattack system” in Uroboros’s tail.
4. Realize that said system is not a trap.
5. Draw the Leviathans into the game using the counterattack.
6. The enraged Leviathans begin to attack Uroboros.

7. The Leviathans are not Uroboros's allies but neutral monsters.
(This is particularly important to notice.)

8. Jump onto the Leviathans and fight together.

Even this was more than humanity had learned in its entire history—but it was still just the tutorial. Uroboros had prepared a truly fiendish game for its human challengers.

"It sounds like...fun!" Pearl said.

"Yeah. The best," Fay responded, nodding at her as they rode their Leviathan through the clouds, Uroboros in hot pursuit. "You can see it now, right, Pearl? No matter how hard the gods' games might be, they aren't impossible. And that goes for this one, too. It contains cleverly hidden hints that tell you how to proceed if you're paying attention. It's a perfectly calculated riddle game. All of which means..."

"...that Uroboros has even more fun in store for us after this!" Leshea said with a wink as she surfed up alongside on her own Leviathan. "First, we have to find this god's *real* weak point. Uroboros made the tail so obvious, and it turned out to be the trigger for this gimmick, but that means it must have a different vulnerability somewhere."

"Yeah. So as for where we start looking—"

"The most suspicious place, obviously." Leshea nodded at him.

Their Leviathans began dropping altitude, diving down below the clouds.

"You humans say not to show your stomach to just anybody, right? Well, we were on Uroboros's back—so how about we try its stomach?"

"Yeah, let's head down and see what's on the other side."

They emerged on the underside of the almost suffocatingly thick clouds to discover themselves looking directly up at the bottom of the floating Uroboros. Fay, Pearl, and Leshea all goggled.

Pearl screamed. "They're...eyes! Two bright red eyes, right there!" She pointed, her voice scratching.

In real-world terms, Uroboros's eyes looked something like the biggest jewels

anyone had ever seen, two massive ruby spheres positioned in the god's face. The only reason the humans knew they were eyes was because as their Leviathans approached, the huge orbs rolled around to focus on them. Looking at them. Taking in the humans coming ever closer.

"Nice to finally meet face-to-face," Fay said. From the moment the eyes had turned toward him, he'd felt an indescribable pressure from them, a force that dried out his throat and told him that this being was on a higher level, different from humans in every conceivable way.

For at that moment, the eyes radiated undisguised hostility.

"Fay! Is it j-just me, or are these Leviathans heading for the eyes?!"

"Yeah, and we're supposed to do the same thing. This time I'm sure."

It was a hint from the god: this was the reason that endless sky of clouds had been populated with so many Leviathans. It was to lead them to the god's weak point.

"So... So this is it, then!"

"Yeah. We're supposed to take out those ridiculous eyeballs to make Uroboros say *ouch*."

Dozens of Leviathans formed a sort of flock, rotating quickly as it gradually closed in on Uroboros's eyes. Then they picked up speed, making a beeline for the ruby crystals.

"It's... It's so bright..."

"This is bad! Stop!" Fay called.

The flash came the next second, Fay ordering his Leviathan to halt just as both red eyes lit up as bright as the sun.

A ruby beam, fired from the eye not under Leviathan attack, lanced through the blue sky. Several nearby Leviathans exploded, the shock wave forcing several others away and downward through the air.

All of this occurred while Fay and the others looked on.

"B-b-but why did that happen?!" Pearl cried.

“Uroboros was never going to let us win that easily. Those eyes are security systems, each protecting the other.” Enemies who approached the right eye would be attacked by the left, and if you got too close to the left, the right would hit you. “How’s it look, Leshea?” Fay asked.

Leshea had been trying to sneak closer to Uroboros from the far side from Fay and Pearl’s Leviathan, but she had to back out of the attempt in a hurry. “Hmm... I don’t think we can go around. The eyes lock on to any enemies,” she said. “And even if we do get close, it doesn’t look like it’s going to be simple.”

She was watching the remaining Leviathans continue to attack Uroboros. The two eyes couldn’t keep up with an assault from three different directions, and one of the creatures got past the crimson beams, slamming into the right eye. Two more followed, this time hitting the left.

But nothing happened. The eyes were supposed to be Uroboros’s weak point, yet no matter how hard the Leviathans hit them, they didn’t leave so much as a scratch.

“Man, the difficulty level’s through the roof on this one,” Fay sighed as he watched the scene unfold. “Even the Leviathans aren’t able to smash those eyes. I guess we need a powerful apostle—mage or Superhuman—to make the move.”

“S-so what do we do, Fay? Neither of us has an offensive Arise! We need to let Leshea handle this!” Pearl exclaimed.

“Easier said than done,” Fay replied. “We need a way to keep the eyes from noticing her.”

“Is there one?”

“There has to be. There can’t *not* be.”

He gritted his teeth. He could think of one possibility—a ploy that would demand the precision to thread the eye of a needle, and borderline miraculous timing. *But it would be incredibly risky. If we screw it up, all three of us will be out on the spot.*

Were there any alternatives? He just needed to stay calm; there was a right answer here. There had to be. That was what he told himself, anyway—but

then, as if to undermine his confidence, the Leviathan they were riding started to howl, then began to buck like a wild horse.

“It won’t... It won’t listen to me anymore! Fay, I think we just found out how brief ‘briefly’ is in Hidden Rule 2!”

“What a time to run out of time!”

Their control of the Leviathan was slipping away. When the creature returned to being an entirely neutral monster, no longer beholden to either god or humans, they would almost certainly be flung off into the blue.

They were out of time.

Leshea was the first to seize the initiative: “Fay, I’m going on ahead!”

She kicked off her Leviathan’s head, leaping into the sky—toward the next Leviathan, and then the next. She used them as if they were a staircase in the sky, bouncing from monster to monster, avoiding Uroboros’s beams as she made her way toward the eyes.

