

GODS' GAMES

WE PLAY

3

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Kei Sazane

Illustration by
Toiro Tomose



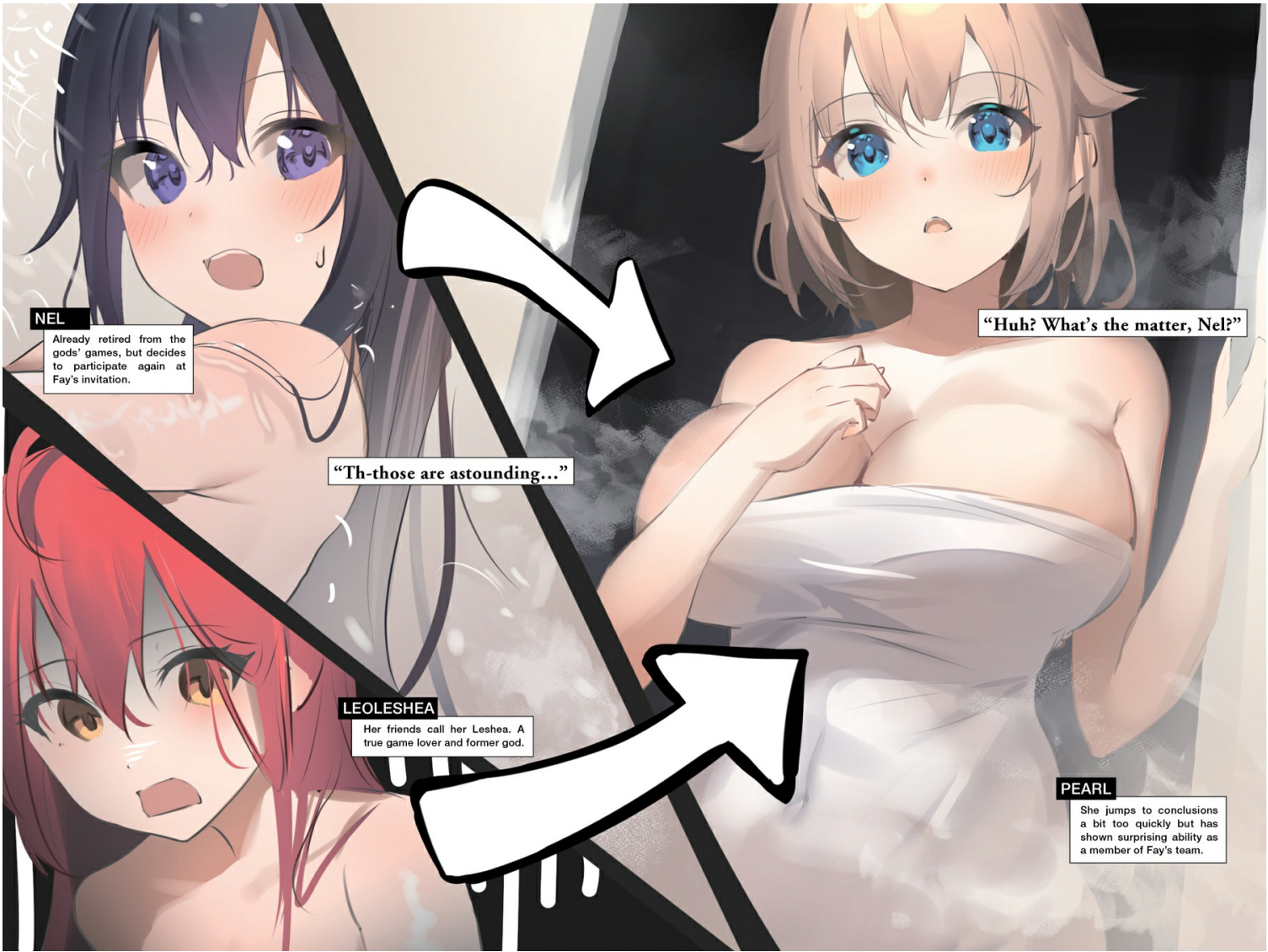
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GODS[®]
GAMES
WE PLAY

3





NEL

Already retired from the gods' games, but decides to participate again at Fay's invitation.

"Huh? What's the matter, Nel?"

"Th-those are astounding..."

LEOLESHEA

Her friends call her Leshea. A true game lover and former god.

PEARL

She jumps to conclusions a bit too quickly but has shown surprising ability as a member of Fay's team.



TEAM CAKE-BAKING?





"No way..."

"Excuse me?"

You couldn't have

forgotten me,

the Undeclared!"

she said in a sweet and

utterly self-confident tone...

???

A mysterious girl who calls herself the Undeclared and is...a real character.

FAY

A game lover whom some people call humanity's greatest hope.

GODS[®] GAMES WE PLAY

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Continued I, Too, Jump into the Fray



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Characters



Fay

People expect great things from this apostle, the best rookie in recent memory. His team also includes Leshea and Pearl.



Pearl

An apostle who possesses teleportation abilities. She once earned herself the nickname Assumption-Autopilot Girl, which should tell you how much trouble she can cause.

Leshea

Full name Leoleshea. A former god who awoke after three thousand years sleeping in ice. She adores playing games.



Nel

A former apostle from Mal-ra. She tries to wager her way back into the games, but...

Prologue

The Bookmaker

Gods' Games We Play In a small subdimension—the smallest Elements of all, though one god called it the field of play.

"...What exactly do you mean, human?"

"I mean everything's going exactly the way I planned."

Two voices rang out, one after the other: the god's question and the young man's response. The deity was the Polymorphic God, Gremoire—the Bookmaker, also known as the Mimic, the Shapeshifter, and the Doppelgänger. In this particular Elements, where the gods' games were played, Gremoire had transformed to look like the young man's companion, Nel.

The young man, Fay, turned to the god and said something he'd been planning all along: "I win this game."

"You what?"

"From the moment you accepted this match, I knew I'd be victorious. No matter how things progressed. And it's all gone exactly the way I expected." Fay was going straight to declaring victory. "I told you, right, Nel? It'd be great if you won, but you didn't have to feel bad if you lost?"

"Wha...?"

The dark-haired young woman who had fallen to her knees after her defeat slowly looked up, her face pale.

This was Nel Reckless. She was retired from the gods' games with three wins and three losses. She'd challenged the Bookmaker, wagering three of someone else's victories—namely Fay's—in an effort to come out of retirement and rejoin the ranks of the players. But it had been a disaster. She'd wasted her bet. His wins.

And yet...Fay was declaring victory.

“All right, switch off with me,” Fay said. Nel was still staring at him in confusion as he patted her on the shoulder and gave her a bracing smile. “Looks like this isn’t quite making sense to you,” he said. Not to Nel—but to the god who had assumed her form. Gremoire was looking at him in absolute disbelief. “That’s fine. I’ll be happy to explain everything. But first...”

He looked the Bookmaker in its amber eyes.

“Now it’s my turn to play. *Then* we can check our answers.”

And now, we turn back the clock on our story by approximately ninety-six hours...



Player.1

Welcome Back to Ruin

Gods' Games We Play

1

Who is the true master of this world? Humans?

Anyone faced with that question would have to answer, *No*.

Isle Cities dotted the continent like islands in a vast sea. With a single step beyond them, one would discover a world largely unknown to humans.

Terra incognita.

There were grasslands roamed by massive primordial creatures called Rexes and scorching deserts where a person would collapse from heatstroke within an hour, while huge marine life forms that could swallow a ship whole swam the seas.

All of which was to say that to go from city to city was to take one's life in one's hands.

"I had this same thought when we went to Mal-ra, but the railway really is amazing, isn't it?" Pearl said.

The Continental Railroad was a special express train that connected different cities. Pearl, a golden-haired girl, was gazing out the window as the scenery rushed by.

"Even though we're speeding through a broiling wasteland where it's fifty degrees Celsius outside, the train is nice and cool. Isn't it, Leshea?"

"Yeah, sure," a vermilion-haired girl answered idly. She was the Dragon God

Leoleshea, and she was a very beautiful young woman with lovely amber eyes that radiated mystically.

She was a real, true deity, descended from the superior spiritual realm...but she somehow lacked the dignity one might expect of a god. At the moment, she was completely absorbed in a handheld game.

“Oh, wow! There’s a Poison Scorpion! It might look small from here, but full-grown, they’re almost two meters long!” Pearl exclaimed.

“Yeah? Huh.”

“I can’t imagine how challenging it must have been to make this area suitable for human habitation.”

“I guess.” Leshea didn’t look up from her handheld. She’d hardly given what passed for an answer the entire trip, but Pearl, as enraptured by the scenery as Leshea was by her game, didn’t seem to notice.

“I’ll bet thousands of people worked to help build this line to Ruin! Maybe tens of thousands! Don’t you think it’s amazing, Nel?!”

“Retry... Comeback... I’ve got this! I can do it!”

“Uh, Nel?”

“Haah... Haah... Hngh! I can’t let myself be afraid. I’m a capable woman, and I can channel my resolution into my strength! I’m playing with Master Fay’s wins on the line, after all!”

She wasn’t even listening.

Nel, a young woman with black hair, sat in a corner of their four-person private compartment, pounding her fists against her legs and muttering to herself.

“Hellooo? Nel?”

“No matter what, I have to take down the Bookmaker and—”

“*Fwoo.*”

“Woah!”

Pearl blew gently on Nel’s ear from the seat beside her, making her jump.

“Wh-what are you doing, Pearl?!”

“You were off in your own little world. I was just bringing you back.”

“Oh...” Nel said, finally joining Pearl in reality. She didn’t even seem to know she had been talking to herself. “I’m sorry, Pearl. And Master Fay. You found it in your hearts to bring me with you, and here I am dragging down our morale...”

“No, hey, it’s cool. I was doing some thinking of my own,” said Fay, who had actually been lost in thought as well. Whereas Nel had been thinking about herself, though, Fay’s mind had been mulling over the preparations for *a certain game*.

Specifically, he’d been contemplating a strategy for his next competition in the gods’ games.

“Were you thinking about your retry, Nel?” Fay asked.

“Y-yeah, of course. Believe me, I understand what a heavy responsibility it is to wager with one of your victories, Master Fay.”

Nel was an apostle—but a retired one. She’d achieved three victories in the gods’ games, but had also lost three times, whereupon she was forced to withdraw from the competition. There was no way for a human to get around that stipulation.

But the gods often acted *on a whim*.

A human proverb stated that “One god’s trash is another god’s treasure.” And indeed, among the many gods, there was one eccentric deity who would play even with those who had failed as apostles.

This god was called the Bookmaker.



*

Ordinary gods: They would award victors with one win; if players were defeated, they would be given one loss.

The Bookmaker: If a player was victorious, it would erase one loss. If a player was defeated, it would erase one win.

“Word is the Bookmaker isn’t quite like the other gods. Makes sense, since it’s a one-on-one fight...”

Nel heaved a sigh, unable to hide her nerves. She was still desperate to play games. If there was a one in ten thousand—even a one in a hundred thousand—chance of a comeback, she wanted to take it. If she was still a bit despondent at the idea, it was because the cost in this particular god’s realm was one of Fay’s victories.

A match with the Bookmaker worked like this:

1. A human played a one-on-one game against the Bookmaker.
2. The bet was one victory belonging to a compatriot. In this case, Fay would furnish the “coin.”
3. If the challenger—Nel—won, one of her losses would be expunged, meaning she would go from a 3-3 record to 3-2.
4. If Nel lost, Fay would lose the win he’d wagered, going from 6-0 to 5-0.

Gulp. Nel swallowed heavily under Fay and Pearl’s collective gaze. “I know it’s great if I win and all. But...if I lose, then you’ll be robbed of one of your precious victories, Master Fay. I’ll bet you could count the number of apostles with a six-game win count on one hand, even if you searched every Arcane Court branch in the world! When I think of costing you one of those victories...”

“It’s totally cool. Don’t even worry about it.”

“Master Fay?!” Nel choked out in shock.

“But she’s done all this worrying for you!” Pearl cried. Both of them jumped to their feet.

It might be of interest to note that Fay was completely sincere in what he said, but Nel was too overwhelmed to really hear him. “Master Fay,” she said, “I know I may be completely out of line saying this, but I think you should take more pride in your achievements!”

Fay was 6-0 in the gods’ games, a record never before achieved in human history. There was always the possibility that an even stronger god might appear to challenge him, but at this rate, he seemed on track to win ten games and achieve humanity’s very first Clear.

“You heard Chief Secretary Miranda, Master Fay! To sacrifice one of your wins on behalf of a total stranger like me would be to waste a treasure that belongs to all humanity!”

“I did hear her. Thanks for the reminder.”

“Exactly! The average win chances in the gods’ games is eleven percent! The simple reality is that behind the handful of winners like you and Lady Leshea, countless apostles have foundered in defeat!”

One win was worth ten losses.

Ten failures for every victory humanity managed to claw from the games. The Bookmaker’s proposition was to wager one of these rare and precious victories against just one of those easily acquired and numerous defeats. From a rational perspective, it was practically highway robbery. Anyone would have felt the same weight of responsibility that now made Nel’s shoulders tremble.

Fay, however, just shrugged. As Nel looked at him earnestly, he replied, “I guess. I’m not saying I don’t take my wins seriously. All I’m saying is that you don’t have to sweat this contest with the Bookmaker, Nel.”

“I know what you’re saying. I’m just not sure what you *mean*.”

“I *mean* we have every chance of success.”

Pearl was the first to react. “Really?!” she exclaimed with a gasp. “I knew it, Fay! I knew it all along! You have some secret plan for helping Nel win against the Bookmaker!”

“Fraid not.”

“What?! Well... Well, then you must have figured out what kind of game the Bookmaker is going to challenge her to!”

“Nope. Not a clue.”

“What makes you think we have any chance, then?!”

“*Because* we’re facing the Bookmaker.”

“...?”

“...?”

Pearl and Nel looked at one another, puzzled.

“Master Fay? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I wish I could tell you, but I’m not completely sure yet. This is my first time playing against the Bookmaker, too, remember? I wouldn’t want to give you false hope.” Fay glanced over to the window seat, where Leshea was still absorbed in her game. “Hey, Leshea. If Nel loses this game and it costs me some of my victories, would you be upset?”

“No one’s gonna lose.” She snapped the power switch of her game to Off—having just defeated the computer on the highest possible difficulty. “‘Cause you said you think we can win, right, Fay?”

“I did. And I do.”

“Then we should take on that Bookmaker.” The former god grinned. “I’ll be rooting for you, too, Nel.”

“Y-yes! Thank you, Lady Leshea!”

“And because Fay and I will be rooting for you, you’d never *lose*, would you?”

“Huh? I... O-of course I’ll do my very best...”

“I know you will. With all the time we’ve spent on you and all the hopes that are riding on this, you’d never disappoint us with a pathetic showing, would you? I mean, we only dropped out of the World Games Tour specifically so we could help you. I know you’d never let that go to waste, would you? *Would you?* Oh... Nel? What’s wrong?”

“.....”

There was no answer. The dark-haired girl had collapsed on the floor of the compartment.

“Falling asleep when I’m showering her with encouragement. How rude!”

“She’s not asleep, she’s unconscious...and foaming at the mouth! Ooh, Leshea, you may not have meant to, but this is because you put all that pressure on her! Nel? Nel, speak to me!” Pearl cried, shaking the unconscious girl’s shoulders.

Fay watched them. “We’ve got a couple more hours till we reach Ruin,” he mumbled. “I wonder how we should pass the time...”

2

It was almost noon and the sun was beating down from overhead when the special express train that had left the Sacred Spring City of Mal-ra late the night before finally made it over the horizon and arrived in the Sacrament City of Ruin. This was one of the Isle Cities that dotted the continent, and the center of operations for Fay and his team.

“We’re finally back!” Pearl cried as she jumped off the train. “Being a tourist is great and all, but there’s nothing better than the familiar sights of home!”

“So this is Ruin,” said Nel, emerging behind Pearl and looking in amazement at the packed cityscape. “Master Fay. Which of these buildings is your home?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t tell me! Do *all* of them belong to you?!”

“...”

Fay pondered that for a moment. From the way Nel was asking the question...

“Hold on, Nel. Do you think I own an entire building?”

“Well, don’t you?”

“I live in the dorms at the Arcane Court. I don’t own a doghouse, let alone a whole building.”

“Whaaat?!” Nel sprang into the air so dramatically that she dropped her suitcase. “You’re six and oh in the gods’ games! An *unrivaled* record! Everyone treats you like the superstar you are! You’re telling me you don’t have houses everywhere in the world and live in luxury?!”

“Ahh, I see what you mean. Yeah, I guess there are some players who do that sort of thing.”

The apostles who challenged the gods were humanity’s representatives, and they were treated like pop stars. Those who achieved particularly distinguished records could receive special treatment from the Arcane Court.

“I’ve never bothered with the promotion paperwork.”

“What?! Why?!”

“Oh, I’ve thought about applying. Right before I went to Mal-ra, in fact.”

Fay glanced over at Leshea. She was trotting along behind them, empty-handed, and she gave him a quizzical look.

“But when I tried to sit down and fill out the paperwork, *someone* burst into my room all, ‘*Why bother with boring old scraps of paper when we could be playing games?!*’ and I never got the chance to finish.”

“Ah.” Nel nodded seriously. “So I have to corner you if I want an in, Master Fay... Excellent information.”

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“O-oh, nothing! We’re supposed to go to the Ruin branch office, right? Well, what are we waiting for?”

Fay could only look flummoxed as Nel hurriedly turned away from him.

Beside them, two young women conferred.

“She *did* say something, didn’t she? Something strange.”

“We’ll definitely have to be wary around her...”

Leshea and Pearl whispered to one another, but they were speaking so quietly that Fay didn’t hear them.

Arcane Court, Ruin branch office.

Nel looked up at the twenty-story building and clenched her fist. “So this is the Ruin office! Master Fay’s personal fortress!”

“I’m only saying this because I feel like there’s some sort of major misunderstanding going on, but I’m not the CEO of the Ruin branch office, and I’m not one of its sponsors, either.”

Nel whipped around.

“You’re not?! When *everybody* knows what great work you do?!” After a moment she said, “Who runs the place, then?”

“I guess that would be Chief Secretary Miranda. She’d deny that she’s important, though—she calls herself the world’s busiest gofer. As for me, I’m only one of more than a thousand players in Ruin, and there’s plenty of promising talent out there besides me.”

“Precisely!” exclaimed an unfamiliar female voice. A young woman with striking pink hair stood in the entryway of the building. “Heh-heh-heh! Welcome home, my esteemed senior colleagues. I’ve been awaiting your arrival with bated breath!”

She looked to be fifteen or sixteen years old. She was around Pearl’s height, a little shorter than Leshea. She wore the vestments of the Ruin branch office, marking her as an apostle.

“Well, I think Secretary Miranda is waiting for us. We better hurry,” Fay said.

“Hold it right there, you!”

The new girl positioned herself in front of the office’s sliding door, blocking their path and crossing her arms as if to say, *You shall not pass!*

“I’m Anita Manhattan. This year’s most notable rookie—is what I intend to be called!”

Fay didn’t know her and had never heard that name. Evidently she was a new apostle, but what could she possibly want with him?

“Anita? Sorry, but, uh, I’m kind of in a hurry here. I’m happy to chat with you, but we’ve got to keep it short.”

“I have nothing to say to *you*.”

“Huh?”

Fay had expected a lot of possible responses from the girl who called herself Anita, but that hadn’t been one of them.

“My business is with those distinguished young women there!”

“Uh...”

“My, my.”

“Hmm?”

Anita pointed to Pearl, Leshea, and Nel, who all blinked. One could easily imagine a large question mark floating over Pearl’s head.

“You want something from us?” Pearl asked.

“Pearl, treasured sister!” Anita lunged forward and grabbed the still-bewildered Pearl’s hand. “Call me Annie, I beg you!”

“Wha?! B-but we just met...”

“I humbly ask you to join my team, Empress (motto: The Imperial Lady’s Frontline)! My team is a perfect garden, home to only the finest and purest young ladies!” Anita’s eyes blazed, and she hardly even blinked as she gazed at Pearl. They were so close their bangs nearly touched. “Observe her soft, short hair; the innocent gaze of a small, adorable animal! From the mildly out-of-it clumsiness to the Assumption-Autopilot personality that gets completely fixated once an idea is in her head, I have no complaints! A perfect one hundred out of one hundred!”

“Wh-wh-what are you talking about?!”

“And to top it all off, this abundant chest! I imagine myself lost in this valley that’s bigger than my face—ahh, I can’t take it! I give these twin peaks two hundred million points!”

“Help! She’s a pervert!” Pearl cried, leaping back as Anita unabashedly went to shove her face into Pearl’s chest.

“And you, with the black hair!” Anita exclaimed, cornering Nel next.

“What? What?!”

“Ahh! Lustrous dark hair like the finest silks! A limpid gaze and slim, toned limbs! How powerful! How inspiring!”

“Yeeek!” Nel jumped away as Anita reached out and stroked her thighs.
“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“These thighs, powerful as a mountain goat’s! Two hundred points—no, I should say two hundred million! Oh, I do hope you’ll get to know my team, Empress, better!”

Then she changed targets again, turning forty-five degrees and making a beeline for the last remaining young woman, the former god.



“Leoleshea, treasured sister! I admire and revere you even more than I did before!”

“Uh... Thanks?”

“Argh, I am so elated to meet you in person that I could float straight up to heaven! My heart feels like it’s going to pound its way out of my rib cage—you can probably hear it from where you’re standing!”

She grabbed Leshea’s hand and brought it to her chest. Leshea reflexively squeezed the small but unmistakable swell she felt there.

“There! Feel my heart race!”

“Your pulse is seventy-two. Pretty normal, really.”

“It’s not a matter of numbers! Consider your own rare beauty, this vermilion hair that could be spotted from a kilometer away! It’s gorgeous! A trillion points! I give you a trillion points!”

“...?” Leshea looked perplexed.

“I have a special place prepared for you as an honorary member of Empress!”

“Uh...” It seemed like Leshea wasn’t sure how to respond.

Anita, for her part, looked like she didn’t have the gall to caress Leshea the way she had Nel’s thighs. Instead, she shook her hand vigorously. “Leshea, treasured sister! Pearl and Nel, treasured sisters! You would be even more beautiful than you are now if you were surrounded by the pure young ladies I’ve gathered. Ditch this guy—he’s not even worth mentioning!”

Kzzkt.

One could almost feel the air freeze when she said that. The atmosphere among the three young women standing before Anita was cold enough to send a shiver down the spine.

“Yes, that’s just what you should do! Okay, so he’s won the gods’ games a few times, but his luck can’t hold out forever. You, my sisters, deserve to be on a team that suits you better. Specifically, my team!”

“.....” Leshea was absolutely silent.

“.....” So was Pearl.

“.....” And Nel.

All three of them were looking at the ground, so it was impossible to read their facial expressions. But they could be heard to whisper:

“*My Fay is not even worth mentioning?*”

“She thinks Fay’s wins were just lucky?”

“How dare she speak that way about someone I owe so much to...”

Fay could hear the whispering—he knew he wasn’t imagining it. Anita, however, was still absorbed in her sermon. “I’ll say it again! Why waste your time with this totally average-looking guy who’s only won by chance when what you need is a team full of the sweetness, beauty, wisdom, and tolerance that... huh?”

She finally noticed. Finally saw that the three young women refused to look at her, but instead were muttering among themselves.

“Good idea. Where should it be? The girls’ toilet? Boys’ toilet?”

“I vote for the underbrush! Full of bugs and leaves!”

“I suggest a storage room. One with a door we can lock!”

“Is everything all right, treasured sisters?” Anita asked, blinking.

The three turned on her, chuckling and wearing unsettling smiles. Anita, who seemed to mistakenly assume that they were chatting about something fun, brightened up and went over to them. “Goodness gracious, my dear sisters! Whatever is so funny? You must let me in on it!”

“Oh, of course,” said Leshea.

“We were just discussing where you should *go*,” Nel added.

“What?”

“Are you ready?” Pearl asked, and then she pointed directly above Anita’s head. A golden warp portal appeared. “This is the part where you disappear!”

“Huh? Wha—? Wait! Treaaaasured siiistteeeeeeeers!”

Anita vanished. Evidently Pearl's powers included the ability, heretofore unknown even to Fay, to forcibly teleport someone away.

"You didn't have to get that angry...", Fay said.

"Oh, we're very angry," Leshea snapped.

"I'll never let anyone make fun of you, Fay, even if she is a junior colleague!" Pearl said.

"Mm-hmm! A fitting punishment," Nel concurred.

Cowed by the three young women, Fay could only reply, "R-right."

3

They were in an office on the seventh floor of the Arcane Court building and blinding sunlight was pouring through the windows.

“Welcome back, Lady Leshea. And fine work as always, Fay.” A bespectacled woman in a suit offered a polite bow as they entered. This was Chief Secretary Miranda. Her almond-shaped eyes had a spark of professionalism and intelligence in them. “All right. I’d love to congratulate you on your victory in Mal-ra, Fay, but first there’s an issue. I gather there was some sort of kerfuffle at the door?”

“Oh, right...” She was referring to the Anita Abduction Incident, presumably. “If you mean that girl Pearl teleported away, I’d say she brought it on herself.”

“I dumped her in some underbrush so she would get all dirty and covered in leaves!” Pearl exclaimed, puffing out her cheeks. Despite how she sometimes acted, she was an accomplished Teleporter. Her ability manifested in two ways:

1. Teleport: she could connect locations within a thirty-meter radius with warp portals, and move freely between them. However, this ability had a thirty-second cooldown time after use.
2. Shift Change: Pearl could swap the locations of two people or two objects. However, they had to be people or things she had touched or which had passed through one of her warp portals within the last three minutes.

Normally, Teleporters get one or the other, Fay thought. But Pearl can do both.

If used carefully, such abilities could turn the tide of the gods’ games. Fay was sure that Anita’s passionate invitation to Pearl had been inspired not just by her looks and personality, but also her Arise.

“Please, hear me out, Chief Secretary!” Pearl cried.

“I know all about it. I was watching via the security camera on the front door.

I was just asking as a formality,” Miranda said. “So, you met Annie. She’s the only daughter of the president of a company that makes popular dating games. She’s learned the ins and outs of every dating sim out there, and now she’s convinced she’ll master real-life rom-com, too. She’s hell-bent on getting every girl that’s her type to join her team so she can build the ‘perfect garden.’”

“There are some very strange people in this office,” Pearl said.

“If you need someone to beat a dating sim game, there’s none better. Unfortunately, the number of dating sims among the gods’ games is vanishingly small.” Miranda shrugged. “All right, let’s get back on track. Welcome back to you too, Pearl. You represented yourself excellently during the WGT.”

“Th-thank you very much!”

“I knew from the moment you joined us that we had something special on our hands. I knew you were the kind who could carry this office on your back!”

“I think that’s a very belated compliment, ma’am!”

“Well, all joking aside...” From behind her glasses, Miranda’s cool gaze settled on the dark-haired girl who had remained silent the whole time. “You must be our guest, Nel.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” Nel said, straightening up. “I-I’m very sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused! Ahem... I’ve been exceedingly rude to Master Fay, and to all the employees of the Ruin branch office! Um, I brought Mal-ra *Manju* Buns as a souvenir.”

“Oh? Fried octopus flavor, I see. That’s...unique.” Miranda pulled the box of treats over. She gave Nel a slight smile, but the girl still appeared extremely nervous. “I’ll be frank. I’d love to tell you to give up the ridiculous idea of betting one of Fay’s precious victories in the Bookmaker’s game...but the staff of this office doesn’t actually have the right to stop you. Just make sure you beat that god and make your comeback!”

“Th-thank you, ma’am!”

“I’ve got high hopes. Fay’s six wins already puts him among the ranks of the great heroes of the past, and with Lady Leoleshea on his side, I think humanity finally has a team that can blitz its way to ten victories. And you’ll be betting

with one of those previous victories.”

“Y-yes, ma’am. Believe me, I realize...”

“I’m surprised someone with a mere three victories to her name caught Fay’s attention, but then again, he’s always been a softie. If you lose this game, Nel, it’ll be like you took one of humanity’s greatest treasures and pitched it into the trash. Just keep that in mind.”

“.....” Nel was absolutely silent.

“Sorry. Not to put too much pressure on you. Anyway, good luck!” The Chief Secretary patted Nel on the shoulder and smiled cheerfully. “If you lose, you’re not leaving Ruin alive. Oops! Did I say that out loud?”

“Eeeek!”

“I’m just teasing you. I do need to know that you understand what you’re getting into, though. This is no small amount of work on my part, too. Ahem. Now, Fay.” She turned to him. “When do you want to face the Bookmaker?”

“That’s up to Nel,” Fay said, looking at his new companion. “What do you think?”

“I-I’m ready to go whenever! My mind is made up and my heart is set!” She pounded her chest demonstratively. “I hear the Bookmaker’s game isn’t like any of the other gods’. No real point bending myself out of shape trying to prepare. I’d rather dive right in before I get cold feet!”

“I think the earliest you could do that would be the day after tomorrow.” Miranda looked at a monitor on her desk. “That gate hasn’t been used in decades, after all. I’ve got people working around the clock to dust it off.” Then she sighed. “For form’s sake, Fay, I have to ask—do you really think you can win this?”

“I do.”

“All right. Good luck out there.”

Chief Secretary Miranda gave them a resigned smile, and then she leaned back and stared up at the ceiling.

The sun was dipping below the horizon. In most homes, it was dinnertime. In the girls' dorm adjoining the Arcane Court, a chorus of excited voices could be heard.

"And now! We will begin the girls' welcome party!" proclaimed the leader of the toast—Pearl, holding up a glass of orange juice. "I know it's a little cramped, Nel, but I hope you'll make yourself at home!"

"Th-thank you very much."

"Oh, you don't have to thank me! All we really did was relocate Leshea to my bed."

They were in Pearl's personal quarters. Their hostess was already in a highly festive mood. Nel sat on her knees in a formal *seiza* posture at the table, feet tucked under her behind. Then there was Leshea, who had happily and rather unilaterally occupied Pearl's bed. Three people, three very different ways of approaching the moment.

"This bed! Is! Amazing!" cried Leshea, face down in Pearl's pillow. "What tremendous suction! It's so puffy and fluffy that I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get up!"

"Heh-heh! I know, right, Leshea? That's my special Once You Lie Down You'll Never Get Up Again bed, and it took almost my entire salary last year to buy it! The triple coil mattress embraces you like a warm hug!"

".....Zzz..."

"Wait! Is she asleep already?!"

One of those present had already been defeated (sleep-induced).

Despite the somewhat formal name Pearl had given the gathering, the evening was pretty free-form.

"Thank you, Pearl... I can't believe someone like me was not only welcomed here—you even let me share your room," Nel said.

"Ha-ha-ha! Please, think nothing of it." Pearl glanced at Leshea to make sure

she was asleep, then grinned mischievously. “I’ve been wanting a new teammate. I mean... Fay and Leshea are wonderful, but they’re more something to strive toward. A marker. I’ve been hoping for someone who can work with me to get closer to them. Someone I can talk to!”

“...” Nel was lost for words.

“I m-mean, of course, I know we have to work hard, but—eek?!” Pearl shrieked, because Nel had suddenly hugged her.

“Pearl!” she cried. “You... What a good person you are!”

“N-Nel... I can’t b-breathe...”

“I know! I know exactly how you feel! Master Fay and Lady Leshea are without equal—they carry the future of the Arcane Court on their shoulders. We, who have the privilege of joining them on their journey, cannot be content to be merely average. We must learn and grow so that we can help them! That’s what makes us true teammates!”

“Yes, exactly! That’s precisely what I think!”

They shared a firm handshake. As Leshea snoozed, a fervent vow was made by the two young women.

“We will not be baggage for our team! We are the Retired from Ordinarity...es!”

“Indeed! We are and we shall be! We—! Hmm? What was that noise?”

A cute electronic jingle came from somewhere beyond the living room.

“Oh, that’s the tub. The water’s heated. Please, go ahead and take the first bath, Nel.”

“I—I could never! That privilege belongs to you, the mistress of the house, Pearl!”

“But you’re our guest!”

“It would be improper for a guest not to give her host her due!”

Grr! The two of them stared each other down.

After a tense moment, Pearl let out a sigh. “All right. There’s one way to solve

this. We'll just bathe together."

"What?"

"There's a Stone Age book that says meals and baths are the best events for promoting closeness, right? We should heed our forebears!"