“Ahh, crap! No more time to think, huh? All right, let’s do it, Pearl!”

“D-Do what?!”

“Here’s the plan...” What Fay said next, his idea of last resort, was just a few words, for every instant was precious—and those words were all but drowned out by the howling of the Leviathans as they came to.

“Y-You can’t be serious!”

“It’s the only thing we can do. And we’d better have perfect timing—Uroboros isn’t going to let us get away with anything less.”

You could exhaust your wits against this opponent, use every bit of skill and cleverness you had, and it still might not be enough.

“The gods smile on those who make their own miracles,” Fay stated. “Right, Uroboros?!” This was the end of the line; it would divide the winners from the losers. Clinging to the increasingly agitated Leviathan, Fay managed to shout, “This is it! Climb!”

There was a voiceless cry and with a lurch, the Leviathan stopped moving.

“We just need another forty seconds,” Fay said. “Fight for us, please! I know you want to stick it to Uroboros, don’t you?”

The Leviathan flapped its wings. With Fay and Pearl still on its head, it and the other remaining Leviathans began to make a great circle around Uroboros, gaining altitude as they headed for the eyes.

“That’s perfect; keep going,” Fay praised. All they could hear was the wind, a roar that enveloped them as they rose in a beeline for their opponent.

The god, of course, saw them coming.

“The eyes are glowing again, Fay! It’s going to launch another attack!”

“Take care of our friend here, Pearl!” Fay called.

As soon as he saw the glow, the warning that the beam attack was about to come, he jumped off the Leviathan, grabbing onto another that was gliding just overhead, and from there to yet another one.

Light sped from Uroboros’s right eye, piercing not Pearl, but the first Leviathan Fay had jumped to.

I figured—the god’s defense mechanism prioritizes targets closest to the eyes. And it targets humans before Leviathans.

Fay was the nearest human, and so, knowing that Uroboros was going to be gunning for him, he’d jumped from one Leviathan to the next, avoiding the beam by a hair’s breadth.

The god’s left eye was next. Recognizing that the right had missed, Uroboros rolled to leer down at Fay. The next attack was coming. He wouldn’t be able to dodge it. Fay felt sweat run down his back; the knowledge that he was cornered chilled him to the bone. Then, suddenly, he was looking up at a young woman with vermilion hair.

“I got its attention,” he said.

“I like your work!” Leshea replied, and with one final leap, she arrived at the god’s eye.

Fay had been the bait—evading the right eye’s attack and garnering the left’s attention. He’d only earned a few spare seconds, but it was enough of an

opening for Leshea to clench her fist and launch herself at Uroboros's defenseless right eye.

"Okay, here I go! No holding back!" Her fist flew, striking the ruby sphere with the force of a comet.

She was rewarded with a great *gloop*.

"What?!" Leshea exclaimed. The feeling of the eye under her fist was overwhelmingly...*not*. It had undergone an instantaneous state change, transforming from a bright red crystal into a viscous jellylike substance that absorbed and diffused the force of Leshea's blow. "Huh... Maybe I was 0.01 second too slow?" Leshea gave a little smile. She hadn't been swift enough. In the fraction of an instant before her blow had connected, Uroboros had noticed her.

There were two flashes, two tremendous lights coming one from each eye and flying at Leshea.

"Hrm," she said. "Who makes a girl do something like this?" Her clothing had all but burned away, leaving her pale skin exposed, but her eyes were shining. "Fay, I made an opening."

"Yeah, I got you."

Leshea dropped down as Fay went up, powered by a kick off the head of his Leviathan. Higher, higher, ever higher. He was aiming for the right eye. There was a scratch there; the god hadn't been able to completely negate Leshea's attack.

One more should do it. Just one more hit, even with mere human strength.

"It comes down to this, Uroboros!" Fay shouted.

Light began to gather in the god's eyes again. Which of them would be faster? Would the human fist shatter the god's eye? Or would the god's beam sear the human first?

Pearl and Leshea watched with bated breath, but they weren't the only ones. In the real world, all the apostles of Inferno were watching, along with Miranda. And thanks to the broadcast from the Arcane Court, people around the world

were transfixed by this ultimate battle with the undefeated god.

“Here goes!” Fay brought up his fist. Uroboros’s eyes sparkled. Their timing was utterly simultaneous, and yet everyone watching could tell that simultaneous wasn’t quick enough.

A human fist couldn’t even reach the speed of sound—but the god’s beam would move at the speed of light. Traveling 900,000 times faster than Fay’s strike, Uroboros’s attack would blow him out of the sky.

Everyone watching shared a single thought: *Even this isn’t enough*. Uroboros was practically cornered, and yet the fangs of the undefeated god had not been broken...

“Hey—bet I really had you going there for a second, huh?”

The boy who would challenge the gods, Fay Theo Philus, wasn’t making a fist. Instead he was reaching out, his pointer finger extended, pointing at the right eye that was about to vaporize him, undaunted in the face of the enemy.

“Time to compare answers, Uroboros!”

The beam. The great light, spreading out toward the defenseless Fay.

“Move me!” Fay shouted.

“The Wandering, activate!” Pearl cried. A shimmering golden warp portal appeared, Fay vanishing through it. He teleported, appearing on Pearl’s Leviathan.



The beam from Uroboros's right eye, now bereft of its target, went flying off...
...directly into Uroboros's left eye.

"That's the strategy for you, isn't it, Uroboros? Let the god bring down the god."

That's right: Leshea's attack on the deity's eye had been merely a feint, a way of buying time so Fay could get closer. And even that was only in order to draw Uroboros's fire, with Pearl's Teleportation ability waiting in the wings.

"You've had your fun," Fay said, pointing at the god. "Today, I think we win."

The god's massive ruby-colored eye shattered into thousands of pieces with a tremendous *riiiiiing*, a noise that somehow sounded like the angels' chimes even as it roared like the bell to end all bells.

And then, a great howl issued from Uroboros.

It was the first time in history human ears had ever heard such a sound from the Endless God, a roar that rolled and echoed through the clouds.

That day, people around the world watching the gods' games celebrated. The stream from the branch office of the Arcane Court in the Sacrament City of Ruin recorded an almost unprecedented number of viewers. Not just apostles, but ordinary citizens from every corner of the globe had seen the battle.

A god had been defeated—and not just any god, but the Endless God, Uroboros. The undefeated deity whom not even the greatest sages and geniuses of the past had been able to subdue.

"Am I really seeing this?" Miranda asked herself. Her throat was dry from nervousness; she felt woozy from a lack of oxygen, since she'd practically forgotten to breathe as she watched the monitor. And yet she couldn't tear her eyes away from the stream. Neither, naturally, could the other employees watching with her. Neither could anyone outside. Hundreds of people were gathered to watch the gigantic monitor mounted on a skyscraper downtown, never mind that it was the middle of the night.

"We always called it one of the Three Great Impossibles. I all but gave up hope when they drew Uroboros, but... Ha-ha! They did it! They won..."

There was a tremendous cheer—miraculously, just as Miranda was coming back to herself, everyone in the room and those in the city outside spontaneously broke into an earsplitting round of applause. She imagined the same thing was happening in cities around the world.

In fact, they had just received word that the sudden dramatic influx of viewers from every corner of the map had crashed the servers at headquarters.

“Phew... I’d love to bask in the triumph, but the chief secretary needs to get right to business. Can’t let all the good work Fay and his friends have done go to waste.”

She threw herself up off the sofa. It was time to start drafting a manual: people would keep playing the gods’ games, which meant that eventually someone else might draw Uroboros, too. They had to analyze Fay’s strategy, optimize it so any apostle could use it. Then they had to spread the knowledge around. That was what the Arcane Court did.

“It’s not going to be easy, of course, but...at least it seems like it might be rewarding.” Miranda turned to one of her subordinates and spoke quickly: “Put on some coffee, will you? I don’t think we’re going to be getting much sleep tonight.” Then she looked up at the ceiling and said to herself, “I wish I could see the look on Inferno’s faces right now!”

Silence reigned in the Dive Center in the first basement of the Ruin office, where something less than twenty apostles were staring holes through a monitor. As Team Inferno, including their captain, Orvan, watched, the Endless God gave a great roar.

It was perfect. A flawless victory. That was the only thing you could call it. What struck them more than anything, though, was that while Fay and the Dragon God Leoleshea had executed much of the strategy, it was their former teammate who had made that final upset possible.

“Hah... I can’t believe this.” Looking up at the golden-haired young woman on the monitor, Orvan couldn’t hold back a smile, even though he felt like he might simply collapse. “Pearl won. And you stand or fall together in the gods’ games... Meaning that since we were there, we’re considered to have beaten Uroboros, too.”

Their names would be connected with this historic defeat of the Endless God—a tremendous honor. None of them had imagined that Pearl would make up for that one loss in a fashion quite so spectacular as this.

“I give, Pearl. You beat me fair and square... Amazing work.” Captain Orvan sighed audibly and gave a resigned shrug of his shoulders, making sure his teammates got the message. “You saw it, folks. If she owed us anything, she’s paid it back now—with interest, I’d say. A little much, maybe.”

And although he didn’t say it out loud, Captain Orvan had a thought: that perhaps those three, together, might actually be able to achieve what no one ever had. Maybe they could Clear the gods’ games.

3

Meanwhile, in the superior spiritual realm of Elements, where an endless blue sky was filled with billowing clouds...

“Clothes! Leshea, your clothes! H-here, I’ll give you my jacket!” Pearl said.

“Hm? Oh, don’t worry about it. They’ll come back when we get back to the real world.”

“But *I’m* embarrassed, here!”

Pearl, meeting Leshea when she landed back on the Leviathan, was being very insistent about the former god’s state of dress. Specifically, the fact that she was stark naked. Uroboros’s beam had burned all Leshea’s clothes clean away.

“The livestream is broadcasting us all around the world right this second! And that includes your...your nakedness...”

“That’s okay,” Leshea stated.

“You’re supposed to be embarrassed! Fay! Fay, you’re not allowed to look over here yet, okay?!”

“Sure, no problem,” Fay replied, keeping his back to Leshea and Pearl. As it happened, he didn’t need Pearl to tell him not to turn around. He couldn’t take his eyes off what was occurring in front of him at that moment.

The god's great, scarlet eye had shattered into thousands of shining pieces of crystal, which were now floating in the air.

They caught the light and shimmered, like countless rubies hanging in the sky. It was almost as if the blue expanse had been bathed in twilight.

Suddenly, there was another huge roar.

"Whoa, what?" Fay said. Uroboros was howling again.

"Wh-what's that?! Is something *else* going to happen?" Pearl questioned.

"Don't tell me the game's not over..."

"That's a bad, bad joke, Fay! Don't say that! We can't go on. Leshea is naked and I'm at my limit..." Pearl sounded as sincere as if she were praying.

As Fay and the others watched from their mount, something came shooting among the thousands of shards of crystal.

A silver-haired young woman in a kimono.

She was smaller and looked even younger than Pearl. Fay had never seen her before, but he instinctively knew who she was. One of her eyes was closed, but the other was a ruby, and it shone with the light of curiosity.

This was the god's spiritual body. In the same way Leshea had incarnated herself as a human being when she became interested in humans, any god who was interested in people could project a shadow of itself like this, although it happened only rarely.