"Did they have books in the Stone Age?"

"Leshea! Leshea, come on, wake up!" Pearl set about trying to rouse the near-comatose Leshea.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Hmm? What's going on? Are we gonna play a game?"

"We're going to take a bath."

"A bath?"

"Yes! I thought all three of us could take one together. To help us grow closer!"

"...!" Leshea gasped and her eyes snapped open. She sprang from the bed and, of all things, began straightening her rumpled clothing. "I just remembered something very urgent that I have to do!" she said.

"Leshea?" Pearl asked.

"Sorry, girls. I've got to duck out. You enjoy your bath!"

Then, without waiting for an answer, she escaped to the hallway. Pearl and Nel abruptly found themselves alone in the room.

"Gosh... I wonder what's gotten into her," Pearl said. "I guess it is what it is. We should go ahead and take our bath." She crossed her arms. "You head in first, Nel. I'll clean up the glasses on the table."

"Sure thing."

The bath was really intended for one person, so the changing area wasn't exactly large. Nel stripped down and went into the adjacent room where the tub was. Hot steam drifted around the room, carrying some kind of aroma that tickled Nel's nose. Honey, she thought. Probably some kind of bath salts. The water in the tub was a milky white, and a child's rubber ducky floated on the

surface.

“It’s really...cute. Nothing like my bath.”

While Nel was assessing the accoutrements, the door opened, and she heard Pearl from the far side of the steam.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! How’s the water temperature?”

“Oh, uh, I actually haven’t gotten in y—”

Nel’s voice caught in her throat. All of her attention was suddenly riveted on the silhouette that began to emerge from the steam.

Pearl was naked as a jaybird.

Nel had seen deities—actual gods—with her own eyes, but *this* gave her a greater shock than any supernatural entity had. This particularly large part of Pearl.

“Th-those are astounding...”

“Huh? What’s the matter, Nel?”

The golden-haired girl blinked in surprise. Nel, meanwhile, couldn’t tear her eyes off the two massive mounds on Pearl’s chest.

“Pearl... I had no idea you were packing *those*. I mean, I could tell you were big, but it seems your clothes were somehow...hiding your true size...”

“Huh? Oh...” Pearl, realizing where Nel was looking, glanced down at her own chest. “Yeah... I was just thinking my underwear’s been getting tight again. That might explain why they look bigger without.”

“They’ve been freed from their seal!”

“What’s that mean?!”

In a word, Pearl’s body, when freed from all its seals, was a thing of awe.

“You and your ‘*Oh, I’m just so ordinary!*,’ Pearl! When you were walking around with something—well, two things!—that any woman would be jealous of...”

Nel found her gaze drawn inexorably to the valley, which had begun to flush

ever so slightly.

“Let me guess... Are you hiding watermelons in there?”

“That would be quite a trick!”

“They’re so big you can’t even cover them with your hands—so big that if you turned around, they would still be visible from behind—and yet, they somehow remain perfectly round. They’re smooth as a baby’s skin, and in between they form a perfect valley, impinged upon neither from the right or the left, and therein lies soft, seductive—”

“That’s enough reporting!”

“The way they go *boing boing*!”

“No onomatopoeia, either!”

“If you are the gods’ own mountain range, Pearl, then I... I am a vast, flat plain to look out over.”

“Are you trying to be poetic?!”

“Ngh!”

Before she knew what she was doing, Nel found herself pressing back against the wall of the bath. She saw it now. She understood why Leshea had left the room in such a hurry.

She’d been afraid. Even the former god, knowing she was outmatched by the *divinities* Pearl was harboring, had withdrawn from the contest.

“Uh, um, Nel... You don’t have to grit your teeth and shake your head quite so hard... Oh! I know! You must have some excellent qualities of your own!” Pearl said, talking a little too fast. “It’s just like that girl Anita said this morning—the part of you a person would stan is definitely your thighs!”

Nel’s thighs were toned; she’d always been the athletic type. It didn’t hurt that her Arise was Moment Reversal, which could send anything she kicked back the other way, regardless of its mass or energy. This leg-based Arise did indeed give her the legs of a mountain goat.

“Yes... Yes, I see! That is the part of me worth stanning!” Her eyes burned

brightly. “I just have to make Master Fay realize it! I must nurture in him a desire to caress a woman’s toned thighs!”

“Don’t make Fay sound like a pervert!”

Same time, different place...

Never imagining that his name was being invoked at a secret convocation of young women, Fay was in the boys’ dorm, sitting at his desk and studying a piece of notepaper.

33, 30, 31, 60

He stared at the scribbled line of numbers—the only thing on the paper—hard enough to burn a hole through the page.

“This is our letter of challenge. I sure hope the Bookmaker takes it,” Fay said, and clenched his fist.

Player.2

Nel's Loss and a Certain Victory!

Gods' Games We Play

1

The day of their showdown, they arrived at the Dive Center in the basement of the Arcane Court where they found an unfamiliar Divine Gate. This gate led to the Bookmaker. Because no one had challenged this deity in the last thirty years, the gate had been in storage until the day before.

“Huh, it even looks different from the other gates,” Fay said. “It’s in the shape of a giant hand.” This was his first time seeing it, too.

The Ruin branch office had five Divine Gates in its keeping. Four were shaped like dragons’ heads, but this one, which led exclusively to the Bookmaker, was different.

“We’re really going in without broadcast cameras, Chief Secretary?” Fay asked.

“Yeah. We can’t stream this game, so there’s no point allocating broadcast personnel to you. Save some people, save some money, am I right?” Miranda replied. She was the only one there to see Fay and his team make the dive. Normally the place would be packed with cameras, beaming the apostles’ image to the world—but today, there was no such equipment, nor any other members of the staff. It was just Fay, his three companions, and Miranda. Five people in total gathered in the Dive Center.

“Now, I mentioned this briefly yesterday, but for reasons unknown, the Godeye lens doesn’t work in games with the Bookmaker. Once you go in there, Fay, we won’t have surveillance on you.” The Bookmaker permitted no

interference from the outside: this deity desired a one-on-one confrontation between a human and a god, and its Elements was constructed to reflect that. “All right, it’s time. Well, not that it matters that much *when* you make the dive.” Miranda looked at her watch. “Feeling all right, Fay?”

“I’m always feeling fine.”

“Sounds like we’re ready when you are, Lady Leoleshea.”

“Great! So am I!”

“Pearl, did you eat breakfast?”

“I did, thanks!”

“That just leaves...”

Standing at the head of the four-person group was a black-haired girl staring intently at the glowing doorway that had formed in the palm of the giant hand—the center of the Divine Gate. She’d been grimacing at the portal without a word.

“...you, Nel.”

Finally, Nel simply said, “I’m going to do this even if it kills me. I *will* defeat the Bookmaker!”

“Good. You can imagine me here, cheering you on.”

With that, Fay and the others jumped through the doorway, beyond the glow, to face the Elements of a god they were encountering for the first time.

Elements: The Miniature Garden that Reflects People's Hearts

VS Gremoire, the Manifestation of Callowness and Pretense

Let the game begin.

2

People chosen by the gods became apostles, gaining admittance to the superior spiritual realm known as Elements—the playing fields of the exalted gods. What kind of place would it be? What kind of game awaited them?

Only the gods knew...

Fay and the others landed in a small room that appeared to be a casino.

It was a modest space enclosed within gray walls. A single light hung from the ceiling, under which sat a table covered in blue felt and fringed with gold. Coins sat stacked upon the table.

“Huh?” Leshea blinked as she looked around the room, which was just a few square meters. “Hey, Fay... Is it just me, or does this Elements look sort of like a run-down casino?”

“Yeah. It’s unique, all right.”

This was the Bookmaker’s world. It was smaller and gloomier than any realm Fay had dove into before.

“The one thing I don’t see here is a god,” said the challenger, Nel, looking around suspiciously. “It’s pretty cramped. I don’t know about this. Showing us into a room that looks like it could be in a real-world casino? What’s this Bookmaker up to?”

“This is a polymorphic space. It shows you what’s in your heart.”

There was a soft tapping of footsteps, followed by a familiar voice.

“Your human hearts shaped this room. This suffocating chamber is the realization of the anxieties you cling to. The light overhead is bright because you have hope for the future. Hmm... This casino table is nice work. Proof that you really are set on challenging me.”

From a shadowy corner of the room where the light didn’t reach emerged a slim girl with dark hair.

Nel Reckless.

“Two Nels?!” Pearl exclaimed. She looked back and forth between the pair of Nels, but almost everything about them, from their height to their build, voices, and hair, was identical.

With one exception: their eyes. The real Nel had deep violet irises, but this replica had eyes of amber.

“Delightful! I haven’t had human visitors in so long.” The god who had become the spitting image of a human grinned—a tight upward curl of the lips that would never, ever have crossed the face of the real Nel. *“Well! Shall we play?”*

The deity’s gaze settled on Nel, who stood right in front of it.

“Are you asking me?” Nel said.

The god in Nel’s form nodded.

“That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? To challenge me? If you win, I’ll erase one of your losses. Let me guess—you think this is moving too fast? That’s how things work in my realm. I know, of course, what you hope to gain here. I don’t need lengthy exposition.”

“Maybe not, but we do,” said Fay, cutting in between the two of them. “We’d like to understand you the same way you understand us.”

“Why?”

“It’s only natural to want to know about your opponent, right?”

“Gremoire,” said the god who took Nel’s form. Its eyes darted to the casino table, then it took a seat on the tabletop in lieu of a chair. *“I am the polymorphic god. Humans have given me many names: Mimic, Shapeshifter, Doppelgänger, and more. Almost two hundred names, in fact.”*

“But Gremoire is the one you prefer right now?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Feel free to call me something else if you wish.”

At that moment, Fay saw Pearl light up.

“Sure! Gremoire’s such a hard name to say. From now on, your name is

Amber Eyes Chimera God! We can call you Agott for short!"

"What a gross name."

"It is not gross!"

"Anything else you want to know? I'm itching to get down to the game, here."

"Let's spell out the rules. Just so we're all on the same page," Fay said, his eyes drifting to the casino table where the polymorphic god sat. It was piled with playing cards, dice, and coins. His gaze only lingered on the game components for a second. "We're here hoping to get Nel out of retirement. You and her play a one-on-one game. If Nel wins, one loss is subtracted from her three and three record so it becomes three and two."

"You've got it." The Bookmaker gave him a mischievous look. "You can wager whatever you like. One win, two—the higher the stakes, the more fun the game." There was a beat. "I assume it's your win marks she'll be betting with?"

"Yeah," Fay said, looking straight into those amber eyes. Then he said: "I bet three wins on Nel."

"Wha?!"

"Wh-wh-whaaaaaat?!"

Nel stared at Fay, agog, and Pearl jumped nearly a foot in the air.

"Hold on, Master Fay! You never said anything about that to me!"

"Or me!" Pearl added.

"I decided last night. Take it easy, both of you." He tried to calm them down since they both looked ready to grab ahold of him. Fay shook his head. "If we win, Nel would go straight to three and oh."

"But if we *lose*, you're going to be in all sorts of trouble, Fay! Y-you'd lose three wins from your six and oh record! Arrrgh! Leshea, help us!" Pearl turned toward the vermilion-haired girl. "Say something to Fay!"

"He's welcome to do it. I don't mind."

"I think I made a fatal, deadly, and terrible mistake in choosing who to turn to!"

"The wager is settled," said the god in Nel's form, popping up from the table. *"This is great! I'm not sure a human has ever bet that many wins before."*

"Nel," Fay said, patting her on the shoulder before taking a step back. Nel looked like she was doomed. "I've done everything I can to put you in the best position possible. I still think we can win this—*no matter what happens*. So just enjoy it."

Nel caught her breath. "Th-thank you!" Then the black-haired girl stepped forward. "The contest begins, Bookmaker! Show me your game!"

"Poker," the god said.

Nel stopped short. "What?"

"Let's make it something you might actually have a chance at. A nice, ordinary human game, right?"

The god picked up a pack of playing cards and tossed it to Nel. It was sealed with a special sticker to show that it had never been opened—proof that it hadn't been tampered with.

"I have my first visitors in forever and I'm in a pleasant mood. Don't let that bit of good fortune get away."

So, poker it was. Their contest would consist not of a game devised by the gods, but one invented by humans.

"Oh! I almost forgot to mention." The polymorphic god Gremoire's amber eyes flicked toward the people standing behind Nel—Fay, Pearl, and Leshea. *"There is to be absolutely no table talk from this point forward. The rest of you may stand and watch silently. But if you get noisy, I'll eject you from this place on the spot."*

"Fair enough," Fay said.

The Godeye lens didn't work in the Bookmaker's territory. That was assumed to be because the Bookmaker wanted to focus exclusively on a game with one other person—therefore, everything that had happened so far was within expectations.

"We'll only talk among ourselves. Until the game is over, we won't say a word

to Nel.”

“Then let the game begin.”

Poker: a game where players try to make scoring combinations using a hand of five cards. It’s not just a matter of how strong a player’s hand is—it’s also about how they bet their coins based on the strength of the cards they’re holding.

Even Fay hadn’t been expecting the Bookmaker to propose this particular game.

People tend to think of poker as a mind game, but that’s not really true. It’s a contest of luck.

The role of skill in determining victory or defeat was remarkably insignificant. For one thing, the strength of a hand one was dealt depended on luck. Except in situations where a highly experienced player was pitted against an amateur, as long as someone held the better hand, it didn’t matter what sorts of psychological tricks their opponent tried to pull—they *would* win.

A simple demonstration of this was the fact that the winner of the poker world championship changed every year. No single player, no matter how experienced, could consistently take victory.

Not even a god.

“The rules are simple. One: You get five cards. Two: In a turn, players can each trade in cards they don’t want. Three: Once you’ve built your hand, you start betting.”

“...” Nel gave the pack of cards a hard look. “There’s nothing *special* about this deck, is there? This is just a straight game between you and me?”

“No tricks, no traps, no connivances. You have as much chance of winning this game as I do. Theoretically, at least.”

“...” Nel’s breath caught in her throat and she raised an eyebrow. The Bookmaker’s point was clear.

“Theoretically, you can win this game. But practically? I don’t think you can beat me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Dunno. But think of it as a little gesture of compassion on my part that I said so. If you think you can prove me wrong, then do it.” Nel-the-god faced Nel-the-human over the casino table. Five coins were stacked by each of them. *“Whoever takes all five of their opponent’s coins is the winner,”* the Bookmaker said.

“Sounds good to me.”

“The wager is three win marks. If I’m victorious, three of that human Fay’s wins will be erased. If you come out the winner, three of your losses will be erased.”

“Done!” Nel howled and grabbed her coins off the table. “I won’t lose! I *can’t* lose! Master Fay and everyone else are counting on me!”

“.....” The Bookmaker was silent, eyeing Nel’s pack of cards. *You shuffle and deal* seemed to be the message.

VS Bookmaker: Poker, Game 1

Nel shuffled the deck and dealt five cards to each of them. This way, she knew the god hadn’t pulled any tricks.

Then again, this is a god we’re dealing with. Changing the suit of a playing card would be child’s play. The Bookmaker doesn’t seem like the type to do that, though.

The gods didn’t want to cheat. They didn’t seek absolute victory—they just wanted to enjoy a game, a battle of wits. Fay trusted that there were no tricks here; that it was just a simple game of poker.

Still, this was the gods’ world they were in. Even a seemingly simple game of poker might defy human expectations.

“Whoa! They’re...floating?” Nel said as the cards she’d dealt began to hover. They formed a tidy line, reminding Fay of the time he’d played 3D Memory with Leshea.

“Are you doing that?” Nel demanded.

“I just spared us the trouble of having to hold the cards. Makes it easier to

concentrate, doesn't it?" replied the Bookmaker, whose cards were also floating in midair. They were face-in, of course, so Nel, Fay, Leshea, and Pearl had no way of knowing what the god was holding. *"I can't see your cards, and believe me, I won't peek."*

"All right," Nel said after a moment. The floating cards made her hand perfectly visible to Fay and the others, who were standing behind her. She held a 2, 5, 5, 8, and a Queen. She'd gotten a pair of fives.

"You get a good hand?" The thing was, they had no idea what the Bookmaker was holding. This was where it got tricky. *"We both have five coins. For every game, we each ante up one coin."*

"All right," Nel said again, then tossed a coin onto the table. The Bookmaker did the same, leaving them with four each. The first person to hit zero would be the loser.

"Now it's time to replace cards. I'm going to keep two of mine and replace the other three."

"Me too."

Nel and the Bookmaker each pointed to three of their cards. Those cards drifted down onto the table like falling leaves, and new ones floated up from the deck to join their hands.

They'd each replaced three cards—at this point, it was possible to guess what each of them had originally been holding. Nel and the Bookmaker had both been dealt one pair. They'd traded in the other three cards in hopes of getting as much as a full house.

That puts Nel at a slight disadvantage, then. Her pair was fives, which is fairly weak as pairs go.

Fives would lose to everything higher: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, J, Q, K, A. Statistically, the likelihood that the Bookmaker's pair had been lower was not very good.

"...!"

When Nel saw the cards that had floated into her hand, though, she gave the slightest intake of breath. As they emerged, Fay saw: 3, 5, 5, 7, 7. Two pair. Not

the strongest hand by any means—but it was something she could work with.

From across the table, the Bookmaker stared at Nel hard enough to bore a hole in her.

“.....” For a long moment the deity didn’t make a sound; the Bookmaker had hardly glanced at the replacement cards. While Nel was fixated on her hand, the Bookmaker was fixated on *her*.

“Okay,” the Bookmaker said at length. “*I’ll let you go first.*”

Now that the drawing was done, the psychological warfare at the heart of poker began.

Players could choose one of four actions.

1. Bet: Indicate a desire to wager. It was possible to wager zero coins, in which case the contest would involve only the single-coin ante.

2. Call: Choose to reveal cards at the current bet.

3. Raise: Increase the number of wagered coins. (This shows you have confidence in the strength of your hand.)
4. Fold: Effectively, surrender. You lose your coins, but you don’t have to match an opponent’s raise.

“I bet one coin,” Nel said. Now she had three left. (She’d paid one as an ante, and now put one in for her bet.) At that, the god in Nel’s form grinned, a hideous leer that said, *Now I’ve got you.*

“*Raise.*” The Bookmaker took all four of its remaining coins and pushed them to the center of the table. “*I’m all in.*”

“All in?!”

“*Well? It’s your turn. You can call my bet and put in all your coins, or you can fold...depending on whether you think I’m bluffing!*”

Nel had just two options: call or fold. If she called, it would bring the game to a head in an instant. If she folded, she would lose two coins, but she would have another chance in the next game.

“.....” Nel sat in silence for a long moment. In her hand were two pairs, fives and sevens. Not a great hand, but come the showdown, there was a chance it could win. If Nel won, she would get all the coins in the pot—and win the game. Meaning she’d go from 3-3 to 3-0 and make her longed-for comeback.

It was so close, she could almost taste it. The return she’d dreamed of, literally and figuratively, was ripe for the taking...

“No!” Nel cried out, gritting her teeth. “It’s a trap, isn’t it?!”

“*Hmm?*”

“It’s too good to be true. Me, defeat a god like you in less than a minute? I’m not that impatient!” She slammed her cards face down on the table. “I fold!”

Unconditional surrender. Nel had three coins left. In contrast, the Bookmaker gained the two coins Nel had bet for a total of seven.

“*Hmm?*” The Bookmaker’s cards spun face out: A, A, J, J, 4. Two pair—but higher than Nel’s. In other words, if she’d taken the bait and gone all in, she would have been the loser. The game would have gone to the Bookmaker and not just Nel’s comeback but Fay’s three wins would have slipped through her fingers.

“Sh-she almost lost everything,” Pearl murmured, sweat dripping down her cheek. “Her intuition was spot-on! She folded because she guessed the god had a strong hand! Maybe she lost two coins, but she lives to fight another day. I think that’s a pretty good start, don’t you, Fay?”

“...” Fay didn’t say anything.

“Fay?”

The response came from Leshea. “Yeah, you’re right...*if* that was intuition just now.” She almost sounded like she was talking to herself. Nel, focused on the contest, probably didn’t even hear her.

“*Shall we start the second game?*” the Bookmaker asked. “*You can shuffle and deal again.*”

“Okay,” Nel said. The ten floating cards fluttered down. She gathered them up, shuffled the deck intently, and then dealt them each five cards.

Game 2: Nel: 3 Coins; Bookmaker: 7 Coins

Ten playing cards floated up into the air. Just like the previous game, Fay and the others could see Nel's hand over her shoulder. When Pearl saw what Nel was holding, she gasped quietly.

A, 2, 6, 8, Q.

Nothing. An even worse hand than the single pair she'd gotten in the first game.

What about the Bookmaker, then?

"..." The amber-eyed god was stock still across the table, focused entirely on Nel. The deity watched for the slightest twitch from the human opponent, while remaining still as stone itself.

"First, we need to buy in. One-coin ante."

Two coins were tossed into the middle of the table. This left Nel with two coins and the Bookmaker with six.

"Going to replace any cards?"

"I'll replace..." Nel stared at the cards in her hand. "Four cards."

She discarded everything but her Ace and took four new cards.

That was the best plan. Victory in poker was determined by the rank of the hand you held as well as the numbers on the cards. An Ace was the highest card—even with just a single pair of them, a victory was conceivable, depending on what the Bookmaker was holding. It was a thin ray of hope, but still...

"I'll take one card."

"What?!" Pearl cried.

The Bookmaker was only going to replace one card? The other four *must* form a pattern of some kind. Two pairs, maybe. Or perhaps the god was holding three of a kind.

It could be looking for a flush or a straight with that one card. However this shakes out, it's likely to be a strong hand.

Whereas Nel had been holding a single high card.

If the Bookmaker already had even three of a kind, the game was over.

“.....”

Because Nel was now staring in choked silence at her new hand: A, 5, 6, 10, K. Still nothing.

It wasn't impossible to get an opponent to fold with an aggressive bluff, but an opponent holding three of a kind or better wouldn't fold.

This is a game of luck, after all. If the opponent's hand is just better, then the mind games don't work.

Nel still had two coins. She could spend one bluffing, and even if she lost, she would have a single coin left—just enough to keep her in the game. It was always possible things would pan out better next time, but...

“I bet one coin.”

“I raise one coin,” the Bookmaker said, almost before Nel could finish speaking.

“...!” Nel's breath caught. The deity was telling her to bet everything she had. She was in an even worse position than the first game, because she had no hand to speak of. She could try to bluff her way through it, but an opponent who had been confident enough to trade in only one card seemed unlikely to fall for that.

“Time to choose,” the Bookmaker said. The amber eyes glinted as they fixed on Nel. *“You can call and go all in—not that I think you have the hand to back it up.”*

“...” Nel gritted her teeth. The Bookmaker had seen right through her—the god didn't have to be able to see her cards to know that when Nel had replaced four of the five cards of her opening hand, she'd been desperate.

A long, long silence followed. Finally, just two words slipped from between Nel's lips.

“I fold.”

“Too bad.”

The god in Nel's form chuckled. The cards floating in the air turned around—to reveal 4, 7, 8, 9, Q. Nothing.

"If you'd called, you would have won."

"No way!" Nel exclaimed, leaping to her feet before she could stop herself.

She stared at the five cards as they drifted down to the table, her eyes bloodshot.

She'd had only a high card: A, 5, 6, 10, K.

But the Bookmaker had also had no more than a high card: 4, 7, 8, 9, Q.

Their hands were of the same rank, and Nel was holding the higher card, the Ace—so the game would have gone to her. The rules dictated as much. Yet one thing didn't make sense.

"Why would you only trade one card?! If you'd ditched two, you could have shot for a straight! Heck, you could have tried for two pair, or even just one! Anything!"

"Who cares how strong my hand is?"

"Excuse me?"

"This game played out exactly the way I predicted. I knew that if I pressed my bluff, you would fold without a second thought. Because you don't want to win."

"What?! The hell I don't!"

"You don't. You don't want to win. You want to not lose."

The god pointed at the five cards in Nel's hand, the ones that would have given her victory if she'd called.

"Remember what you said to me just before we started?"

"Huh?"

"You said that you wouldn't lose. That you 'can't.' If you really want to make that comeback, what you should say is, 'I'm going to win.' At that moment, I knew. Ahh, I thought, this human won't take the risks to win her comeback. She's too afraid of losing her friend Fay's wins."

Nel trembled. “W... Well, I...!” It was true. She’d said the words herself: she wanted to win with the minimal possible risk. That meant continually folding until she drew a hand she knew she could really fight with, and that was what Nel had done. It was her biggest mistake. The hand a player had to fight with was the one they held in the moment.

“You think you can beat the gods without taking any risks?”

The deity showed no mercy. The more a player’s strategy sought to minimize risk, the more they would fold. And the more they folded, the more the god could simply continue to bluff, harder and harder. Everything Nel had planned had been obvious from the start.

“And so, you have one coin left. No more folding.”

The ante for the next game would take all the money she had. Giving up would not be an option, and she would be forced to fight.

Nel inhaled deeply. Then she said, “Hey, all I need is a better hand than you!”

She clutched her final coin.

Game 3: Nel, 1 coin; Bookmaker, 9 coins.

Nel shuffled and dealt the cards with her own hands. Five to each player.

Pearl watched her, transfixed.

“Please... Please! Draw a strong hand...!” She observed the cards from over Nel’s shoulder.

9, 4, 5, 6, 7.

No hand. Again. The key difference from the last game, though, was the 4-5-6-7. That could become a straight, either 3-4-5-6-7 or 4-5-6-7-8. There was maybe a fifteen percent chance of drawing one of those cards. It was a strong enough hand—if the 3 or the 8 didn’t come up, it was useless, but if one of them did, then it had a high probability of winning.

“I trade one card!” Nel bellowed.

“Think you have a strong hand, do you? If you’re only trading in one card, then you’ve got better than two pair at least. A full house? Maybe a flush or a

straight?” the Bookmaker said calmly, replacing two cards. “But remember, human. It’s not so easy to collect a strong hand!”

“But it’s not impossible. I just need the right card!”

Nel moved. As she placed her hand on the top card of the deck, she squeezed her eyes shut as if she were praying.

If she got a 3 or an 8, she’d as good as won this match.

“If I don’t draw this card...”

“You won’t.”

The pronouncement was cold, unsparing. The deity across from Nel was chillingly expressionless.

“The gods smile only on those who make their own miracles. That’s not what you’re doing. You’re just cornered, and hoping for an intervention that will turn things around for you. The gods won’t smile on you.”

“That’s not true! I—!”

Nel turned over the card, and her eyes went wide.

An Ace.

Her hand was A, 4, 5, 6, 7.

Still nothing.

She clenched her teeth so hard Fay and the others could hear it from where they stood.

“This isn’t over yet,” she growled. “It all depends on what you have in your hand.”

“Three of a kind.”

The god’s hand revealed itself to Nel: 4, 4, 4, 8, 9.

Nel stood there, lost for words, as the five cards drifted down to the table. The final coin vanished from her hand as if melting away.

Game over.

Nel was defeated, having lost all her coins.

It was an ugly finish, hardly befitting a battle between a human and a god.

"You could have won. Yes, even you, human." The god almost sounded nonchalant. *"If you'd pursued a strategy that would allow you to steal victory instead of simply avoid defeat. You should have called my bluff in the second game."*

"..." The black-haired girl didn't answer. She simply sat there, eyes wide, sweat pouring down her forehead.

"What a waste of time. You got steamrolled, human."

"..." Still Nel said nothing.

"You had at least three chances to win this game. It was your own fault that you wasted them. I thrashed you once, made you cry the second time, and crushed you the third. You've lost every hand."

Abruptly, Nel slid from her chair and crumpled to the floor.

"Nel?!" Pearl rushed over and clutched Nel to her chest, but the dark-haired girl looked like a puppet with its strings cut. She was deathly still.

The Bookmaker looked down at her.

"A human challenger after so long... I hoped for better." The god sighed, as if to show how boring this all was. *"I know what you were thinking. It was blindingly obvious. You were betting with your precious friend's victories, so you absolutely, positively couldn't let yourself lose. You couldn't make any risky bets."*

The Bookmaker threw down its cards, which drifted through the air and settled on the floor in front of the broken Nel.

"Well, you saw all that. You'll never undo this girl's losses," the god said, turning toward Fay. *"And of course, I'll claim those three victories I've got coming to me. The ones you wagered."*

"..." Fay didn't say anything, but he felt a dull pain in his right hand. The VI that had been carved there, the mark of the gods, disappeared—now replaced by a III.

Fay's record in the gods' games went from 6-0 to 3-0.

“Talk about boring. What a letdown.” The god sighed again, as if not even happy to have bested Nel. This was a god who hadn’t had a chance to play a game in decades, and the pleasure of the opportunity had been denied it. Simple, childish—or was that godly?—frustration. *“Here I thought I might be able to enjoy a game for once. Go home, humans.”*

The god turned its back on them.

But Fay said, “Just a second. This is where the game really starts, and you know it.”

The Bookmaker, about to walk away, stopped in its tracks.

“Oh I do, do I? What exactly do you mean, human?”

“I mean everything’s going exactly the way I planned.”

“Hrm?”

“Bookmaker,” Fay said, staring straight at the Polymorphic God, “I win this game.”

“You what?”

“From the moment you accepted this match, I knew I’d be victorious. No matter how things turned out. And it’s all gone exactly the way I expected.” Fay wasn’t challenging the god—he was going straight to declaring victory. “I told you, right, Nel? It’d be great if you won, but you didn’t have to feel down if you lost?”

“Wha...?”

“All right, switch off with me.” Nel was still staring at Fay in befuddlement as he patted her on the shoulder and smiled reassuringly. “Looks like this isn’t quite making sense to you. That’s fine. I’ll be happy to explain everything soon. But first...”

He looked the Bookmaker in its amber eyes.

“Now it’s my turn to play. *Then* we can check our answers.”

“You? Play?”

“Looks like you want to know what’s going on—why I’m declaring victory. I

don't blame you. So let me show you—show you that I've already won.”

The god was speechless. Nel, still collapsed on the ground, raised her head weakly.

“Master... Fay...?”

“Don't worry. It'll work out. Somehow.” He nodded, but didn't turn around, never flinching from his confrontation with the god. “You cheered me on—twice! Against Dax, and against another god. I wanted to return the favor.”

“.....” The Bookmaker still couldn't seem to find anything to say.

“The game starts now, and it's gonna be a good one. I know you're still dying for a fun game.”

The Bookmaker was said to be a god against whom apostles hoping for rehabilitation could play a one-on-one game. But who had determined that, and why? Wasn't it because the gods who ruled the games were all whimsical, fickle, and eager to play with humans?

“I wager my remaining three wins. If I win, you erase Nel's losses.”

The Polymorphic God was agog. A minute passed, then two, then five, a dizzying stretch of time.

“I've decided,” the god finally said with a smile. *“I've decided, human.”*

“Decided you're ready to face me?”

“No! I've decided what game we're going to play.”

It was Nel's face, but amber eyes so unlike Nel's flashed at Fay as the god brought its hands together.

“We will now have three games. You need to figure out the dirty little tricks I'm playing in them!”

Intermission

The Chief Secretary's Bad Feeling

Gods' Games We Play

At the Arcane Court Ruin branch office, Chief Secretary Miranda lounged on a sofa in her office, watching something on a handheld device. "Ooh! The Fruit Parlor in town has a limited supply of Paradise Melon Parfaits! Maybe I can go grab one at lunch..."

There was a burst of static and a voice demanded, *"What happened to your job, Chief Secretary Miranda?"* The display of fresh cream and melon had distorted and disappeared, replaced by a beefy man in sunglasses sitting ramrod straight.

"Ugh. What a sight. I think I lost my appetite," Miranda groaned.

"Nice to see you, too."

The man's expression didn't falter, in spite of Miranda's dig.

He had close-cropped golden hair and an angular face; he looked rough and ready in a way that totally fit the pro-wrestler-esque short-sleeved jacket he wore. But believe it or not, he actually ran the Arcane Court branch office in Mal-ra, Nel's home city. His name was Chief Secretary Baleggar.

"There's still an hour till lunch. Not sure how I feel about finding my colleague loafing around watching videos instead of working."

"And whose fault is it if I am, Chief Secretary?" Miranda asked, sitting up on the sofa. "I can't settle down for the life of me. Our best prospect and greatest hope, Fay, is off wagering his wins against the Bookmaker. Can you blame me if that feels more important than my inbox?"