"Uroboros?" Fay asked.

With a voiceless sound, the silver-haired girl floated closer. She stopped just in front of Fay and studied him for a moment. Finally, she cocked her head and said, "*Huh. I guess I lost. Was my game too simple, I wonder?*" Her voice was disarmingly sweet. She pursed her lips as if annoyed, but even that was somehow charming. "*Not bad, tiny humans. Not bad.*"

"...Tiny humans?"

"*I'm willing to consider today my loss. To be fair, you only completed one of the three patterns I prepared—the head and tail routes are still waiting. But*

okay. Today, I guess I lose. It can't hurt every once in a while."

Talk about condescending. Thanks to her voice and appearance, though, she totally lacked a god's typical imposing dignity.

"Let's play again sometime! I'll think up an even harder game for next time." The girl smiled. Then she reached into the folds of her kimono. *"Ah, yes. I will give this to you. A piece of mine eye."*

True to her word, she produced a shard of Uroboros's eye, perhaps one of the countless pieces floating in the air, and held it out to Fay.

Pearl practically jumped a foot. "Ahhhhhhh! I c-can't believe it! Is that...a God's Diadem?!"

A reward for defeating this god. A tick on your victory tally wasn't the only thing you could win in these games. Apostles who gave the gods a battle they found especially satisfying could receive special rewards.

God's Love: Granted for a victory achieved without a single casualty.

God's Diadem: Granted for defeating an undefeated god for the first time.

This was the latter. By triumphing over Uroboros, who had boasted an undefeated record until that moment, Fay received a God's Diadem.

"'Precious' doesn't even begin to describe this reward! Apostles all over the world challenge high-difficulty-level gods in hopes of getting something like that," Pearl said. She swallowed heavily.

This wasn't just any reward, either. This was a prize for defeating the Endless God, Uroboros, whom Arcane Court outposts throughout the world had given up on.

"Y-you have no idea how valuable that is...", she remarked.

"Huh. Yeah, first time I've gotten one of these," Fay replied, taking the crimson shard from the young woman's hand. The girl might be a so-called "spiritual body," but her hand was strikingly soft. "Let me guess—it's not just a rock, is it?"

"Hee hee! Your face says you are curious what kind of amazing power this shard possesses, tiny human." The corners of the silver-haired girl's mouth

turned upward in a grin. *“Of course it’s not just a rock. It possesses the most incredible power of all!”*

“What’s that?”

“Whenever you are carrying mine eye, you will be guaranteed to ‘draw’ me. So you can play with me anytime you wish. Hope to see you again.”

The Eye of Uroboros—a God’s Diadem. Holding it when you Dove into Elements would ensure that you wound up with Uroboros. You would never encounter another god. And Uroboros had already declared that she was going to dream up an even more demanding game for their next meeting.

Fay didn’t say anything.

Pearl didn’t say anything.

Leshea didn’t say anything.

All three of them were silent, their faces growing distinctly concerned. The god in front of them, however, didn’t seem to understand why.

“Er... What? You’re not happy? Didn’t you hear me? You can play with me anytime you want! And I’ll have something even tougher for you next time. Ooh, next time the game is going to be a hundred times harder than—”

“Who would wanna play a game like that?!” Fay exploded.

“I beg you to reconsider how difficult you make your games!” Pearl said.

“And I’m not coming here just to get my clothes burned off every time!” Leshea added.

Their angry shouting resounded around Uroboros’s Elements.

Vs. Uroboros of the Endless Growth—WIN

The Forbidden Word Game

Time Elapsed: 11 Hours, 17 Minutes, 29 Seconds

Win Condition: Make Uroboros say *ouch*

Lose Condition: All apostles out

Hidden Rule 1: Attack Uroboros's tail, suffer a counterattack

Hidden Rule 2: After fulfilling Hidden Rule 1, you can control the Leviathans for a brief time

Dropped Item: Eye of Uroboros (Dropped on: Mythical Difficulty)

4

Sometime later...

Specifically, seven days after that first victory over Uroboros. The Arcane Court had successfully converted Fay's strategy into a manual for others to use. This inspired other apostles to boldly challenge Uroboros...

...and all of them were annihilated.

"I don't understand it, Fay!"

"Uh, what's that, Chief Secretary?"

"We borrowed the Eye from you, right? And we've been throwing teams of apostles at Uroboros since then. And yet..."

"Yes?"

"Uroboros is bigger than ever! Instead of six miles long, it's sixty! And the Leviathans aren't neutral monsters anymore; they're completely under Uroboros's control!"

"Ah..." Fay, confronted with Miranda's lament, clapped his hands. "Uroboros really did raise the difficulty. Losing must've stung."

Even deities had their pride. No one liked to lose, even gods.

"It's not such a big deal, right?" Fay said. "It sucks to lose, but that's where the fun is."

"How do you figure?!"

"That's just how games work."

Win, lose—but play again. That was the true joy of games.

🏆 Class/Results 🏆

FAY

Rank V
5 wins 0 losses
(3 wins in first stint; Giant God Titan; Endless God Uroboros)

LEOLESHEA

Rank II
2 wins 0 losses
(Giant God Titan; Endless God Uroboros)

PEARL DIAMOND

Rank II
2 wins 1 loss
(1 win in first stint; Endless God Uroboros)

Pointers on Rank from Chief Secretary Miranda



What's that? You want to know how we calculate apostles' ranks?

Rank falls under the purview of the Arcane Court, of course. The court is always tracking what happens in the gods' games—as, naturally, are the tens of thousands of viewers watching our streams.

Anyhow, the quickest way to determine an apostle's rank is to glance at their hand. Each time they play in a god's game, the god carves the apostle's win or loss into their palm.