"All right. Sorry." Baleggar looked serious. *"I know it's all because of our Nel."*

"You're darn right it is." Miranda, however, smiled thinly. "I mean, if Nel can

make her comeback, great. Fantastic. But I don't think it's worth the risk. If Nel loses this game, a six-win count slips through humanity's grasp."

"Couldn't you have stopped them?" Baleggar asked after a moment.

"You know as well as I do that administrative officials can't give orders. The best we can do is give information and advice. It's the *players* who make the calls."

"You have a point. So how's the game going?"

"No idea. They can't take the Godeye lens in there. I'm on the edge of my seat, and I wouldn't mind if you'd help share some of the anxiety."

"You know what's a good way to fight anxiety? Do your work! Did you see the urgent message from headquarters?"

"Not really. I'm sure it's just about Nel, anyway."

"Well, you're wrong about that. One more reason not to slack off."

"Okay, okay. I'll have a look. If I feel like it." Miranda tossed the device down on the sofa and dragged herself to her feet. Then she took a deep breath. "Win or lose, with Nel playing the Bookmaker, I figured it would all be over pretty quickly. It's already been longer than I expected. What, are they playing more than one game? I mean, knowing Fay... Argh. I just hope he hasn't done something stupid like challenge the Bookmaker himself..."

Player.3

The God's Three Little Tricks

Gods' Games We Play

1

"The game is called Three Little Tricks."

The deity's voice reverberated around the superior spiritual realm, the home of the gods on high.

"We will now have three games. You need to figure out the dirty little tricks I'm playing in them!" The god was still in Nel's form, distinguished from the real Nel only by those glinting amber eyes. *"Let the games begin."*

There was a *crack*, and the subdimension around Fay and the others shattered, breaking into countless tiny pieces. They found themselves cast into black space. By the time they registered that, though, the pitch darkness around them was already changing again. The little casino room became...

...a panoply of clouds shimmering with rainbow hues that spread out before them. A heavenly world that indeed appeared divine.

"Wh-what's all thiiiiiiis?! Ow!"

They were descending rapidly.

Pearl, followed by Fay and Nel, landed smack on...not the ground. Instead, they were on a now-massive casino table, hundreds of meters across. The coins piled on the table must have been several meters in diameter themselves, and each of the playing cards seemed to be the size of a small swimming pool. Fay and his companions had landed on a roulette wheel, which looked big enough for a respectable footrace.

Everything was enormous in scale.

“Wh-where are we?”

Even Nel, still reeling from her defeat, was surprised enough to heave herself to a standing position.

Perhaps the best way to describe this place would be like a gigantic casino in heaven. But who was it for? The coins alone, nearly wider than a person was tall, made it abundantly obvious that this was no place for humans. For that matter, even an elephant—or a Rex, the rulers of the Earth—would have seemed small in this enormous playground.

So what was bigger than an elephant or a Rex?

Thoom!

Something shook the massive table on which Fay and his friends stood and caused the clouds nearby to quiver.

“——!” Pearl let out a voiceless scream.

Something was coming, something that loomed on the horizon. At the moment it was so far away as to be indistinct, but it looked like a giant the size of a mountain. That shock just now had seemed like an earthquake, but it was this creature’s footsteps.

And that wasn’t all. There was a flapping of wings overhead and a creature that looked like a unicorn descended, accompanied by a shining spirit Fay couldn’t name—and lo and behold, it started to play one of the slot machines!

“Don’t tell me. Is this...?”

Fay couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Welcome to the gods’ casino!”

The voice sounded like that of an adult woman. She emerged from between the mountains of coins, raven-haired and wearing a fiery red dress. She approached them with elegant strides. *“My Elements changes form based on what’s in the hearts of the human challenger. I wondered what sort of world you would conjure up. I sure never expected this!”*

“Bookmaker? Is that you?” Fay asked.

“Ding, ding, ding! You got it.” The gorgeous woman giggled. *“This is a space that several gods got together and made—oh, let’s just say on a whim. As you can see, they like to come here when they’ve got time to kill. A way of passing the hours until some humans show up—or maybe consoling themselves after being defeated by those humans? Anyway, I’ve never seen someone project this place before.”*

“I’m more surprised by your appearance,” said Fay. The Polymorphic God Gremoire frequently took on human form. It had assumed Nel’s shape during their game, and Fay had expected it to look like him in this one. “You don’t think you look like me... Right?”

“No,” the woman said flatly.

“So is that your real form?”

“Also no.”

“What is it, then?”

“Let me ask you a question,” Gremoire said, fixing Fay with amber eyes—the only element of its appearance that hadn’t changed. *“Who is it that’s guarding you in here?”*

“Huh?”

“Oh, that’s right. You can’t remember.” The polymorphic god’s eyes crinkled in a very pointed smile, as if all this were funny. *“The moment a human enters my Elements, I analyze their information. Organic data, their spiritual and mental states, their Arise—I can scan every bit of it. Except yours. You, I couldn’t copy.”*

“Uh...”

“My intervention was deflected by the god who protects you. How do I put this in human terms? Ah. I guess you would say it’s like when a security program detects someone trying to hack into your personal data. The god must like you very much indeed.”

Fay gave the Bookmaker a look of utmost perplexity.

“...? I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It was the absolute truth. All he understood was that for some reason, the Polymorphic God Gremoire had apparently failed to turn into him.

A god’s protection?

That did make Fay think of one thing—his Arise, “May Your God.” It represented that he had been granted the divine love of the gods. It was the ultimate regenerative power: it neutralized interference from any god at all, everything from a scratch to a mortal wound, to malice, curses, and bad fortune. It was the reason he had revived after being put out of action by Titan’s fist in their game of Hide-and-God-Seek.

Having said all that, humans had no way of knowing which god had granted their Arise.

I don’t know more than anyone else. I just remember discovering this little mark on the back of my hand as a kid.

A mark from the gods, showing that he had been granted an Arise. No one knew, or could know, which god had given it to him or why, and the mark itself faded in a few days. Fay was as much in the dark as everyone else as to why he had been gifted this power.

“Fine. It doesn’t really matter, anyway. It shouldn’t affect our game.” Gremoire ran its fingers through its wavy black hair. It rested a hand on its chest. *“I picked this body from among the humans I’ve transformed into recently. I understand she was a legendary gambler, who established the largest gambling hall in human society. Don’t you know her?”*

“Is she famous?”

“She was. Maybe about fifty years ago.”

“How would I know someone from fifty years ago?!”

Apparently, in the gods’ eyes, fifty years passed for recently. Although it was, of course, long before Fay had been born.

“I told you it didn’t matter. Now comes the part when you need to pay attention.”

The Bookmaker stamped with its high heels, striking the table underneath them.

There was a *thrum*, and something rose out of the ground: a human-sized casino table much like the one Nel and the Bookmaker had used in their game.

“This is Three Little Tricks. We’re going to play three games.” The dark-haired god put up a hand with three fingers raised. *“They will be, in order: a coin flip; poker; and Old Maid. What do these three have in common?”*

“They’re mostly games of luck.”

“In all three of them, I am going to win. I am going to beat you.”

“...” Fay didn’t say anything.

“You just had a thought, didn’t you? ‘That’s strange. Something’s wrong.’ Well, you’re right. This is unnatural.” The god smiled, mischievous and innocent. *“The incongruity struck you, didn’t it? That I could declare certain victory in games of luck. It shouldn’t be possible... Unless I’m cheating.”*

“So you’re going to cheat?”

“I am! The contest is for you to see through the trick I use to ensure my victory.”

It was as simple as simple could be: if Fay could figure out the nasty little cheat involved in each of the three games, he would win.

“Now, here’s an important promise: I will use only one trick.”

“Huh! I like it.” Fay had to admit, he couldn’t immediately think of anything, any one single cheat that would enable victory in all three of those games. “Consider me interested. If it’s a trick that a human like me can possibly see through during the game, then I accept your challenge.”

“Here’s what we’ll do, then,” the god said, beckoning—not to Fay, but to the three who stood behind him: Leshea, Pearl, and Nel. *“I’ll tell your companions ahead of time what the trick is. If they all agree it’s reasonable, then we’ll have our match.”*

Each of the women reacted very much in character.

“Wh-whaaaat?!” Pearl cried.

“You’ll do what?!” Nel demanded.

“Such confidence! I like that. Sounds good to me,” Leshea said.

One of them sounded shocked, one startled, and one excited, but all of them trotted over to the Bookmaker. Nel in particular looked deeply disturbed as the deity whispered in her ear; she was still agonizing over her bitter defeat to this very opponent.

“*My trick is...*,” the god whispered. “*In each of the three games, I’ll _____.* Specifically, _____.”

For a moment, all Fay could hear was murmuring. Then Pearl burst out, “W-wait, do you mean—?!” and at the same time Nel shouted, “Hey, hold on! Y-yes, I follow the logic, but that’s *some* cheat!”

The two women looked at each other, solemnly.

“It, uh... It’s true that I’ve never heard of cheating quite like that, but I think it will be okay... Somehow,” Pearl said hesitantly.

“I guess it’s possible. Probably. Although as cheating goes, it makes me pretty angry,” nodded Nel, who still looked unhappy.

Both of them had obviously been deeply startled by the revelation of the trick. Neither, however, had objected, meaning it *should* be feasible to see through the deception.

For her part, Leshea burst out laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! What an idea! That’s hilarious!” She laughed so hard that she clutched her sides, waves rippling through her vermilion hair. “It gets my approval! I think it’s great!” When she finally got over her laughing fit and collected herself, she turned to look at Fay. “Guess we all agree. Have fun, Fay.”

“Y-yes, I approve! I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out, Fay!” Pearl said, raising an encouraging hand.

Last came: “Master Fay.” Nel clenched a fist, her face drawn. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me. Obviously, I can’t give you any hint as to what the trick might be, but what I can say is...I know you’ll be able to see right through

it! I have faith in you!”

So the judgment was rendered, the decision made. The three young women, his teammates, had each determined that he would be able to figure out what was going on.

“All right. I’ll play your game,” said Fay.

“Let’s get started, then.” The god in the form of a beautiful woman took an elegant stride over to the casino table and sat in a chair across from Fay. *“Three little tricks a god pulls on you. Now, I wonder, what will you do?”*

Three Little Tricks

Win Condition: Figure out the trick the Polymorphic God Gremoire uses to ensure victory.

Lose Condition: Fail to figure out the trick by the time the three games are over.

If victorious, Nel’s three losses will be erased and she can come out of retirement.

If defeated, Faye’s three wins will be erased and his record becomes 0-0.

Game 1: Coin Toss—start.

“Pick which coin you’d like to use,” the god said, gesturing to the coins around them.

This casino table was piled high with hundreds of coins—some gold, some silver, some black, or white, and others every color of the rainbow.

And Fay had to choose just one.

Understanding what that meant, he pulled out a black-and-white coin. The front (heads; white) side showed Fay’s face. The back (tails; black) side showed the woman whose form Gremoire was currently imitating.

We flip the coin, and whoever’s face shows up is the winner. Simple as that. If I make the flip, I know I can get the side I want a hundred times out of a hundred, but of course, the same is true for the god.

No matter which of them flipped, the contest would be somewhat lacking in fairness.

“Should I toss, or will you?” Fay asked.

“Your friend will do it.” The god pointed to the three young women watching them. *“Other than my little trick, these games are going to be perfectly fair. We’ll have your companions act as dealers and facilitators. You first.”*

Gremoire flipped the coin through the air; it arced toward Nel, who caught it, although she didn’t look too pleased.

“I can’t say I like this. But I guess I’m your ‘dealer’ for this round, Master Fay.” As Fay and Gremoire looked on, Nel took a step forward and placed the coin on the toe of her shoe. “All right...”

“Hey, uh, Nel? What are you doing?” Fay asked.

“Flipping the coin.”

“Yeah, uh, don’t you usually do that with your finger?”

“I know how to use my legs better. You want to see this thing flip, just wait till I kick it.” She raised her leg like she was bouncing a soccer ball and nimbly juggled the coin, no bigger than the tips of her toes, on her foot. “See? My Arise is all about my feet. I practice kicking every day.”

“Sure. Makes sense...”

Nel’s Arise was called Moment Reversal, and it allowed her to deflect anything she kicked, regardless of its mass or energy.

I seem to remember that when I first met her, she kicked a truck out of the way. The way her foot came up almost instinctively shows how much she’s practiced.

A foot-related Arise? For Nel, even kicking a coin into the air was a simple trick.

“Here’s what we’ll do: One. I’m going to kick the coin. Two. While the coin is in the air, Master Fay calls heads or tails. Three. Just to keep things fair, after Master Fay makes his call, I’ll kick the coin again while it’s still in the air. Then we let it land to settle the flip.”

The white front side of the coin showed Fay's face. The black reverse side was engraved with Gremoire's.

I picked this coin because the two sides are different colors. That'll make it easier to detect if it does anything unnatural in midair.

Once the coin was in the air, it would be impossible to make any significant changes to its trajectory—and meanwhile, Fay had been given the prerogative of calling heads or tails.

The Bookmaker says its trick will ensure victory. So I can guess that whatever it is, this cheat is something that will prevent me from ever winning this coin toss.

What trick, what kind of intervention, could do that?

As Fay looked on, Nel positioned the coin on the tip of her shoe again. "Here goes, Master Fay."

For an instant, Nel's foot became a blur. She kicked her leg up, all the way over her head, like a dancer, and the coin vaulted into space.

Twirl, twirl, twirl, twirl, twirl.

It spun faster than the human eye could see. Even Fay, who had done more than a bit of coin toss practice in his time, found it difficult to be sure how it would come down. He wouldn't be calling it a hundred times out of a hundred on this one. At best, he might manage eight out of ten.

The coin whizzed through the air. Fay waited until the second before it hit the ground, then called, "Heads!"

He had made his decision. At the same instant, Nel gave the coin another kick. It rose up along exactly the same trajectory as the first time, and came down along the same trajectory.

The coin landed, then bounced across the soft, cushioned ground, then finally came to a stop.

Showing the black side with Gremoire's face.

"It's...tails, Master Fay," Nel said, her voice strained. "I'm sorry."

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for, Nel. It’s just a game of luck, right?”

Right. The flip just now had been a pure contest of luck. The coin hadn’t done anything funny on its way down. It hadn’t stopped in midair, or been forcibly pulled to the tails side, or anything.

There should be a 50-50 chance of either heads or tails coming up. One out of two times. To all appearances, it looks like I just lost by coincidence.

But then there was the Bookmaker’s pronouncement that Fay’s defeat was assured, and the Bookmaker’s victory certain, because of the god’s trick.

“All right, got it.” Fay clapped his hands. “Next up! You said the second game was poker?”

“Look who’s in a hurry. Is that a touch of panic I hear?”

“Nope,” Fay said to the god across the table, cool as anything. “It’s just that Chief Secretary Miranda is back in the human world, and she’s got to be beside herself waiting to find out how this all went.”

“Very well. I’ll explain the poker game.”

“Same as earlier?”

“Not quite. We’ll only play one round. So we won’t be needing these.” There was a great sliding noise as the Bookmaker pushed the mountains of coins aside. *“It’ll be a simple matter of hand collection. We each start with five cards, and get one chance to replace as many as we like. Then we have a showdown with whatever’s in our hand.”*

“In other words, totally luck-based.”

“And yet I’m going to win. Thanks to my trick.” The Bookmaker rested an elbow on the table, then put its chin on its hand. *“Let’s begin. First, we’ll pick the dealer for this game.”*

“Ooh! Me!” Leshea’s hand shot into the air. “If I deal the cards, it’ll be nice and fair, right? All right, let’s not waste any time!”

Leshea had the deck in hand before the Bookmaker could say a word. She tore off the seal that showed the deck hadn’t been opened, then pulled out the jokers and plopped the other fifty-two cards on the table.

“Hmm, good. Looks like the cards are all here. And nothing obvious that could serve as a mark, either,” Leshea said, reviewing the deck for obvious cheats.

Fay agreed with her: this was a new deck that hadn’t been tampered with. And since Leshea didn’t see anything, it seemed unlikely that the cards were being moved or affected in any way by some invisible divine power.

Doesn’t seem like there’s that much the Bookmaker could do to a deck of cards, anyway—because the possibilities are limited by things that could apply to all three games.

A coin toss. Poker. And Old Maid. The god would use a single trick in all three of them, so if the cheat in poker was manipulating the cards, the cheat in the coin toss would have to be manipulating the coin.

And I know for a fact that didn’t happen, because I got to call the flip.

Even if, for example, the god had prepared a coin that always landed on tails, when Fay called tails, it would have signaled the god’s defeat. The god would never have staked everything on such a fallible ruse. Not when it declared that this trick would guarantee victory.

Right. I need to use this poker game to narrow it down to two or three possible tricks. Then I can see which it is in the game of Old Maid.

The poker game was the perfect chance. Unlike the coin toss, which was over in a matter of seconds, poker would afford him plenty of time to think—as well as to watch how the Bookmaker behaved.

“Okay if I deal, Fay?” Leshea asked.

“Yeah, go ahead.” Fay nodded, but he never took his eyes off the god across from him; he never even blinked. Instead, he carefully observed the dark-haired woman with her elegant smile and her chin resting on her hand.

Definitely not looking threatened by me. Almost like the Bookmaker assumes that no matter how closely I watch, I’ll never see the cheat happen.

Here came the cards. Leshea dealt out five to each of them, first to Fay, then the Bookmaker.

“No floating cards this time?” Fay asked. The hands Leshea had dealt

remained resolutely on the table. They showed no sign of drifting up into the air as they had during the game with Nel.

“If I caused the cards to levitate, you might take that to be another form of interference. That would just spoil the fun.”

“Point taken. And thanks for the hint.”

Fay picked up his cards. His hand was 8, 8, A, A, 7. Two pairs, including a powerful pair of aces. In a normal game of poker, this would be an excellent starting hand. He could trade in the 7 and hope for 8, 8, 8, A, A or maybe 8, 8, A, A, A—a full house. A near guarantee of victory.

Meanwhile, the Bookmaker sat across from him. *“You like your hand? Oh, I do hope you drew some good cards.”* The god still had that small smile. And, of course, five cards.

The problem is that I’m-totally-in-control smile. Is that because the Bookmaker drew a good hand? Or just because it’s that confident in the trick?

For that matter, maybe it was both.

“Which of us replaces cards first?”

“Whichever you like.”

“I’ll go first, then.”

Fay took another glance at his 8, 8, A, A, 7. Then he tossed all his cards on the table. “I’m changing all five.”

“Wha—?!” Nel cried.

“You’re whaaaaaaat?!” Pearl exclaimed.

They both leaned forward from where they were positioned behind him, watching.

“Have you lost your mind, Master Fay?!”

“Y-yes, that’s right! You had two pairs! Why wouldn’t you just exchange the single 7? Even if you were feeling greedy, you should have kept the aces!”

“But then I’d never win, right?” Fay said. The god had some invisible trick at work. If Fay’s two pairs were somehow willed by the deity, then complacently

changing his single card would leave him with no chance against whatever the Bookmaker was holding.

That was why he needed a whole new hand.

There wouldn't be any point to winning this round of poker. What I want to see is what we've got more than two cards down that deck. That's why I have to change everything.

If Fay had exchanged only one card, everything from the second-next card onward would have gone into the Bookmaker's hand. If that was somehow part of the god's plan, this change of all five cards would give Fay a chance to see it.

"Okay, here they come." Leshea dealt him five new cards. Nel and Pearl looked on nervously as he picked them up.

2, 4, 9, J, J.

One pair—a weaker hand than he'd had before. Worse, his study of the cards revealed no obvious pattern to the numbers or suits that came up from the deck.

"How many cards are you going to exchange?" Fay asked.

"No."

No? What did that mean? Before he could ask the question, the black-haired woman spread her cards on the table. A (♦), 2 (♦), 3 (♦), 4 (♦), 5(♦).

"Straight flush."

"....!" Fay's breath caught.

That was basically the most powerful hand in poker. The chance of drawing it straight off the deck was so low that "good luck" was hardly enough to describe doing so; it rendered Fay's hand-replacement strategy meaningless. He found he couldn't resist a wistful smile at the sheer ostentatiousness of it: the Bookmaker had as good as said "I did this on purpose."

So. The god's straight flush was already in that first hand. Now that's starting to feel like cheating!

It was hard to imagine it had even been possible to interfere in the coin toss

earlier; it was always conceivable that Fay, with a 50-50 chance, had simply guessed wrong. In this hand of poker, however, it was obvious that something was fishy.

All right, time to think. What trick could the god possibly pull that would apply to both a coin flip and a game of poker?

Consider the coin flip. Suppose that after Fay had declared tails, the god had used something akin to psychokinesis to influence the coin's fall and make it land on heads. Well, how would that work in poker? Could the god swap the cards around in the deck using psychokinesis?

Like, pull whatever cards it wanted from the pile? Hmm... With me watching? Would that be possible?

All right, scratch psychokinesis for now. There were plenty of other supernatural phenomena that could be manifested with divine power.

Coin Toss: 1. Freeze Time (then turn the coin over to heads). 2. Hypnosis (so everyone sees heads instead of tails).

Poker: 1. Freeze Time (pick preferred cards for hand). 2. Hypnosis (make everyone see the numbers and suits you want).

And of course, there was always the possibility of something like option 3. Dramatically increasing the god's luck (and counting on that luck to win both the coin toss and the poker game). Now, *that* would be cheating.

There were so many possibilities—the gods' powers were endless, after all.

It's like trying to grab hold of fog. Guess I knew it would be. It's tough to narrow down the possibilities when you're dealing with a god.

Even the most cursory reflection on the situation suggested several dozen possible tricks the god could be pulling. And Fay only had one more game—one more clue.

"Round three is Old Maid, right?"

"Done pondering already?"

"Yeah. I can do my thinking when it's all over."

This was it. And the dealer for their game of Old Maid would be...

“All right, your turn! Get out there!”

“Eek!”

Leshea gave Pearl a smack on the behind, provoking a yelp from the golden-haired girl.

Yes, Pearl would be their dealer. The Bookmaker beckoned to her and she plodded forward, looking uneasily at Fay.

“Uh, um, Fay...”

“No need to be nervous—just deal the cards. I’m the only one who has to worry about the game,” he said.

“...” Pearl stood there, speechless.

“Huh? Hey, what’s wrong?”

“N-no, it’s nothing! I’m just afraid of making some silly mistake...”

“Hey, relax. You’re only dealing out cards. You’re not gonna make any—”

“Ahhhh!”

Before Fay could finish his sentence, Pearl started shuffling furiously, and in the process, her hand slipped and cards went flying everywhere.

“Gosh, these are *really* slippery cards!” she cried.

“Okay, so you made a mistake,” Fay remarked.

He helped her pick the cards up off the ground. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it gave him the opportunity to examine each of the cards he picked up.

It doesn’t look like any of them have been tampered with. Not the front, not the back...

Between this and the poker game, he felt he could say that much for certain.

“Ahem. There are fifty-two cards, plus a joker, for a total of fifty-three,” Pearl said, shuffling again. “I’m going to deal them out to you, so that one of you gets twenty-six and the other gets twenty-seven. I know that’s a lot, but at least

you'll be able to make lots of pairs! Please place them to the side of the table."

Then she started dealing. Fay got the hand of twenty-seven cards. As he found matched pairs of numbers among them, he discarded them. Finally he was left with six cards: 3, 5, 8, 9, Q, and the *Joker*.

The Bookmaker, meanwhile, had five cards left—the same number, of course, that Fay would have had without his *Joker*.

"You have more cards, so I'll let you choose. Do you want to draw, or shall I?"

"I think I will," Fay said, and then he took the god's leftmost card. He got an 8, forming a pair, which he discarded. Now he had five cards including the *Joker*.

"My turn, then. Say, you there..." The beautiful black-haired woman pointed a finger squarely at one of the onlookers. *"Human. What are you doing, trying to leave? Your job isn't done here."*

"Eeep!"

Pearl, who had been surreptitiously trying to sneak away, now found herself the target of the pointed finger, so she flinched and froze.

"You want this human to win, don't you? Tell you what. I'll make you a very special, highly exclusive offer. Just to make absolutely sure I can't cheat, I'll let you stand directly behind me and look at my hand."

"What's this about?" Nel demanded.

"I told you. I like to pick nice, fair games that a human can win. Here, take a good look."

The Bookmaker spread out its cards so that Pearl, who had moved behind the deity, could see them.

"I have four cards in my hand. Do any of them look funny to you?"

"No... They don't." Pearl shook her head hesitantly. "As far as I can see, Fay, there haven't been any tricks pulled on these cards."

"Well, there you have it. Ah, I believe it was my turn to draw a card." Fay held up his cards, and the beautiful woman reached out, pointing to each of them in turn. *"I think I'll take...this one."*

The rightmost card.

Pearl, when she saw what a Bookmaker had taken, squeaked, “Ah?!”

It was the Joker.

Fay hadn’t been expecting that, either.

I was so sure that whatever this trick was, it would allow the god to avoid my Joker. Was that luck? Or...did the Bookmaker do it on purpose?

Something felt off. After all, the Bookmaker had already proclaimed victory in this game before it even started. And from the moment Fay had drawn the Joker, all the deity had to do was refuse to take it from him, and that victory was assured.

So why?

Fay refused to let this go. He couldn’t shrug off this nagging sense that something was wrong. He couldn’t just say “Well, whatever” and carry on. All his knowledge and experience warned him to take heed of this feeling.

“As you obviously know, the Joker has passed to me,” the Bookmaker said, shuffling the five cards in its hand so Fay wouldn’t know which was which. Then it fanned them out again. *“Your turn.”*

“Sure thing.”

Fay drew a queen, completing another pair. Now he held only a 3, 5, and 9.

“Now, I’ll go.”

The god took Fay’s 5, which had been on the rightmost edge of his hand. So now Fay had only two cards, 3 and 9. The Bookmaker was holding 3, 9, and the Joker.

At this moment, the momentum was decisively in Fay’s favor. If he drew either the 3 or the 9, he would win (because the god would then draw Fay’s final card, leaving him with no cards in hand). He had a 66.666666 percent chance of winning. He just had to avoid drawing the Joker.

“All right. My turn,” he said.

Twice in a row, he had taken the leftmost card in the god’s hand. This time, he

instead chose the right, veritably grabbing it from the Bookmaker.

“...!” His breath caught in his throat.

It was the Joker.

His bad feeling had been spot-on.

In other words, I was induced to draw this. Even though I drew left twice, then made a point of going right for the final draw.

The god couldn't have known whether Fay would draw from the right, left, or center. Unless there was genuine prognostication at work, the Bookmaker couldn't position the Joker exactly where Fay was certain to take it.

Anyway, the god can't be seeing the future—because that wouldn't work in the coin toss or the poker game.

Fay now had three cards in his hand.

“My turn.” The black-haired woman reached out and gingerly pulled a card from Fay's trio. The 9. That completed a pair for the god. “And that's game,” it said.

Fay was holding the 3 and the Joker, while the god had only a 3. On the next turn, Fay would draw and the god would go down to zero cards.

Fay had lost. All three games had resulted in the Bookmaker's victory, as promised.

“You see?” the god said, wearing a cold smile. Pearl looked on from beside the table, worried, while Nel and Leshea watched the action closely from behind Fay. “It's time. What's your answer?” The deity leaned on the table again and studied Fay. “How is this god tricking you?”

“.....” Fay didn't reply immediately; instead, he crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

Think back. Remember every single thing that happened in these three games. Let's start with the last one, Old Maid. The Bookmaker caused me to draw the Joker. There was some sort of deliberate interference at work there, I'm sure of it.

It was nothing to do with the card itself, though, so what other kinds of tricks might be possible?

Old Maid: Prognostication; seeing through the cards; mind-reading; swapping cards.

The god was distinguishing the cards in some way, but X-ray vision and mind-reading wouldn't help in a coin toss. Neither would seeing the future—at least as long as it was Fay calling the flip.

What trick could be used in all three games? I'm dealing with a god, here. It could be almost anything.

Like freezing time, forcibly distorting space, or even manipulating destiny itself. Even once you allowed for cheating that a human player could possibly recognize, there were any number of ways that a god could ensure victory in those three games.

But all three of my teammates agreed to let me do this. Would that have happened if it was some trivial trick like that?

That was a big hint. Whatever this trick was, Nel and Pearl had been shocked by it and Leshea had burst into laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! What an idea! That's hilarious!"

"Y-yes, I approve! I'm sure you'll be able to figure it out, Fay!"

"Master Fay... I know you'll be able to see right through it! I have faith in you!"

The three of them had all been confident he would crack the riddle. That had to mean the god's "trick" was something a human might reasonably think of. Not likely to be time-freezing, or illusion, or destiny manipulation, or any other god-tier kind of cheat wildly outside the realm of daily experience.

Then there was one more thing—the funny feeling he'd had while playing Old Maid.

The Bookmaker pulled my Joker and there's definitely something strange about that.

The god had declared absolute victory in these games of luck. It should have been a simple matter to avoid the "Old Maid." Sure, Fay had ultimately taken

the Joker back and lost, but in that game, and that game only, he'd seen a chink in the god's armor.

Whatever this trick is, it isn't all-powerful. It seems like the Bookmaker couldn't see the Joker in my hand...

All right, time for a guess. He just needed to remember all the phenomena he'd observed during these three rounds.

1. The god's trick could cause Fay's prediction in a coin flip to be wrong.
2. The god's trick could collect a straight flush in the opening hand of a poker game.
3. The god's trick could *not* see where Fay was holding the Joker in Old Maid.
4. The god's trick could... (this power can be deduced from 3).

..... Fay paused for a long moment. Finally he thought, *Ah... I get it.*

In light of these facts, only one thing could tie all the tricks together.

"I'm going to die of boredom waiting for you," the Bookmaker said, elbow still on the table, with a demonstrative sigh. It flipped an hourglass over in its hand. *"Take too long and I'll decide you need a time limit. Maybe, let's say...when the sand in this hourglass runs out?"*

"Hey, Leshea," said Fay, brazenly ignoring the Bookmaker's remark. Instead, he turned toward the vermilion-haired girl standing behind him. "Got kind of a tangential question for you."

"Yeah?"

"There's two ways to cheat in Old Maid that give you a guaranteed win. Which do you like better?"

"..." For just a second, the former god was silent. An instant later, though, a smile blossomed on her face and she replied, "Wait, what? Hey, I don't know!"

"Okay, it's cool. Like I said, tangential. Now, then..." Fay turned back to the casino table, back to the amber-eyed god watching him suspiciously. "Let's go

again.”

“...!” The Bookmaker made a disbelieving noise.

“It sucks, losing all the time, so I’m gonna get my revenge. Let’s have another hand of Old Maid. Pearl, if you’d be so kind as to deal again?”

“What are you talking about?” the god demanded, the words tinged with annoyance. *“I told you, the game is over. If you’re just trying to buy time because you can’t figure out how I cheated—”*

“Hardly.” Fay stared straight at the Bookmaker, full of such spirit that his human words were able to interrupt the utterance of a god. “Or what, you want me to make it explicit? All right, then listen up.”

He let the words hang in the air for a moment. A challenge from a human to a god.

“In the next game, I’m gonna break your winning streak.”

“Fine. My final act of mercy toward you. Deal the cards, human.”

The Bookmaker snapped its fingers. Once again, Pearl picked up the deck. As Fay and the Bookmaker looked on, she shuffled them very, very thoroughly, then dealt them, anxiety written across her face.

Intriguing. I’m guessing this little episode of déjà vu is genuine coincidence.

Fay found himself holding twenty-seven cards again. Again, he began making pairs and discarding them. This time, though, he took his time with each and every card. A 5 and a 5. An ace and an ace. As he went, he piled the cards at the side of the table, each pair atop the other, not a millimeter out of place.

“Being awfully careful with our cards, aren’t we?” the Bookmaker said.

“I begged and pleaded for this rematch. And now I’m gonna bring down the wrath of the gods by being too serious about it?” Fay replied.

At last, he sorted out his hand. He was left with five cards: 5, 7, J, Q, and the Joker. The Bookmaker, meanwhile, held four cards.

“I’ve got more cards. Mind if I draw first again?” Fay said.

“Be my guest,” the god replied lightly. Fay took one of the cards from his

opponent's hand, a Jack. Now they had four and three cards left, respectively. The god responded by drawing Fay's 7.

That was the moment when the contest was decided.

"Bookmaker. In the last game, you drew my Joker, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Bad luck."

"That's what I'd call it. But you didn't care, did you?"

"Of course not," the god laughed. *"Because it wasn't going to stop me from winning."*

"Oh no?"

Fay's hand consisted of a 5, a Queen, and the Joker. The god had to be holding a 5 and a Queen. It was Fay's turn to draw. This was where the change happened.

"..." Fay reached out—and then stopped. He stared at the two cards the raven-haired beauty was holding up, his fingers inches away from them.

"What's wrong? That's an awfully big glower for a god's cards."

"Just observing the backs of your cards."

"...?" The black-haired god narrowed its eyes, not sure what he meant. Fair enough. Fay was the one holding the Joker; why think so hard about which card he would draw when he was sure to get a match? The god was holding 5 and Q. Either would form a pair with something in Fay's hand that he could then set to the side in his little pile.

"....." Fay continued to stare.

"You test even my comprehension," the Bookmaker said, fixing a cold gaze upon Fay's outstretched hand. *"You claimed to have seen through my trick. You promised you would defeat me."*

"Yeah, I did."

"So why do you hesitate?"

"I'm not hesitating. I'm choosing."

“...?” The god gave him another questioning look.

“I know that the card I pick now will decide whether I win or lose.”

This time the Bookmaker simply fell silent, but only for a moment. Then it heaved a sigh and, with undisguised contempt, said, *“Do whatever you want. But I warn you—whatever you do, it will be wrong.”*

“Do whatever I want? Thanks, I think I will.”

The god held two cards, and they were certainly a 5 and a Queen. If they had been anything else, Pearl, who was observing this game as she had the previous one, would have noticed.

“All right, I’ve got it,” Fay said, choosing the card to his right. He drew the Queen, forming a pair and leaving him with only his 5 and the Joker. And with the Bookmaker to draw.

“I’ll take this one... Oh, too bad.”

The god had drawn the Joker. That left the god with a 5 and the Joker in hand, while Fay held only a 5. *“Let me guess. Feeling lucky right about now?”* The Bookmaker chuckled. *“Now comes the fateful choice. If you can draw my 5, you win...but sadly for you, the path you’re going down is a repeat of our first game.”*

Fay met that cold laughter with complete calm. “Why don’t you just spell it out already? Your trick is one that causes me to eternally draw the Joker.”

“—!” The god almost visibly flinched.

“But that won’t work. Because we’re already—”

He reached out. Toward the god’s two cards. Toward the two cards designed to force him to draw the Joker...

“—comparing our answers!”

Fay drew the 5.

That made a pair with the 5 in his hand and he discarded down to zero cards.

“——?!” Now the god was well and truly stunned, its amber eyes wide as saucers. *Unbelievable*, they seemed to say. *How could this human ever draw*

anything but the Joker while the trick was active?

“Looks like you’re not quite sure what just happened,” Fay said. He stood up, his pair of 5s still resting on the table. He was looking at Pearl, who was smiling but also looked choked up, as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

“Fay...!” she cried.

“It’s as simple as this—I satisfied the *hidden* win condition.”

That’s right. The game of Three Little Tricks had an additional, secret win condition above and beyond its stated goal.

Three Little Tricks

Win Condition: Figure out the trick the Polymorphic God Gremoire uses to ensure victory.

Win Condition (Secret): Actually win a game against the Polymorphic God Gremoire. (=Undo the game’s most fundamental rule, that the god must always win, by defeating the deity.)



Of course, it would be impossible to satisfy the secret win condition without completing the surface objective as well.

“The true nature of the trick here is *collusion* between you and my friends.”

As the god sat, not moving a muscle, Fay delivered his answer—his declaration of victory.

“It was four-on-one here, and the one wasn’t you, Bookmaker, it was me. Right, Leshea?”

Finally, there was a “Pfft!” from behind him, and Leshea, who had kept herself under control the entire time, could hold it in no longer.

“Ha-ha-ha! Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Yes! Exactly! Ahh, you hit the nail square on the head! Aw, and here I thought I did such a good job. Maybe it was Nel or Pearl who tipped you off.”

“Don’t try to pin this on me!” Pearl exclaimed.

“N-nor me...!”

All three of the girls began talking at once, as if a dam had broken. The tension that had suffused the room drained away—both the anxiety of wondering whether Fay could really beat the Bookmaker, and the guilt of conspiring with the deity to deceive Fay.

“So, spill, Fay! How’d you know?” Leshea asked with no hint of remorse. She was obviously much more excited to find out when and how Fay had seen through the ruse.

“I had a feeling. Like how...” Fay paused and looked at the casino table. It was covered in cards. His eyes went right to the Joker, the only image that was out of place. “Say, Nel. Did you understand what Leshea and I were saying earlier?”

“Hmm?” Nel looked hesitant. “Master Fay? Do you mean when you were talking about the two ways to guarantee a win in Old Maid? Actually, I’ve been wondering about that. What in the world were you talking about?”

“One way to cheat would be never to draw the Joker, and the other would be to always force your opponent to draw it. Either way, you win, right?”

“—!” Nel gave a sharp intake of breath.

Fay was right: to be absolutely certain of a win in Old Maid, you would have to fulfill one of those two conditions. Never once draw the Joker in the former case; or always give it to your opponent in the latter.

“At first, I assumed the Bookmaker must be going for the first one. That opening straight flush in the poker game had me subconsciously assuming that the cheat entailed always drawing the cards you needed.”

But that wasn’t quite true, and it was that first game of Old Maid that had allowed Fay to realize it.

“The god *drew* the Old Maid.” That one moment allowed Fay to guess that the god’s strategy involved making him take the Joker. “Now, here’s the important part. This trick, which forces me to take the Old Maid, *only activates if and when the Joker is already in the god’s hand.*”

To play out the implications a bit, it meant that the Bookmaker couldn’t affect the cards in Fay’s hand. Only those in its own.

“This was where my other funny feeling became crucial. You know what I mean, Pearl.” He turned toward the golden-haired girl. “Why was I dealt twenty-seven cards?”

“Wha...?”

“I mean, I know the answer. Because that was *your job.*”

Old Maid was played with a full deck of cards. Thirteen different types, Ace through King, multiplied by four different suits equaled fifty-two cards. Plus the Old Maid made fifty-three. Divide them between one god and one human, and one of the players would have twenty-six cards while the other had twenty-seven.

Which made the behavior of the dealer—Pearl—notable.

“I’m going to deal them out to you, so that one of you gets twenty-six and the other gets twenty-seven. I know that’s a lot...”

“Fay gets the hand of twenty-seven cards.”

Fay had gotten the larger hand. And since the fundamental principle of Old

Maid was to *not* draw the Joker—or, if you did, to get rid of it as fast as possible—then the player with the smaller hand had the advantage.

The dealer dealt fairly, yes. But if she had the opportunity to choose who would get the advantageous twenty-six-card hand, Fay would expect Pearl's natural inclination to be to give it to him.

“For some reason, though, you dealt me the tougher hand. Two games in a row, no less. Now, why would that be?” He remembered how nervous his companion had seemed—that was when, for the first time, he had begun to doubt her. And then it had come to him. “That whole game of Old Maid, you were standing behind the god. Looking right at its hand. It was supposedly in the name of being an impartial observer, but it was really so you could use your Arise to swap cards.”

Pearl had two types of teleportation abilities. One was simple teleportation, of which Fay had seen her make extensive use. But today, she had been using her other ability—Shift Change. Pearl could swap any two people or objects that she had touched within the last three minutes.

For example...

In the Sun Race Relay with the Sun Army God Mahtma II, Pearl had said: *“I can use Shift Change to switch the Sun Flower with another flower in an instant!”*

It was enough for Fay to be sure: Pearl's Arise could explain what had happened in this game. It was the key to the trick.

“Pearl, you were constantly looking at the god's cards in the name of observation. If I drew anything but the Joker, you just had to switch it with the Old Maid.”

In that final moment, the god had been holding the 5 on the left and the Joker on the right. The moment Fay touched the 5, Pearl simply had to Shift Change it with the Joker.

“That would match up with my hypothesis that the god's trick can't affect the cards in my hand, only the ones in its own.”

Once Fay had worked out that much, the rest was easy. In the coin toss and the game of poker, just like in Old Maid, it was not the god that had been

cheating. It was the dealers, Nel and Leshea.

So when had the deity planted the seed of this trick, this collusion? It would have to be...

"If it's a trick that a human like me can possibly see through, then I accept your challenge."

"Here's what we'll do, then. I'll tell your companions ahead of time what the trick is. My trick is... Specifically, _____."

It would have been right then.

Fay had thought the Bookmaker had taken an exceptionally long time to explain a simple trick. It had been because the deity was conferring with his three companions, planning.

Fay was familiar with Nel and Pearl's Arises. That was why they each agreed that he would be able to tell what was going on. Because the trick involved their special powers, they were confident Fay would be able to figure it out.

"....." The black-haired woman watched Fay silently, chin still perched on her hand. Fay turned to the god and said, "I've got to hand it to you. When I think about it, you were working to conceal your trick from the moment you started explaining things, weren't you?"

"This Elements shows you what's in your heart."

"The moment a human enters my Elements, I analyze their information. Organic data, their spiritual and mental states, their Arise—I can scan every bit of it."

The Bookmaker could scan a person's Arise. From the moment Nel and the others had arrived in this Elements, the god had known what their powers were. That was why it was possible to come up with this game.

"As far as the coin toss... Now, this is me just sort of spitballing, but I'm guessing that had to do with the 'dealer's' Arise, too. Didn't it, Nel?"

"I'm so sorry, Master Fay!" Nel said, bowing deeply. "I... I can hardly bring myself to admit to such malfeasance...but yes. I controlled the coin flip when I kicked it."

Nel's Arise was called Moment Reversal, and it allowed her to kick away any object her foot connected with, regardless of its mass or energy. That was the secret here. *Nel had kicked the coin specifically so that it would flip an odd number of times.*

For example, if the coin spun forty-nine times, then kicking it using Moment Reversal would cause it to spin ninety-eight times before hitting the ground. An odd number of flips would become an even number, and a coin that should have landed on heads would be tails instead.

That would require uncanny accuracy, obviously. The kind of accuracy that would demand untold amounts of time and effort to achieve.

But a player who challenged the gods themselves would not begrudge such time or effort. Certainly not Nel, who had been defeated by the gods and wanted to make a comeback. No; such effort was the minimum any challenger of the gods would make. Something like this would be child's play.

That left Fay with a question, though.

"One thing, Nel—that trick would only work if I was right about my call. What would you have done if I'd called wrong?"

"I just had to trust you on that." Nel gave him a small smile and held up a coin. The front was white and the back was black. Fay had chosen it specifically because it would be easy to see which was which while it was in the air. "I had faith that a man headed for ten victories in battles of wits with the gods would never be outfoxed by a simple coin flip. Like I said...I'm sorry."

"No, you did a great job. If it was the first time I'd seen you do that, I would never have guessed." He turned to his final companion. "That just leaves you, Leshea. And yours hardly needs explanation, so let's just pass."

"What?! Why?!" the former god said, eyes wide. She'd been waiting excitedly for him to reveal *her* secret.

"Why? Because there *wasn't* really anything going on when you dealt out that poker game. Right?"

"Of course!" she said, putting a hand to her chest proudly. "Someone as thoroughly practiced as I am could deal a straight flush right off the deck with

their eyes closed!”

“It’s partly on me. I wasn’t watching you.”

In this regard, in fact, Fay had been completely outwitted. Convinced that it was the god who would be cheating, Fay had been watching the Bookmaker’s every move during the poker deal. Meanwhile, Leshea could calmly arrange the cards however she wanted.

“What do you say, Bookmaker?” said Fay.

For the first time, the black-haired god broke its silence and looked at them. It had been studying the playing cards scattered around the table. *“I say...no. I’m not convinced.”*

That brought them up short.

“You won the game, yes. But it’s strange. That last game of Old Maid—even if you knew what the trick was, you still shouldn’t have been able to beat me.”

“Oh, I agree.”

Fay couldn’t stop Pearl’s Shift Change. The Bookmaker had been holding the 5 and the Old Maid. Even if Fay had been lucky enough to pick the 5, Pearl should have been able to swap the cards around in the instant before he drew. And yet Fay had taken the 5—meaning Shift Change hadn’t activated.

“That’s just plain against the rules.” The amber eyes fixed on Pearl. *“You shirked activating your Arise, didn’t you?”*

“No,” Pearl said. “I didn’t.”

“Well, I didn’t see any Shift Changing. So if it wasn’t you, then what was it?”

“Simple.” The golden-haired girl met the god’s glare, an absolutely mischievous smile on her face. *“I couldn’t activate it.”*

“What?”

“I could only use my Shift Change within three minutes after dealing the cards.”

“.....!” This time, the Polymorphic God Gremoire was well and truly struck dumb, its eyes as wide as they would go.

The deity finally seemed to have realized: Pearl could only use Shift Change on objects she had touched within the past three minutes. And the game of Old Maid between Fay and the Bookmaker had taken longer than that.

“Now you get it, right? Why everything went the way you planned in the first game, but the second one took longer than three minutes?”

“You were buying time for yourself?!”

“Bingo. Using the rhythm of my draws.”

It was the way Fay had stopped short of taking the opponent’s card on his turn, instead studying the god’s two cards as if his life depended on it.

“What’s wrong? That’s an awfully big glower for a god’s cards.”

It had been a bluff.

Fay wasn’t “studying” the cards at all. He’d been delaying, waiting for more than three minutes to pass since the game had started, so Pearl wouldn’t be able to use Shift Change.

“All right, but it was still a 50-50 chance. Just good luck that you drew my 5.”

“Nah. No luck about it.”

“...?” The Bookmaker gave him a questioning look.

“After you took my Joker, you never shuffled what was in your hand. You always put the cards you draw to the left. So I knew exactly where the Old Maid was.”

The Bookmaker ground its teeth. Its pride had gotten the better of it.

In Old Maid, it’s common sense to try to hide the Joker in your hand when you draw it. But the god didn’t feel the need to do that. Whatever Fay picked, Shift Change would swap it with the Joker, so the god didn’t feel obliged to hide the Old Maid.

“You figured all that out in our first game, and made it the basis of your strategy in the second?”

“Uh-huh. I was pretty sure that if I could keep Shift Change out of the equation, I could win it.”

“Well, well!” The black-haired woman giggled. Then the god gave a little shrug as if to concede defeat. *“That was a thoroughly enjoyable game, up to and including checking our answers. Yes, I would be willing to call that satisfying.”*

“That’s great. Glad to hear it.”

“Here’s your reward, as promised.” The Bookmaker, still in the form of the beautiful woman, stood up, then walked over to Nel, its shoes clicking on the floor.

“Wait... What...?” Nel blinked, flummoxed. The Bookmaker grabbed her left wrist, bringing the palm up to its soft lips... “Y-yiiikes!”

“There. Done.”

The kiss had lasted but a second. By the time the Bookmaker, looking openly amused, had turned around, the III on Nel’s palm indicating her losses had vanished without a trace.

“Oh, wow...” Nel stared hard at her hand, and trembled. “Is... Is that it? I can make my comeback now?”

Her record was now 3-0. She could return as an apostle.

“Master Fay! Thank you so m—”

“Oh, right, right.” The Bookmaker clapped its hands, interrupting Nel’s emotional display of gratitude. The deity turned squarely toward Fay. *“We have one more thing to compare answers on.”*

“Hmm?”

“You told me that everything was going according to your plan. That however things went, you and yours were going to win, and indeed had.”

While it was true that Nel had succeeded in making a comeback, she had lost the three wins she’d gambled in the first game, as the 3-0 now on Fay’s hand showed.

This was not worth it. Chief Secretary Miranda probably would have pointed out that a win was worth ten times as much as a loss, so to trade three of Fay’s wins for Nel’s three losses was, in fact, a catastrophic failure. Hardly a success by any means.

“You’re asking how I could be so confident? Well, just look.”

“Hmm? Look at what?”

“Pearl, Nel, Leshea?” Fay said, calling to his three companions as the god looked on in befuddlement. “Could the three of you hold out your palms?”

“Sure!”

“What?”

“Like this, Master Fay?”

Each of them held out their right hands. A simple glance was enough to cause the Bookmaker’s eyes to go wide. On each of their palms was a III—indicating that they each had three wins.

Leshea, 3-0: Titan, Uroboros, and Mahtma II defeated.

Pearl, 3-1: Uroboros and Mahtma II defeated on top of a 1-1 record to start with.

Nel, 3-0: Three losses erased, leaving zero losses.

Finally, Fay showed his own right palm, and the III engraved there.

“This is what I’m talking about.”

Fay, 3-0: Titan, Uroboros, and Mahtma II defeated on top of a 3-0 record to start with for a total of six wins, minus 3 lost here.

Each one of them had three wins.

“You can’t be serious...”

“Sure I can. My plan was always to line up our win marks.”

Fay, along with his three companions—Leshea, Pearl, and Nel—all had three wins apiece. This had been Fay’s second objective, in addition to helping Nel make her comeback.

“This way, all of us teammates can achieve ten wins at the same time,” Fay said.

If Nel had beaten the Bookmaker, that would have been terrific. But even if she didn’t, Fay would be in a position to line up their win counts. When Fay had

said that they would win no matter how things turned out, this was what he had meant: whether Nel won or lost, the resulting scenario would benefit them.

“*Th-that’s* what you were planning?! But Master Fay, why?! Why take such a roundabout route?” Nel’s voice was strained. Who could blame her? She probably had no idea why Fay wanted them to have identical win counts so badly that he would sacrifice three of his own precious victories to get there. Neither did Pearl. For that matter, maybe even Leshea didn’t quite understand. “The thought that you would do this for me makes me so happy it hurts, Master Fay, but if you really got nothing except a parallel win count...”

Fay met her pleading gaze with a question. “Didn’t you ever wonder, Nel?”

“Huh?”

“Think about it. In all the hundreds of years that humans have been playing the gods’ games, how is it that no human, ever, in history, cleared ten wins?” Then he went on, “Secretary Miranda said it herself, right? It’s not like there haven’t been brilliant geniuses and gaming prodigies throughout the centuries. But seven or eight wins was as far as they could get before they lost. We’ve never even had someone with nine wins.”

“Y-yes? So?”

“Because *that’s the limit of individual play*. Against the limitless number of gods, I think eight wins is as much as one solitary genius can hope to get.”

And it wasn’t enough.

One lone, brilliant player wasn’t enough for humanity to reach the heights of nine or even ten wins.

The gods’ games, by definition, consisted of a god versus *several humans*.

So it had been with Titan, Uroboros, and Mahtma II. The games the gods served up were beyond the ability of a single player, however brilliant, to complete.

The gods had been silently teaching humanity this lesson: that one single outstanding player should not seek to challenge them alone.

“I think there might be a hidden condition for reaching ten wins,” Fay said.

“Like, maybe when an entire *team* reaches eight or nine wins, there’s a reward, or some kind of change or something. So that’s my plan—*our* plan. We go for those ten wins together, all of us, and see where it gets us.”

“Wh-when you put it that way...,” Nel said, her mouth hanging open.

Pearl, likewise agape, picked up on it too.

“...I guess it makes an awful lot of sense!”

Leshea, who had always been on Team I Don’t Really Care if Fay Loses His Wins, didn’t seem to think any of this was worth all the fuss.

Fay wasn’t quite finished, though. He said, “I do have one other motivation. Matched win counts are a game strategy.”

“Hmm?”

“Wha...?”

“Aw, I’m just sort of talking to myself at this point. Don’t take it too seriously.”

This final reason for matching their win counts had to do with one particular game that Fay could think of. But that only applied to an uncertain future—who knew if they would ever play it?

“Huh! You really are thinking this through.” The Bookmaker crossed its arms, clearly intrigued. *“You seriously mean to go for ten wins in the gods’ games? Heck, give it your best shot. If you lose three times and want to make a comeback, I’ll be right here.”*

“I’ll do my best to make sure it doesn’t come to that.”

“Come on, throw me a bone.” The black-haired woman smiled at him. *“All right, get outta here. There’s only so many games a human can play in their short life, right? You’re wasting time, hanging out in my realm.”*

With that, a soft light bubbled up around Fay and the others, enveloping them, and then they were whisked out of the Elements.

The Polymorphic God Gremoire stood in the Elements known as the gods’ casino, looking disappointed now that the four humans had vanished. *“Sigh. Back to having time on my hands. Wonder how many decades it’ll be before the*

next humans show up.”

Plink.

At that moment, the space in front of the god’s eyes cracked.

It was an invasion into a superior spiritual realm; the subdimension was being forcibly twisted and warped, a sign that someone or something was trying to break open the bonded space and force their way into the gods’ casino.

Plink plink.

The crack got bigger, spidering like glass. A dark hole opened, a rift in space just big enough for a person to squeeze through. And who should appear but...

“Well!” Gremoire remarked when it saw the god before it. *“Fancy seeing you here. Not a visitor we get very often at the casino.”*

“.....” A young girl, of all things, had hopped through the hole and now stood silently regarding the Bookmaker. She had hair so silver that it glimmered like fresh snow, and her skin was likewise snow-pale. Her face looked like it could have been painted by the greatest artist, almost *divinely* lovely. Her eyes gleamed with a powerful red light, like two rubies.

If Fay, by sheer chance, had still been there, he would have doubted his own eyes.

“Uroboros,” smiled the Bookmaker, naming the deity who had appeared. *“To what do we owe the pleasure? I can’t remember the last time you left that little world of yours. Why the change of heart?”*

The girl the Bookmaker called Uroboros said nothing, not at first. The god simply began to stalk silently around the casino table. Finally, it turned and demanded: *“Those humans just now. Where did they go?”*

Player.4

Retirements Not Allowed

Gods' Games We Play

1

In the Arcane Court branch office in Ruin. Specifically, the third floor of the men's dorm. Even more specifically, Fay's room. Which, at this moment, resounded with the cracks and hoots of celebratory noisemakers.

"Congratulations on your comeback, Nel!" said Pearl.

"Th-thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Let's have a game party to welcome you to the club!"

"L-Lady Leshea... Truly, it's an honor..."

Sitting in her usual formal posture between the two other young women with their noisemakers, Nel blushed furiously.

She was, one might note, dressed at that moment in the uniform of the Ruin branch office. By her own request, she had chosen to transfer to Ruin to make her comeback, rather than doing it in Mal-ra. In other words, she had succeeded in joining Fay's team.

"All right! Let's play!" cried Leshea, clutching a board game. "A board game only reaches its full potential when you have four people playing against each other. And we just happen to have finally achieved that perfect player count!"

"O-oh. Yes, of course. I'm very touched by your warm welcome, but I... I..." Nel, in fact, had been looking in open amazement around the living room for some time now, taking in every detail of Fay's quarters. "I've never actually been in a men's dorm before..."

She continued to stare. She seemed particularly fixated on the simple bed that sat in one corner of the room.

“A young lady in the bloom of youth pays a visit to the chambers of a young man of similar age... When the two of them, both at the very height of the springtime of their lives, find themselves in the same room together, surely it cannot be that nothing occurs...”

“Huh? Did you say something, Nel?”

“N-no, Master Fay! Nothing at all!” she exclaimed, shaking her head vigorously as she snapped back to herself.

Beside her, Pearl veritably burst off the sofa as she exclaimed, “*I’ve got it!* I knew this welcome party was missing something! Right, Fay. Name something no celebration is complete without. In four letters!”

“A...game?”

“Cake!”

Pearl plopped a plastic shopping bag on the table. It contained eggs, flour, butter, strawberries, and a few other things. The ingredients for shortcake, it appeared.

“It should look delicious, and it should *be* delicious, and it should be gorgeous and wonderful! And this party definitely needs one! Fay, may I borrow your kitchen?”

“What? You’re going to make it yourself, Pearl?”

“Sure! Just watch me!” Pearl put a hand to her chest and nodded, brimming with confidence. “The three of you play your game. I’ll make you the best shortcake you’ve ever eaten!”

“You sure? Gee, thanks, Pearl. That’s really nice of you,” said Fay.

“Eh-heh-heh! Please, think nothing of it.” Pearl gave him an embarrassed smile. “If it makes you happy, Fay, then it makes me happy, too.”

“—!”

“—!”

There were two sharp intakes of breath: Nel and Leshea, who had been smiling as they listened to this conversation, each suddenly had a hard glint in their eyes.

“All right, I’d better get to the kitchen and—”

“Just a second, you!” Pearl started to turn around, but Leshea snatched her by the collar, the way you might pick up a kitten. “Tell me something, Pearl, dear. Do you always carry cake ingredients around with you? You made a big show of having just thought of this idea, and yet you had your flour, eggs, and everything else right here and ready to go.”

“Eeek! I d-d-don’t know what you mean, Leshea!”

“Huh! Then why is your voice trembling?”

“Eep! You, too, Nel?!”

Pearl found herself trapped between Nel ahead of her, and Leshea behind. Both of them looked calm enough, yet Fay felt a shiver run down his spine.

“Pearl... You’re trying to *get a step ahead of us*, aren’t you?” Leshea demanded.

“Eeek?!” Pearl froze. “Wh-what are you talking about, Leshea? I just want to welcome Nel to our team with a nice, friendly cake...”

Pearl’s golden hair seemed increasingly disheveled as the black-haired girl drew herself even taller in front of Leshea. “That’s a bluff if I ever heard one. Making me feel welcome is a convenient cover for the person you *really* want to give this cake to.”



“Aah... ohh...” Pearl’s mouth worked ineffectually open and shut. Seeing that she was blocked from every direction, however, her shoulders slumped. “All right... I suggest the three of us collaborate.”

“Great idea!”

“Yes, a fine suggestion.”

The three girls nodded at each other.

As for Fay, the odd man out, he still hadn’t grasped exactly what was going on.

“Huh? Can I help, too?”

“No, Fay, you wait right there,” Leshea said.

“This is a job for the girls’ alliance!” Pearl informed him.

“Yes, exactly. The three of us will work together to complete this cake,” said Nel.

“Oh, uh, you will?”

The young women bustled off to the kitchen. Fay found himself sitting alone in the living room with nothing to do but listen to their progress.

He didn’t have to listen very long.

Crash!

“Oh no!”

The trio’s elapsed time in the kitchen couldn’t have been more than five seconds before something broke.

“I—I was just looking around, taking in the sights... Like, ‘*Whoa, this is Master Fay’s kitchen,*’ right? When the plate just broke!”

“Aw, don’t worry about it!” Leshea said, sounding like she was taking her own advice. “I dropped a plate too once, but Fay never even noticed!”

Yes. Yes, he had. He’d just decided not to make an issue of it.

“Okay! Everybody ready for Fun Cake-Making Time? Here we go!” That was Pearl, walking to her own beat, as usual. “First, a very important message.

Earlier I acted like I was going to make this shortcake from raw ingredients, because I wanted to impress Fay. But the fact is that actually baking the sponge cake would take forever, so I secretly *bought* some sponge cake to use!”

“That *is* big news!” Nel exclaimed.

“Now, I’ve made the fresh cream nice and easy by getting some commercially available, ready-made whipped cream!”

In the living room, Fay couldn’t restrain himself from groaning, “Why did you even *have* that shopping bag?!” But his little outburst didn’t reach the girls in the kitchen.

“Okay, let’s get to cake-making! We just take our fresh-baked (store-bought) sponge cake and apply this whipped cream...”

“Say, Pearl, don’t we need the strawberries yet?”

“The strawberries come after the cream—no, Leshea, don’t push me—”

Fay heard somebody take a tumble. Pearl’s shout reached him in the living room.

“Oh noooo! I fell and now I’m covered in whipped cream! Argh... It’s in my hair and everything...”

“Hngh! Wait! I know what this is!” Nel declared in a resounding voice. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it, Pearl? To go to Master Fay like that and be all, ‘*I’m* the real cake!’”

“What?! That was *not* my plan!”

“Oh, so that’s how it is! ‘Try a little taste of the whipped cream here on my cheek,’ you’ll say! What a shameless strategy!”

Fay rolled his eyes, turning away from the girls’ white-hot dispute.

“Sounds like I’d better go buy more whipped cream,” he muttered and left the room.

An hour later, Fay was finally presented with the completed cake.

“I, uh...have a lot of questions. Like, why is there an entire banana (unpeeled) stuck in this cake? And why does it say ‘happy birthday’ in chocolate icing even

though it's not my birthday? And what is this marzipan Santa doing here at this time of year?"

"It's a celebration! We wanted it to be *decorated!*" Leshea said as she emerged from the kitchen, holding a banana in each hand. The former god seemed to be the culprit behind the fruit stabbed into the cake.

"Nel, would you do the honors?" Pearl said.

"Mm-hmm! If you need something cut, I'm the one for the job!" Nel, armed with a cake knife, expertly cut the dessert into slices.

Or...she looked like she was about to.

"Er..." With the blade of the knife inches from the cake, she suddenly stopped. "Master Fay, I feel like I should ask... Is it all right if I cut the cake into quarters?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, there are four of us here right now, but I thought maybe... I don't know. Maybe you have a game analyst, coach, and advisor that I don't know about."

"Ahh. No, not at this stage."

There were two reasons for that. One was that Fay was very particular about only recruiting team members who truly loved games...

And the other's Leshea. She's got a bit of a reputation around the Ruin office for being really cute until you tick her off and she turns SCARY.

Pearl and Nel were the exceptions to the rule—both of them had accepted Fay's personal invitation to become members of his team. But most apostles who didn't have the kinds of pressing circumstances the two girls did would never voluntarily work closely with Leshea.

"Hmm..." Nel still looked thoughtful. "I've never been quite sure when to bring this up, Master Fay, but what is our team name?"

"Oh! I was wondering the same thing!" Pearl said, thrusting her hand into the air. "A strong team needs a cool name! You said you were thinking about it, right, Fay? Did you come up with anything?" She got right in his face.

“Yeah, about that...” Fay scratched the back of his head, embarrassed. It’s time for a confession: Fay was not very good at naming things. In fact, he had never named anything in his entire life.

I got my name from my parents, obviously. And my Arise, the whole May Your God thing, Secretary Miranda came up with that.

A shortage of experience produced a shortage of competence. So it was with the team name. Until Nel directly asked him about it, Fay had just kept telling himself that he could worry about it later.

“I think we can worry about it later...,” he said.

“No, we can’t! Don’t you remember Chief Secretary Miranda telling us that if we don’t hurry up and decide, the ‘team name’ space on our registrations will always be blank, and then the poor administrators won’t know what to do?!” Pearl was not in favor. And unfortunately for Fay, he had no real rebuttal.

“Maybe this is a good chance for all of us to think of something together,” he said. “Leshea? Anything you’d like for a team name?”

“I want something that sounds powerful. So everyone will know the minute they hear it that we’re unbeatable!”

“And you, Pearl?”

“Ooh! Something cute! We need to sound friendly and charming!”

“Okay. Nel?”

“To me, truthfulness is more important than anything. If our name can also be refined, if it can have a poetic ring to it, then even better.”

“Okay, I’m getting a *lot* of mixed signals here.”

Opinions were completely, totally divided. Incidentally, Fay himself would have been happy with just about anything, so long as it was simple and easy to remember.

“The first team I joined has dissolved, so maybe we can base it on that... Nah, Secretary Miranda would give me grief for not trying hard enough. I wish *she* would just come up with something for us.”

He knew exactly what Miranda would say to that: *Could you please not make more work for me?* But with everyone on the team wanting such different things, it would be a lot faster to just get a third party to do it.

Thirty minutes later...

Fay and his teammates, having finished their cake, showed themselves to the ninth floor of the Arcane Court building. Which is to say, they dropped in on Chief Secretary Miranda.

“Huh?” Fay said when they arrived, doubting his own eyes. On the door was something he hardly ever saw there: a sign stating IN A MEETING. Apparently, Miranda was talking to someone and didn’t want to be disturbed.

Which didn’t stop Leshea; far be it from this former god to concern herself with mere human circumstances.

“Oh Mirandaaaa!” she chirped, knocking on the door. “Have your silly meeting later! We need you to think of a team name for us! Come on, Miranda! If you don’t open this door in five seconds, I’m going to fill your office with magma!”

“Yikes!” said Fay.

They indeed had to wait only a few seconds. Had Miranda heard Leshea’s threat? Hurried footsteps came from inside the room.

“Argh! What is so important that it couldn’t possibly wait?”

“Hey! Miran—”

“Vice-Secretary, see if you can get confirmation from the other global branch offices—*now*! How many people are involved in this? And tell headquarters we need backup!”