For example, our young friend Pearl has a small scar shaped like a II on her right hand, and a I on her left—in other words: two wins, one loss. It's a way of making sure apostles don't go around exaggerating their achievements.

You might be interested to know that Fay has a V on his right hand and nothing on his left. Why is that, you ask? Because Fay is undefeated so far! There's nothing to put on his left hand.

If you'd like to know more, check in again later.

Player.5

Here Come New Challengers!

Gods' Games We Play

1

Defeating Uroboros, the Endless God, was said to be one of the Three Great Impossibles in the world—but just about everyone everywhere had witnessed it being accomplished on livestream.

Even here, far from Fay's Sacrament City of Ruin.

Even here, in the Sacred Spring City of Mal-ra.

The thousands of people gathered watching the monitor mounted on the side of the building split the air with cheering as they watched this unprecedented, historic event.

In the Mal-ra branch office of the Arcane Court, however, a young man in a black coat observed Fay and his group on the screen silently. He had watched the defeat of Uroboros, keeping a sleepless vigil all night to observe the more than ten hours of intense battle.

"This Fay... His gameplay certainly is superb," the imposing young man said with, of all things, a smile. And then he practically howled: "Most amusing!"

His name was Dax Gear Scimitar, and he was known as the most distinguished rookie apostle from Mal-ra two years ago.

"Fay! It seems you and I are destined to face each other. I, the most distinguished rookie of the year before last, and you, that of last year. We'll find out which of us is truly the best recent rookie!" Then he snapped, "Kelritch!"

"Yes, Dax?"

“The day of reckoning is near. Make certain you strengthen yourself in preparation.”

“Yes, Dax.”

The responses, calm and cool, came from a tanned young lady, a fellow apostle, standing next to Dax. Her reserved demeanor almost made her seem like his assistant—but she was watching the monitor with her head cocked questioningly. “This Fay... Does he please you?”

“Yes, to the utmost!” Dax nodded, thrilled. “Finally. Finally, I’ve found a man worthy of facing me in a game.”

“Hmm...”

“What’s the matter, Kelritch?”

“I’ve heard you say that before. But when you finally squared off against them, I remember how you sighed and said they had failed to meet your expectations.” The young woman named Kelritch looked disappointed. “Dax... Don’t get your hopes up, okay?”

“This one is different. He’s on another level. This guy is the real deal.”

“You’re sure about that, just from one stream?”

“Trust me, I know!”

“He’s an apostle from another city. There’s no guarantee he’d accept your challenge.”

“Your boorishness is showing, Kelritch.”

“What?”

“Someone who truly loves games would never run away from a challenge to play.” Dax flipped back his coat and began striding through the building, his fist clenched. “I’ll be waiting for our showdown, Fay. It will come, and I’ll be ready!”



Fay was the hero of the Sacrament City of Ruin; Dax, the hero of the Sacred Spring City of Mal-ra. But far away from them both, in the south of the World Continent...

...was the Myth City of Hekate-Scheherezade.

It was a massive urban center that floated several miles above the surface. At its very center, in the great hall in Arcane Court headquarters, there was a girl. She was looking quietly up at a monitor, observing the moment when, for the first time in human history, the Endless God Uroboros was defeated.

“He’s a strange human,” she mused. “I thought he only won because Leoleshea, a former god, was with him, but no...”

Silence. There was no response from anyone. And why should there have been? The girl was alone in the huge hall.

“Fay Theo Philus. This makes him five and oh in the gods’ games.”

To take victory five times in battles of wits against the gods—it was overwhelming. Far beyond anything that could be explained as mere good luck.

“This human...Fay... What *is* he?” the girl wondered aloud.

He had no special background. Nothing in the materials sent over from the Arcane Court office in Ruin suggested he had been specially trained in games from a young age, say. There was, though, one thing entered in the “Special Remarks” section, and it did relate to when he was young: a girl he referred to only as “Sis” had taught him to play.

Fay himself claimed that this was the source and foundation of all his abilities.

“Sis? Who in the world could that be?”

Silence again. And then:

“It amounts to nothing.” The girl shook her head. “For only *we* will be allowed to Clear the gods’ games.”

She was Saint Heleneia: leader of the world’s most powerful team, Mind Over Matter (motto: “The Holy see where all souls gather”). She stood for a moment in the center of the great hall, then vanished as if diffusing into light.

Tutorial

This Is the End of the Tutorial

Gods' Games We Play

The afternoon sun flooded the fifth-floor café in the Arcane Court building.

“So you see how it is.”

“R-Really, Captain, that’s plenty! Anyway, I’m the one who was trying to make amends for screwing up six months ago...” Pearl Diamond waved her hands anxiously at the man sitting across the table from her—a superior; indeed, the captain of her own former team, Inferno. Orvan. If someone had told her a few days before that he would be here bowing his head to her, she would never have believed them. “You treated me to lunch and everything... It’s more than enough for me...”

“Er, sure.” Orvan looked at her, feeling somewhat awkward. “I’ve spent the last few days talking to the team. They all want to apologize to you.”

“Seriously, sir, you’ve done plenty!”

“We sort of thought you’d feel that way. That’s why I came alone for today.” Orvan gulped down his water. It was (for the record) his fourth glass. “I understand it’s going to sound like I’m just covering for myself, but I want you to know something: I never blamed you for that mistake, or for the fact that we lost that day.”

“You didn’t, sir?”

“No. I was going to tell you the next day, but you’d locked yourself in the girls’ dorm and wouldn’t come out. You wouldn’t even answer the phone.”

“I’m, er, very sorry about that!” This time it was Pearl’s turn to apologize. “I was s-so sure I could never face any of you again... I expected you to tear me

apart, Captain...”

“I wish you would get your head out of your assumptions,” Orvan said, but he was smiling. “There’s something else you should know. The vacancy you left? I never filled it.”

Pearl didn’t immediately say anything.

“If you ever felt like it, we’d be happy to have you back on the—”

“Thank you, Captain,” she said, gently interrupting him. She bowed her head deeply to her former leader. “I understand how you are, so I can tell you this honestly: I’ve found the people I want to work with.”

“I figured.” A rueful smile flashed across her former captain’s face. He’d known—he’d known she would turn him down, and why. Known she’d found the team she would join. “Maybe you’d consider joint exercises with Inferno, someday? Or even a practice game? If there’s any way we can help you, just say the word.”

“I really appreciate that,” Pearl replied. Then she stood up and bowed again before she left the café, Orvan still smiling as he watched her go.

Elsewhere on the grounds of the Arcane Court office, a wide courtyard was bathed in sunlight, but it was chilly and warm at the same time. The city of Ruin wasn’t far from the Great Northern Cold-Wave Zone, and the freezing air from that area intermingled with bursts of heat from the sun.

“Leoleshea?” Fay called as he walked around the courtyard.

“Hm?” The girl he was talking to was lying in the grass, looking up at the clouds.

“Chief Secretary Miranda gave her official permission. She said we can start out with three people, you and me and Pearl. Even if she hopes we’ll find a few more for our team.”

“That’s good news. I knew Miranda was a sensible person.” Leshea sat up, her vermilion hair covered in blades of grass. (Which, unfortunately, she either didn’t notice or didn’t care about.) “All right, then! That’s settled—let’s go play some gods’ games!”

“No dice.”

“What?! Why?!”

“None of the Divine Gates’ mouths are open. One opened a couple of days ago, but they filled up on players right away. The secretary says we’re not the only ones who are eager for a challenge.” Those games were, after all, the best stimulant around. Plus, watching Fay and his team smash Uroboros had gotten everyone fired up.

“What are we supposed to do, then?!” Leshea cried.

“Make a reservation and wait, I guess. We need to come up with a team name, anyway.”

“Bah.” Leshea hugged her knees. Just as Fay was thinking she looked like nothing more than a pouting child, her face brightened again. “Well, it’s all right. Now I can enjoy waiting. I’ve got an idea, Fay—how about we play games in my room every day until a statue opens? And Pearl, too, naturally.”

“So, what, we get together at nine every morning or something?”

“Silly! You’ll both stay over, of course. I’ll permit you one or two hours of sleep a night. Caffeine pills and energy drinks will do the rest. I’ll make sure to have a whole selection!”

“You’re scaring me again!”

“You know something? I’m really excited about the future.” Leshea gave him a bright, innocent smile. The former god, now young woman, looked up at the shining sun and said, “When I told them to bring me this era’s very best player, I didn’t know who I would get. It turned out to be you.”

Fay didn’t say anything.

“You’re exactly what I expected—and so much more,” Leshea declared, still looking at the sky. She just glanced toward Fay, her vermilion hair framing her face. “And there’s someone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“This girl you’re looking for. I know you wouldn’t talk that way about just anybody. She must really love games, and I’d be thrilled to meet her.”

“When I find her, I’ll introduce you. You’re kindred spirits, no question.”

To his own surprise, though, Fay found it difficult to picture that moment. When he tried to imagine his vermilion-haired Sis meeting Leshea, he could only summon a hazy, indistinct image.

She was someone else. A different person. She had to be—how else could it work?

He was silent for a long moment.

“Fay?” Leshea asked.

“Huh? Oh, it’s nothing. Just thinking.” He waved away her inquisitive glance. “Anyway, that can wait until after everything’s over.”

She gave him another questioning look.

“Because we’re just getting started, right?” Fay reached out to help pull Leshea up off the ground. “We’d better enjoy ourselves, or what’s the point? Let’s have some fun matching wits with the almighty gods!”

Leshea was lost for words.

“I wonder which god we’ll get matched up against next. Aren’t you excited to find out?”

“I sure am!” Leshea exclaimed. Her vermilion hair billowed behind her. She gripped Fay’s hand and jumped to her feet, then turned toward him and spread her arms wide.

“Come on, Fay! Let’s play our hearts out—again!”



Afterword

Bring me this era's very best player.

Those simple words, spoken by a former god, are where this entire story starts.

Hello, and pleased to meet you! I'm Kei Sazane, and this is my book, *Gods' Games We Play*. How did you like it?

In this story, all-knowing, all-powerful gods challenge humans to very serious but also extremely fun battles of wits. I'd never tried writing in the wit-battle genre before, so it was a real treat for me to work on this. Gods and humans both hate to lose, so they throw themselves into their games against each other. I hope I can continue to depict that world in a fun and engaging way.

Many people have helped me bring this story to you: The pro-gamers on the front lines of gaming competitions. (This humble author is a big fan!) The many accomplished authors, editors, illustrators, and manga artists within the light novel industry.

All the booksellers and bloggers who are alert to light novels.

Everyone in the online-video community, on YouTube and beyond.

My editor K-san, who shepherded this project through every stage of its life; and my illustrator Toiro Tomose-sensei, who took on this job despite a busy schedule. Tomose-sensei knocked everything out of the park, from the color illustrations on the cover and foldout to the black-and-white interior pictures, blessing this book with literally god-tier illustrations.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart!

More than anyone, though, thank you to those who picked up this book! Thank you so much.

Okay!

As the epilogue to Volume 1 suggests, Fay and Leshea (and Pearl, of course!) have only just begun to play. I'm expecting to release Volume 2 sometime in the spring. You can expect Fay to face off against the gods' overwhelming army!

Hope to see you in Volume 2!