“Uh...?” Leshea blinked. Secretary Miranda hardly seemed to be looking at her. Even though Leshea was standing right in front of her, with that blazing vermilion hair that you couldn’t miss from several hundred meters away, the Chief Secretary seemed to look right through her.

“Hello? Chief Secretary Miranda?” Fay said. “Don’t tell me you’re still mad about me losing three wins to the Bookmaker. I told you, that was all part of my

plan! And I also spent five hours pressing my head into the floor in apology...”

“Stop all dives into the Divine Gates immediately! We can’t allow there to be any more victims!”

She didn’t seem to hear Fay, either. He’d thought maybe she was still upset at the stunt he’d pulled with the Bookmaker, but he knew what the Chief Secretary sounded like when she was angry, and this wasn’t quite it.

Finally Miranda turned and looked at them. “Huh? Oh... Fay.” No sooner had she looked at him, though, than she turned around again. “Sorry, we can talk later! All right, Vice-Secretary, I’m on my way!”

She charged into the hallway, racing off down the corridor as if Fay and the others weren’t even there.

“She went so fast she didn’t even lock the door...” Fay said. In fact, she hadn’t even closed it; the door to her office hung open. Fay had never seen the usually relaxed Chief Secretary look quite so panic-stricken.

“Well, whatever. Let’s wait inside,” said Leshea.

“Wha? N-no, Leshea! You can’t just go into someone’s office!” Pearl said.

“If anyone gets mad at us, we’ll just leave.”

She marched through the door. Fay followed her—and his eyes happened to light upon the monitor on the Chief Secretary’s desk.

“Hmm?”

He wouldn’t normally condone such a thing, but under these exceptional circumstances, he couldn’t stop himself from reading the words on the screen.

“What’s all this?”

Emergency Information

Worldwide reports say apostles are unable to exit their dives.

Starting approximately 57 hours ago, 209 apostles who have dived through Divine Gates located around the world have found themselves summoned to the same Elements.

No further communication has been received from any of them.

None have returned home yet.

“Wh-whoa! What the heck’s going on?!” Pearl exclaimed.

“So it’s been fifty-seven hours since the game started, more than two hundred people have gone in, and not one of them has emerged? That *is* unsettling,” Nel said, peering at the monitor.

It was normally simple to get out of a god’s Elements. You could win or lose the game, or else retire for some reason during the course of play. In all three cases, you popped right back to the human world. Yet none of these apostles had returned, and they weren’t even communicating with the human world.

“Wait,” Pearl said, going pale. “Could this mean...?”

It could.

The possibility was emerging of a game that should by all rights never occur.

A game that made it impossible to return to reality.

Such a thing was unheard of. Certainly Fay didn’t know of it ever happening.

The gods’ games clock in at over a hundred hours all the time. That’s nothing new. But usually that means a steady stream of players retiring back into the real world.

Was this some special game that was dragging on, then? They couldn’t dismiss the possibility, but the complete radio silence nagged at Fay. Usually, apostles carried a device called a Godeye lens with them into the Elements, which broadcast what was happening back to the human world.

“Fifty-seven hours ago? That would be about when we were getting back from the Bookmaker, right? Whatever’s going on, it sounds like we just missed it,” Leshea said, joining them in looking at the screen. “Think this is why Miranda was so upset, Fay?”

“I’d say it’s pretty likely.” He scrolled the screen a bit and learned that Arcane Court headquarters had issued a blanket ban on dives anywhere in the world, lest more apostles end up trapped in the game. “From what I’m seeing here... It’s almost like someone is *collecting* apostles in a single game. The phenomenon hasn’t let up since it started more than two days ago.”

“That sounds really super dangerous!” Pearl said, eyes still glued to the monitor. “Those poor people... They dove in, just wanting to play with the gods, and now they’re trapped in there and can’t get home?!”

“Yeah. I can see why the Chief Secretary would be concerned.”

She’d certainly seemed uncommonly panicked, but if what this screen said was true, her alarm was fully justified.

“Hmm...” Leshea, meanwhile, cocked her head, wondering about something. “This doesn’t quite make sense. In fact, speaking as a former god, it hardly makes any sense at all!”

“How so?”

“This is saying that every Divine Gate in the world is leading to a single game. Just one Elements. But there are lots of gods who want to play with people, so normally when players dive through the gates, the gods have to scramble to grab some of them.”

“Meaning someone has cornered the market, huh?”

“Some god is keeping all the humans to itself. Although I couldn’t begin to guess why.”

Somebody was *forcing* more than two hundred apostles to play a single game, and not letting any of them return home.

It’s like those people were led into a trap. Pretty dirty move on the part of this god. Who would do that?

Fay scrolled down to the very bottom of the page, but there was no information about which deity was involved.

At exactly that moment, though, a small window popped up on the screen.

“Mail? Oh, I guess this is Chief Secretary Miranda’s device. It must be for her... I guess it’s probably about this emergency?”

“We’d better check it out, then!” Leshea chirped.

“What? N-no, Leshea!” Pearl said. “Looking at what’s right on the screen is one thing, but reading her *mail*? We can’t—”

“Oops! My finger slipped!”

The message that appeared on the screen could be summarized in a single sentence: They had decided to send a rescue team.

“Guess they’d have to,” Fay said. He would have done the same thing in their shoes. “A bunch of apostles can’t get back to reality, so you send someone in to bring them back. I guess you could compare it to, like, if a bunch of climbers got stuck on a mountain. You’d send a rescue squad up to try to help them.”

“Sounds like fun!” Leshea said, her eyes shining. “Count me in! A game that two hundred people haven’t been able to clear in over fifty hours? That maybe you couldn’t clear if you played for *ten thousand* hours? I’ve *got* to know what it is!”

“Eep!” Pearl squealed, recoiling. “N-now, just wait! This rescue team would be going into the game, right? The game that no one else has come out of yet? Wouldn’t that mean *they* could end up stuck in there, too?”

“Right! Like how grave robbers go looking for mummies and end up *becoming* mummies instead!” Leshea said.

“Doesn’t that sound super-duper dangerous?!”

“Hell yes, it’s super-duper dangerous!” someone said, accompanied by a *slam* as the office door flew open. “Guess who just got back from her meeting!”

“Chief Secretary Miranda?! I swear it’s not what it looks like! It wasn’t my idea to come barging into your—”

“Pearl, my dear, it sounds like you’re *interested* in this incident.” Miranda’s eyes flashed. “I overheard you talking about the rescue team. Yes, of course you *would* want to join!”

“N-no, I wouldn’t! I didn’t mean to stick my nose into—”

“Allow me to explain, then!”

“I don’t wanna be a mummyyyyyy!”

They then listened to Miranda’s explanation. (They didn’t have any other choice.) “The game involved in this incident is simple: a *maze*.”

Sure. Everyone knew about those. They could range from basic puzzles a kid sketched in their notebook to the elaborate, human-sized mazes adults knew and loved from amusement parks.

“The catch is, this one is big. *Really* big. In fact, ‘labyrinth’ might be a better description. We had a pretty good idea what was going on thanks to the Godeye lenses carried by the first apostles to dive, and it was on the world stream until several hours in.”

They’d *had* a good idea. In the past tense. Presumably meaning they didn’t anymore.

“What’s a labyrinth without monsters and traps, right?” Miranda said with a sigh. “There’s a lot of nasty pitfalls in this maze, and one of them broke the Godeye lens.”

“Huh? But Chief Secretary, if an apostle fell in a trap, that would mean they lost the game, right?” Pearl asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“And when you lose a game, you come back to the real world, right? I mean, normally...”

“Normally, yes. Except that this game has one messed-up little twist.” With a *thunk*, Miranda placed a small recording device on her desk. A spare Godeye lens. “As best we can gather based on the fragmentary evidence from the lens, we think this game allows *unlimited retries*.”

“Uh... What?”

“Doesn’t matter if a trap gets you or a monster hacks off your head. When something kills you, you just respawn at the starting point. Every time.”

“Wha...? I don’t get it,” Nel said, frowning with concentration as she tried to take in the information. “Wouldn’t that guarantee a human’s win? If everyone can just retry every single time they lose, then eventually someone *has* to escape the maze, right?”

“You’d think so, Nel. That’s the optimist’s assessment, anyway.” Miranda gave them a smile with no humor in it. “The thing is, this respawn happens

automatically. The apostles don't get a choice."

Meaning the players were trapped in a nightmare-difficulty game with no way back to reality until someone cleared it.

"Think about it. The difficulty of this labyrinth was calibrated with the knowledge that there would be endless attempts. Might be fun the first few times, but by the twentieth or thirtieth time, the excitement is probably wearing thin. And as the hits keep coming, annoyance is going to turn to agony, and agony to terror."

Imagine making hundreds of attempts, and still never reaching the goal—all as time continued to pass in the human world. You might be stuck in this Elements while weeks or months went by outside. You might spend the rest of your life in this god's maze...

"That sounds super-duper-*duper* dangerous!" Pearl exclaimed.

"And it is, as I said," Miranda replied. This time, there was pain in her voice. "In short, we have a maze of unimaginable difficulty that no one has been able to emerge from yet. Dives have been summarily forbidden, lest we end up with even more trapped apostles. On the other hand..."

"They're looking for a rescue team to bring them home?" Nel said.

"Precisely. Excellent guess. Or maybe I should say, excellent job reading my mail."

So she'd noticed that. Oops.

Not that the Chief Secretary looked in the least bothered by it.

"You should know that the rescue team would have two objectives."

1. Successfully clear the game (i.e., figure out the appropriate strategy); and 2. Find any possible save items in the labyrinth (making it possible to save and return to reality).

"That first objective should be obvious. As for the second, the existence of save items was described by the meep, so we assume it's true. Unfortunately, no one has found one yet..."

"I've got it!" Leshea burst out. "I have the perfect solu—"

“Absolutely not.”

“Why *not*?!”

Miranda’s refusal was unequivocal and landed quicker than a lightning bolt from the hand of a deity.

“I haven’t even told you what it is yet!” Leshea whined.

“I assume you’re going to say you want to go into the game yourself.” She sighed for the umpteenth time. “I was just playing with Pearl earlier. Notwithstanding what I said to her, this is a worldwide problem. We have to wait for the higher-ups to take action.”

“The higher-ups? Like who?”

“I mean Arcane Court headquarters.” Miranda indicated the monitor with her eyes. The sender of the mail they’d read said *Arcane Court HQ Executive Division*. “It was headquarters’ decision to put together a rescue squad. The plan is to include personnel from each of the branch offices, but if they mount a large-scale rescue effort only to have the entire team end up trapped along with everyone else...”

Well, critics around the world wouldn’t just stay silent. The Arcane Court would look incompetent for having lost so many apostles; the consequences could very well undermine the entire organization.

“The members of the rescue squad will be specially selected by headquarters. Until then, the branch offices just have to wait. Nobody goes unless HQ calls them up—not even you, Lady Leshea.”

“So I just need them to request me!”

“In a word, yes. But headquarters is being extremely strict with their criteria and extremely fastidious about their process, so—”

Ding!

It was at that moment that Fay received a message. The sender? None other than Arcane Court HQ Executive Division.

“Oh, there it is, Chief Secretary. I think they’re asking for us.”

“Oh, for the *love* of—!” The Chief Secretary put her head in her hands.

“Yippee!” Leshea clapped and cheered.

“Urgh...” Pearl did not cheer. No, she looked very grim indeed.

“I see. Yes, this is perfect!” Nel declared. She made no effort to conceal her eagerness for this contest.

As the others celebrated—or didn’t—Fay read the message on his device.

“Let’s see here... Huh. They want everyone who’s been chosen at an emergency video conference tomorrow. Can’t wait to see who else shows up!”

2

Hundreds of apostles were trapped in an inescapable game.

Arcane Court headquarters had forbidden all dives, leaving branch offices around the world in a completely new and unknown situation.

The number of people who were unable to make it back to the real world was 209. The elapsed time of the game had surpassed 70 hours; in other words, the apostles had been in there for close to three solid days.

“All right, Fay. You had a chance to sleep on it. Are you sure you haven’t thought better of this? You still want to be part of the rescue effort?”

“Of course I do.” Fay nodded at Chief Secretary Miranda, who walked alongside him, her footsteps clicking off the floor. “I usually like to figure stuff out once I’m in the game, but things being what they are, I’ve taken a few steps to prepare this time.”

“Prepare how?”

“I mean, coming up with a strategy. I had last night to think about it, and I’ve narrowed it down to a few things that could be going on—and some plans to deal with them.”

They arrived at the meeting room. Fay found himself at a round table that could easily have seated more than thirty people—but the room was empty. The only thing there was a video monitor.

“We have another eighteen minutes until the meeting starts. You okay if we go ahead and join the video conference?” Miranda asked.

“Sure, go right ahead.” Everyone involved in the rescue operation was going to be at this meeting. Fay didn’t want to wait one moment longer than he had to find out who was participating and start learning about their special qualities.

Bzzt.

The picture on the screen was divided into eighteen parts, representing the

seventeen worldwide branch offices and headquarters. In addition to Fay, nine people were visible, the screen displaying their names along with their faces.

Which means ten of the branch offices are already here, including mine. No sign of headquarters yet, though.

Silence reigned. It was so quiet that Fay briefly wondered if the sound had been muted, such was the chill stillness that clung to the meeting.

Everyone present was an ace from their office, all of them such promising young players that even Fay recognized their names and faces.

At the moment, they all looked very tense.

Nobody said hello when Fay joined the meeting. Nobody even looked at him. They were all lost in their own thoughts.

Guess I can't blame them. We're talking about a game where the rescue team might end up stuck just like everyone else. You should be a little nervous about something like that.

Fay's ruminations, however, were rudely interrupted by the arrival of another apostle—identified as the participant from the Mal-ra branch office.

"Sorry to keep you kids waiting!" the new arrival boomed. It was a young man with dark silver hair and eyes that glowed with sheer determination.

A young man who Fay remembered very well.

"Oh, hey! Is that you, Dax?"

"Fay! I always knew that the destiny we call games would draw you and me together again!"

Dax Gear Scimitar: a year ahead of Fay in the Arcane Court, he had formed his own team in his rookie season, faster than any apostle had ever done before. He was currently 3-1 in the gods' games. His dashing good looks and forceful gameplay led some to call him "the Prince of Games," and his charisma had made him the preeminent apostle in Mal-ra.

"It is I, your greatest and most powerful rival, Dax!"

"Okay, let's, uh, maybe walk it back a little in public... Ahh, whatever. I'm just

glad to see a familiar face. So you're on the rescue squad, too?"

"No."

"What?!"

"I'm sorry. I have to apologize for Dax."

A young woman appeared beside the other apostle. Her pale blue hair stood out against her tan skin, and her bearing was calm, almost detached. Her name was Kelritch Shee, and she'd been Dax's partner in the game of Mind Arena that they'd played in the showdown between their two cities. Currently, she was also blushing a bit thanks to Dax's behavior.

"We have other business that prevents us from being part of this operation. But when Dax heard that you were going to be here, he insisted on poking his head in..."

"Uh-huh." Dax nodded without a shred of remorse. *"Fay! I've heard that Nel is back in the games."*

"Yeah? I mean, yeah! Boy, word does travel fast."

Fay suspected, though, that even Dax would have no way of knowing that he had lost three wins in his match with the Bookmaker and was now 3-0.

Miranda didn't want that getting out. She figured it would be too much of a blow to public morale—said we needed to judge our timing.

So as far as the world knew, Fay was still 6-0.

Then again, Fay couldn't picture Dax being much bothered even if he learned the secret.

"Nel is a fine apostle in her own right. I know she'll be a valuable asset to your team. Therefore, Fay, I expect to see even greater gameplay from you in the future!"

"Yeah, I'll work on it."

"Very well. Let the meeting begin!"

"You aren't even in the meeting! Who made you the MC?!"

As Dax, gatecrasher that he was, energetically attempted to get things rolling,

his partner Kelritch grabbed his wrist and began to drag him away. *“Let’s go, Dax. Sorry for the trouble, everyone. Good luck out there.”*

“No one can say he doesn’t follow his heart,” Fay muttered.

As Dax and Kelritch disappeared, Kelritch could be heard to reply, *“Yes. His heart has caused us a great deal of trouble.”*

As they left, a female apostle whom Fay also recognized came on screen in their place.

“Hello, Fay. It’s been a while,” she said.

“Oh, hey. Yeah, good to see you. Camilla, right?”

“I’m honored you remember me.” The young woman smiled slightly. She had wavy brown hair and looked to be in her early twenties. She wore glasses that made her look like the intellectual type, while her tall, slim build contributed to an overall impression of maturity.

Camilla Velvet was her name. She was the team leader of Archangel (motto: The great angels), and had faced the Sun God with Fay in the Sunsteal Scramble against Mahtma II.

“It’s a relief to see you here, if you don’t mind my saying so.” Camilla slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose. *“There’s never been a rescue squad deployed to the gods’ games before. Headquarters is sweating bullets. You know there’s nothing that scares a bureaucracy more than something with no precedent. But me and my team aren’t feeling any better. In fact, we’re shaking in our boots over here.”*

“You mean because we might all get stuck in there, too?”

“Yeah. After I heard the risk analysis yesterday, I was so worried that I could only sleep at night!”

“You know that’s the *only* time most people sleep, right?”

“But the quality was way down! Anyway, the point is, I’m glad there’s someone here I know we can count on. Plus—”

Abruptly, Camilla stopped talking. At which point everything was silent. Of the nearly a dozen people gathered in the video conference room, Fay and Camilla

were the only ones speaking. She'd just been so relieved to see someone she knew.

The cities all talk to each other and know each other, of course, but there can't be too many people from different cities who have played a game together like Camilla and I recently have.

What they needed here was a spark. Someone to go first.

And it didn't look like anyone else was volunteering.

Despite the muted atmosphere, Fay leaned toward the screen and said, "Uh... Hello everybody. I'm Fay, from the Ruin branch office. I'm here because I was asked to participate in a rescue attempt for the apostles who are currently trapped in an ongoing game. It's good to see all of you here."

"You're Fay Theo Philus, aren't you?!" someone said, in a voice so excited that it dispersed the awkward atmosphere almost by itself. The speaker was a young man with golden hair who seemed mature beyond his years. *"Last year's top rookie! A six-and-oh undefeated record in the gods' games! You're incredible! I saw your match with Dax, too. Boy, you put on a hell of a show!"*

"Oh, uh, thanks."

"I'm Ezrace. I'm here on behalf of the Ocean City of Fisshara. Hey, thanks, man. I was just thinking somebody needed to break the ice here. I'm just too much of an introvert!"

Ezrace certainly didn't seem like an introvert. If anything, he had the energy of a born actor. His bright voice, cheerful look, and pleasant smile all seemed to come straight through the screen.

"And here on the monitor next to me is—"

"Nayuta. From the East Asia City of Pol-a. Nice to meet you." A girl with dusty red hair and a gloomy demeanor limply waved a hand at them in greeting. Her uniform was designed to look like an article of clothing called a kimono. She gave them all a mischievous wink. *"I've seen all your games, too. Including the one where you smashed through Uroboros, one of the world's Three Great Impossibles. Sure hope you're feeling up for another hopeless job!"*

“I’ll, uh, see what I can do.”

“Ranios, from the Steel Wall City of Cassin. Good to see you all here,” said a towering man with features that looked like they had been carved out of solid rock. Despite his thoroughly imposing appearance, his voice was strikingly gentle. *“Normally, we wouldn’t see each other outside of something like the World Games Tour or the World Games Grand Prix, but that’s how the games are, isn’t it? They sometimes give us these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. I might wish the circumstances were less dire, but I’m grateful for this chance to put my head together and strategize with so many other gifted players.”*

“Thanks, man. You took the words right out of my mouth,” Fay said, nodding. Privately, he was deeply relieved. These were people he could talk to.

The real objective wasn’t to clear the game, it was to find a way to get players back to reality. Given the considerable risk that they themselves might not come home, there was no room for secrets or brinkmanship here. Everyone would have to be willing to share everything they had—their intelligence, their skills, their ideas. Luckily, they all seem to be on the same page when it came to that.

No stubborn or pigheaded people in this group. I guess I should have known headquarters would pick the most flexible minds they could for this job.

Bit by bit, the energy began to flow through the meeting. They went around the group and one by one each of them, nearly twenty people, shared who they were and where they were from.

“Heh! I see it’s come around to me,” Camilla said, sliding her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. She jumped to her feet. *“A pleasure to meet each and every one of you! I’m Camilla from the Sacred Spring City! I urge you all to remember my na—”*

“Pipe down,” said a voice.

“Why should I?!” Camilla shot back instinctively, but then she exclaimed *“Oh!”* and clapped her hands over her mouth.

The speaker was a man who had just appeared on camera, wearing vestments with gold embroidery. A man from Arcane Court headquarters.

"I hate to interrupt this collegial chat, but it's time to get started," the man said calmly. He looked to be in his early twenties; his brown hair was cropped close and in his eyes there was a cold, appraising light. He was as sharp and as sculpted as any top-class athlete. Just from the way he carried himself, it was obvious that he excelled at games of wits. In any case, you didn't get to join headquarters without being a brilliant player.

But there was one notable thing about him: *his outfit wasn't black.*

"Only members of Arcane Court headquarters are allowed to wear that gold thread."

"The black outfits mean that they're the most accomplished team at their office."

Any member of a headquarters team would get to wear the gold embroidery. But, Fay assumed, only the best team at headquarters would get to wear black uniforms, the way Dax did at Mal-Ra. And this man's outfit was white. He might be from HQ, but he wasn't from their best team. Which meant...

"Come to my team, Fay!"

"I'm recruiting the best rookies from around the world. Headquarters thinks their precious Mind Over Matter is the strongest team around, but I will go beyond even them!"

Mind Over Matter (motto: The Holy See where all souls gather). The most powerful team in the world, the one Dax sought to overthrow, and one in which Fay himself was quite interested. He'd hoped he might see them at this meeting, but spotted no sign of them.

Does this mean they're not part of this? An unprecedented crisis no one has ever faced before, and they're not sending their best people?

Something felt off about this. In the few seconds Fay spent debating whether to say anything about it, however, he lost his chance.

"I'm Kilhiedge," the young man from headquarters said. *"Headquarters has asked me to chair this meeting and give you all the rundown on what's going on."* He pulled out a single piece of paper, and not a very large one, at that. *"Unfortunately, all the information I have for you fits on this sheet. Here's what*

we know about the game so far.”

Vs.???

Maze Escape Game

Win Condition: Defeat the final boss in the dungeon’s innermost chamber (confirmed by meep)

Lose Condition: None (unconfirmed)

Supplemental Rule: No lose condition because respawn enables infinite retries (unconfirmed)

Supplemental Rule: Save items enable return to the real world (confirmed by meep)

No lose condition. That was the most dangerous thing about this. The respawn meant that dying wasn’t treated as actually losing the game, with the result that they couldn’t get back to the human world.

“At present, two hundred and nine of our colleagues are trapped in this game. Their Godeye lenses have stopped broadcasting images, but based on what we know of the game system, we’re reasonably confident that all of them are safe. Although that also means that the game is ongoing.” Kilhiedge held up two fingers. *“Our objective is twofold: one, to help the trapped apostles clear the game, and/or two, to help everyone escape. We would be happy with either, but realistically, we think the second is more likely. Almost by definition, one would have to find save items before defeating the final boss.”*

“I’m not so sure about this. What if you can only have a limited number of save items?” asked Nayuta from the East Asia city. She had propped her elbows on her desk and was looking at the ceiling. *“There are two hundred and nine people in there, but what if you can only have up to ninety-nine save items? We’d all start fighting over who gets to go home. And more than half the player count would still end up stuck there.”*

“That’s what we’re here for,” Kilhiedge said. He turned the paper over, but there was nothing printed on the back; it was just a blank white sheet. *“If it comes to distributing the save items, that lies in our hands. We may have to decide who gets to go and who has to stay. We may be called upon to make*

even more awful decisions than that. But that's what the eighteen of us are here for. To lead this rescue squad and make those calls."

"So we play it by ear, do we? We improvise?" the imposing man asked quietly. "That sounds very heroic and all, but it means all the responsibility falls clean on our shoulders."

"That would be correct," Kilhiedge said without so much as flinching. "Let's not mince words: the value proposition here is not good. The reward is, at best, minimal. And the risk is, at worst, that you never get to come back to the human world again. With the additional danger of the choices you may be asked to make inside the game."

"....." Ranios was silent.

"The most incentive we can offer you is perhaps a measure of fame if and when the operation succeeds, but at this point none of you need any more of that..."

"There is something, 'leader,'" Camilla broke in, subdued. "Those two hundred and nine apostles who can't get out? Three of them are my friends."

"—!" Kilhiedge sucked in a breath.

"I'm going. For my friends. There are some things that no glory and no reward can measure. Otherwise, you can bet I would never be even thinking about taking on a killer game like this."

The golden-haired youth Ezrace applauded lightly and said, *"I couldn't agree more."* He smiled to hide his sheepishness. *"One of my junior colleagues is stuck in there. A particularly pretty one. I mean... Come on, I'm a coward. There'd have to be something like that to get me to go in."* Then he looked toward Fay. *"Fay? What made you want to join the rescue team?"*

"Oh. Uh, good question."

He thought for a moment. It was true enough that he'd been genuinely concerned when he'd heard about the trapped apostles. At the same time, as a player himself, there was a part of him that wanted to test himself against this labyrinth with no escape.

But if he really had to articulate it...

“I guess I was just...kind of curious.”

“Huh? About what?”

“About what this god *wants*. This game is categorically different from the others we’ve seen.”

“You mean the infinite respawns?”

“More the forcible gathering of apostles from all over the world.”

That was the source of Fay’s misgivings. Endless respawns were explicable as a game system, but the way this game was sucking in apostles from everywhere in the world, that was something no one had ever heard of before.

Even Leshea was surprised by it. The real mystery here isn’t the endless respawns. What we have to figure out is this forced gathering.

That was why he was going to dive.

“I want to understand why whoever is doing this, is doing this. I mean, we have to, right? Otherwise, what’s to stop this god from collecting apostles, game after game, infinitely?”

“——!” That set everyone in the video conference buzzing.

Fay was right, though. Even if they got those people out of that labyrinth, it would only be a temporary fix. The one way to solve the real problem would be to confront the god behind it.

“Gosh, Fay. So you’re not about getting out of this game at all—your only objective is to clear it?” Ezrace asked.

Fay, though, dismissed the notion with a quick wave of his hand. “I wouldn’t say that. I’m just hoping. I agree that locating the save items should be our first priority, and I’m going to do everything I can to help the people who are stuck in there.”

“That’s very wise,” Kilhiedge said with a small nod of approval. *“An exemplary demonstration of prioritizing. Yes, in a perfect world, we would clear this game. But we can’t let our egos make us forget that there are people in there who*

need help.” Finally he raised a hand. “That’s all from me. The Executive Division will contact you when the dive schedules are finalized. Any questions?”

Hands went up around the virtual room.

A little less than an hour later, when the Q&A session was over, the video conference concluded. One person after another blinked off the screen, until only Fay and Camilla were left.

“So it sounds like we’ll be split into four groups, diving at twelve-hour intervals. We get to decide which group we want to dive with. You have a preference?”

“I’ll have to talk to my teammates about it,” Fay said. And he meant that, but so long as Leshea was on his team, he knew what the answer would be. “You, Camilla?”

“We’re going in first. I told you—my friends are in there. The sooner we can get them out, the better. So, Fay...” The brown-haired apostle looked at him, and behind the lenses of her glasses, he could see the pain in her eyes. *“...We’re going to need you more than ever this time. Please?”*

The next morning, Fay and the others were in the basement Dive Center of the Ruin branch office, gathered in front of the Divine Gate.

“So without further ado, we’re going to be in the first and earliest group to dive. How are both of you feeling? You sleep well?” Fay spoke enthusiastically.

“No! No, I did not! How could I?!” snapped Pearl, whose eyes were bloodshot.

“I have to admit, when I got word last night, I was pretty shaken,” Nel said with a wry smile.

Standing behind them was Leshea, her eyes sparkling. She clearly couldn’t wait to get through that gate.

“I’m so stoked to see how big this maze is!” she said.

“Just be careful in there, Lady Leshea,” said Chief Secretary Miranda as she stepped off the elevator. She had big bags under her eyes; she’d probably been up all night coordinating with other cities around the world. “This is still a developing situation. The only thing we know for sure is that every Divine Gate

in the world still leads to this labyrinth that no one can figure out. This game is dangerous.”

“Right! And the fun is in figuring out what’s going on!”

“That’s about what I expected from you,” the Chief Secretary said with a defeated shrug. “I assume you gave her the details, Fay?”

“Sure did. Our priority this time isn’t to figure out the game, it’s to rescue the trapped apostles. The starting point in the maze appears to be random, so the first task is to link up with the other members of the rescue team. Anything else I should have mentioned?”

“No, it sounds like you covered it.” Miranda held a pick-me-up can of coffee, which she now downed in a single swig. “All right. Well, have a nice trip. And make *sure* you come back.”

“I’m just going to do what I always do,” Fay said flippantly to the Chief Secretary, who still held the now empty can of coffee. “I’m going to go play a game with the gods.”

Then he jumped into the Divine Gate, toward a game unknown, a contest never before seen.

Elements: Divine Labyrinth Lucemia

VS: ???, the ??? god Let the game begin.

Fay, Leshea, Nel, and Pearl, one young man and three young women, jumped through the dragon-shaped gate. Chief Secretary Miranda and her subordinates watched them.

“Hoo boy,” muttered Miranda, who was on to her second can of coffee. “Ugh... I think my stomach’s going sour.”

“That’s why I said you should go with the lightly sweetened coffee!” one subordinate said.

“I’m not talking about my drink,” Miranda replied with a half-smile. What she was talking about, of course, was what was happening. She certainly agreed with headquarters about putting together a rescue team, and she knew they had chosen the right people from her office. “But the people they picked were

almost *too* famous. If Fay and his team get lost down there, as well, it'd be a hammer blow to humanity."

That was what made this suck so much. Yes, she hoped the rescue operation would be successful, but they couldn't ignore the looming possibility that the rescue squad, too, would fall victim to this game. It was a serious dilemma.

"I guess all we can do is hope and pray for their safety." She finished her second coffee and tossed both the empty cans into the trash.

This game was going to be a long one. She should go back to her office and keep working.

No sooner had she turned around to get back in the elevator, though, than there was a tremendous crash overhead—in other words, from the surface.

"Wh-what the hell was that?!"

The underground hall shook violently enough that several of her subordinates stumbled and collapsed to their knees.

"An earthquake?!" somebody called.

"Too short for that!"

It had been a single, sharp impact, almost as if a Rex had slammed into the Arcane Court building.

Another staff member came racing out of the elevator. "Chief Secretary, I have a report!"

"About that impact just now, I hope. What caused it?"

"A silver-haired girl, ma'am..."

"A...what?"

"An unidentified young woman came down from the sky. Plus, she's cute as *heck*!"

Miranda paused and crossed her arms, gazing upward. After a moment's thought she said, "Do young girls today *usually* come down out of the sky?"

Fifteen minutes earlier...

Somewhere above the Ruin branch office of the Arcane Court, a young woman shot toward the ground, her shoulder forward, scything through the air toward a spot filled with apostles and administrative personnel milling around. Her pink hair fluttered behind her.

“Leshea! Pearl! Nel! My treasured sisters!”

It was Anita Manhattan, the young woman who had tried to get Fay’s female teammates to join Team Empress a few days before. A stray word had earned her their wrath, however, and she’d ended up dropped ignominiously in the bushes. Anita wasn’t deterred, however. In fact, her motivation burned hotter than ever.

“If you think a little undergrowth will stop me, think again! I’m going to clear my high-difficulty sisters’ routes and make my team really sparkle!”

It was only natural that the more attractive a “treasured sister” was, the more challenging she would be. To defeat them would demonstrate Anita’s own power.

Anita’s Arise, incidentally, was called Iron Heart. Despite the name, it wasn’t just her heart: this power made her entire body as hard as steel. An elephant could trample her into the ground and she would walk away smiling. Anyway, she was sturdy. Being dumped into some bushes didn’t hurt her. It didn’t even tickle.

Then something came plummeting out of the airspace directly over Anita’s head at an immense speed.

Impact.

There was a blast wind and a roar as if a missile had exploded; it swept people nearby off their feet.