Kei Sazane

The twilight of winter

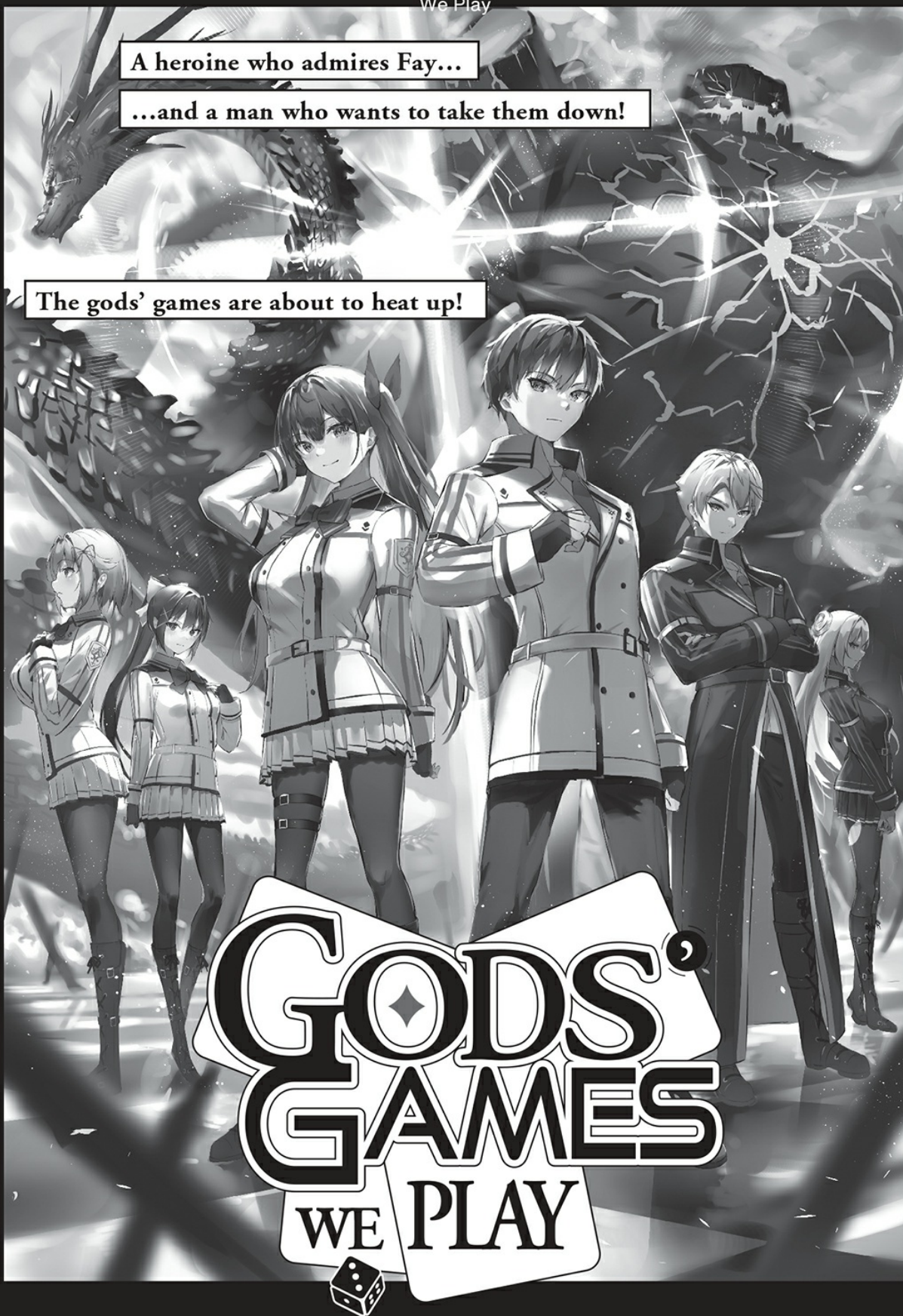
N E X T

| NEXT |
Gods' Game
We Play

A heroine who admires Fay...

...and a man who wants to take them down!

The gods' games are about to heat up!



Volume 2 – Coming 2023!

N E X T

NAME **Fay Theo Philus**

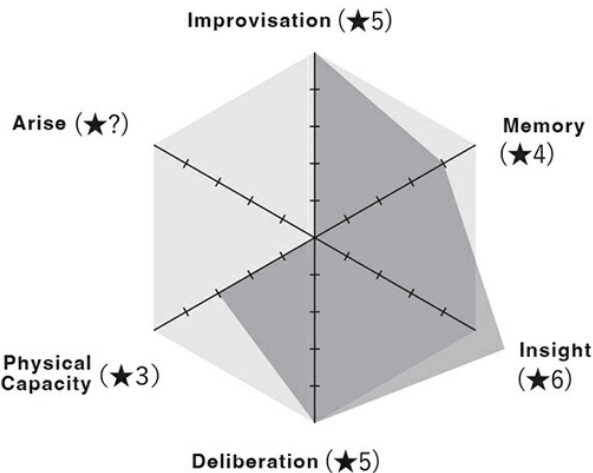
PROFILE

Seventeen years old. Made an apostle last year, he promptly achieved three straight victories in the gods' games, making himself one of the most accomplished—and famous—rookies in recent memory.

ARISE: May Your God

Fay is the only person in history known to possess this Arise. Even he doesn't know which god gave it to him or why.

SPEC



Physical Capacity★3

Fay has the physical abilities of a completely ordinary teenager (★2). His Arise is technically Superhuman, and so is considered to contribute to his physical capacity, but the fact is that it doesn't really enhance his abilities in that area, so he merits only a ★3 ranking here. The average apostle with a Superhuman Arise has a ranking of ★4.