“Eek!” someone cried.

“Yikes! Wh-what the heck?!” shouted another.

People looked around, trying to figure out what had happened, but dust and smoke obscured everything.

Several more people came running over, drawn by the noise.

“Wh-what’s going on here?!” All of them stood frozen as the dust cleared, revealing an enormous crater.

What had landed here? A warhead? A meteorite? What else could cause an explosion of this magnitude?

“.....Urgh. Wh-what just hit me? *Koff! Koff!* If it weren’t for my Arise, that could have been really ugly!”

Anita stood in the center of the crater, albeit not very steadily. Iron Heart had allowed her to survive whatever had happened, but not much more. She was caked in dust and her clothing was tattered. Her hair, which she’d spent three hours having done at her favorite salon, was a frizzled mess.

“I d-demand to know who did this! Come out here and show yourself!”

At which moment, an innocent voice spoke up from behind Anita.

“Huh! That’s weird. Maybe I got the coordinates just a little bit wrong?”

The voice came from the center of the crater—and when the onlookers saw who was speaking, they all felt an anxious lump in their throats.

A young woman of divine beauty stood before them.

“Maybe? Just a little wrong?” she said with an endearing cock of her head. She had hair so silver it was almost translucent, and wide ruby-red eyes. She was so lovely she captivated all who saw her—she almost seemed like something out of a fantasy. Her beauty bordered on the transcendent; simply by her presence, every work of art in the world seemed to dim a little.

Which left just one question. With all that beauty, why were her clothes so—in a word—bad?

She wore a T-shirt with the word *Undefeated* scrawled across the chest in huge letters. Over that she wore a baggy jacket, along with a choker around her neck—she was a walking fashion disaster if there ever was one. What an embarrassing waste of her unearthly beauty.

“Heeey, tiny human! I’m here! Come out, come out, wherever you are!” The silver-haired girl took a casual leap, effortlessly hopping from the lowest point of the crater to the street where dozens of people watched.

“Yikes!”

“Wh-who’s that? An apostle with a Superhuman power?”

“I don’t remember anyone with hair that color at our office! And those weird clothes...”

The crowd buzzed, but the newcomer paid them no mind. In fact, she hardly seemed to see them. She was looking this way and that, searching.

“Heellooo? Tiny human? Where aaaare you? Are we playing hide-and-seek?” She rifled through the bushes, popped open manhole covers, checked behind trees, and finally even peered into a trash can. “I don’t get it! I’m sure these are the right coordinates...more or less.”

She was obviously looking for someone.

Anita had watched all this, as frozen as everyone else, but now she snapped back to herself.

“Huh?! H-how could— I can’t believe I—!” She’d been so taken with the silver-haired girl’s beauty that she’d almost forgotten to breathe. “I can’t believe that I, the master of romance, could make such an error!”

She belatedly scrambled up out of the crater after the newcomer. Who was this girl? The way the light seemed to pass through her hair was fantastical! The unsullied innocence in her face was enough to make a person sigh with longing.

“I found it! I’ve finally found it!” Anita exclaimed.

The final piece that belonged in the puzzle of her team, Empress.

“Huuuuman! Aw, come on! I’m here for you!” the silver-haired girl called.

“Treasured sister, please, wait!” Anita cried, racing up behind the silver-haired girl as fast as she could. Then she whipped around in front of the young woman, blocking her path.

“Huh?”

“Treasured sister! I beg you, please join my team!”

She was addressing the other girl as if she were the elder, which might seem funny considering that from their outward appearances, they seemed to be about the same age—maybe Anita was even a little older. But that wasn’t the point. Any young woman worthy of her respect was a treasured sister in her eyes.

“My name is Anita Manhattan! You can call me Annie!”

“Say, human,” the silver-haired girl said with a tilt of her head. “You don’t know the tiny human, do you?”

“Tiny human? Who’s that?”

“Okay, fine.”

“W-wait, please!” Anita grabbed the silver-haired girl’s hand and dug in her heels. “I see you’re looking for somebody, but you must take an occasional break from your exhausting search. Come now, my dear sister. I have the finest tea in my room—perhaps you’d join me for a drink?”

Those ruby eyes fixed her in place; the way they shimmered was so eerily beautiful that Anita almost forgot to breathe. To think a girl of such ethereal magnificence actually existed in this world!

“Truly, you are the pinnacle!” Anita cried, leaning close. “Your hair is like the silver river that flows through the heavens! Your face, so innocent that Cupid himself would seem villainous in comparison! Your cheeks are so soft that I can hardly hold myself back from pinching them! Ahhhh! A trillion points! No, five hundred trillion! I give you five hundred *trillion* points!”

“Huh?”

“And yet... And yet, the pain is beyond description!” Anita ground her teeth. She was looking at the shirt the silver-haired girl was wearing. “What in the world moved you to wear that lame T-shirt?!”

Oh, the pain! The pain of it all! It was beyond Anita’s comprehension, how a girl could possess a loveliness to rival the gods, and then wear an outfit like *that*! Especially that shirt, the one that said *Undefeated* in big letters.

“Argh! The shirt! The sheer lameness of it is killing me!”

“Why? I *am* undefeated.”

“Uh... I don’t quite follow, but anyway! The jacket? The choker? Have a little subtlety, girl! You’ve already got everything you need to be a stunner—your clothing should be as refined and perfect as you are! You deserve better than that ridiculous shirt!”

“...” The other girl’s eyebrows twitched. “Are you calling my outfit ugly?”

“I am indeed! This is a pathetic squandering of true beauty!”

“Human...” The lovely girl’s eyes were cold. “I focused my entire divine fashion sense into this shirt, and you dare call it ugly?”

“I dare! Oh, how I dare! But worry not—Annie will whip up something that will bring out your unique—”

“Outta my way.”

Whack. The silver-haired girl delivered a karate chop to Anita’s head. She pitched forward, feeling like she’d been hit by a tank.

“Heeeeey! Tiny Human? Are you in here?” The silver-haired girl hopped easily over Anita, where she had collapsed on the sidewalk, and trotted into the Arcane Court building.

Which brings us back to the present moment.

“What?! Annie got driven into the pavement and is being taken to the hospital?!” In the basement of the Arcane Court building, Chief Secretary Miranda couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Can people normally be driven into the ground?”

“W-well, several witnesses said they saw the girl who came out of the sky karate chop her on the head.”

“Hmm. Well, I wouldn’t fret. With Annie’s Arise, it should hardly leave a scratch.” Miranda could worry about her later. Right now, she was more concerned about the silver-haired girl who had supposedly come dropping out of the heavens. “So? Where’s the other girl now?”

“She’s—”

BOOM.

The second impact came from the elevator in the back of the Dive Center. Miranda and the other staff turned just in time to see something prying open the doors with a metallic shriek.

It was the delicate hand of a young woman.

“Holy crap!”

“Tiny human? Hello? Are you in here?” An adorable face framed by silver hair peeked out from the gap between the doors. “Say, human. You know anything about Tiny Human?”

“I’m sorry?” Miranda said, her brain temporarily shutting down in the face of the girl’s question. Human? Tiny human? The first one seemed to be her. But who was the second?

“I’m here for my rematch with the tiny human?”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t explain much...”

The silver-haired girl studied her. This was obviously the young beauty who had come down from the sky. Miranda had been shaken by the way she casually wrenched open the elevator doors, but she didn’t seem to mean them any harm. If anything, her sweet face almost looked...friendly.

“Let’s start from the top,” Miranda suggested. “Who are you?”

“I am undefeated!”

“Uh...”

“Undefeated! You know this word?” The girl puffed out her chest, displaying the word emblazoned on her shirt—but unfortunately, Miranda still didn’t know what she meant by it.

“Um? Does that say ‘god’ on the back of your jacket? You certainly have a fashion sense all your own. Wait.....”

Undefeated? God? As in... The Undefeated God?

That name sounded oddly familiar. Where had she heard it before?

“I underestimated the tiny human last time and let myself be beaten, but I got the Bookmaker to erase that loss! Now I am once again undefeated!”

“Okay, wait. I think it’s coming to me. Uhh...”

While Miranda was still thinking, the silver-haired girl caught sight of the Divine Gate. Fay and the others had plunged through it just moments ago, but now the dragon’s mouth was closed. This was a special characteristic of the Divine Gates: when the gods wanted more players for their games, they would open. Otherwise, those jaws would stay shut until the game was over.

“Is this where Tiny Human went?” *Creaaak*. The silver-haired girl pried open the dragon’s jaws. “All right, then!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” cried everyone in the room, their voices bouncing off the walls in, really, a rather lovely harmony.

“Waif—I mean wait—I mean—Hold on!” Miranda cried, so thoroughly discombobulated that she could hardly get the words out.

The Divine Gate, the entrance to the superior spiritual realm, was supposed to be closed with the very power of the gods—and yet this young woman had casually popped it open. This was more than just brute strength—it should have been impossible for anyone but an *actual* god. Even the former god, Leshea, probably couldn’t have done it.

“Ooh! I smell Tiny Human!” the girl said, her eyes brightening.

“Just a second... Is that girl...?” For the first time, Miranda truly registered the visitor’s translucent silver hair and ruby eyes, and the image of a certain god flitted through her mind. The physical characteristics certainly matched up. The first time this god had appeared to Fay, the outfit had been all black—not quite the punk-esque look Miranda was seeing now, but the overall appearance certainly rang a bell.

“The Undefeated God... The silver hair... The red eyes... Ahhhhhhhhhhhh?!”

Miranda remembered. She suddenly remembered everything.

“I-It’s not possible!” she exclaimed, pointing as hard as she could at the silver-haired girl. “Uroboros?!”



*

“I am undefeated! You have a problem with that?”

With that, the girl jumped into the Divine Gate.

They were facing an unprecedented crisis, an unprecedented game, from which no one at all had returned to the human world. And now a real ringer—practically a cheater—had added herself to the mix. An actual god.

The Endless God Uroboros had joined the fight (while looking for Fay).

Player.5

Lucemia, the Labyrinth of No Return

Gods' Games We Play

1

The gods' games: in which the gods on high selected humans to become apostles and enabled them to enter the superior spiritual realm known as Elements, the gods' playground.

When Fay and the others came leaping through the Divine Gate, they found themselves in a space composed entirely of glowing monitors, dozens of them. Literal cyberspace.

Shimmering letters floated above Fay, Leshea, Nel, and Pearl:

Choose dungeon difficulty.

1. "One Might Even Feel Love"

2. PMD

"Huh? They're gonna let us choose the difficulty?" Fay said, taking a hard look at the unexpected message.

Choose the dungeon difficulty?

I don't get it. That's not what we expected. Everything we heard suggested we were going to be thrown straight into a merciless labyrinth.

Choose their difficulty?

This seemed like a compassionate gesture toward the player. Not the sort of thing he would have expected from whichever god was serving as game master of this maze which held people captive.

Then again, it was tricky to tell the difference between the two options.

“Aren’t difficulties usually called, you know, ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ or something?” Pearl asked, looking intimidated. “Since this says it’s the difficulty levels, I guess it’s probably a choice between easier and harder. Number one, ‘One Might Even Feel Love’—that sounds sort of, you know, compassionate and kind. But I don’t have any idea what ‘PMD’ is supposed to mean. Do you, Fay?”

“Beats me... No, wait, I’ve got it!” Fay said, the pieces coming together in his mind.

If the first choice was the easy mode, the second would be the difficult one. “PMD” could only mean one thing.

“Pearl... I think PMD is short for ‘Player Must Die.’”

“Does that mean what I think it means...?”

“Yeah. In other words, there’s one mode so easy it feels downright loving, and another mode where the whole point is to murder the players.”

“There are extremes, and then there are extremes!” Pearl said, almost physically shrinking back. Then she pointed straight at “One Might Even Feel Love” and said, “I want this one, obviously!”

“I agree,” Nel said, also pointing. The letters of option 1 blinked, and there was a cute little *ping!* sound.

But at almost the same time, there was an unpleasant *da-dum*. Fay and Leshea had pointed at 2. Player Must Die.

“Fay! Leshea! What are you *doing?!?*” Pearl wailed.

“This is the obvious choice,” Fay said.

“Any player worth their salt would go right for the highest difficulty whenever they get a choice,” Leshea added.

However, nothing happened to Fay or any of his companions. The choice of difficulty didn’t seem to make any visible difference to them personally.

“So maybe it’s the dungeon that changes?” Fay suggested. “Like, maybe the monsters get stronger and stuff?”

“I hardly think this is the time for measured, rational analysis! Wh-wh-why would you *do* that?! You know we might be stuck here forever, right?!” Fay’s golden-haired companion was bright red.

“Calm down, Pearl,” Fay said gently. “There’s a reason I did this.”

“What possible reason could you have?”

“Because I want to see what happens if you get different endings.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, it’s pretty standard, right? Games with varying difficulty levels often give you a different ending depending on which difficulty you complete.”

This was especially common in video games. On the easy mode, you would get the ordinary ending; only by clearing the more difficult mode would you finally see the true ending.

“A lot of times the ‘true’ ending is the happy outcome for the characters. And if we’re the protagonists trying to clear this maze, what does a happy ending look like for us?”

“Wha? Well, getting back to reality, of course...” Pearl stopped, and her eyes went wide. “You don’t mean—?!”

“Yep. I think it’s possible you only get back home by clearing the difficult mode. Admittedly, though, I’m only about twenty percent sure.”

That was why they had to check. By splitting their choice of difficulties, they could see how the game differed from one to the other.

Difficulty selected.

Welcome to an exciting adventure! A huge labyrinth is waiting for you to explore.

A mysterious number 0 floated over their heads, then disappeared.

“Huh? What was that?” Pearl asked.

“It went away in a hurry. Number of respawns, maybe?” Nel said. The two of them looked up where the number had briefly been.

In front of them, the glowing monitors winked out, a rift appearing like an

opening door...

...to reveal a grassy plain that spread as far as the eye could see.

It was full of verdant plant life, and a pleasant spring breeze rustled the grass. There wasn't a cloud in the sky all the way to the horizon.

"It's a grassy field," Nel said.

"Yep. That's grass all right," Leshea confirmed.

"Lots and lots of grass," Pearl said.

"Nice place," said Fay as they trotted out and through the field. It was idyllic—if they didn't know better, they would never have guessed that hundreds of people were trapped here. They might have been going on a picnic as they meandered through the ocean of green.

"No! We can't let our guard down!" said Pearl, looking around the area from her place at the head of the group. "This is a clever mind game! They only want us to *think* we're in a peaceful field—and then *bam!* They'll get us with a trap! Keep your eyes peeled, everyone!"

"You think this has to do with me and Pearl picking the easy difficulty?" Nel, walking beside Pearl, frowned.

"You mean maybe if we'd all chosen the difficult mode, this plain might have been different? It's possible. We don't know yet. And it looks like we've got plenty more ground to cover," Fay said.

In fact, they still saw nothing but green. As they followed the gentle slope of the earth downward, they began to spot trees and underbrush.

"Ooh, that tree looks like the perfect place to have some lunch! I wish I brought sandwiches," Pearl said.

"Is this what passes for keeping your eyes peeled, Pearl?" Leshea asked.

"B-but Leshea! It really is quiet and peaceful here!"

Indeed, the field continued off into the horizon. If there had been any monsters around, the group would have seen them coming from hundreds of meters away—but they didn't spot anything of the sort.

“You know, it might not be a bad idea,” Fay said. “We’ve got a long road ahead of us, and we need to plan our strategy. This might be a good time for a quick rest.” He agreed with one thing Pearl had said, anyway: it was hard to stay vigilant when they were just trotting across this empty field. “I think we should catch a break in the shade of that tree and try to assess our situation.”

“I second that!” Pearl said, and then went racing for the tree.

The tree was part of a whole grove bursting with greenery; inviting red fruit hung from their branches.

“Wow! These apples look delicious!” Pearl said.

“Apples?” Nel said. “I’m not sure about that. They’re too big to be cherries... But then again, they look a bit like peaches... Hmm...”

“Oh, who cares what they are, Nel?” Pearl arrived at the grove. The plump, ripe apples (?) hung tantalizingly, the branches bowing under their weight so that they were just within reach. “Apples, cherries, peaches, whatever—any fruit this red and ripe must be sweet and delicious!”

She reached out to take one—and was met with a *pop*.

The branch over her head fired one of the fruits right at her, with the speed of a flying bullet.

“Look out, Pearl!”

“Huh? *Hngh*?!”

She tumbled backward, and then lay deathly still...

Respawn.

Fay and the others stood at the starting point of the field.

Nobody said a word.

After a long, long moment, Fay broke the silence. “I get it. So it’s *that* kind of game. Anybody dies, and we all get sent back. We’re going to have to be awfully careful.”

“Pearl, please try not to get killed by such a blindingly obvious trap again,” Leshea advised her.

“It wasn’t *blindingly obvious!*” Pearl shot back, rubbing her cheek. Tears beaded in her eyes. The abused cheek, incidentally, had healed completely upon respawning. Pearl, however, didn’t seem ready to accept the manner of her death. “Why an apple?! Why would an apple come flying on a diagonal directly toward my cheek?! This is in violation of every law of gravity and physics!”

“Hey, it’s a game,” Leshea said.



“I don’t care! Apples should fall *down*, in games and in life!” Pearl sighed. “At least I understand now. Those apples aren’t red because they’re ripe—they’re red because they’re bathed in the blood of so many human victims!”

Not so much ripened as *engorged*.

Whatever the case, they now saw how the traps worked there. Even the field was more than met the eye. At least now that they knew, they could do something about it.

“All right, let’s try that again,” Fay said.

“Oh! Fay! Let me lead the group! Give me a chance to regain my honor!” Pearl said, and immediately started walking at a fast clip. She gave an enthusiastic wave, motioning them forward—toward the trees, of course. “When you run into nasty traps, you know you’re on the right path! I can tell that this is definitely the way to go!”

“That’s a pretty astute analysis, Pearl.”

“Oh, you can count on me, Fay! Those apples got the better of me last time, but I’m not afraid of them anymore!”

So they entered the Killer Apple (?) area.

The fruit all looked delicious, but they knew from hard experience that it could also be fired at them with the speed and force of a bullet.

“Careful, Pearl. There might be more dangers here than just apples,” Nel said.

“But of course, Nel!” Pearl said, advancing one step at a time, her expression drawn. “Ah, yes, I see. The best strategy for dealing with these trees is not to get close to them!”

She diligently kept her distance, ready to dodge in case anything came flying at her. She knew now that an apple didn’t have to be right over her head to fall on her; it could come from anywhere. Finally, she was just about to walk past the last tree when— *Pop!*

A bright red Killer Apple came racing straight at her head.

“You think I’d fall for that?! Yah!” Pearl hit the dirt and the apple missed her,

digging itself into the ground several dozen centimeters down the road. That would definitely have been a fatal shot if it had connected.

Pearl came over and glared down at the apple. “Hmph! Pitiful fool. You should know that I, Pearl Diamond, never fall for the same trap twice!”

Then she spun on her heel, with all the confidence of the overwhelming victor that she was. “Let’s go, everyone. It’ll take more than some apples to stop us!”

She turned again and began walking out of the woods. No sooner had she taken a step, however, than— *Pop!*

The apple burst out of the ground like a missile, aimed right at Pearl’s back.

“Pearl, look out!” Fay shouted.

“Look out for—what?!”

She took the apple in the small of the back and pitched forward, then was still as the grave once more.

Respawn.

Fay and his group found themselves back at the start of the plain. Needless to say, this would be their second retry.

“I! Can’t! Believe this!” Pearl’s face was as red as the apples that had killed her. She was humiliated by her two successive defeats, and had nowhere to let out her anger. “Whoever heard of apples that jump into the air?! Whatever happened to the dang law of gravity?! Somebody think of the poor *scientists* and what would happen to their *work* if apples just started hopping up off the *ground!*”

“Y’know, I’ve got to hand it to this place,” said Leshea, far more impressed than Pearl was. “Apples normally fall down—so this place takes that conventional wisdom and literally turns it on its head, so that apples on the ground fly into the air! This one’s your loss, Pearl.”

“How did I lose to an *apple*?!” Pearl howled, stamping her feet. “I hate this! Okay, next! You take the lead this time, Nel!”

“R-right!”

So it was that Nel went to the front of the group. In the end, no more murderous apples appeared—it was just the two that had killed Pearl.

“This isn’t fair. Why am I the only one who got taken out by apples?”

“Aw, don’t be mad, Pearl. Thanks to you, we cleared the first trap area,” Fay said.

“Yeah, I guess. I was just hoping I could look good for you, Fay...”

“Hmm? Hold on,” said Nel, holding up a hand in a *stop* gesture.

Ahead was a hole, a yawning chasm in the middle of the otherwise unbroken sea of green. Even from this distance, they could tell it must be more than ten meters in diameter.

“Urk! I don’t like the looks of that one tiny little bit!” Pearl said.

“Yeah, I’m with you. A pit like that might as well have a sign on it that says ‘Something’s gonna come flying out of me,’” Fay agreed.

They all prepared for danger—all except Leshea, who marched right up to the hole, her vermilion hair flapping in the wind. She walked to the very edge and peered in. “There’s nothing in here,” she said.

“What? R-really?! But we know this place loves to wait for you to let your guard down and then spring at you!” Pearl said.

“I’m telling you, I don’t sense anything down there. Take a deep breath and come look,” Leshea said, beckoning to them.

Fay trotted up and peeked into the chasm, and he had to agree there didn’t seem to be anything inside. “Maybe this is the opposite of the thing with the apples. Make you *think* there’s danger when there’s not.”

“That’s not very nice!”

“Maybe not, but it *is* good craftsmanship.”

A peaceful forest that contained killer apples. And now a portentous hole that turned out to be...just a hole. Perfectly designed to play on gamers’ nerves.

“Looks like an awfully big hole, though. It’s pitch-black, you can’t see the bottom, and it’s probably several hundred meters down. If you jumped in there,

you'd definitely die."

"So why do you sound like you're thinking of doing just that, Faaayyy?!" Pearl grabbed him. "We've already been annihilated by two different traps! We don't need any more dumb respawns!"

"Yeah, I guess it would be a waste of time."

"It sure would! We have to find those trapped apostles as soon as we can. Plus we're supposed to link up with the rest of the rescue team, aren't we?"

Fay had been joking, of course; he wasn't about to go jumping into any bottomless pits.

He saw something much better.

"What say we head for that castle?"

A massive palace towered in the middle of the field. It looked like this labyrinth adventure was finally about to get underway for real.

2

The moment Fay and the others entered the castle's great hall, a cheerful fanfare announced their arrival.

"Tutorial complete! Excellent work!"

A meep dangling from a chandelier worked its way down to them, flapping its little wings. *"I, friends, am the meep charged by my divine master with explaining this game to you. But I think you've already had a little taste, yes?"*

"Oh, we tasted it, all right! And it tastes *bad!*" said Pearl, already dragging. "If that was the tutorial, does that mean now we get to start the real maze?"

"Bingo! On the other side of this door is the divine labyrinth, Lucemia." The meep gestured around the great hall. *"You've already respawned twice, so you know how it works. From now on, this room will be your respawn point. No matter how many times your group is annihilated, you'll always start again here, and there's no wait! You can dive back into the labyrinth immediately."*

“We’re finally here,” Nel said, her face tight. At last, they would be able to explore the maze that had trapped so many of their colleagues.

“I will now commence the instructions. Please look over here!”

The meep gestured again, and a board bearing the game explanation blinked into existence.

Divine Labyrinth Lucemia

1. Your objective is to defeat the final boss in the innermost chamber. (When the final door opens and you escape the labyrinth, you win.)

2. The maze is full of monsters, tricks, and traps that you’ll have to navigate to advance.

3. Items throughout the labyrinth will help you on your journey.

4. Two or more items can be combined to craft a better item. Additionally, only one item may be carried in the right hand and one in the left (for a total of two items maximum).

5. Your initial game stats are based on yourself. (Note: There are limits for those who selected PMD mode.)

6. The respawn system allows you to retry any number of times. Respawn occurs when any team member is deemed dead. Be careful! Upon respawning, you lose any acquired items, while defeated bosses and cleared traps are reset to their original state.

“You really have to do it all over again when you die?” Pearl moaned.

“Not at all!” the meep responded with a shake of the head. *“The one thing you don’t lose is your knowledge and experience! So never give up, no matter how many times you’re defeated! Through trial and error, you’ll figure out how to best even the most fearsome foes!”*

“You’re just *assuming* we’re going to die?!”

“Oh, one more thing. You’ll see a number over your heads.” The meep clapped its hands, and the same mysterious numbers that had flashed over the group’s heads when they chose their difficulty reappeared. *“This is your unlock percentage. It’s a little something for the truly dedicated among us. It starts at zero and goes up to one hundred percent. Whenever you clear the dungeon’s tricks and traps, the number goes up. I guess you could call it a measure of your passion for this labyrinth!”*

“A-and what do we get for achieving a high number?” Pearl asked.

“Self-satisfaction,” said the meep.

“Then why would anyone care about it?!”

“You might be interested to know that the unlock percentage doesn’t reset even if you respawn.” The numbers overhead winked out of existence again. The meep let its gaze sweep over each of them in turn. *“Anyone have any questions?”*

“If we do, will you answer them?” Fay responded.

The meep held up two fingers. *“I can answer questions related to the following two subjects: the legend of the divine labyrinth, and the returning of players to their world.”*

“Huh! You’ll even tell us how to get back to the real world?” That much, at least, lined up with what Chief Secretary Miranda had told them—that their main objective wasn’t to actually finish the maze, but to find the save items so that they could get out of this Elements. “I’m interested in that first one, but why don’t we start with the second?” Fay said.

“There are two ways to go home. One is to defeat the final boss and escape the labyrinth—in other words, to finish the game. There may be times, however, when you feel you’re truly stuck, or when you have something you need to do back in reality. For those instances—”

“There’s save items?”

“Precisely! Save items allow you to return to the human world while retaining the current state of your inventory and any cleared traps and so on. You’ll also respawn from the location of that item.”

Someone had really thought this through. Everything from the meep's explanations to the existence of save items was exactly what players would have wanted.

Then again, I guess that tells you just how hard this dungeon is. They'd already seen how nasty the place could be right in the tutorial. The very fact that the respawn point had been set to this room—so the players could jump right back into the maze—was an implicit threat from the god-game master: *You're gonna need it.*

"So what about that first one? The legend of the labyrinth?"

"Allow me to enlighten you!" The meep spread its hands and looked to the ceiling like an opera singer about to belt out an aria.

Once upon a time there was a god who loved building mazes. This god would wait in the innermost depths of its labyrinth, excited for humans to come and find it. But no one ever finished the maze, and eventually the god died of boredom.

"That's not much of a legend!" Pearl squawked. "N-no, no, no, no, no, no, I mean, wait! The god died?! But it's a god!" She looked up at the meep floating overhead.

"Uh-huh."

"You don't sound very worried about it!"

"Well, this did happen hundreds of years ago. But as you can see, my divine master's beautiful dungeon still remains for you to explore and enjoy!"

With a resounding creak, the huge doors at the far end of the hall slowly opened.

"You see? The doors of the labyrinth Lucemia have opened, and a grand adventure is about to begin! No matter how trying the trial, no matter how fearsome the foe, with your wits and courage, you will forge a path!"

Well, there was one sure way to find out what was in there.

With the meep's encouragement, Fay and his band went through the doors and into the maze.

Elements: Lucemia, the Labyrinth of Death and Rebirth
VS. The Master of the Death-Dungeon, ???? (Deceased;
only game remains)
Let the game begin.

In seventy-two hours, no one among two hundred and nine apostles had succeeded in returning home. How terrible must this labyrinth be? The very thought was awful, stifling.

As the doors opened, they were confronted with a dazzling, sumptuous hallway that stretched on endlessly.

The floor bore a black-and-white mosaic pattern. The walls were made of some kind of yellowish stone, and the ceiling was supported by thousands and thousands of stone arches. The passage wouldn't have looked out of place in a castle.

"Wow! This is gorgeous!" said Leshea, who had been pretty quiet to that point, as she stepped into the maze. Her eyes sparkled almost as brightly as the surroundings. "I assumed a labyrinth would be dreary and cramped and smell funny, but this isn't like that at all! I love it! This is the sort of thing you would expect from a god dedicated to building mazes. I so admire craftsmanship like this!"

Even the floor was beautiful, so polished that if you looked down, you could see your own face in it.

There was just one thing.

I can't help thinking about that grassy field, Fay thought. Peaceful place, gorgeous...and it had apples that killed you pretty much before you knew what was happening.

Leshea was looking studiously at the floor, and Nel and Pearl were gazing up at the chandeliers, but it wasn't because of their arresting beauty. The three of them were looking out for anything that might be a trap.

When they had proceeded about a hundred meters down the hallway, Pearl, who had been taking it all in intently, mumbled, almost to herself, "No traps yet..." Then she said, "Fay, you remember that branch we passed a while back? Think we should go back and see where it goes?"

"Personally, I'd rather keep heading straight for a while. I'm curious how far this hallway extends."

Plooch.

No sooner had Pearl pointed back toward the branch hallway than they heard something from that direction. Small, but unmistakable. *Plooch*. It sounded like a water balloon bouncing along the ground.

In fact, there was more than one of it, and it was getting closer.

“Something’s coming!” Pearl yelled, jumping backward.

“Monsters?!” Nel said, dropping into a fighting stance. Fay and Leshea likewise got ready to move. Whatever was coming didn’t seem to be bigger than a small animal, but they knew that was no reason to let down their guard.

They all kept their eyes fixed on the bend in the hall...

“Pfff!”

Five little brown fluffballs appeared, each about the size of players’ palms. They came sproinging down the hall, reaching roughly the height of Pearl’s waist with each bounce.

“Aw, what sweet little things! Are those puffballs?!”

“You know them, Pearl?!”

“No, but just listen to those little puffing noises, and look at that adorable fluff! What else could you possibly call them?!”

Great. Thanks, thought everyone except Pearl.

“Oh my gosh, they’re sooooo cute! Fay, do you think I could take one home with m—Yipes!”

“Pff!”

As Pearl bent down to get a better look at the creatures, the five puffballs (?) bounced up and smacked her in the face and hips.

“Nooo! Stop! St... Hey... It doesn’t hurt?”

“It’s like getting bopped with a pillow,” said Nel, casually batting one of the creatures away with an open hand. Fay experimentally allowed himself to get hit by one of the puffballs, and if he had to compare it to something, he would have said it was like a big marshmallow. Kind of pleasant, actually.

“Pfff?!”

At that point, the puffballs fled, bouncing off as soon as they discovered their attacks were ineffectual against Fay and his friends.

“Oh, they’re leaving! Hey... What’s this?” There were some wood boards scattered behind the puffballs. When Pearl picked two of them up, shimmering letters appeared in the air.

Craft:

2 Wood Boards → Wooden Shield Craft?

“Yes, please!” Pearl said. The moment she said it, the wood boards floated into the air, where they disassembled into smaller pieces. A few seconds later, Pearl was holding a brand-new wooden shield. What was more, the number over her head—the one the meep had identified as the unlock percentage—ticked up from 0 to 1 percent.

“Oh boy! Fay, I made a Wooden Shield!”

“And you upped your unlock percentage. Two birds with one stone, nice. Since crafting is part of the game, I guess it’s part of the percentage, too. It does sort of give you a feeling of accomplishment.”

There were still six boards left, so Fay, Leshea, and Nel all crafted wooden shields as well, and their numbers all went up to 1 for having completed their first craft.

“Seems like a promising start. I think we might actually be doing all right, don’t you, Master Fay?”

“Yeah. And these shields should give us a boost. Let’s see what other items we can find and what we can make with them as we go through the maze.”

They knew how the game worked now. The four of them advanced down the hallway in the direction the puffballs had gone, brandishing their shields.

“Pfff!”

“Oh, back for more?” Nel said. A single puffball had appeared in the hallway. It was no bigger than before, but this one glittered a gold color.

“That’s got to be a rare specimen! Catch it, Pearl! I guarantee it’s got a great item!” Leshea said.

“Great minds think alike, Leshea! Okay, come here, sweetie pie. Don’t be afraid. I just want to pet you...”

“.....” The puffball almost seemed to look up at her. Pearl reached down to pat it on the head—and the Golden Puffball sprayed something at her.

The Golden Puffball used God Bless!

It does 9,999 damage to all party members. Fay’s party is destroyed.

Their vision went dark. When they came to, they were back in the great hall. Almost as one, they said: “.....Huh?”