Insight★6

This is Fay's true strength, more than even he knows. The source of Fay's strength is his ability to intuit ways to approach games that even the game masters themselves—the gods—didn't anticipate. This isn't an inborn ability; rather, it comes from playing with "an older girl with red hair" whom Fay knew when he was young.

NAME **Dragon God Leoleshea** (Her full name may be even longer...?)

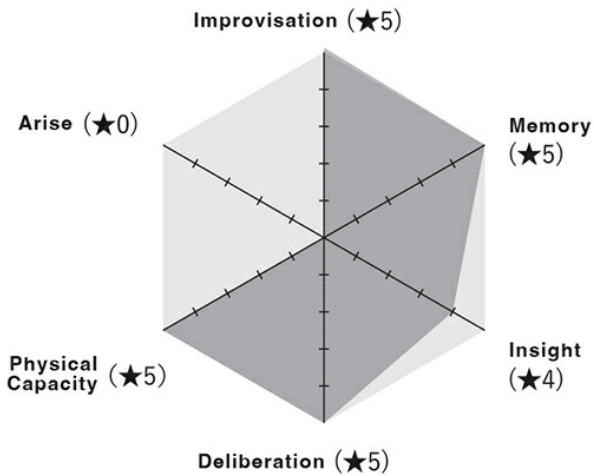
PROFILE

Age: unknown. A “former god” excavated from the permafrost belt. Participating in the gods’ games with Fay in order to regain her godhood.

ARISE: None

Being a former god, she possesses unlimited access to powers far more potent than an Arise.

SPEC



Physical Capacity★5

She has a god’s body, meaning she can go without sleep and has no need of food or water. Mage apostles can pummel her with spells and Superhuman apostles can hit her as hard as they like, and nothing leaves so much as a scratch on her. She seems nigh invulnerable... But then there are those rumors of Leshea casting a sidelong glance at Pearl (or at least at a very specific part of her anatomy) and mumbling sadly that there are “even more incredible bodies” than her own...

Arise★0

According to Leshea, she lost her proper powers as the Dragon God when she became a human.

NAME **Pearl Diamond**

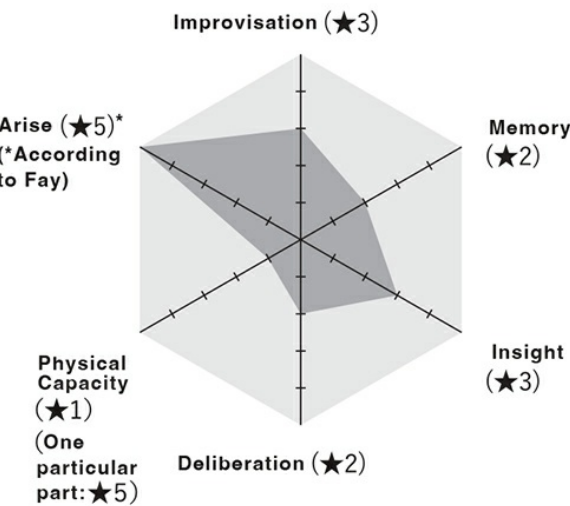
PROFILE

Sixteen years old. Became an apostle last year, same as Fay. Her exceptional teleportation abilities gave people high hopes for her—in fact, she attracted more attention than the anonymous Fay.

ARISE: The Wandering (Pearl's name for it)

A teleportation ability that Fay describes as “absolutely exceptional.”

SPEC



Arise★5

Pearl possesses two distinct abilities as a Teleporter. (Fay: “It’s really unusual to see someone who has both.”)

① Instantaneous Teleportation

Pearl can create a pair of connected warp portals within a diameter of thirty meters around her and move freely through those portals.

② Shift Change

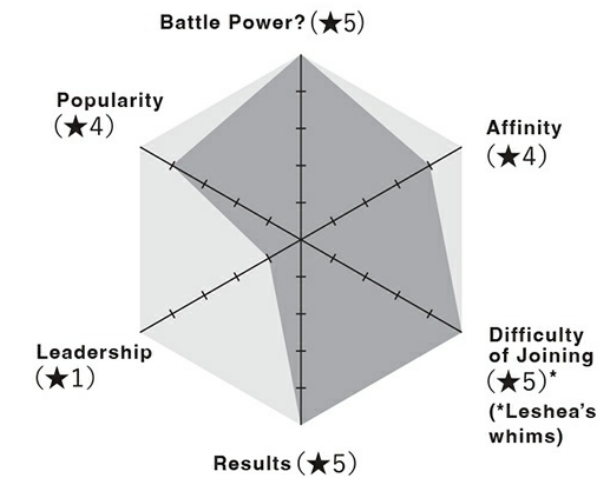
Pearl can interchange the location of any two people and/or objects. However, the target of the ability must be someone or something that has either passed through the warp portals of (1), or which Pearl has touched, within the last thirty minutes.

NAME **Team Name Undecided**

PROFILE

Formed by Fay and Leshea. By recruiting Pearl, they've become a cutting-edge gaming team. Fay and Leshea applied together to create the team, with Fay as its leader (since Leshea ran away at the idea). They haven't even settled on a name yet, but their victory over Uroboros has attracted attention from all over the world.

SPEC



What's that? You want to know about Fay and his team?
Well, hold on a second. As Chief Secretary of the Ruin branch of the Arcane Court, I root for all our teams. I can't give special support to any one team, and anything I might say would be strictly a personal opinion and would not officially represent the Arcane Court. With that disclaimer...
I'm looking forward to where they go from here. I'm excited to find out how a team including young Fay and Lady Leoleshea will play against the gods. I'll bet even Arcane Court headquarters has their eye on this group.
Oh! Along with that top rookie from a couple years ago...

(from an interview with Chief Secretary Miranda)

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