Player.6

I, Myself, Appear!

Gods' Games We Play

1

"Welcome back!" the meep said merrily when it saw that Fay and the others had respawned. They were back in the great hall of the castle. *"A grand adventure is about to begin! Pick yourselves up and do your best!"*

Underneath the sparkling chandeliers, Fay, Leshea, Nel, and Pearl stood and stared into space.

"Ahh... I get it," said Fay.

"So that's how this game is going to be," said Leshea.

"I have regrets," said Nel.

"It killed us all instantly," said Pearl. "You know, I'd like to know something! What was the point of crafting those wooden shields? They didn't do a thing! We still took 9,999 damage! How many hit points do we have, anyway?!"

"Pearl, you currently have fifty-one hit points," the meep informed her.

"Seriously, did that wooden shield even mean anything?!"

"This is weird," said Nel from beside Pearl with a sigh. "Pearl and I both chose the easy difficulty, and the creatures are still that strong? Is the idea that we should steer clear of any monsters?"

There seemed to be "normal," or brown, puffballs, and the golden kind. Easy enough to tell them apart at a glance—but there would be no way to guess just how strong a Golden Puffball was if you didn't already know.

Killed on sight, Fay thought. This is one of those “If at first you don’t succeed, die, and die again” games.

The meep had told them that even their complete annihilation wasn’t in vain. The players retained their experience and knowledge. Just like this respawn. They had learned, from hard experience, the difference between the puffball enemies and the vastly more dangerous Golden Puffball. They would be able to take advantage of that knowledge in their next run.

“Oh, and I noticed something else!” Leshea said with a clap of her hands. “I had this weird weak feeling when we were walking along. It must mean that choosing the PMD difficulty put a hard limit on even my power.”

“Yeah, and my Arise.”

Fay’s Arise, and Leshea’s sheer strength, should have allowed them to survive the Golden Puffball’s attack, and normally they would have. But the PMD difficulty appeared to have curtailed their powers, resulting in a total party wipe.

Then again, if even one person dies, the entire party respawns, so I guess it wouldn’t matter if Leshea and I survived anyway.

All the same, it hurt that Leshea’s abilities had been diminished. She could have bulled through some of the traps and monsters in a way no one else could.

“Plus, that broke our Godeye lens,” Fay said.

The respawn had healed their wounds and mended their clothes from the puffball’s God Bless attack, but the miniaturized recording device on his belt was still broken. Apparently it fell outside the whole auto-repair thing—only the god knew what the exact criteria were, but it looked like anything that wasn’t specifically necessary to complete the dungeon wouldn’t fix itself.

“And that means no more broadcast from us. Chief Secretary Miranda is probably pulling her hair out right about now. Guess this means we’re stuck here, too.”

“I knew grave robbers always wound up as mummies!” Pearl said.

“Just one more reason to hurry up and figure this place out. Shall we start run

number two?" Fay replied.

They stepped out of the great hall and back into the labyrinth. Just like the first time, they were greeted with an ornate hallway that extended farther than they could see.

"So we know that Golden Puffball is out there, and that it's dangerous. I'd like to come up with some way to deal with it before we run into it again, but I'm not having much luck. Leshea, any clever ideas?" Fay asked.

"Good question," she said, and fell silent as she walked down the hall. Then she said, "The gold one seems like an area boss, don't you think? The way it appeared from around that corner makes me think it's an obstacle, put there to keep us from getting farther. Which means running away isn't the right plan. We have to defeat it and keep going that way."

"Defeat it how?"

"We could take the brown puffballs hostage and make it surrender!"

"That's a *creative* solution, at least."

As far as it went, Fay agreed with at least half of what Leshea had said. Namely, that they had to defeat the Golden Puffball rather than try to avoid it. But he still wasn't sure exactly how.

If we take one of those God Bless attacks, we all die. Which means there are only two real options: defeat it before it attacks, or somehow avoid the attack.

Unfortunately, he wasn't immediately coming up with any good ideas for either of those things.

"I'm thinking crafting is our best bet. I say we start by finding every item we can besides those wooden boards and see what we can make," he suggested.

The crafting system was potentially very profound. For example, if A plus A made B, the A plus B might make C. Then you could combine B and B to get D, or B and C to get E, and so on. Even a single item type could yield a nearly limitless number of new items, provided you had a big enough supply.

"I get it. You really could play this your whole life, couldn't you?" Nel said.

This was a game created on a truly staggering scale. The number of items

alone was breathtaking. The flip side was that they risked never being able to narrow it down to what would actually help them defeat the Golden Puffball.

“At this rate, we’re just going to wind up with more and more trapped apostles. Including us,” Fay said.

“Master Fay,” Nel said, stepping forward. “Can we go find that Golden Puffball again? There’s something I’d like to try.”

“Yeah?”

“The three of you, please stand back. I need it to focus its attack on me alone.” She started striding forward, toward the corner around which the Golden Puffball lurked.

The five familiar brown puffballs appeared, and Nel patiently weathered their attacks. Then they ran away, and their golden counterpart emerged in their place.

“Oh gosh, it’s here!” Pearl yelped.

“Get back, Pearl!” Nel shouted and raced forward. Her footsteps slapped against the floor as she made a beeline for the Golden Puffball. It saw what she was trying to do and took a big breath in...

God Bless.

The breath came spewing out its mouth. If it so much as touched Nel, she would die and they would all be annihilated. The instant before it reached her, though, Nel kicked her left leg high into the air. “Right back at you!” she shouted.

Her Arise, Moment Reversal, activated. Capable of repelling any object regardless of its mass or energy, it could have kicked away a missile or an asteroid. It would certainly work on some breath.

The air Nel kicked went flying back the other way, smacking squarely into the Golden Puffball. “*Puuuff!*” it cried.

It dropped a small key—presumably an item—and then ran away.

“Oh my gosh, Nel, that was amazing!” said Pearl, picking up the key. “This key must go to a door somewhere! I get it—we don’t have to get all obsessed with

items to get us through this maze! I can't believe you could kick its own breath back at it! If people could have seen that on the stream, they'd be cheering their heads off right now! Plus, look at this!"

The unlock percentage number had appeared above all four of their heads, where it went up from 1 to 2. It hadn't increased when they had defeated the normal puffballs, so this showed that the Golden Puffball must have been a special case—an area boss, just as Leshea had suspected.

"It might not be much, but every small step gets us closer to the goal—and it's all thanks to you, Nel!" Pearl continued.

"Er...yes, of course! Most satisfactory!" She was blushing, but she also puffed out her chest, pleased with herself. "I owe Master Fay a debt I can never repay. If I can serve the team like this, that's all I want. Well, let's be going. You can trust me in the lead!"



They walked around the corner.

Or rather, tried to. But just as Nel took a step, a window directly beside her shattered.

Crash!

A very familiar red fruit came flying through the window...

“Nel, look out!”

“Wha—hrggh!”

She hardly had time to turn around before the Killer Apple hit her in the head. With a cry, she pitched forward, dead.

Respawn.

“Welcome back!” The meep’s greeting echoed around the room, but the others were silent for a moment as they found themselves back in the great hall.

At length, Fay said, “Right. This is the kind of game that punishes every moment of weakness.”

“We let our guard down because we beat the area boss,” Leshea added.

“Nel,” Pearl said, “you know they say pride goes before a fall, right?”

“I’m so sorry! I can’t apologize enough!” Nel said, throwing herself down and pressing her forehead into the ground. She knew she had let Pearl’s extensive compliments go to her head. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment.

“Hey, meep?” Fay said. “We beat that Golden Puffball. When we respawn...”

“All monsters and traps respawn with you.”

“I’m soooooooooo sorry!” Nel slammed her head into the floor again.

They would have to re-fight the Golden Puffball. And of course, they had been stripped of any items they had collected or crafted.

“I guess it could be worse,” Fay said. “This means that even if you happen to find a rare item, or if you make it to the final boss in the deepest dungeon chamber and then die, you still come back here and start from scratch. It hardly

bears thinking about.”

“Noooooooooooo!” Pearl cried.

When you died, you started again from the very beginning. Meaning you had to make it to and through the final boss with no hits, no mistakes. It could easily take hundreds, even thousands, of attempts.

Fay clapped his hands, and when he had the attention of his three companions, he said, “Let’s promise each other one thing. No matter what happens, no matter who messes up or gets us killed, we treat it as water under the bridge. The real danger in this game isn’t making mistakes. It’s hurting our friends by giving them a hard time about those mistakes. That’s the sort of thing that will split us up and make us hate this game, and that’s the opposite of what we want, right? Instead, we learn from whatever happens and carry on.”

“Y-yes, of course!” Pearl said.

“I understand and accept this teaching, Master Fay,” replied Nel.

“I don’t even think of them as mistakes! It just means we get to enjoy the game again and again!” Leshea chirped.

They each nodded.

“Good. Let’s get going. I’m curious what’s happened to the other rescue teams, but presumably we’re all in the same boat.” Fay pointed toward the door. Time for run number three. “If we’re gonna do a no-death run of this dungeon, we’ll have to die a lot first to make it happen.”

At that moment, Camilla’s team, Archangel, was in another part of the maze. They’d dived not long after Fay, and found themselves attempting Lucemia from another starting point.

They’d respawned thirty-seven times—they were already finding themselves stymied by a particularly powerful foe.

“There he is! It’s him *again*!”

“Shit! You can see he’s asleep in a corner of the hallway, but he wakes up the instant you get anywhere near him! Leader?”

“Fall back!”

Archangel beat a hasty retreat. Before they had gone ten full meters down the hallway, though, the brutal area boss was before them.

A pitch-black puffball.

“*Puuuff!*”

“Urk! So you’ve got us cornered, Dark Puffball! But this time you’ll taste Frostbite!”

Camilla was a mage. She unleashed an ice bullet that slammed straight into the bouncing black puffball as it flung itself around the hallway. The creature was frozen in place.

For a moment.

“*Puuuuff!*” it cried and shattered the ice, lunging forward again. It wasn’t even scratched.

Camilla and her team paled.

“I don’t get it!” Camilla said. “Physical attacks don’t work, Arise attacks don’t work—how are we supposed to take this thing down?!”

The Dark Puffball’s eyes glittered menacingly.

Dark Illusion.

Anyone unfortunate enough to make eye contact found themselves, as they say in games, confused.

“H-hey! My body is moving on its own! Wait! Why am I tearing my clothes off?!” Camilla shrieked as she began to pull at her own outfit.

And when one of her teammates still had a functioning Godeye lens!

“No, no, no! You can’t broadcast my body to the entire world! Think about the under-eighteen crowd!”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s nothing to see,” someone said.

“Excuse me? *What* was that?”

“Uh, nothing, Captain!”

Within moments, the entire party was thrown into chaos. Some people began stripping like Camilla, while others flung themselves down on the spot and went to sleep. So much for a battle—they were effectively the boss’s puppets now.

“Somebody help! What are we supposed to *do* about this thing?!” Camilla screamed.

So it was that, in one corner of the labyrinth Lucemia, one of the teams that had entered the game as part of the rescue operations soon needed saving themselves.

2

Fay and his team, blissfully unaware of Archangel’s tribulations, were busy trying to craft with every item they could find.

“Ta-dah! Look what I made!” Pearl said, holding up a shimmering shield. “They call this a Mirror Shield, Fay! But the description makes it sound like it doesn’t have a lot of defensive power. What do you suppose it’s for?”

“Mirror, huh? Maybe there are some monsters in here that, like, if you meet their eyes you get confused or turn to stone or something, and it’s for them? You could send their own gaze back at them with a mirror.”

“You really think there’s an enemy out there built specifically to be defeated by this thing?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a big maze. It might be out there.”

“Too bad there isn’t one right here. I’d like to try this shield,” Pearl said, her shoulders slumping. Then she turned back to Fay. “What’s that you’re crafting?”

“An alarm clock.”

“I’m sorry? Come again?”

“I made an alarm clock. Here, have a look.” Fay was holding a digital clock of the kind that could be found in any ordinary home. “The components were screws and some mechanical parts. I thought maybe all we could make were swords and shields and stuff, but it turns out there are also some...surprises in

this crafting system.”

“Great...” Pearl gave the clock a suspicious look. “And what does it, uh, do?”

“It has a very loud alarm.”

“Which is good for....what?”

“It wakes up any sleeping monsters nearby, and they’ll come after you. Remember that group of sleeping puffballs? We could wake them all up if we wanted.”

“Why would we do that?! Don’t do that!”

“I think I might keep it with me. Since I managed to make it and all.”

“No, get rid of it! We can only hold two items each. We can’t use up our precious item slots on junk like that!”

While Pearl and Fay debated the merits of the alarm clock, Leshea had been absorbed in her own crafting project. Now she jumped to her feet. “Don’t even bother, Fay!” She was holding, of all things, a trumpet. “My Reveille Horn will wake up monsters in a way larger area than your silly alarm clock! I’m gonna test it out right now!”

“Noooooooo! Don’t you blow that bugle!” Pearl cried, rushing to stop Leshea.

Next in line was Nel, currently opening, of all things, an umbrella.



“Master Fay, I put together plastic and wood to make this ‘Ordinary Umbrella.’ I crafted it anyway, hoping it might have some sort of secret effect, but it looks like it really is just a normal umbrella.”

Fay give it a look. Then he said, “Well, hang onto it for now. Just in case.”

Pearl was right—they could each carry only up to two items. Clogging up their inventory slots with stuff they didn’t know the effect of might seem inefficient, but Fay had a feeling that anything that could be crafted here must have some purpose.

Even stuff that doesn’t seem to have an actual use as an item, maybe it’ll turn out to be crafting material for something else.

This umbrella, for example. The description read: “*Perfect for warding off the rain and snow.*” Didn’t sound like much, right? But there was every chance that, by combining it with another object, it would produce a much more powerful item.

“Okay. Are we about ready to move on?” Fay asked.

At the moment, they were by a set of stairs that had brought them to the second level of the labyrinth. The monsters on the second level were stronger than those on the first, so they’d crafted everything they could get their hands on in hopes of finding a way to fight back, but it seemed that weapons that would enable them to defeat the monsters directly were few and far between.

That’s a message: “Use your wits and your Arise.” The items in this game are just here to help you get through the maze.

There was something else Fay noticed as they worked their way through the halls. He thought they’d been down there well over ten hours, but he didn’t feel at all sleepy or hungry. That was the sort of thing that could only happen in an Elements.

“We’re on the second floor now, but we’ve barely moved away from the stairs. No telling what we might find here,” he said, walking forward as carefully as he could.

Tak.

It was then that they heard heavy footsteps coming from the intersection ahead.

“Is it a monster?!” Pearl yelled, trying to scuttle backward.

“Shh! Hold on, Pearl. Those are human footsteps if I ever heard them,” Nel replied, catching her by the shoulders.

Quite a few sets of footsteps, in fact. Five people? No, at least ten. When Fay and the others listened, they realized they could hear voices having what seemed to be a conversation.

“Fay! Do you think it could be the others from the rescue team?!”

“Yeah, or maybe monsters that have taken on human form. You’ve seen how nasty this dungeon can get. There might be creatures that can imitate humans, just like the Bookmaker does.” They backed away a few steps, waiting and listening as the footsteps drew closer.

Tak. Tak... Tak.

Finally, human forms appeared in the intersection.

“This way, Captain Ashlan. They said the voice came from over here!”

“All right, but stay sharp! I wouldn’t put it past this shit-ass dungeon to make us hear voices just to lure us into a trap! All right, who’s there?! Give us a name! Are you some kind of monster?”

A young man with light brown hair jumped out from the intersection. He was taller than Fay, but slim, with attractive features and an ineffable charm that made it impossible to hate him.

“Captain Ashlan?” Fay whispered loudly.

“.....” The man in front of them stopped short and stared in their direction. “Are my eyes playing tricks on me? I could swear I see my junior apostle right in front of me... Or is it a monster pretending to be him?”

“It’s the real me.”

“The real you?!”

Captain Ashlan Highrols looked shocked. He and Fay knew one another; he

ran Team Blaze (motto: The wild fire) for the Ruin branch office. Fay had worked with him a couple of times as a rookie, and knew that although Ashlan could be a bit impetuous, he was loyal and compassionate to a fault.

Then, Fay remembered a conversation he'd had with Ashlan shortly after Leshea had first arrived, when he'd been looking for a team they could both join.

"I'll get right to the point: would it be possible to join your team?"

"Hell yeah, man, we'd love to have you!"

"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..."

I saw his name on the list of trapped apostles. I could hardly believe the captain would get himself stuck down here.

It had surprised Fay, to say the least, that Ashlan was not among the rescuers, but among those needing rescue.

"Oh, hell. Oh, *hell*! Even *you're* stuck down here, Fay?!" Ashlan said.

"We're with the rescue team. At least theoretically. We haven't found a way out yet, so that sort of puts us all in the same boat."

"Rescue? Who ya rescuin'?"

"Um... Well, you, for one."

"Huh! Maybe lead with that next time!" Then Ashlan swept Fay up in a hug.

"Captain... You're hurting me..."

"Ha-ha-haaa! I was so sure we must both be lost! I should have known the Arcane Court would be more on the ball than that! So. How are things in the human world?"

"Frantic. Whatever this is, it's happening all over the world."

"What's that mean?"

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know."

Captain Ashlan would know *he* couldn't leave the maze until he finished it, but he would probably never dreamed that apostles all over the world were suffering the same fate.

"Those girls there are your teammates, right, Fay? Lady Leshea I recognize. So, what the hell are we supposed to do?"

Fay counted eleven team members standing behind Ashlan, all of them watching him very suspiciously. Everyone obviously wondered what the situation really was.

"Well, Captain, I think *you* should start out with a quick rest." Fay pointed at Ashlan, and then, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, he said, "Let's share what we know with each other. The one thing I'm certain of is that this dungeon is still full of secrets."

Back at the Arcane Court Ruin branch office, Chief Secretary Miranda was flopped across her desk.

"....."

"Slacking off again?" asked the craggy-faced man on the monitor.

She didn't have to look up to know that it was Chief Secretary Baleggar from the Mal-ra branch office. Between the WGT and working on Nel's comeback, she'd talked to him enough recently to recognize him by voice.

So she didn't look up. Instead she said, "Urgh." Then she heaved a sigh. "I really don't have it in me to talk with some stuffy old guy right now."

"I take it Ruin's no better off than we are."

"Whazzat mean?"

"I mean the rescue teams. Camilla's Archangel team has gone radio silent. Same with the group from the Ocean City of Fisshara, I'm told."

"Well, damn..."

"I don't suppose you've heard anything from Fay?"

No, she hadn't. She still didn't look up from her desk as she crossed her arms in an X: nope, nuh-uh, nada. The Godeye lens had worked for a little while, but

the attack from the Golden Puffball seemed to have destroyed it, and now she had no idea what was happening to him.

“They’ve been incommunicado for fifteen hours already. Argh, my stomach hurts! If we lose Fay and Lady Leoleshea, my office is going to catch so much heat...”

“Yes, but you knew that going in.”

This game was just too dangerous. When they’d sent in the rescue teams to save the trapped apostles, they’d understood that the rescue teams might get trapped themselves and need more rescue teams to help them... The need for help would only snowball.

“I reached out to headquarters again. They told me that ‘at the present time,’ they don’t have any plans to send in more rescue groups.”

“Cutting their losses. Like a lizard dropping its tail.” This time, finally, she raised her head, heavily. There were deep, dark bags under both eyes. “I just wish I knew what Fay and Lady Leoleshea were doing in that dungeon right now.”

In that dungeon right then...

Captain Ashlan and his team, Blaze, had been exploring the labyrinth for nearly a hundred hours already. At one point they’d encountered another team and linked up—until the entire party was wiped.

“We should’ve agreed on a place to meet each other,” he said with an agonized sigh as they walked down the hallway. “We didn’t realize until afterward that everyone has different respawn points. Once we took that TPK, everyone got scattered everywhere. If we’d decided on somewhere we could meet up, we could’ve kept getting back together no matter how many times we were wiped. You and I need something like that. How about the intersection where we first met each other?”

“Sounds good,” Fay said.

“Sounds like the rescue team isn’t having any more luck than the rest of us. Guess that shouldn’t be surprising.” Ashlan shrugged. “I think they’ve got the

right idea, about making it the priority to find the save items. This maze is *crazy* big. We've been at it for almost a hundred hours, and I guess we've only seen a small percentage of the whole thing. To clear the entire labyrinth, we'd be talking weeks or maybe even months down here. Hell, maybe your entire life, if you weren't careful."

"Captain, have you learned anything about what or where the save items might be?"

"Yeah, we did. Didn't we, guys?" Ashlan turned back to his eleven teammates, who nodded eagerly. "We're on the second floor, right? On the far end, there's a locked room. And why do you lock a room? Because there's treasure in it!"

"So you think we need to find a key?"

"We've already got *a* key. But we need one more."

Ashlan showed Fay the key he was holding, which had protruding edges like a puzzle piece. It seemed to be half of a whole: put the two halves together to obtain a complete key. Was Fay imagining it—or had he seen something a lot like this?

"You're new in here, so you might not know yet, but there's a bunch of area bosses wandering around this labyrinth, real nasty customers. Like, there's this one on the first floor called the Golden Puffball. All I'm saying is, watch out. You can all be dead within about three seconds of the battle starting." Ashlan sighed. "To beat it, you need to craft an item called the Celestial Nymph's Fan that can send its God Bless attack right back at it. The catch is, to craft the fan, you need a Heavenly Cloud and Rainbow Silk, and those are both rare items. They hardly ever drop! We're on the hunt for them right now."

"Uh... The Golden Puffball?" Fay asked.

"Yeah. What, you know it?"

"Uh-huh. We ran into it earlier."

"Hah! My condolences. The thing's a beast, right? You're like, the hell are we supposed to do about this?"

"We took it down."

“.....Huh?”

“We got past it. I mean, *I* didn’t do it; it was thanks to Nel.”

“You *what?*!” Captain Ashlan whipped around to look at Nel. With a hint of an embarrassed smile, she reached into her bag and took out the golden key.

“It, er, it was nothing. I was able to kick the God Bless attack back at it. Is this the other key you were looking for, Captain Ashlan?”

“Holy hell! Yes! Yes, that’s it! Give it here! Uh, please!”

Ashlan shoved the two keys together.

Craft:

Golden Key Fragment + Silver Key Fragment → Execution
Grounds Key

Execution Grounds?

When Fay saw the name of the key that they’d crafted, he swallowed heavily. He had a very bad feeling about this. In a twisted, cruel dungeon like this one, the only thing that was likely to be executed at any execution grounds was—
“All riiight! Now we can get going, people!” Ashlan said.

“H-hold on, Captain Ashlan! I’m telling you, I’ve got a bad feeling about this!” Fay called to the other team’s captain as he raced down the hallway. Unfortunately, Ashlan didn’t hear him. He’d been wandering in here for nearly a hundred hours, and finally thought he had a way forward. He thought he was going to get to the next stage, the next level. Even if something in his head knew the need to stay cool, his heart was seized by the possibility of moving forward.

After traversing several intersections and several flights of stairs, Ashlan announced, “Here, Fay, this is it!”

He pointed to an extremely thick iron door. Eerie mist floated around it, and an icy wind blew through the area.

“This is definitely, obviously, *completely* super dangerous!” said Pearl.

“Yeah, I don’t like the looks of this,” Nel agreed. Both of their faces were

bloodless.

It was the Execution Grounds, after all. No doubt with a trap or a monster waiting to execute the players.

“I hear you. But don’t worry so much,” Ashlan said as he delicately fit the key into the lock. They all heard the distinct *click* in the fetid air. “Pearl—it’s Pearl, isn’t it? You’re afraid there’s a big, bad raid boss waiting behind this door, but seriously, it’s fine. I haven’t been down here a hundred hours for nothing. Item-crafting knowledge wins out in a situation like this.”

“Wha... What? Wait... Does that mean...?”

“Fact: this Pure Bell I’m holding is a rare item that rings whenever there’s a threatening monster nearby. Additional fact: one of my teammates is wearing X-Ray Specs, which reveal any traps. And neither of those items is reacting. Which tells us what?”

“No way! The execution-grounds thing is just a bluff to frighten players?!”

“Bingo. All right, let’s open this door!”

Captain Ashlan gave the door a good kick. It opened with a resounding creak to reveal a circular room some sixty meters in diameter. Along the wall were hundreds of candle holders, the flames of the candles in them flickering and dancing.

“I’m not seeing any traps in here, Captain Ashlan,” one of the Blaze team members reported.

“And my bell isn’t ringing,” Ashlan said, scanning the room. “See, girls? Nothing to worry about. Just like I said.”

He was right—there were no obvious monsters or traps. Yet despite his optimistic pronouncement, he looked increasingly doubtful.

“This is weird,” he said after a moment. “There’s no traps or monsters, but there’s also no doors or treasure chests or...*anything*. It’s just an empty room.”

They’d come to a dead end. The door key crafted from the two hard-won halves had brought them to...this?

That’s definitely not all there is to this place. There’s a gimmick, something

we're missing.

A hidden door, maybe? Fay started feeling along the floors and walls, but didn't find anything that seemed likely.

"Whatcha doing, Fay?" Leshea asked, skipping over to him. "I mean, besides feeling every surface in the room?"

"I'm looking for some sort of trick. Like maybe a hidden switch or something. Anything unusual."

"Why are you looking so hard when there's a major aura right in front of you?"

"Sorry?"

Leshea pointed at Ashlan, who stood smack in the middle of the room.

"Hmm? Something the matter with me, Lady Leoleshea?" he asked.

"No, not you. There's a different aura right where you're standing."

Then Nel said, "Master Fay?" She had her eyes closed and her hand cupped at one ear. "It's very, very faint, but I can hear breathing."

"You can?" Fay asked.

"It sounds like something...sleeping?"

"Eek!" Pearl cried and jumped back. "I j-j-just felt a very wet and slimy breeze on the back of my neck!"

"Where, Pearl?"

"Over here! Right behind me!" She pointed, like Leshea, at the center of the Execution Grounds. This was a closed room. How could there be a breeze down here?

Yeah. It should be still. So what's making those candles flicker?

The candles had already been lit when they entered the room, the flames already fluttering.

The flames were dancing.

Nel had heard a sound like breathing. Pearl had felt clammy air on her neck.

And then there was that aura. All the signs pointed to...

“Captain Ashlan, there’s a monster in here!”

“Huh? Fay, man, calm down. If there’s a monster in here, why isn’t my bell ringing? It proves there’s no threat!”

“What if it were sleeping?”

“.....Huh?!”

“Maybe that breathing sound is an invisible, sleeping monster. That would explain everything!”

There was, in fact, a raid boss here. The name of the room, the Execution Grounds, had warned them.

“We know for a fact that some of the monsters in this labyrinth sleep. The reason no battle has started is because the boss hasn’t woken up and noticed us yet. So there are two possibilities. Either this enemy is always invisible, or it’s invisible and invincible while it’s asleep.”

Most likely the latter, Fay figured. If it were simply invisible, then it almost certainly would have already picked one of the nearly twenty people in its room to smash. It seemed more likely that while it was asleep, this monster was effectively treated as if it didn’t exist. (That is, they could pass through it.) That would also explain why the Pure Bell didn’t ring.

“Huh. So we’ve gotta wake this bad boy up before we can fight it?” Ashlan said.

“Oh! Oh my gosh! That’s it, Captain!” Pearl said, clapping her hands. “We just have to wake it up!”

“Yeah, but how? Do we all shout at the tops of our lungs?”

“No—you use an alarm clock!”

Fay had crafted just such an item, the otherwise mysterious Alarm Clock. Leshea’s Reveille Horn might also do the trick, although it raised the question of why there were so many different items for waking up monsters.

“Might as well give it a try,” Fay said, taking out his alarm clock.

“Yeah! And I’ll blow this thing as loud as I can!” Leshea pulled out the trumpet and took a deep breath.

“Captain Ashlan, Pearl, Nel? All of you stand back. I don’t think that raid boss is going to be in a good mood when it wakes up,” Fay said.

“R-right, good idea. Everyone, stick close to the wall. Here it comes!” Ashlan said, and he and his team dropped back. Only Fay and Leshea stood there, their monster-rousing items at the ready.

“Time for a wake-up call, Leshea!”

“Let’s do it!”

The alarm clock jangled.

The trumpet yowled.

And a tremendous light enveloped Fay and Leshea.

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys the players.

The players are destroyed.

Their vision went dark. The next thing they knew, Fay and his three companions were back in the great hall.

Almost as one, they said, “What just happened?”

3

A respawn. Apparently, the party had been wiped. That much, they gathered from the “in-game text”—but it hadn’t been much of a battle.

“I am so! Sick! Of this difficulty level!” Pearl yelled, red in the face. “We just died in a literal second! Have you ever seen a game not even bother to tell you that you were damaged or attacked or whatever, but just say you were destroyed?!”

“Welcome back, all of you!” the meep said.

“Ooh, I’ll *welcome back* you!” Pearl snarled.

Setting aside Pearl’s tirade for a moment...

“Yep. That was a raid boss, all right,” Fay said. Even he looked a little tired when he smiled. Pearl was right: this was a bit overboard. Given the text’s use of the word “destroy,” it would seem to imply that the attack was impossible to evade or defend against.

So they had a raid boss called the Sleeping Lion. Fay had a pretty good grasp on the general idea at this point. As far as he could tell, this thing slept in the Execution Grounds, and as long as it was asleep, it was invisible and invincible.

Meaning we can’t do anything to it until we wake it up. Which we did, and I think we were right about that. It was after that that everything went south.

They needed some way to deal with its Rage Arts.

“Okay. Our progress as such is pretty good. Let’s go again.”

“Fay? But that boss is still there,” Pearl said.

“Yeah, maybe we can talk to Captain Ashlan about that. He’s been playing a lot longer than we have. Maybe he’ll know how to craft an item that can protect against that attack. I mean, there’s got to be something, right? We had to craft the alarm clock to wake the boss up, so we’ve got to be able to craft something that will take it down.”

“Y-you’re right, that’s a good idea!”

Take two.

Down the hallway, past the horde of puffballs, defeat the Golden Puffball, get the key. By the time Fay and the others reached the meeting point, Captain Ashlan and the other members of Blaze were waiting.

“Captain, about that boss...” Fay said, but before he could get another word out Ashlan replied, “The Countermagic Shield.” He sounded awfully sure of himself. “You said you crafted the Wooden Shield, right? Listen, a mirror and mithril can be combined to make Magic Alloy, and you can combine *that* with the Wooden Shield to craft the Countermagic Shield.”

“We have one here,” said one of his teammates, holding up a shield that

glimmered a pale silver. “Our analysis is that the Rage Arts used by the Sleeping Lion is some kind of magic—so this shield should be able to reflect it back. We want to equip everyone with one of these.”

“Let’s go get some revenge,” Ashlan said, turning smartly on his heel. “I don’t care if it’s a sleeping lion or a sleeping tiger or whatever. We’ll show it that humans are smarter.”

First, they would need components. Fay’s team was tasked with gathering fifteen Wooden Shields, while Ashlan and his crew got the Magic Alloy. Then they combined everything to make fifteen Countermagic Shields.

“All right, everyone got their shield? Then we’re ready!” Ashlan called, holding up his own shining shield.

Thence to the Execution Grounds...

They kicked down the door and prepared to once again confront the raid boss.

“All right, Fay! Let’s cut this bastard down to size!”

“Sure thing, Captain.”

Fay started the alarm clock. The monster woke up, and there was a terrible roar...

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys the players.

The players are destroyed.

Their vision went dark. The next thing they knew, Fay and his three companions were back in the great hall.

Almost as one, they said, “What just happened?”

Apparently, the party had been wiped.

Take three.

The third time Fay and his group arrived at the meeting point, they found Captain Ashlan practically tearing his hair out. “The difficulty in this dungeon is *broken*! How can the Countermagic Shield not work against that thing?!” he was

shouting.

“We’re back, Captain Ashlan,” Fay said.

“Oh, hey, Fay. This is nuts. That thing’s Rage Arts are turning out to be way more dangerous than I realized.” He slumped against the wall and looked up at the ceiling. “Me and my team were just saying that what we really need is a proper strategy conference. So it’s like, this thing is called the Sleeping Lion, right? So maybe it’s weak to sleep attacks. Maybe you can make it go beddy-bye. What do you think?”

“It would probably just return to its initial state. Impossible to see, impossible to harm.”

“Yeah, it figures!” Ashlan sighed dramatically. “So maybe the thing to do is beat it before it gets to use Rage Arts?”

“Maybe, but it does kind of annihilate us within a second of the battle beginning.”

“Maybe we could run outside the attack’s area of effect!”

“The in-game text says ‘the players are destroyed,’ which makes me think it can’t be avoided.”

“Gaaah! What are we supposed to *do*, then?!” Captain Ashlan was on the verge of tears, and even Fay was having trouble seeing any way through this. After all, they were dealing with a wildly overpowered attack that obliterated entire parties.

“Nel, I don’t suppose you could kick this attack back the way you can with the Golden Puffball, could you?”

“This particular attack? It’s invisible, so I would have to guess where it was.” She crossed her arms and looked grim. “If we believe the text that says it ‘descends from heaven,’ then maybe it comes out of the ceiling. If I could just figure out the timing...”

“That’s it, kid!” Ashlan’s eyes were shining. “You kicked the Golden Puffball’s attack right back in its face! No problem, then! You just do the same thing to this Lion asshole!”

“I... I mean, maybe...”

“No *maybe* about it! Come on, everyone! This time, we’re gonna settle this!”

So it was that for the third time they took the key and opened the door. Fay had the alarm clock ready to go. They had it down to a science.

“Ready, Nel? I’m going to wake it up.”

“Y-yes, I’m ready, Master Fay. Any time!”

Fay set off the alarm clock. The instant he did so, Nel activated her Arise, Moment Reversal, and kicked her leg high into the air.

“Yaaah!”

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys the players.

The players are destroyed except for Nel.

“*Welcome back, everyone!*”

“I am soooooo sorry!”

They were back at the respawn point, the great hall. No sooner had the meep greeted them than Nel burst out with an agonized apology.

“My kick worked, but it made me realize—that attack comes down on us like thousands of meteors. At best, I was able to kick away maybe one percent of them.”

“Leaving the other ninety-nine percent to destroy us, huh?” said Fay.

In this game, they stood or fell together. If even one member of your team died, the entire team would respawn.

In most games, a larger group means better chances—but this place turns that convention wisdom against you. More players on your team becomes a liability. Nasty.

But they had learned something: their Arises would work, even against a raid boss. The problem was that even if Nel could survive Rage Arts, the rest of them would still be slaughtered.

“So what do you think we should do, Captain A—”

“That freakin’ does it!” When they saw Captain Ashlan at the meeting point, his eyes were bloodshot and he was chuckling to himself. “If you just stand there, you die. Craft a defensive item, you die. Use your Arise, we die. There’s only one thing we haven’t tried. Kill it before it kills us!”

“What? H-hey, um, Captain?!”

“The best defense is a good offense! I say we craft the most powerful offensive items we can find and go in swinging! We take that thing out in the zero-point-one seconds after the battle starts!”

He was off the deep end.

Thus came take four. Door, alarm clock...

“Yaaaaaah!” cried Captain Ashlan. “You sick freak! Taste *my* rage, how about that!”

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys the players.

The players are destroyed.

Take five. Back at the meeting point.

“Captain Ashlan...”

“Please, Fay. Not a word.”

The man who had dared to take on the raid boss had burnt himself out completely. He didn’t even have the strength left to slump against the wall; he just lay on the floor, spent.

“If you just stand there, you die. Try to hit first, you die. Crafting doesn’t help, and an Arise doesn’t help much. What’s wrong with this monster?! That damn attack...”

“It does feel like we’ve gone through all our options,” Pearl agreed with a sigh. “Nel described it as being like thousands of meteors, and I don’t think even my Teleportation abilities would allow me to escape the area of effect. Don’t you have any more ideas, Fay?”

“I do.”

“I should’ve known. Of course even you wouldn’t be able to—wait, you do?!” Pearl spun toward him. “Why didn’t you say so?!”

“It just came to me. It took seeing that in-game text four times, every time we were destroyed.”

“Yes? What about it?”

“It says, ‘The players are destroyed,’ right? That’s pretty specific language.”

It almost seemed to be deliberately limited *to* the players. Which led Fay to a possibility.

“I’m thinking, maybe it doesn’t affect anything *other* than the players.”

“You got any proof of that?”

“Nel kicked the attack back, but the Sleeping Lion was fine.”

“Huh?!” Nel’s eyes widened—now she was interested. “Y-yes! You’re right, Master Fay! In comparison with the Golden Puffball, I can see it. God Bless was able to defeat the Golden Puffball, but *this* attack doesn’t defeat the Sleeping Lion.”

Nel’s Arise had seemingly enabled her to send some of the meteors flying back at their attacker—but it had no effect on the Sleeping Lion. Why? Because Rage Arts only targeted humans; nothing else was damaged by it.

“We need something, an item that can absorb those falling meteors for us. The attack only works on humans, so if we could just protect our heads, it couldn’t touch us... Nel, you crafted something like that, didn’t you?” Fay said.

“You mean...”

“This thing!” Fay held up an item that could be found anywhere in the human world.

An ordinary umbrella. *The Ordinary Umbrella*.

All it did was protect you from things that fell from the sky. They’d wondered what use it could possibly be—well, they had just found out.

“Ahhhhhhh?!” Pearl cried, pointing at the item in Fay’s hand. “Y-yes! Of

course! Captain, that's it!"

"What's it, kid? You think that umbrella will stop the Lion's attack?"

"Think? I'm sure of it, Captain Ashlan! Everyone get moving! We need to find wood and plastic for everybody as quick as we can!"

They set about crafting Ordinary Umbrellas, and when everybody had one, they headed to the Execution Grounds for round five.

Sixteen people filled the room where the Sleeping Lion slept.

"Going to set off the alarm, Captain," Fay said.

"All right, Fay, go for it! Make that thing blare!"

He activated the alarm clock, and the ear-splitting, timekeeping noise awakened the invisible raid boss.

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heaven and destroys the players.

The players are...not destroyed.

So went the in-game text.

The Execution Grounds were filled with the players' cheers.

"Yes!"

"Yessssss! We did it! We survived!"

Several of the members of Blaze threw their umbrellas into the air.

"Hold that thought! This ain't over yet!" Captain Ashlan shouted.

The room shook with the creature's roar, causing Fay to break out in a cold sweat. The monster was no longer invisible-invincible. A lion appeared before them with jet-black fur and a crimson mane. It stood some three meters tall, so large that a full-grown human would have to crane their neck to look up at it.

"Look at the size of it!" Fay choked out.

"The rest of you, get back—don't get hit! Even one of us goes down, we all respawn!" Captain Ashlan bellowed.

But he was preempted.

“If we can see this thing, that means *our* attacks should work, right?”

Up above, over even the black lion’s head, a former goddess flew, her vermilion hair flapping in the wind. She came down from directly above the monster, square in its blind spot, and drove her fist into its back.

A number appeared where Leshea had landed her blow: *1*.

Leshea landed on the lion’s back.

“One damage?” she said, uncharacteristically brought up short. “Oh shoot! I forgot! I’m really weak right now!”

“.....” The Sleeping Lion raised its head. Then it bucked Leshea into the air, raising one paw and slashing at her with sleek, brown claws.

“Whoops!” Leshea twisted in midair, nimble as a cat, and dodged the swipe. The claws got within a hairbreadth of her. “Aww, my ribbon!” she said as the ribbon at her chest drifted away in two pieces. The razor-sharp claws had nearly torn her shirt open. She held it closed with one hand as she landed near the wall.

“Our turn, guys! Let’s do it!” Captain Ashlan shouted, and as one, the members of his team prepared to attack the boss.

His mages brought every kind of magic to bear. Fire, ice, lightning, and wind assailed the lion’s legs and face with the speed and ferocity of a machine gun. There was so much light that even from a distance, Fay was nearly blinded, and the shockwaves almost took his breath away.

And yet...

1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1.

The numbers that came up were all 1. They were doing only the most minimal possible damage.

“Aw, what the hell?! How can all our attacks do *one*?!” Ashlan shouted.

“.....” Silently, the black lion stretched out its legs, as if the storm of magical attacks was no more irksome than a warm shower.

“Fall back!” Fay shouted, and at the exact same second as the apostles began

to retreat, the Sleeping Lion raked the floor with its claws. “The damage we do isn’t even scratching this thing!”

From their perspective, the lion might as well have been invincible. This was a raid boss—who knew how many hit points it had? And the human attacks were only doing 1 damage.

“I—I see it! I’ve got its remaining HP!” said a female apostle in something close to a scream. “And it’s 2,497,301!” She had equipped some sort of binoculars that allowed her to see the boss’s HP.

“This will never work, Captain Ashlan! We couldn’t do that much damage in ten years!” someone else called.

“Ugh! This stupid, stinking difficulty!”

This boss seemed impossible to defeat without cheating. Even Leshea’s punch had only done 1 damage—no matter how weakened she was, that said something. This thing was probably set up so that all external attacks did only a single point of damage.

The lion roared, then it raised its front legs high.

“Everybody out of the way!”

The Sleeping Lion uses Landmine Quake. All objects on the ground are damaged.

The floor of the Execution Grounds began to break up. Stone turned to pebbles and then to dust. Anyone who didn’t leap into the air at that exact instant would be swallowed up by the shockwave and vaporized without a trace.

“Dammit! Another of these unfair, OP attacks!”

“N-no! Wait, Captain Ashlan!” said the girl with the HP-revealing glasses, pointing at the black lion. “It’s working! Its remaining life is down to 1,785,789!”

“Huh?! Why the hell would it be—wait! Don’t tell me!” Ashlan sucked in a breath. “That attack said it hits ‘all objects on the ground,’ so it damaged itself!”

This wasn’t like Rage Arts, which explicitly targeted the players. Landmine Quake was described as targeting *all objects*, and that included the raid boss,

taking out a big chunk out of its health.

That's how you get through this!

The players attacked, and the Sleeping Lion counterattacked, damaging itself in the process.

"This is a battle of attrition! We have to make it attack us!" Fay said.

"Everyone keep your wits about you—keep dodging its quakes!" Ashlan added.

The mages resumed their onslaught, maintaining a distance from the Sleeping Lion. Every hit did minimal damage, but it was all about provoking another counterattack.

The lion roared again and reared up onto its hind legs, the posture it took just before it unleashed its seismic smash.

"Here it comes! Everybody jump!"

The Sleeping Lion uses Landmine Quake. All objects on the ground are damaged.

Everybody in the room jumped into the air. The shockwave from the quake raced underneath them, turning more of the floor into a dust cloud.

"That's a success, Captain!" the young woman called, unable to hide the excitement in her voice. "The Sleeping Lion is down to 1,493,111 HP! Just another eight...no, seven times!"

"You heard her! Just think of it like sixteen-person jump rope!"

They were all leaping into the air in time with the attack—Ashlan's metaphor wasn't far off. If even one of them got out of sync, all of them would be destroyed. Meanwhile, they would have to dodge the Lion's attacks and continue piling on the 1-damage magic hits.

"This is one hell of a boss," Ashlan said, sweat pouring down his cheeks. You couldn't even blink with this creature—the 0.1 seconds your eyes were closed was too much to give away in this fight. The only way to know when the Landmine Quake attack was coming was to watch the Sleeping Lion at every moment.

This is a test of endurance that wears away at your nerves. Everyone is under absolute pressure, knowing they can't be the one to mess up.

Fay felt like his eyeballs were starting to dry out. So did everyone else—unwilling even to blink as they focused on their foe.

“Everybody jump!”

The fourth attack came, then the fifth, then the sixth. The players were taxed to their very limits trying to endure the fight. At the same time, the Sleeping Lion continued to whittle down its own health with Landmine Quake. 1,210,000 HP, then 990,000, then 760,000, 540,000, 310,000, and finally 110,000.

They lost track of how long, how many hours, this back-and-forth had been going on.

“Remaining HP 5,981! This is it!” shouted the girl with the HP-revealing item. “One more time! If we can dodge one more attack, the Sleeping Lion will be out of HP!”

“Everybody stay cool!” said Captain Ashlan, even though he was dripping with sweat. “We’ve only gotta do this one more time! Focus on avoiding its attack!”

The black lion moved, rearing up again—the signal that Landmine Quake was about to hit. At the same instant, all sixteen people in the room responded, without even a word among themselves.

Incoming!

They all stood with their backs pressed against the wall of the Execution Grounds, ready to jump in the air the moment the shockwave approached.

Ready to...

“Agh!” cried someone from the corner of the room. It was the young woman with the binoculars, who had dropped her item and fallen to the ground. She’d been so focused on keeping track of the boss’s life total that she hadn’t noticed the trap directly under her feet.

A large fissure had formed in the floor, which had finally given way under the stress of so many Landmine Quake attacks. She’d caught her foot in the gap.

“Saki?!” Captain Ashlan turned, but it was too late. Fay, Leshea, and Pearl

were already jumping into the air, and none of the other members of Blaze were close enough to help.

Unable to get up, she wouldn't be able to avoid the attack. When the quake hit her, she would die instantly—and everyone on the team would be forcibly returned to the respawn point.

Not when we've come this far!

They'd found the raid boss, solved the riddle of why it was invisible and invincible, and after much trial and error had even learned to survive Rage Arts. They'd whittled down 99 percent of the boss's HP—and now they were going to have to do it all again? All this time, and they *still* wouldn't beat this thing?!

Captain Ashlan was gripped by a burgeoning sense of doom... But it was blown away as another young woman came to the rescue.

"Outta my waaaaay!" she cried as she raced across the room, black hair billowing—heading straight for the massive black lion.

"Nel?!"

"..." She didn't answer. She didn't have time. Instead, she ran even faster.

The Sleeping Lion roared and reared up on its hind legs, preparing to slam its front paws down and initiate the devastating shockwave known as Landmine Quake.

Which meant one thing.

"If it never brings those paws down, there's no attack!"

Nel jumped.

She kicked her leg up, aiming for the lion's forelegs as they descended. "Grrrraaaahhhhh!"

The lion's paws fell toward the earth.

Nel's kick rose toward the heavens.

A tremendous roar split the air as the two collided.

Fay remembered something. He remembered that before he had gone into this game, Dax, who had been Nel's colleague in Mal-ra, had told him: "*Nel is a*

fine apostle in her own right. I know she'll be a valuable asset to your team."

Because she never knew when to give up.

Even when she had lost three times and had to leave the gods' games, she refused to be humiliated in defeat; she refused to listen to what other people said. Instead, she asked Fay, an apostle from a completely different city, to help her make a comeback. And now she was bringing that tenacity to bear on the Sleeping Lion.

"Go the hell back to sleep!" she roared.

Her Moment Reversal Arise could kick anything it was possible to kick, even a god's power—and now her foot was aimed squarely at the lion's paws and face.

The raid boss yowled and stumbled backward. It was bad enough that 99 percent of its own health had been worn down by the repeated Landmine Quake attacks, but now it had had its attack literally thrown back in its face.

"Did that stop it?" Pearl asked hesitantly, looking up at the massive monster as it swayed drunkenly. Every apostle there watched with bated breath.

"....."

Until, with something like a great sigh, the black lion collapsed to the ground, shaking the room.

Nel landed back on the ground, breathing hard. "Huff... Huff..." As they watched, the Sleeping Lion's body gradually grew transparent, as if becoming part of the background.

It's going back to sleep.

When it was gone, the raid boss left behind loot: an item of pure crimson color called the Resurrection Bell.

"Phew!" As everyone else stood in stunned silence, Fay wiped the sweat from his brow. "Captain Ashlan?" he said.

"Y-yeah?"

"Looks like we win. I vote Nel for POG (Player of the Game)."

Finally it seemed to hit Captain Ashlan. "We won? I mean... We won! HeIIII

yeah!”

Blaze shouted and jumped for joy. As they celebrated, Pearl grabbed Nel in a hug, overwhelmed with emotion. “Nelllllll!” she wailed.

“Ack! P-Pearl?!”

“We did it! We won! And it’s all thanks to you! Sending its own attack back at it? I would never have thought of that!”

“G-gee, uh, you mean it? I didn’t really think, I just acted. I hardly remember what happened...”

“Whether you remember it or not, the proof is right here! Look at this loot!” Pearl held up the crimson bell. “I think you should keep it, Nel!”

“Oh... Hey, this bell looks like the one Captain Ashlan has.” She took the bell from Pearl and studied it carefully. “Judging by the name, you think it allows you to revive a dead player?”

“What a great item! Try giving it a ring, Nel!”

At that instant Fay, who had been listening to the two girls chat, got a very, very bad feeling.

“It’s a trap!” he cried. “Nel, don’t ring that bell!”

“What?”

It was too late. She had already given the bell a shake.

Jingle...

The clear, sharp sound seemed to fill the Execution Grounds.

And with a roar, the huge black lion reappeared.

The bell had woken it up again.

“N-n-n-no! Whyyy?!” Pearl said.

“The bell woke it up!” Fay said. This raid boss could be awoken by any item that made a sound—a bell as well as an alarm clock.

In short, the loot was its own trap, inducing players to fight the beast again.

“The boss is back at full strength! 2,500,000 HP!” Saki shouted.

“This is the worst, meanest, *nastiest* dungeon I’ve ever heard of!” Pearl exclaimed.

“I’m so sorry!” Nel cried.

They’d had just about enough of this dungeon.

Just as they thought their hearts might break, however, there was a tremendous crash—and the ceiling of the Execution Grounds caved in.

“I found you, Tiny Human!”

A girl appeared, her silver hair whipping in the air. Her ethereal red eyes seemed to glow as she descended from the hole in the ceiling.

“And now, I appear!”

She landed, of all places, smack on top of the Sleeping Lion’s head.

“Heh-heh-heh! Looks like I win our little game of hide-and-seek. Well, I should—I’m undefeated, after all!”

Despite her crowing, sadly, Fay didn’t recognize her. “Um, sorry. Who are you?”

She wore a T-shirt with the word UNDEFEATED scrawled across it, and a baggy jacket over that. She even wore a choker and earrings. She was pretty—like, *really* pretty—but her outfit was so, uh, unique that it was almost too much to take. Fay was sure that if he’d met this girl before, he wouldn’t have forgotten her.

I do feel like I remember her voice. Who the heck is she?

Yes, the sound of her voice tugged on something in his memories.

“Excuse me? You couldn’t have forgotten me, the Undefeated!”

“No way...”

The sweet and utterly self-confident tone—an image flashed through Fay’s mind of a young woman in black.

“Huh. I guess I lost. Let’s play again sometime!”

I’ll think up an even harder game for next time!”

The shimmering silver hair. The large ruby-red eyes.

Not to mention that word, “Undefeated,” emblazoned across her shirt as if to rub people’s noses in it. It all made him think of someone feared throughout the Arcane Court, the “undefeated god” whose games were said to be impossible.

“Uroboros?!”

“Yes! It is I!” the god in a girl’s form exclaimed joyfully. “I said we should play again sometime, but I haven’t seen you once since then. I’ve been sooo bored, so *I* decided to come play with *you*! How about you ditch this stupid game and come to my—”

The lion roared.

Uroboros was, after all, standing on its head. And the raid boss was feeling fit as a fiddle.

They knew what was coming next. The fight had started, and that meant Rage Arts was inbound.

The Sleeping Lion uses its Rage Arts: A light descends from heav

—

“Quiet, you.”

Uroboros gave the lion a gentle bop.



The Sleeping Lion takes 80 quadrillion, 7,991 trillion, 300 million and 199 damage.

The Sleeping Lion is dead.

“.....”

Without another sound, the gigantic lion slumped over. *This* time, the god’s fist had done its job on the boss.

“Bah! That’s what you get for interrupting me, you mutt,” the god-girl said, landing lightly on the ground.

Incidentally, Captain Ashlan could be heard to moan, “Why’d we go to all that work?” but Uroboros took no notice of him.

“Say. What’s this?” Something glowed at the god’s feet. A stone platform with a golden sword stabbed into it rose up.

Save Item: Lionheart.

Brave warriors: return to the place of this battle at any time.

Team Blaze, all of whose members had sat down from sheer exhaustion, jumped to their feet. There was general chaos as everybody shouted, ““A save item?!””

They all raced up to the stone with its sword.

“This is it! A save point!”

“We can finally go home!”

As each person touched the sword, their names were carved into the pedestal. Leaving your name in stone like this seemed to be how you saved in this game.

“All right, this is making sense. I’ll bet we just pull the sword out of the stone to activate the item. Then we can get out of here and go back to the human world. Finally. You really saved our necks, Fay,” Ashlan said.

“.....” But Fay didn’t answer.

“Huh? What’s up? You’re looking awfully grim. Don’t you want to get out of

this dungeon?”

“Something’s bugging me, Captain Ashlan.” Fay still had that bad feeling. Yes, they’d found a save point, but their circumstances didn’t seem any better than before, in his opinion. He wasn’t sure how much of these feelings to share with the other team leader.

“What’s goin’ on? Why’re all you humans so happy?” Uroboros asked innocently, her voice echoing around the Execution Grounds. She was looking from the sword and stone to the members of Blaze eagerly crowding around it, and back again. “Why’re you so glad to *save*?”

“Because we can finally get back to reality, deity. You better believe we’re glad. We’re only getting out of here by the skin of our teeth.”

“Yeah? And then what?”

“Uh...?”

“You go back to the human world. But you’ll play the gods’ games again, right? And since you saved here, every time you dive through your Divine Gate, you’ll come back here, won’t you?”

This dungeon allowed no one to abandon it. It would permit them to return to the human world, but only on the condition that, until they completed the labyrinth, they would never be able to play another game.

Yeah. It’s a save point, not salvation. Just a temporary escape. We can yell and we can cry, but we’re going to have to clear this dungeon.

But if Fay was right about that, then the labyrinth had an even more critical bug. He wondered how many of the others had noticed.

“Y-yeah, I hear you! But now we’ve got something that will let us get back to the real world. With enough time, we can clear this dungeon, no matter how obnoxious it is!” Captain Ashlan said with as much confidence as he could muster.

“Hmm?” said Uroboros, looking at him with a quizzical tilt of the head. “Haven’t you realized, human?”

“Realized what?” Ashlan snapped.

“This game will never end.”

Ashlan almost choked.

“This game’s got a bug. One that prevents the story from progressing.”

That caused a burst of muttering to erupt, and the mood in the room changed perceptibly.

“But what does that mean? A bug that keeps the story from going on?” Pearl said, knitting her brow in confusion.

“Pearl,” Fay said simply, “do you remember what the meep told us when we first reached this dungeon? There was a legend, right? You remember what it was?”

“Sure I do! How could you forget the shock of hearing that a god was dead?”

Once upon a time there was a god who loved building mazes. This god would wait in the innermost depths of its labyrinth, excited for humans to come and find it. But no one ever finished the maze, and eventually the god died of boredom.

“Okay, next thing,” Fay said, talking to Pearl but speaking to all fifteen other apostles in the room. “Remind me what we have to do to clear this game.”

“Huh? We have to escape the labyrinth, right?”

“Listen, Pearl. The meep said we have to reach the deepest chamber and defeat the final boss. Then the last door will open and we can escape.”

“R... Right,” Pearl said ambivalently. She didn’t seem to see what he was getting at.

“Let’s go over this again. What was the legend that the meep told us about?”

“That the god who made this labyrinth died of boredom.”

“Before that.”

“That the god waited for people to come find it in the innermost depths of the maze.”

“Right. And what do we have to do to clear the maze?”

“Defeat the final boss in the...innermost... Er...”

The god was in the labyrinth’s deepest chamber. As was the final boss.

Which would seem to imply...

“See? I think it’s safe to assume that the god in the innermost chamber *is* the final boss.”

“Huh?! But I thought the god was dead!”

“Right. Which is exactly the problem.”

There was a door that would allow them to escape the maze, and all the players had to do to open it was defeat the last boss—the god itself. Except that the god in question had died a natural death—cause: sheer boredom—centuries ago.

“The win condition is to defeat the last boss, but that boss died without being defeated, and now it’s impossible to progress. The door out of this labyrinth is going to stay shut forever,” Fay said.

“Wh-wh-whaaaaaaaat?!” Pearl exclaimed.

That was why the god-girl Uroboros had said that this game would never end.

A fatal bug, the absence of the final boss, made it impossible to meet the clear condition.



* * *

“That can’t be true,” Pearl said vacantly, speaking as much to herself as to anyone else, and the members of Blaze looked as desolate as she sounded.

“Which leaves us with only one option,” Fay said.

“We start trying to clear this maze in earnest.”

Continued

I, Too, Jump into the Fray

Gods' Games We Play On the eighth floor of the Mal-ra branch office of the Arcane Court, a hall full of photographs displayed dozens of pictures of apostles who had visited this city for friendly matches over the years. All of them were well-known, accomplished figures.

As he stood there looking at them, footsteps pattered up to him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Dax." It was his team partner, Kelritch, with an armload of files stuffed with documents. "It took me a good three hours, but the Chief Secretary finally cracked. You and I are cleared to dive into that labyrinth as part of the third wave of the rescue operation."

"Exceptional work, Kelritch." She could almost feel heat radiating from the glow in Dax's eyes as he turned toward her. She knew what it was—fascination with a game that had never before been encountered in all of human history.

"I feel compelled to point out that we could end up trapped in that game, never to return."

"Are you afraid?"

"No." There was no hesitation in her brown eyes. "No game is worthy of my fear."

"They are to be enjoyed," Dax agreed with a satisfied nod. Then he let his black coat billow behind him. There was no uncertainty, no anxiety. For he knew what was waiting for him—the one rival more deserving of him than any other.

He cried, "Fay! I always knew that we were destined to meet again. This maze, this labyrinth, shall become the new crossroads where our lives shall intersect!"

"I'm not sure it counts as destiny when you specifically go there to find him."

Kelritch gave an exasperated sigh. Then she said, “Dax, I’ve been hearing rumors. They say the one team that wasn’t part of the rescue operation initially has begun preparing to join the effort.”

“Oh. So you’ve finally decided to show your hand, Mind Over Matter!”

Mind Over Matter (motto: The Holy See where all souls gather) was composed of only four people, but it was the strongest team in the world. Dax didn’t know whether headquarters had leaned on them, or something else had caused their change of heart—but that notorious foursome was on its way into the inescapable game.

“It’s only a rumor, I stress,” Kelritch said.

“That’s all I need.”

The world’s strongest team would be there.

His destined rival would be there.

This was shaping up to be the greatest game the world had ever seen, and the curtain was about to rise.

“We go forth, Kelritch! And as for you, Fay... Just you wait!” He gestured to his partner. “Onward! Into the fray!”

So Dax, the Prince of Games, was determined to test himself against the divine labyrinth, Lucemia.

Afterword

“I am undefeated! You have a problem with that?”

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 3 of *Gods’ Games We Play*!

It turns out humans and gods are much alike in their love of games.

Volume 1 was humans versus gods.

Volume 2 featured Fay and Dax in a human-on-human battle.

In Volume 3, the gods finally enter on the players’ side.

There’s been a lot of super positive reaction since the reveal of the cover illustration, and as promised, the (self-proclaimed) undefeated god has joined the battle. (Your humble author, by the way, was just as thrilled as everyone else by Toiro Tomose’s adorable work on the cover!) At the same time, this volume deals with Nel’s return to the apostles’ ranks. She’ll be someone to watch as she fights anew—now on the side of Fay and his team!

Now, I’ve got an announcement to make: *Gods’ Games We Play* is getting a manga adaptation! Kapiko Toriumi will be doing the art. The first chapter will run in the October issue of *Comic Alive*, on sale in August!

Toriumi has read the original novel very carefully and channeled it brilliantly into illustrations. Your humble author is very excited to see where that version goes!

I hope you’ll root for Fay and Leshea as they strut their stuff in manga form!

As ever, many people helped me with volume 3.

I want to thank my editor K, who created this book with me. Toiro Tomose, who did another batch of God-tier illustrations. The Uroboros cover is just the best!

And finally, thank *you*, dear reader, for picking up this book!

I'm thinking volume 4 will be out sometime in winter. You can look forward to a dungeon challenge with an unprecedented player count!

Kei Sazane *On a summer afternoon*

NAME **Nel Reckless**

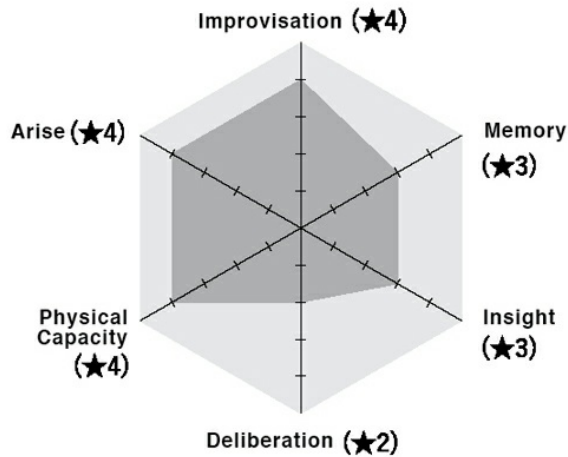
PROFILE

Eighteen years old. Nel became an apostle a year before Fay, and her exceptional athleticism and innate tenacity made her one of Mal-ra's most promising young aces. Too bad she already lost three games and had to retire. But perhaps her story's not over yet...

ARISE: Moment Reversal

She can reverse the energy of anything she kicks.

SPEC



Arise ★4

Nel's Arise can reverse the energy of anything her foot makes contact with. (She can kick it straight back the way it came, or make a minor adjustment to its angle.) Truck, missile, or laser beam—there's no limit to what she can kick. She might even be able to kick a god's power back in its face. However, if a phenomenon covers a wide area, like a tidal wave or an avalanche, she can kick back only a part of it. This Arise is extremely potent, but it's a difficult power to fully utilize. Only someone with Nel's athletic ability could bring out its real potential.

Improvisation ★4

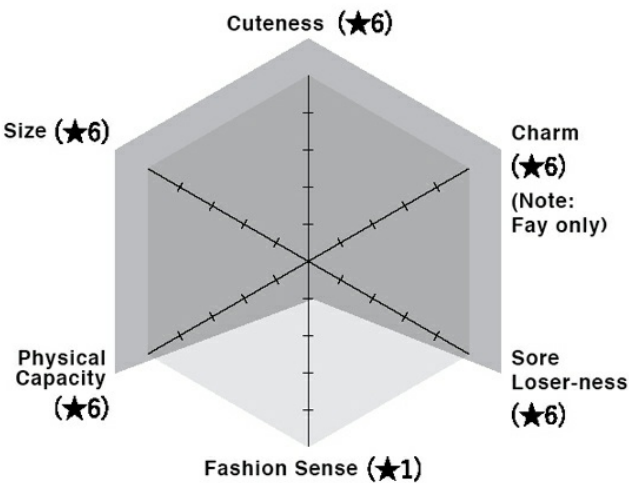
Nel never gives up. She's the type of person who thinks quickest when cornered. If she has to sit and ponder something, she finds ideas harder to come by.

NAME **Uroboros (Human Ver.)**

PROFILE

"I am undefeated! You have a problem with that?"
This is the form that the Endless God Uroboros takes to seek out a rematch with Fay. Unlike Leshea, who abandoned godhood to become a human, Uroboros's true form is a dragon that still resides in the superior spiritual realm.

SPEC



Cuteness, Physical Capacity, etc.★6

Uroboros smashes pretty much every measurement on this chart, which normally only goes up to ★5! She impacts not only the players but even the game master of any game she appears in, but Uroboros herself doesn't like to get involved in games she didn't create.

Fashion Sense★1

She claims to be on the cutting edge of divine fashion.
"That's a lie." (Source: Leshea)
"I wish she wouldn't joke like that." (Source: Bookmaker)

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Gods' Games We Play Volume 3

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KAMI WA GAME NI UETEIRU. Vol.3

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First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: September 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design:
Andy Swist Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Sazane, Kei,
author. | Tomose, Toiro, illustrator. | Steinbach, Kevin, translator.

Title: Gods' games we play / Kei Sazane ; illustration by Toiro Tomose ;
translation by Kevin Steinbach.

Other titles: Kami ha game ni ueteiru. English Description: First Yen On
edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022-Identifiers: LCCN 2022033520 | ISBN
9781975348496 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975348519 (v. 2 ; trade
paperback) | ISBN 9781975394820 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC:
Fantasy. | Gods—Fiction. | Games—Fiction. | Competition (Psychology)—
Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S297 Go 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022033520>

ISBNs: 978-1-97539482-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9483-7 (ebook) E3-
20240906-JV-NF-ORI

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